

**PROFILES IN COURAGE: PRACTICING AND PERFORMING AT MUSICAL OPEN  
MICS AND SCENES**

A Dissertation

by

MARCUS DAVID ALDREDGE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2009

Major Subject: Sociology

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**ABSTRACT**

Profiles in Courage: Practicing and Performing at Musical Open Mics and Scenes.

(August 2009)

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This dissertation explores the social patterns and cultural layers of musical “open mics” in New York City. The study uses a qualitative approach which includes methods such as ethnography, in-depth interviewing, historical and discourse analyses focusing on open mics and the popular musicians who attend and perform them. Open mics, short for “open microphones,” are public events that allow musicians to perform songs without a pre-planned, formal booking with a club or venue. Owing a historical and discursive connection to the folk hootenannies and jazz jam sessions of the past, these events have proliferated and spread considerably across the United States since the 1990s since their development, by name, in the late 1970s. Open mics not only reflect a do-it-yourself and participatory cultural ethos manifested with other recent expressive cultural activities, but also demonstrate a growing interstitial “musical third place” residing between private practicing and public performance.

Musical open mics as musical third places provide musicians and singer/songwriters to network with other musicians, practice new musical compositions and play when other performance opportunities are not readily available. It provides a means for musicians to “hone their craft” in terms of performance methods and also construct musical identities in the almost exclusive company of other working singer/songwriters. This “backstage region” is thus framed and keyed by the musicians onto a continuum between two theoretical poles: performance

practicing and practicing performance. Performance practicing as defined in this study frames a more performance-oriented display for musicians in locations called “closed open mics” or COMs. These settings, also residing on a theoretical continuum are socially more exclusive in terms of performance types, the aesthetic careers of the performers, the genres represented and the sociological makeup of the setting participants in general. OOMs or “open open mics,” on the other hand, usually have a more fluid, diverse sociological composition of musical performers, performance types, and musical genres played and represented in these mainly weekly events. Closed open mics align into more homogeneous, isomorphic settings comprising “local open mic scenes” and open open mics remain more heterogeneous, socially inclusive, and unsettled as “pre-scenes.”

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my wonderful and supportive parents, Mike and Pat Aldredge, and my amazingly patient and lovely wife, Betsy.

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I would like to extend my most sincere appreciation to my committee chair, Dr. Kathryn Henderson, and my committee members, Dr. William “Alex” McIntosh, Dr. Stjepan Mestrovic, and Dr. Harris Berger, for their steadfast guidance and support throughout the course of this research. Your willingness and patience to work with me in my absence from Texas A&M, among other issues, have been truly appreciated. I want to extend my deep appreciation to Jane Sell, who, although not officially on my committee, provided a surplus of advice and help and made the process tolerable during turbulent periods. To my very good friends, Keith, Garrick, Ryan, and Wesley, your encouragement and intellectual stimulation made graduate school not only worthwhile, but you also helped make it meet the academic ideal of placing progressive intellectual discourse among friends at the foundation of the experience.

I want to also thank Natalie Friedman, all my department colleagues, and department faculty and staff for making my time at Texas A&M an intellectually stimulating and productive experience. These acknowledgements hold little importance and merit without extending my sincerest appreciation to all the musicians and non-musicians who participated in this project. For the participants who took time out of their very hectic days and nights to share their personal lives and experiences, I am wholeheartedly grateful. Without your participation, this project would not have been completed. Finally, I want to reiterate my appreciation to my parents and wife and partner, Betsy, whose unflinching support and counsel were essential to the completion of this project.

**NOMENCLATURE**

COM	Closed Open Mics
Cover(s)	A previously recorded song; a cover song
CITY	Manhattan
DIY	Do-It-Yourself
NYC	New York City
OOM	Open Open Mics
Open Mic	Open Microphone
Open Mike	Open Microphone

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The audience senses secret mysteries and powers behind the performance, and the performer senses that his chief secrets are petty ones. As countless folk tales and initiation rites show, often the real secret behind the mystery is that there really is no mystery; the real problem is to prevent the audience from learning this too.

--Erving Goffman

I think that the sociology of art has to take as its object not only the social conditions of production of the producers (i.e. the social determinants of the training or selection of artists) but also the social conditions of production of the field of production as the site of work tending (and not aiming) to produce the artist as a producer of sacred objects, fetishes; or, which amounts to the same thing, producing the work of art as an object of belief, love and aesthetic pleasure.

--Pierre Bourdieu

Competition? I share some of the emotions that make it happen, but I am picky and I think most people are especially [as to] who I share my music and those experiences with. The competition thing...I think it's natural for any cutthroat industry when fewer than five percent of the people are generating a profit, it's going to happen. I don't see myself being competitive as I see myself being a tough critic. I do believe music should be performed for competition. It is not what people sign up for when they sign up at an open mic: to be judged against anybody else. If you sign up for *American Idol* you are, but at the same time at an open mic it's going to happen, the same way it will happen if you go see a series of short plays, you are going to say 'I like this one better than that one' especially if it is a similar forum or meeting.

--Anonymous singer/songwriter, Interview with Aldredge 2008

These pronouncements directly address three substantive themes in this study. Erving Goffman's work catapulted the mundane activities and rituals of everyday life to be viewed through a radically different lens by sociologists and other intellectuals alike. Goffman helped demonstrate how potentially fragile yet meaningful and sacred the social world is from one moment or social ritual to the next (Manning 1992: 5). These practices of the everyday are the interactive methods, processes and performances people put on for each other and are far from natural or innate. In other words, they are social constructions and not psychologically unique.

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This dissertation follows the style of *American Sociological Review*.

Performances in this particular narrative have related but not completely overlapping sets of meanings. Goffman spoke of performance as a quotidian process and means of communication but performance also denotes an ostensibly sacred and elevated musical or artistic event that is considered by musical performers the quintessence of musical production. Much like any other set of expressive cultural practices, art or music is a co-construction that necessitates and is also a product of “work” (Becker, Faulkner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 3). In other words, symbolic practices creating expressive cultural objects and participant affect are worked up through participants’ learned and negotiated interactions overtime.

Thus, as Pierre Bourdieu suggests in the above quote, to better discern and illuminate the nuances and patterns of art or music, the co-construction of art and music requires sociological attention. More importantly, to understand the processes of artistic construction is to look also at how, where and when the artists or musicians themselves are constructed and the social and cultural conditions from where and when they develop. To look at art in depth is to look in greater depth at the artist and from whence they develop their methods, recipes and forms of knowledge of the creative work they do. The everyday life and conditions of the musician is of up most importance and the open mic is in the process of becoming a new institution within the popular musical world. This burgeoning social institution within the musical “art world” (Becker 1982) is a social context by which musicians come together to practice and perform and compare and contrast their music and their performances. The third epigraph embodies the processes that bring musicians together for these activities but that also lead to the symbolic boundaries and hierarchies that separate them.

An “open mic” or “mike” is a musical event regularly occurring at a bar, club or café once a week, and on a very few occasions, once or twice per month. There is usually some kind of voluntary sign up process, some more formal than others ostensibly on a first come first serve

basis, for performance artists wanting a place to perform music, poetry, or comedy. These performances occur without any formal booking, promotion and official payment by the establishment to the performers for their participation. For this study, select locations and events that primarily cater to and serve musicians, as opposed to the inclusion of poets, comics and other artistic mediums, have been selected. Internet websites dedicated to advertising these events have increasingly become more specialized for each artistically expressive performance type and were very helpful to this study in providing information about the vast array of open mic practices. There are open mics dedicated mostly to these other artistic mediums, but for this study, musical performance is the primary concern. The weekly, bi-monthly or monthly event is always directed and lead by a “host” who is the leader of the event appointed by the bar. As will be described in the ethnography, the host’s style in directing and implementing the standards of the event plays a significant role in influencing each open mics setting. Each musical act goes up sequentially according to a sign up list that is filled out before the open mic begins and some type of time or song limitation is expected for each performing act. In terms of the overall temporal parameters, two of the four primary open mics in this ethnography began early between 7 and 8 p.m. and would typically not finish until the last performers have played, often around 2 or sometimes 3 a.m. One began around 10:45 or 11 p.m. and would not finish up until around 3 a.m. and another location’s event began around 8:30 and would not typically go later than 12 or 12:30 a.m.

Open mics abstractly embody many of the salient issues of today’s ever changing popular, socio-musical landscape. Musical performance is the epitome of musical production and the open mic serves the function of providing musicians a location for this ceremonial ritual to be practiced, performed, reconstructed and observed. This is especially the case when ‘real’ gigs are not readily available or obtainable for popular musicians. It is a musical social event

providing a location for popular musicians to play music within a spectrum of settings from a more “practice-oriented” frame to a “performance-oriented” frame which is closer to the frame of a formal booking or gig. This continuum from a practice to performance oriented “frame” (Goffman [1974] 1986) is not completely dominant but is more prominent in certain locales and events than others. Furthermore, these open mics provide musicians dynamic places to work on their art form reaffirming the conceptual notion that art, music or any other culturally expressive object is never at an objectively “finished” temporal junction. Music is inextricably social and meaningful for those who compose it and those who listen to it. Music as an auditory and phenomenological object is both subjective and “intersubjective” constituted, interpreted and potentially contested within the social performances of which it is derived. Either “upstream” or “downstream”, the music performed at open mics, as with the performers themselves, is an element in the dialectical process of becoming as the producers, the audiences, the objects and the social world changes overtime as well (Becker, Faulkner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 1-13). Open mics demonstrate how art and music are always becoming and being renegotiated or reconstructed making upstream and downstream delineations difficult to concretely and definitely objectify.

The creation and propagation of open mics across the U.S. and other western cultures could be due in part to an oversupply of amateur musicians and to the demands of the market. Some research (e.g. Menger 1999; Alexander 2003) purported this to explain the lower salaries, average lower cost of living and tumultuous career paths of musicians and artists. This is certainly evident in New York City which has comparatively much larger numbers of artists and musicians than most other major cities in the United States (Gaquin 2008: 102) and a much larger concentration of artistic and “creative industries” (Americans for the Arts 2008: 8). The slow development and recent explosion of open mics can also be a bi-product of what some have

deemed as a “new participatory culture” (Jenkins and Bertozzi 2008: 171). Modern boundaries between professional, amateur and hobbyist “are blurring” (2008: 172) because the “Do-It-Yourself (DIY)” ethic and ethos is quickly becoming hegemonic in the U.S. The “barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement” have been reduced and leveled through the growth and spreading of the Internet and greater accessibility to less expensive technologies; thus, a greater cultural value has been encouraged for personal expression (2008: 173-175). Consequently, younger artists are increasingly working openly on their crafts collaboratively in a form of “grassroots convergence” (2008: 173-183).

The open mic is a *musical third place* in which music, musicianship and musical identities can do an assortment of things, usually at the core of addressing the foundational and social ritual to perform. This musical third place is a specific variation of Ray Oldenburg’s (1999) concept of the “third place,” but these musical third places differ depending upon the specific open mic. Recent research (e.g. Minahan and Cox 2007) including research on music (e.g. Grazian 2003) has used this concept to further engage and describe how people are reliant upon third places for the pressing need for creating associations and fostering “sociability” that are not primarily based in economic interests (Simmel 1949; 1971). Oldenburg argues that the search for associations and sociability is one of its most vital functions in a late modern period riddled with growing levels and degrees of social alienation and isolation. Other recent research (Tepper and Gao 2008: 32-34) has recently used Simmel’s concept of sociability to explain people’s particular social engagements and participation in various culturally expressive and artistic activities with others.

This research does not seek to diminish the “aura” of music or art as Walter Benjamin (1969) suggested would happen to original art and photography in the presence of modern techniques of mass reproduction as described in his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of

Mechanical Reproduction.” My qualitative study seeks to better contextualize music making as a socially interactive, discursive, ritualistic process of human construction and meaning making. In doing so, I hope to highlight the power of human meaning making processes that do not reside exclusively with or for a select group of people.

My scholarly interest in the open mic phenomena began from experiences and observations within my biography. I was first exposed to a musical open mic in 1998 when at the time I was in a nascent country garage/punk band and looking for a place to get experience playing on a stage in front of an audience, as a band. At the suggestion of the lead singer and guitar player, we went to a local neighborhood open mic in Brooklyn to get our feet wet before trying to obtain real gigs. We were a hodgepodge of musicians running the gamut of musical and performance knowledge and experience. The lead singer/songwriter and guitarist was seasoned and knowledgeable musician having extensively played open mics in Manhattan and recorded with bands and record labels. I initially learned bass guitar in middle school for the jazz band and I also played tuba up through my first year of college. As a bassist, I played in punk and garage bands in high school and college, performing around Houston and various other punkish venues in Texas in the early 90s, but was rusty after not having played seriously for years. The third member and acoustic guitarist was altogether new to guitar playing. Individually, I had worked to regain and expand my ‘chops’ or playing skills and the aforementioned rhythm guitarist was diligently working to learn basic chords and strumming techniques, while the lead guitarist was writing songs and mentoring us both to achieve a higher level of competency. After practicing for months individually and collectively, our next logical step was to leave the house we regularly practiced in and try out the open mic. We went to this open mic a few times as a band, and eventually procured a gig from the owner of the bar. We ceased going to the open mic as we began to acquire gigs in city venues that, from our perspective, gave us higher status and had

greater potential. I was concurrently working on a master's degree in sociology and the open mic event intrigued me enough to conduct a qualitative study on the specific open mic in Brooklyn (Aldredge 1999; 2006) for my thesis. I had already gained entrée and developed contacts and rapport with the owners, so this venue seemed ripe for my study. A revised and shortened version was published in an issue of *Symbolic Interaction* (Aldredge 2006). Throughout the years since my introduction and ensuing thesis research, I have noticed a proliferation of open mics not only in NYC, but around the country, has materialized. This propagation is clearly very important to the amateur and popular musical landscape, but also germane and interconnected to larger cultural discourses, meanings and social forces as well.

Sociological interest in music can be found in the writings of the few foundational figures of sociology like Georg Simmel (Wolff 1959; Etzkorn 1964) and Max Weber (1921) continuing with Frankfurt school's critique of mass culture (e.g. Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 2001; Adorno 2002). The Chicago school of sociology had a few notable studies that helped lay the foundation for urban ethnographies in the early twentieth-century specifically focusing on music or musical production or consumption as salient to a larger sociological topic like crime (Reckless 1933) or specific locations and activities like "taxi-dance halls" (Cressey 1932). My qualitative study is also indebted to early ethnographies such as William Bruce Cameron's publication "Sociological Notes on the Jam Session" (1954), Allan Merriam and Raymond Mack's "The Jazz Community" (1960), Howard Becker's study of Jazz, "Dance Musicians" (1963) and much later his influential book, *Art Worlds* (1982). The "production of culture" approach coined and ushered in by scholars in the 1970s was lead by Becker and other figures such as Richard Peterson (1976). Peterson later explored the impact of the market on constructing "authenticity" in country music (1997) and Paul Hirsch who uncovered the



tremendous impact of “gatekeepers” that act as cultural filters within the business organizations that comprise the cultural industries (1972; 2000).

A substantial increase in research interest in music production, music consumption, and the music industries opened up many new and intriguing doors to studying music as an integral cultural product, while also reflecting social relations and cultural and identity constructions. Becker’s solidification of the notion that art or expressive culture is not solely a product of artists or musicians, but a collaborative co-constructing project within communities, networks, organizations and cultures is noteworthy for this study. This study will attempt to bridge a production of culture approach with a qualitative, ethnographic approach to musical production and consumption with newer culturally-oriented frameworks such as Griswold’s “cultural diamond” (1994) and the theoretical conceptions within “performance theory” (Bauman 1977; Cook 2003; Berger and Del Negro 2004) and Erving Goffman’s (1959; 1963; 1974; 1981) micro-sociological constructs of social interaction rituals, performance strategies and framing devices.

David Grazian (2004) and Timothy Dowd (2004) provide thorough historical and paradigmatic analyses of the “production of culture” approach and the qualitative, interactionist approaches and traditions to the study of music. My research program incorporates the intersections of these two traditions to study cultural practices with the help of the conceptual “cultural diamond” (Griswold 2004). Griswold argues a comprehensive approach to the study of culture, exploring “cultural objects,” the creators and receivers of these cultural objects and the relations that actively construct the encompassing social world (2004: 16-18). For this particular study of open mic musicians and open mic events, these four elements intersect in very intriguing but potentially messy and convoluted ways indicating the relational vitality of each to each other. Indirectly, the focus of this study addresses the significance of the musical social

worlds in which musicians actively perform, interpret and co produce not only popular music, but also cultural beliefs and rituals common to western musicianship as a whole.

The most germane previous studies for my work here are those that focused on musicians as cultural producers and how these musicians used their relations to interactively construct and negotiate musical identities and a subcultural “stock of knowledge.” (Schutz 1972: 80). H. Stith Bennett’s *On Becoming a Rock Musician* (1980) was a thorough ethnography of the world of popular, or more specifically, rock musicians. Bennett pursued an organizational study of the “aesthetic career” and “musical identities” of musicians, examining how musicians acquire instruments, form bands and get gigs, compose music and formulate aesthetic standards in terms of performance. Largely a group socialization and learning process, that happens “on the job” these musicians slowly and interactively construct what it is to be a musician internally and externally and to inhabit the musical world around them (1980: 3-5).

On New York’s socio-musical landscape, open mics are a diverse social form and entity serving diverse musicians at different stages or phases of their “aesthetic career” (Bennett 1980: 190). Aesthetics are patterned personal and social constructs of taste, mainly products of social interactions and collective meanings. They are rarely static for individuals and groups. Aesthetic conventions and standards of performances are social constructs that are institutionalized and reified overtime (Bennett 1980: 6-11). Although popular musicians construct uniquely personal aesthetic careers, they are not isolated in their everyday musical constructions of both the musical texts or material and their social identities. This challenges the long standing “romantic” belief in the “isolated artist” producing art or music while at war with his or her surroundings (Gilmore 1990: 153).

Sarah Cohen’s study *Rock Culture in Liverpool* (1991) is another instrumental study in its focus on the processes by which musicians construct both musical communities and how they

learn their musical crafts. In addition, Ruth Finnegan's *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (2007) has been important, in that it explores amateur/professional musician status distinctions, organizational components such as musical worlds or "scenes" and the processes of learning and negotiating both musical and performance techniques. These three areas are particularly noteworthy because open mic musicians have to negotiate the symbolic boundaries of what constitutes musical amateurism and how that relates to their musical identities. Moreover, the identifications are a social product and (re)producer of the "scenes" in which they are ensconced. This dialectic appears within the interactions of practicing and performing within these open mics. In other words, these three elements intersect in meaningful and "signifying" (Geertz 1973: 10) ways for these musicians. This so happens to also meet two of three suggested areas for future research in the sociology of music according to David Grazian "...the production process within the culture industries; and the consumption of music in real time and space" (Grazian 2004: 206). Musicians produce music and perform for each other at open mics; therefore, they are organizational locations within the culture industries where musical practices of production and consumption occur regularly.

Finally, the concept of *scene*, as it applies to these musical open mics, carries another critical theoretical angle and focus. Erving Goffman used the term in his early writings (e.g. 1959; 1963) to designate a particular type of "uncontained participation" due to, "...a failure of the participants in an engagement to contain their activity can not only lead to betrayal of one or more of their numbers but also cause the content and feeling generated in the engagement to flow over into the situation at large" (1963: 185). A scene for Goffman likely inspires feelings of disloyalty and some potential degree of "affective disorganization" in the members of the group (1963: 187). His denotations differed from how the term is typically used today. This paper will return in the last chapter to further explore this discursive lineage tracing back to Goffman. In

the mean time, the academic history of the word, “scene”, began mainly with John Irwin’s book *Scenes* (1977), which discusses Goffman’s dramaturgy quite extensively. More recently, the scene concept has been picked up and elucidated by a flood of researchers including Will Straw (1991), Sara Cohen (1991) and Barry Shank (1994) with the latter’s now very influential study and book, *Dissonant Identities*, focusing on the music scene of Austin, Texas. A common and integral set of components across these models of scenes are cultural producers or “performers” and cultural receivers or “fans” and finally, “support facilities” or an organizational structure (Bennett and Peterson 2004: 3). The latter element can also be described as a *scene industry* of each particular scene, analogous to the culture industry but on a smaller potentially more diffuse and grassroots scale.

There is an ongoing debate (e.g. Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004; Hesmondhalgh 2005) as to the potential conceptual replacement of the term subculture with the concept of scene. Others (e.g. Maffesoli 1995; Bennett 1999) have argued for the inclusion of another potential replacement or qualifying term, “neo-tribalism.” One argument against the continued use of the term subculture is that it implies a homogeneous societal culture external or outside of that particular group and that all the members within the subculture meaningfully act in very rigidly or standardized way (Bennett and Peterson 2004: 3). Subculture dates back to the Chicago School and garnered attention again with the influential writings from the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s. These were watershed studies for further research focusing on leisure and popular culture. Bennett and Peterson recognize that the ideal belief in a scene is a socially intrinsic importance of a unique place or context for each identifiable phenomenon, in addition to a DIY approach to musical consumption and production (2004: 5-6). Such situations can be seen as providing amateur musicians greater agency as participatory cultural creators within these contexts as opposed to the idea of a more static

subculture. Music making is becoming more democratized with technologies accessible to the everyday popular amateur musician, thus allowing greater grassroots potential for musicians to actively create and distribute music, these technologies also aid in scene construction (2004: 4-6). Finally, Bennett and Peterson (2004) conceptual typology defines three kinds of scenes: local, trans-local and virtual. These types will be used to discern the open mic landscape and how *creator status groups* and local open mic scenes intersect.

As Will Straw (1991: 379) and Bennett and Peterson (2004: 7) have pointed out, usually another critical identifier of a scene is a particular “genre” of music. Different discourses and scenes often intersect and may share similar cultural manifestations and themes. As seen in Shank’s study on Austin, Texas, punk rock, progressive country music, liberalism and Texan culture all brought together commensurate discourses that helped formulate a unique scene. For Bennett and Peterson, if scenes coalesce or emerge within a specific geographical locale, it is a *local scene*, but typically a specific genre and “taste of music” is associated along with the identifiable practices, such as gigs, publications, other events and gatherings (2004: 8). Alan O’Connor (2002) has also made the argument for the continued salience of regional and local scenes in the day and age of globalization, suggesting a potential “hybridity” between the socio-historical forces of local cultures and global influences. *Translocal* scenes transcend the locality, when people who share interests and connections exist in many different geographic locales. *Virtual* scenes are constructed and sustained primarily through the Internet. Common to almost scenes is a unifying genre of music specifically identifiable to each musical scene, no matter which genre of scene it falls into.

An interest in the creation and distinction of scenes is common in earlier studies of musical communities and musical subcultures. David Hesmondhalgh (2005) emphasizes the potential use of the term “genre” over subculture, neo-tribes or scene to best describe the overall

relationships between, “social groups and musical styles....” (2005: 32). In this sense, genre as a concept both reflects and configures the social relations on a more semiotic axis inclusive of discourses of politics, notions of community and other representations of how these are expressed by and for the participants. Rather than choosing from a “reflection model” or a “process model,” I draw from Georgina Born’s (2000) notions to argue the viability of the “multiple articulations” of music. Musical genres both reflect social conditions and construct new ones (Hesmondhalgh 2005: 35). The genre concept has garnered recent sociological interest in shedding additional light to discerning not only cultural music making practices within particular contexts but tracing the changes overtime, too (Lena and Peterson 2008). This is certainly a viable theory as it may apply to open mics where memberships are often somewhat fluid and individualism is a deeply engrained ideology.

This qualitative study will incorporate a variety of theoretical approaches to create an analytical nexus between theory and observations. More specifically, this study will explore open mics as locations for popular musicians to *do* musicianship and musical careers through the negotiations and constructions of learning performance and practicing routines and practices. New York has an overabundance of popular musicians who use open mics at different points of their aesthetic career development for different reasons, but these open mics as musical third places sometimes coalesce into local scenes. In these particular circumstances, the open mic or the means becomes the ends or the scene because at the core of musical creation is the ceremonial ritual of performing. Individualism is a common theme and both the instrumental and expressive components synchronize in different manners in different forms of practice and performance techniques helping construct local scenes with genre hegemony in some locales and genre and population diversity in the will be called *pre-scenes* in the others.

## Methods

Drawing from Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln's (2003a: 5-6) reconceptualization and application of the researcher as an interpretive "bricoleur" this research project incorporates multiple qualitative methods and practices of interpretation. This qualitative study will construct a narrative and representative text of open mics and the musicians who play and attend them in NYC by integrating multiple methods for data collection and textual construction: direct participant observation, informal interviewing within the locales, semi-formal in-depth interviewing and content and discourse analysis. The employment of multiple methods and tools evokes the theoretical and epistemological heritage of "triangulating" the data with the explicit desire to build the best possible and valid representation or text of the events and meanings of the participants (Denzin and Lincoln 2003a: 8; Maxwell 2005: 106-114). Additional methods seeking to provide greater validity to the inscriptions and narratives within this process include strategies such as long term involvement in the field, "respondent validation" seeking "negative cases" taking "quasi-statistics" or frequencies, making comparisons (Maxwell 2005: 111), and finally, getting "rich data" from taking very detailed and thorough "thick descriptions" that Clifford Geertz brought to light in the process of "doing ethnographies" (1973: 3-30). Such thick descriptions of interactions, verbal and nonverbal, of the participants involved in the actions, while also immersing oneself in the activities within the setting, is key to valuing the actors' meanings, interactions and contextual components precedence in the narrative and text of the ethnography (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995: 1-16).

These techniques are employed to ensure a multifaceted ethnographic approach while also drawing significantly from the foundational writings of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) "grounded theory." Updated grounded theory including revisions from Adele E. Clarke (2005), a student of Strauss, has incorporated discourse and visual analysis to the original theory in order

to reflect a more complex and diverse “postmodern turn.” Many of the approaches toward generating valid and representative data are shared in the premises of grounded theory, specifically the inductive approach, thick description, seeking outlying or ‘negative’ cases, respondent input, and taking frequencies through comparative methods. These analytical processes continually develop as the researcher employs a constant comparative method, going back into the field and conducting “theoretical sampling” (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 45). Additional sampling methods such as “purposeful” or “systematic” techniques help build from the initial “convenience” samples and provide additional tools for these comparative methods to eventually build substantive and then formal theories (Maxwell 2005: 87-91). Layering and accreting these challenging techniques allows me to refine the data-driven theory partially by seeking out problematic and ambiguous links to the developing formal theory. The techniques are designed to insure representation and voice to underrepresented groups, categories and peoples within the field, because ethnographies are cultural performances and texts themselves (Denzin 2001: 98-100; Denzin and Lincoln 2003b: 626-629).

The open mic sites and events discussed here were selected from a master list, compiled and consolidated from two online websites that provide listings of open mics around the United States and in major metropolitan locations (Abbie Gardner 2007; Open Mikes 2007). A 25 mile radius was used in the search engine to compile the raw numbers of total open mics in the New York City metropolitan region. Additional suggestions by musicians in the field that had not been previously documented were added to the master list. The fieldwork spanned approximately 15 months total. I spent 13 months directly in the field attending 18 different open mic locations and events. I entered open mics on 55 different occasions adding up to 175 hours in the field supplemented by 50 plus hours in formal interviews conducted mostly at various locations outside of the open mics. Fieldwork durations at the open mics ranged in time from



two and a half hours to eight hours and the average time spent in the field observing was 4.25 hours. Of the 18 different open mics attended, four primary open mic locations, yielded the majority of the ethnographic descriptions and analytical focus, accounting for 35 observational field entries and 137 hours observing. Observing an additional 14 secondary locations helped me to solidify observed sociological patterns across all the open mics and also elucidate patterned nuances within them and across sub-categories, processes and social types.

In-depth, “semistructured interviews” (Rubin and Rubin 1995) were conducted with 21 different participants whom I encountered within the open mics settings. All but one of these participant interviewees met me at one of the four primary locations. Of the 21 interviews four were with open mic hosts and a fifth later became a host at one of the primary locations, the Knot. The remaining 16 interviewees were musicians who were observed playing an open mic at least once. These interviews ranged in time from one hour to five and a-half hours, averaging slightly over two hours. In addition to the 21 formal interviews, an additional 45 informal discussions or interviews occurred with participants within the open mic settings. Furthermore, 16 of 21 interviewees for the formal interviews also participated in these informal interviews, many of whom were regulars or workers within these four primary locales.

In all four of the primary sites, consent from the host or owner, if possible, was sought and achieved to conduct research after that particular event and location was determined to be one of the primary places. Consent was never denied. I disclosed my identity and intentions to as many participants in the locations as I could when I spent significant time at the location. I did this even though the ethical protocol in “public and open settings” (Lofland and Lofland 1995: 32-33) such as these bars, where the only requirement is to be of age to drink, is ambiguous for various reasons. In many cases, people never returned to that open mic during my fieldwork after I provided them the information sheet. Varying degrees of disclosure have been used in other

similar ethnographies on musicians in bars, too (e.g. Grazian 2003). I handed out an information sheet (Appendix A) and I solicited and addressed clarifying questions. As I spent more time developing relationships with the hosts, regular performers and with participants in the setting as a whole, my identity and research purpose was generally made known. Not all the performers or patrons knew of my research but many did by the end of my tenure at the primary locations. There were four primary locations: Bartime, Ruby's, the Knot and Namu's. At Bartime and Ruby's my identity and research was less known. Ruby's had more of a transient membership and the regulars at Bartime that were informed often demonstrated overt apathy or antipathy toward my research although the workers, including the host, were well aware of my work

Bartime presented the greatest difficulty garnering discussions and rapport not only with the performers but the host, co-host and engineer. Initially, the host and co-host were receptive, talkative and helpful but over time they became withdrawn and after numerous cancelled appointments by the co-host, stopped talking with me altogether. The performers were often standoffish and very skeptical of my intentions, on one occasion cursing me and walking off, after I handed her the information sheet and tried to explain my research. This is not to say most participants at all locations were both very surprised or that they exhibited some skepticism at my introduction, but as the fieldwork progressed, many performers especially at the OOMs warmed up and often engaged me in conversation with significant zeal, interest and helpfulness. From an autoethnographic standpoint, these experiences are certainly worth noting and symbolized the closed, exclusive in-group atmosphere that was evident in many ways at Bartime, to be discussed later. A far better response rate for interviews occurred at OOMs than COMs, a fact that embodies the general patterns of these two typologies, of which I will discuss later. Participants were much more receptive and interested in the research at these locations, some offering to give interviews even before I solicited their participation.

After gaining the trust and rapport of participants while participating in the setting, I typically broached the topic of obtaining a formal interview. I regularly offered to buy or purchase lunch, dinner or a coffee and also to travel to accommodate the scheduling and geographical needs of each potential interviewee. When we had agreed upon a formal interview and I met with the interviewee, I presented an additional consent form, which included consent to tape the interview and potentially take photographs of the musician at the open mic. Of the 38 who initially agreed to an interview and exchanged phone numbers or emails, 21 interviews were completed and all but two were conducted outside of the open mic settings. I made a concerted effort to ensure underrepresented and historically disenfranchised groups were adequately represented in the interviews. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter V where I focus on the biographies of these musicians.

An analysis of documents tracing the historical development of the open mic format through its incarnation in the NYC of today will help contextualize my work and mark the beginning of this ethnography. Connecting today's open mic patterns to past and contemporary musical performance activities and performance collectives will also help illuminate the cultural and historical trajectories of the open mic narrative within American culture. A discourse analysis of the biographies and narratives provided from the musicians in the interviews will provide depth and breadth to the aesthetic careers of these musicians and the roles open mics play within them. Examinations of the utterances used by performers specifically on-stage during their performances at the open mic setting will facilitate discussion of the contextual framing and overall blending of performance practices and practicing practices.

A significant amount of research has been devoted to the relational importance between visual discourses, cognition, economies of power and social meanings (Berger 1972; Sturken and Cartwright 2001). Recent qualitative scholarship (e.g. Henderson 1999) has emphasized the

profound importance of analyzing material cultural objects as part and partial of “visual discourse” (Clarke 2005: 206-208) and other sociological components in qualitative research. To address these concerns, I collected flyers, pamphlets and other materials offered or freely available at the sites in order to analyze them as culturally material artifacts or ‘objects’ relevant to these open mics and the participants. In addition, I sought permission for to take photographic images within the settings of those who participated in the in-depth, formal interviews; most participants granted permission. I made no auditory tapes of musical performances. A few self-produced CDs were offered by musicians and gratefully accepted; however, the musicological analysis in this project is kept to genre descriptions and labels, and I do not venture into compositional questions. This is not to say such a project in the future is not worth pursuing, as multi-method, interdisciplinary approaches become increasingly used and valuable but I do not pursue this line of inquiry here because of time and space limitations.

## CHAPTER II

### THE OPEN MIC AND NEW YORK CITY

#### Historical and Cultural Antecedents

In 2006, the film *Tenacious D and the Pick of Destiny* humorously introduces the open mic as a musical forum for expression to many viewers in American popular culture. It gave a very light hearted account of how performances are not just compositionally musical. The film's relatively simple plot centers on an experienced but unemployed rock guitarist mentoring and "training" another musician, played by Jack Black, on how to act and perform as a rock musician both on and off-stage. This training includes a "gig simulator" to test the young mentee's wherewithal in the pressure cooker of a gig. At its inception the mentor and judge proclaimed "If you pass this test, your training will be complete," and he can then "try out" for his band if he passes. After a pizza delivery guy is invited into the apartment converted concert venue, the mentee hesitantly quibbles, "I would rather not do it in front of strangers." At this, the mentor questions Jack Black's character, "What do you think it's going to be like when we play the Coliseum? No strangers allowed?" After failing miserably and smashing his guitar in a "power slide" gone badly the mentor comforts him by saying "Nobody passes the gig simulator in the first time."

Eventually, Jack Black's character uncovers the highly overstated claim that his mentor is a rock star to be a lie. In order to pay their shared overdue rent they decide to attend an open mic contest and "play their first concert" even though it consists of only one song. After accidentally finding out about a magical guitar pick that transformed regular musicians into musical gods in the past, the two set out on an archetypical quest to seek the "pick of destiny." They hope to obtain the pick so they can "write a masterpiece" in order to win the next week's

“open mic competition.” The discourse constructing and defining the open mic narrative has traveled a long, circuitous and relatively secret path by the time it was parodied in this mainstream film and its mainly younger audiences. As the name suggests, open mics have gone from radio based talk formats and political call-in shows to the more recent comedic, poetic and musical forums for performance. These formally little-known, once unknown phenomena are located where higher concentrations of musicians and artists live and are increasingly flourishing as events for socio-musical practice. Open mics are also spreading beyond the United States into other countries and cultures around the world. Although most open mics are not officially deemed competitions, comparisons do occur between performers and between different open mic settings in New York City. The open mic may be new to many in the pop cultural world, but it has—and will continue to have—a salient and growing institutional position within musician communities for years to come.

The historical narrative of the open mic is multifaceted, complex and born from a few culturally discursive trajectories. An analysis (Barker and Galasinski 2001; Clarke 2005) of the term’s history can help provide a cultural contextualization and basis for today’s open mics. The *musical* open mic has some musical genealogical roots in other western socio-musical events and happenings; in America, three ancestors to the open mic are the “hoedown”, the “hootenanny” and the “jam session.” The hoedown was a socio-musical event in early Anglo-American folk music. Simply, an ensemble of musical players with different or overlapping instruments typically alternated playing in an impromptu and improvisational sequence, where instrumentation and song composition was somewhat fluid. These socio-musical events usually coincided and catalyzed community get-togethers that also included dancing and food rituals (Abrahams and Foss 1968).

Also, important was the hootenanny. Evidence suggests the term's genesis was much earlier with different semantic meanings than the musical practice which likely began in the early 40s in Seattle (Wilgus 1965; Wright 1966). The named musical activity didn't socially spread and coagulate until the folk revival of the late 1950s and 60s. The event increasingly occurred at coffeehouses and college campuses and its practitioner and participants were mostly young white musicians who came together to play music collectively. The hootenanny, "...showcased group traditionalism in its purest form" (Forcucci 1984: 231). The ensemble composition also fluctuated in terms of member participation, similar to the hoedown, allowing for fluid boundaries for playing and extended membership and longer periods of playing (Forcucci 1984). This latter point is worth noting as it is important for the hoedown, the hootenanny and the jam session; because of the somewhat fluid membership of the event by musicians over the course of the performance, the actual playing could continue for many hours (Wilson 1982).

The jam session constructed and ritualized mainly within the African American jazz community predated the hootenanny and likely had some influence on the hootenanny and the open mic. As William Bruce Cameron describes it, the jam session is an, "informal, but traditionally structured association of a small number of self-selected musicians who come together for the primary purpose of playing music which they choose purely in accordance with their own aesthetic standards and without any regard for the standards of the buying public..."(1954: 177-178). The jam session is characterized by the individuals submitting themselves to the whims of the group, while simultaneously demonstrating personal competence of improvisation and virtuosity.

These three historical socio-musical events are worth noting within the larger narrative of American musical collective rituals that have materialized outside of a formalized booking,

concert or club gig. They all share some degree of musical improvisation, collective focus of song composition and fluid participant membership. Their relevance here is how these traditions partially defied the traditional ideas of performance with a static collectivity before a set audience as a primary *raison d'être* and also helped produce newer forms of musical performance. As Ruth Finnegan (2007) outlines, the composition of music typically occurs in three ideally typical ways. The first is the “classical mode” when a musical performance is based in a “prior written composition.” Historically, this has been thought to be the most “natural” means of composition (2007: 160-161), but as scholars know today, this never truly existed because the interpretive process of musical compositions during the musical performance always occurs. The second type is the “rock mode of collective prior construction.” As implied this is also based in the temporal separation of composition and performance. The performers collectively compose the music in a preceding period prior to the performance event and then reinterpret this upon the performance (2007: 167). The third type is “composition-in-performance.” This is when composition and performance are a dialectical co-constructed by multiple performers *in situ*. Each member draws from previously learned knowledge of musicological structures, traditions and themes to help interactively construct the music in that particular moment. Improvisation occurs but pulls from a “storehouse of material” to do so (2007: 165-166). Jazz and jam sessions are often the quintessential example of the latter type, but hoedowns and hootenannies fall into this general category as well. These three forms of composition occur at open mics, some more than others in certain locations. This is one of many distinguishing differences across and within the open mics.

Musical production by different forms of collective and socio-musical groups ventures into a culturally DIY landscape today where discursive practices of popular music production and consumption collide and enmesh. More precisely, there are three recent cultural phenomena



that embody a newer breed in participatory consumption of music. These newer activities open up opportunities for non-musicians to simulate the roles and performances of professional popular musicians. These three very popular activities are karaoke, the network television show, *American Idol* and the more recent video game fad, *Guitar Hero*. Karaoke should be addressed first for multiple reasons including chronology of creation and its implicitly influential undertones through these other two pop cultural fads. These phenomena are pertinent because they share and signify important discursive, ideological and cultural themes in this research project including: the growth of DIY, participatory culture (e.g. Drew 2002; Tepper and Gao 2008: 41), the negotiation of notions of artistic authenticity (e.g. Grazian 2003; Fine 2004), the blending of cultural production and consumption (e.g. Jenkins and Bertozzi 2008) and negotiations of musical performance and practicing (e.g. Aldredge 2006).

Karaoke originated in Japan in the 1970s. Taken up in the 1980s by upper middle class and white collar “salary men” primarily, karaoke subsequently diffused into American and western cultures. It was initially embraced by the middle and working class on the suburban fringes of cities like NYC and Philadelphia in the early 1990s (Drew 2005: 375-376). Not until the late 1990s did the urban, upper middle class of big cities begin to appropriate Karaoke with an ironic and parodying twist. Drew (2004) drawing on Goffman’s concept of “breaking frame” (Goffman [1974] 1986: 359) has argued that irony coupled with laughter allowed participants to act in roles not consistent with who they believed they were and this helped usher in another new hip “anyone can do it” form of musical consumption. This musical ethos is not new but has discursively drawn from the folk revival of the 1960s and the punk DIY of the 1970s and 80s. (Drew 2004: 76). The “karaoke scenes” (Drew 2004) which center on the musical rituals of karaoke have not been equally accepted by all. For instance, bohemian “indie” listening hipsters who still maintain the modernist notions of authenticity, the creative genius, and originality as

always trumping cover songs, hold karaoke in low regard an attitude exemplified by the paucity of hip indie songs performed during karaoke by these groups (Drew 2005: 378-79).

Unlike karaoke which allows anyone including those without musical training or acumen to participate, *American Idol* requires the hopeful amateur to have some musical knowledge and background to successfully make the show. *American Idol* was imported from Britain and began on a major America's television network in 2002. It has been a wondrous success from its cultural introduction. An interactive, less passive television program, in encourages adolescent viewers to call in and cast votes, quasi-democratically, to determine if a performing singer wins and moves on to another round of musical performance competition. Now watched weekly by over 25 million viewers, *American Idol* incorporates musical performance and consumerist participation with competition (Price 2003; Frere-Jones 2008). It should not be overlooked how this teaches and influences teen and young adults about performance "idealization" (Goffman 1959: 34), and aesthetic musical conceptions. Thompson (2007) has argued how *American Idol* could beneficially be used as a pedagogical tool to help students critique and refine musical performance techniques and skills. In addition, *American Idol* is another example of how mass media is becoming increasingly participatory in the consumption and reception practices on the American cultural landscape. Unlike karaoke which creates an affective and meaningful connection between the participants, *American Idol* contestants participate with a more competitive mode.

A newer brand of video game allows non-musicians to experience simulating the playing of a guitar or other instruments in a rock band but for competition. *Guitar Hero*, a blockbuster interactive guitar simulation game released in 2007 and its rival game, *Rock Band*, have created a new breed of musical participatory consumerist game modules. Simply, these are video games with a crude facsimile of a guitar that is played along with a popular song, usually rock and a

video that is programmed into the game's memory. If the player hits the right buttons on the plastic hand-held guitar during the song that is prompted on the screen he or she accumulates points with the ultimate goal of becoming a "guitar hero." An increasing number of bars are now offering weekly "Guitar Hero Nights" to attract patrons on habitually slow nights to actively participate in what some have called "the new Karaoke night" (Zezima 2007). One industry person called this burgeoning game phenomenon a part of the "rhythm music genre" of entertainment. One musicologist recently suggested that game participation helps contradict the hierarchical notion of the rock guitar star by making these images and idealizations more obtainable and thus potentially more feasible for those typically daunted by such unobtainable prospects (Walker 2007).

The cultural impact of Guitar Hero is demonstrated in new scientific applications. One recent study (Shreeve 2008) conducted by a music charity in the UK indicated a sizable number of youth have taken up real instruments as a consequence of playing the game while other researchers have begun using it as a method for healing physiological ailments (Boston 2008). As Guitar Hero and its counterparts, like the even less popular and more eccentric "Air Guitar World Championship" (Carlozo 2007) spread around the country and world, it symbolizes and influences a larger cultural discourse combining participatory consumerism, amateurism, competition, and musical practices and performance. Although these popular, mass cultural practices and spectacles center on bringing musical performance and production-oriented practices closer to non-musician consumers, they share on the larger discursive plane, the aforementioned cultural characteristics with the open mic. They also have temporal parallels, having exploded since the late 1990s when open mics were beginning to take off at unprecedented levels and spread across the American cultural landscape, as demonstrated in the

next section. The 1990s saw the open mics popping up in mostly urban settings where karaoke, Guitar Hero nights and air guitar competitions have recently begun to flourish.

### **Semantic Genesis and Development**

The term “open mike” dates historically to radio stations in the early to mid-twentieth century and various programming formats that allowed laypeople the opportunity to talk or discuss matters of public interest (New York Times 1928). By the 1940s around the period of WWII, the federal government was formally warning radio stations and broadcasters to stifle these types of opportunities:

*An open microphone accessible to the general public constitutes a very real hazard in times of war. Questions should be prepared and approved in advance, and extreme care should be exercised to avoid the asking of questions which would draw out information of value to the enemy. Any question regarding the war or war production might make trouble (New York Times 1941)*

The next month the Director of Censorship in the United States forbade a variety of radio programs based on their commonly shared “public accessibility to an open microphone” (New York Times 1942: 30). Open mike formats returned to New York by at least 1950, when listings in the *New York Times* for radio open mikes reappeared (New York Times 1950). The open mike format took off in the 1950s with the help of the post-war economy and the beginnings of the automobile-centric lifestyle. Gaffes in front of the microphone (Grusons 1959), or the speaker not knowing the mic was still “live” (New York Times 1951) became noticeable features of open mics, demonstrating the difficulties of improvisational, unscripted performances, which left little room for error.

Radio open mikes became more overtly political during the politically and socially turbulent period of the 1960s (New York Times 1966), and consequently, raised salient issues of access, free speech and censorship (Gould 1969). These public forums allowed listeners to call-

in and express their views to the DJ and other listeners. Such forums were increasingly viewed as a nascent way of democratizing media. They would provide a medium to those who felt disenfranchised or lacking a voice to express their disgruntled or critical perceptions of the civic and public world around them (Crittenden 1971). One open mike in particular, as studied in the late 1960s, was viewed as relatively positive in its democratic contributions to the community because it could "...stimulate political communication and formulate political issues to some degree" (1971: 210); although the author cautioned a potential for inducing and reaffirming conformity, its overall contributions to educate the public who listened outweighed the negative consequences. Other early uses of the term have been found in political events such as one feminist protest on a college campus, the calendar of events noted that at one rally "...programs will include speakers, guerilla theater and an open microphone" (*Off Our Backs* 1971).

As to where and when the term "open mike" and later the altered abbreviation, "open mic", first emerged to represent a musical, spoken word, poetic or comedic event, is difficult to pinpoint with absolute certainty. Possibly the first journalistic recording of the words "open mike" in New York was in an 1895 edition of the *New York Times* when apparently, "Smith stopped at the door [of a tavern] and called, 'Are you open, Mike?' and received an answer in the affirmative" (The New York Times 1895: 15). The first musical reference is included in a 1978 *New York Times* article on folk music events in Hartford, Connecticut. It explicitly, but briefly mentions that a "...open mike session for budding ballad singers..." would be available, and put on by the Greater Harford Folk Music Society (Sherman 1978: CN12).

Subsequently, a listing of an "open mike format" appears in *The Globe and Mail*, a nationally distributed Toronto, Canada based newspaper. This advertisement in October of 1978 encourages people to "bring yer geeter [sic]" to a "coffee house" implying the weekly format was inclusive of music if not musically exclusive (Conlogue 1978a, 1978b). The Hobbit Hole a

bar that catered to jazz and folk music in Selden, New York provides the next chronological reference with the weekly “open mike” on Tuesdays for “aspiring performers” (Lippincott 1979). In Washington, D.C. a comedy club began an “open mike/amateur night” (Brozo 1979) on Thursdays in 1979 and a *Boston Globe* article in January of 1980 particularly described an event for comedy exclusively (Morse 1980). Brief advertisements for a jazz open mike in Washington, D.C. in 1980 (Latimer 1980) and an “open mike session” during the Kansas City Women’s Jazz Festival in the Spring of 1981 (Duncan 1981), indicate that open mics began mostly within the genres of folk, jazz and comedy, though it would later be appropriated by different genres and performance styles. In December of 1981, another article in the *Boston Globe* describes a club that has a weekly “open-mike night for comedians and bands for all persuasions” (Santosuosso 1981).

The 1980 *New York Times* article “Reliving the ‘Golden Years’ of Folk Music,” observed that, “Folk music is in the air again. One can hear it in the playing of the street-corner guitarists and in Washington Square Park where once again blues singers and ‘old timey’ bands are converging” (Marks 1980). Bringing together the lingering folk traditions of the 60s with a new generation’s interpretations on the musical genre as “singer-songwriters” the neo-folk revival was most prominent at some of the folk mainstays in Greenwich Village. As of 1980, one of those mainstays, the Folk City bar in Greenwich Village, had a weekly Monday night “open hootenanny” (Palmer 1980). By 1982, the musically oriented “Open Mike-Hootenanny” with a slightly altered event title, but at the same bar was inscribed again into newspaper history. The event was characterized as an “open audition” that sometimes led to the musician obtaining a 30 minute slot on the “Sunday afternoon new songwriter’s showcase” (Palmer 1982).

Oral histories provided by participants suggest this open mike possibly began a few years earlier. Although no earlier public record of the open mike by name prior to this has been

found, a weekly hootenanny began at the bar in the early 1960s and lasted for many years. The bar, officially Gerde's Folk City Bar, had opened initially as a coffeehouse in the 1950s and was the location of Bob Dylan's first few professional gigs in 1961 (Shelton 1961; *New York Times* 1987). The owners began booking folk music in 1960 and by 1961 it was called Gerde's Folk City and they had also begun a new weekly ritual created to bring in more people where "professionals and amateurs play[ed] at the Monday night Hootenannies" (Millstein 1961). Hootenannies had become the folk rage in Greenwich Village and across the country by 1963. Robert Shelton, the journalist known for helping start Bob Dylan's career with his first written concert review, characterized hootenannies as the "folk music Jam session" (Shelton 1963). There is some anecdotal evidence that other early 60s hootenannies in Greenwich Village, held at Café Wha? and The Bitter End, also had comedians perform at least occasionally (Bennet 1974). As a whole, this represents a much tighter discursive and cultural connection between not only 60s folk hootenannies and the rise of open mike in the late 1970s, but the cultural and organizational connections between jazz jam sessions, hootenannies and open mikes.

As described in other articles, the Folk City Open-Mike Hootenanny would attract people from long distances, some from out of state, to attend and play this event "for eight minutes." By 1985, the participants would mainly include "...singers, and comedians, musicians and mimics." These performers would sign in as they arrive and were given numbers that were drawn from a hat, which would assign their position in the long line of performers. Some would wait "four or five hours before getting on stage" with no forthcoming payment of their performance. This "hoot" was run by an owner who had "launched the careers of many singers, including Bob Dylan and Arlo Guthrie." It was noted as a place where musicians play that could potentially "be stepping stones to greater recognition and bigger shows" (Hazarika 1985).

By the late 1980s musical open mikes were flourishing in other cities like Washington, D.C. (Stevenson 1988) and comedy clubs were regularly having open mikes even in smaller cities like Cincinnati, Ohio (Coulter 1988). By the early 90s musical open mikes had spread to most other major cities across the country, especially those with larger musician populations. By 1991 one article speculated fifty places in Chicago offered weekly open mikes (Justin 1991), but open mics really didn't take off until the late 1990s and early part of the new millennium with newer genres being integrated into the format such as hip-hop (McRoberts 2001) and opera (Zimmerman 2007). The latter half of the 1990s also brought in similar musical forums called "writers' circles" that appeared across major cities in the United States, including a "Songwriter Series" at a club in New York. These writers' circles were monthly events for acoustic singer/songwriter musicians to come together and share and work on music. The Songwriter's Series in New York included "panel discussions and guest speakers" from workers from the music industry and previously recorded musicians discussing possible recording projects (Flick 1998).

An intriguing article in *New York* magazine on a specific open mic described how an "anti-folk scene" in an East Village bar was constructed; however, as seen in the Folk City articles, many of these artists were potentially "auditioning for the rest of the week" with the hopes of developing a steady gig at the bar (Kihn 1994). The anti-folk scene, born sometime in the mid 1980s, left an indelible mark on the musical landscape of New York City and had a lasting influence on the open mic landscape, too. According to the media and community narratives, a pivotal figure by the name of Latch struggled against the strict genre definitions of the traditional folk music that was hegemonic in Greenwich Village (e.g. Folk City, Speakeasy, The Bitter End) eventually sparked a new genre (Verna 1991) that infused a Punk Rock ethic, ethos and sound to folk music. Other mid twenty-something "rebels" felt blocked and



admonished by the older, more traditional folk performers and clubs for their irreverent variant of Folk music, so they relocated under the tutelage of Latch and found solace and a more receptive location (Kot 1989). Vital to this genre and scene are the weekly “Anti-hoot” open mics at the “Anti-folk headquarters” at the Sidewalk Café in the East Village. Often referred to as the “Fort” this anti-hoot and the anti-folk bastion helped this particular kind of music create a niche within the NYC musical fabric, especially with the help of an annual ritual (i.e. New York Anti-Folk Festival), a growing mystique and lore around budding musical stars (e.g. Beck, Michelle Shocked, Moldy Peaches, Regina Spektor) and a musical label (Bush 1996). This rise of edgier interpretations of folk music in the late 80s also occurred in other places like Los Angeles (Hochman 1989) and would also build the foundations for more variants like the alternative country musical genre in the mid to late 90s. Another recently named genre called “urban folk” has joined other genre permutations but they all have been connected to anti-folk musical genre of the recent past (Light 2007).

Performance poetry took off during the early to mid 1980s as well, likely riding on the coattails of these earlier open mikes. This “revival” of poetry was noted across multiple cities including Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York; other cities may have experienced a development of similar performance poetry scenes as well (Green 1986). Other performance types had a more sardonic and satirical approach. The “poetry slams” that were born from a Chicago bar in 1985 (Echlin 2003) or 1986 (Gehring 2005) depending upon who you read, have contributed to this ostensibly ongoing democratic emancipation of different forms of artistic expression from the hands of a select few elite. Poetry slams are open to anyone to recite poetry and then be criticized, usually with a bit of satire, by ad hoc chosen judges. “Slam poetry” along with “spoken word” has proliferated and spread all over the country to most major urban centers

recently spawning new “teams” from the United States and England competing against each other (Gehring 2005).

According to the widely used website, [openmikes.org](http://openmikes.org) (2008) open mikes are flourishing at an unprecedented rate today. As mentioned, NYC had estimated 110-120 public locations with working open mics listed within a twenty-five mile radius of the city as of November 2008. Very few locations had multiple open mics on different days of the week but those establishments were only counted once. Many open mics have been discontinued, with an estimated 110-120 actually still running, making this list an estimation in representing the actual number of working open mics. With that in mind, other cities’ numbers should likely be reduced proportionately. For a comparison to other metropolitan areas around the United States, Chicago had 118 listed on the same website as did Boston (106), Philadelphia (91), Los Angeles (82), Seattle, Washington (62), Atlanta, Georgia (40), Miami, Florida (37), San Francisco (35), Denver, Colorado (30) and Austin, Texas (29). Clearly, a sizeable number of open mics persist mainly concentrated in urban and “college town” settings where there are larger numbers of young musicians, artists, poets, comedians and other creative types. It may be obvious but it’s also worth noting that a significantly higher concentration appears in the metropolitan and urban settings in the northeast, on the west coast and in Chicago. These geographic concentrations possibly correlate with the rise of the “creative industries” (Caves 2000) and “creative class” (Florida 2002) in certain cities, often concentrated in these regions of the country as well.

### **New York City, the Creative Class, and Third Places**

The growing human consumption of a diversity of culturally expressive objects, such as music, food, art and fashion has fueled the growth of what Sharon Zukin termed the “symbolic economy” (1997: 2). The symbolic economy is a cultural symbol-based system that

distinguishes, separates and excludes certain groups and categories of people from others. Although there is a financial element to the symbolic economy, emotions play a role in its creation as well; civic pride and philanthropy coupled with capitalistic entrepreneurship help shape a city's cultural landscape. Cultural producers, such as artists or musicians, are critical to this process. Zukin argues that this process has much to do with the "reframing" of cultural and urban space, including strategies such as historical preservation and redevelopment of space, which artists often play an essential role in facilitating. Gentrification, often embodied in the spatial (re)construction of lofts and galleries (Zukin 1989), is one process by which the city reframes and reconstitutes an urban landscape and distinguishes it from other places, like the suburbs, which are often devalued for being homogeneous, inauthentic and standardized (1997: 1-24).

Gentrification has led to the increasing commodification of cities for specific symbolic "niches" of consumption particularly for specific socio-economic and cultural groups like today's "creative class" (Bishop 2008: 135). A few select cities have recently been deemed "superstar cities" (Gyourko 2006), such as NYC, Los Angeles or Seattle, where the locations are super-products for the rising and powerful creative class. Those migrating into these cities have increasingly defied former "economic precepts" by moving into more expensive locales where they will likely earn less compared to where they originated (Bishop 2008: 152). They move primarily for cultural reasons often seeking environments and people of similar lifestyles and politics, amongst other "pulling" factors (Bishop 2008: 196-202). Only three of these super star cities in the U.S., however, have almost limitless depth and breadth of the production and organizational industry surrounding the creative class and they are New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Florida and Mellander's (2008) preliminary statistical analysis found a high concentration or migratory "clustering" of musicians in fewer urban locations in the United

States. According to their analysis, "...the dominance of New York is striking, followed by Chicago and Las Angeles" (2008: 7). Noting the increasingly migratory trends of Americans, musicians are also migrating and they are concentrating in a few select cities. Florida and Jackson's demographic tracking of "musicians and music groups from 1970 to 2004" (2009: 3-5) and the overall music industry found that a much higher concentration within a consolidated number of cities. NYC, Los Angeles and Nashville lead the country by far (2009: 15). As Mark (1998) and Florida and Jackson (2009) point out, "medium based clusters or colonies" (2009: 8) representing different genres and subcultures develop within the larger musical urban landscape of the city creating a large potential patchwork of local scenes within the larger geographical urban scene of the city (2009: 8-9). As Currid (2007) mentions, place is important in "branding" cultural goods like music scenes and that manifests either in large urban settings or smaller "inde" scenes. These few major urban cities are uniquely different from the other cities. These major cities are even greater magnets for culturally creative producers, whether they work in fashion, music, theater or film, as *creative producer cities*.

To backtrack, by the 1950s, New York City was well on its way to becoming the new cultural hub and epicenter for the art worlds in the United States and western culture as a whole. As the nineteenth-century witnessed the radical transformation from a production-oriented economy and culture to a consumption-oriented one, New York increasingly saw the concentration of various cultural and media industries and highly valued cultural institutions, such as museums, operas, symphonies and other high cultural organizations. In addition to such "high culture" institutions, popular media and culture, ranging from television networks, Broadway performances, dance companies, art galleries, film organizations, the concentration of publishing companies, MTV, fashion industry, and record companies have also worked to elevate New York City to an unrivaled position in the United States, followed closely by Los

Angeles. A burgeoning population of cultural producers came along with the growth of these institutions and industries and the city itself began to realize the importance of the culture industries working in earnest to reshape and rework the city into a welcoming environment to artists, musicians and other cultural producers (Zukin 1997: 109-118; Currid 2007). If New York City is not knowingly crowned “cultural capital” of the United States by others, it has easily crowned itself.

In 2008, the non-profit agency that focuses on Americans for the Arts organization released a series of statistical and demographic analyses of various artistic-oriented businesses in the United States. In their attempt to better understand, delineate and discern the importance of “creative industries” on the macro-economic landscape of the United States, the Americans for the Arts organization released various reports with a geographical mapping orientation. More precisely, these reports looked at the creative industries across different creative fields (e.g. Museums & Collections, Performing Arts, Visual Arts, Film, Radio and TV) across states, cities, congressional districts, and counties. What pertains mostly to this study is the performing arts industry that includes musical groups, recording studios, concert management, instrument distribution, and composing and arrangement businesses, to name a few. According to the report by city, New York City easily ranks first in the number of creative industries with 26,714 “art businesses” employing 229,579 people. For comparative reasons the following cities rounded out the top 10 in descending order in terms of the number of listed businesses: Los Angeles (18,160), Chicago (6,263) and Houston (5,242), San Francisco (4,837), San Diego (4,432), Dallas (4,297), Seattle (4,065), Austin (2,813), and Phoenix (2,796). (Americans for the Arts 2008: 8).

Considered a truism but the NEA recently statistically confirmed that professional artists live and work disproportionately in urban areas and more than 20 percent of all artists live in one

of the following five major metropolitan areas: Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Washington, DC and Boston (2008:1). An estimated 140,620 artists lived in Los Angeles according to the 2000 census, while 132,990 claimed residence in New York City. The following cities in descending order, which were drastically lower in raw numbers, were Chicago, Washington, DC, Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Atlanta, respectively (Gaquin 2008: 13-15). California and New York have the two largest populations of professional musicians, but the highest proportions per capital are in Tennessee and Hawaii (2008:30). Although some of this doesn't immediately illuminate grassroots musical production and performances in public open mics, it helps contextualize the open mic landscape in New York City and the rise of open mics as a new musical third place and forum for musical production and performance negotiations. New York City remains a cultural epicenter and hub for the cultural and creative industries that are inextricably tied to the larger musical city scene, landscape and economy (Currid 2007). It appears the cities with the largest creative businesses also typically have the highest amount of open mics, with a few exceptions.

In Richard Florida's (2002) thesis on the emerging "creative class", the cities in the Northeastern corridor comprised a substantial geographically regional concentration of this wider class, besides other places, that musicians would fall into. This is far from new, though. New York City has long been a cultural mecca for creative oriented and more precisely, bohemian artistic types. Greenwich Village had long been considered a bohemian enclave going back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century. The modern development of bohemian lifestyles and the social coagulation and concentration of a community these artistic and eccentric types generated in the early and mid-nineteen-century Paris. Immortalized and potentially revitalized by many artists such as in Puccini's opera *La Bohème* (1896) or George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), the rise of bohemia would spread across Western Europe and into

the United States as immigration and new ideas proliferated and spread simultaneously. A cultural and discursive product of a variety of narratives such as the “libertine” ethos that came from the lineage of the Salons of eighteenth century France, the growth of the American “Aesthete” in the late nineteenth century coupled with the growth of the modern urban landscape began ushering in a new mantra and creative subculture that began to separate itself from the industrial world (Stansell 2000: 17-20).

In New York, much of this burgeoning group developed initially in the Lower East Side where Jewish poets, intellectuals and writers formed and discussed the works of, for example, Walt Whitman, Émile Zola and the artworks of Édouard Manet and Édgar Degas (Kotynek and Cohassey 2008: 32-38). Greenwich Village’s subsequent rise and revered status as this new American bohemia has been chronicled by many, including Caroline Ware’s ([1935] 1994) descriptions of the “Villagers”, Jane Jacobs [1993] (1961) in her opus *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Ned Polsky’s “The Village Beat Scene: Summer 1960” [1967] (1998) and others more recently, such as Mitchell Duneier’s *Sidewalk* (1999) and Richard Lloyd who in an ethnography on a “neo-bohemian” neighborhood in Chicago characterized Greenwich Village as the “proto-Bohemia of the United States cultural history” (2006: 90).

Music slowly made its cultural integration into the expressively oriented bohemian enclave and lifestyle. The initial rise of bebop jazz in the 1940s was overwhelmingly a New York City phenomenon under the tutelage of rising jazz greats Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk. This cultural genre of unorthodox musical improvisations frequently spawned ‘jam sessions’ and became an avant-garde movement that slowly made its geographical way down from Harlem to midtown and into Greenwich Village, where the intellectuals and artists had long been ensconced. These eccentric beat writers, such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, found a musical companion to their socially and politically

sympathetic esoteric prose and poetry in the apex of the modern, mid-nineteenth century. As time evolved and the beat turned beatnik and the Village became an increasingly popular destination for college students, intellectuals and coffee house entrepreneurs, the area's demand made it more difficult for the bohemians of working class stature to remain living there (Kotynek and Cohassey 2008: 155-177), but that failed to stop most from still coming, gathering and socializing in the area.

A more dissonant brand of compositions starting in the 1950s by the likes of John Cage, began a newer era of musical methods and marginalities sharing compositional lineage with jazz and also influencing jazz. Drawing from the ideas of Dadaism, the developing "free jazz" of Ornette Coleman and Charles Mingus, the "cosmic" free jazz of John Coltrane, a growing esoteric explosion in popular music was occurring within the bohemian worlds of New York, influencing even classical composers like Leonard Bernstein and folk musicians like Bob Dylan. The bohemia of Greenwich and later the East Village, saw other musically influential performers such as Andy Warhol and Lou Reed's venture, the Velvet Underground, and Jimi Hendrix who was "found" playing Café Wha? still operating in the heart of the district on MacDougal Street today. Jazz and more precisely, the works and style of Miles Davis, had a major influence on Jimi's Hendrix's musical techniques. Jazz's influence on the rising hippie counterculture of the 60s and the rock 'n roll that accompanied it, didn't stop with Jimi, making notable marks on the Grateful Dead, Frank Zappa, Neal Young and the Allman Brothers (2008: 178-189).

The revisiting of American folk music in New York harks back to the days of the early to mid-twentieth century. Musicians like the relocated and older Lead Belly and Woody Guthrie, and the younger rising stars in the Weavers and Pete Seeger all played uniquely important roles in this "folk revival," with the help of Moses Asch's Folkway Records in Manhattan. New York's Washington Square Park, at the heart of Greenwich was one of just a few early important



cultural spaces for these socio-musical movements and it's no surprise that it reappeared as such in the 1980s. After World War II, when many of these folk musicians relocated to New York, they infused another wave of youthful, hip and creative ethos into the already existing bohemia of Greenwich Village (Leland 2004: 69) They would lead the pack into these collective folk "hootenannies" that really took off in the late 50s and early 60s as already exemplified. This laid the social and cultural ground for the imminent New York and American icons such as Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs and Joan Baez that found coffeehouses and cafes, as would others, as fertile public locations for musical sessions and events (Carlin 2008: 183-208).

Finally, the mid 1970s ushered in another pivotal rock genre. Putting aside the never ending debate as to "where" Punk Rock first cropped up, London or New York, the East Village undoubtedly housed two very important venues to the inception and growth of this marginalizing musical counterculture. CBGB's and Max's Kansas City (just north of the Village on Park Avenue) planted the seeds and featured the soon to be revolutionary sounds of bands like the Ramones, Patti Smith, Television, Talking Heads and Blondie (McNeil and McCain 1996; Beeber 2006). The rise of the punk movement in NYC would have a concentrated cultural influence throughout the East Village and Lower East Side. This hardened, more in-your face bohemianism and subcultural paradigm also included punk influenced "class" and squatters riots (Moynihan 2008) that transformed the East Village and the Bowery, already a long-time haven for deviant behavior.

Although the more quirky, kitsch bohemian elements that distinguish the neighborhood from others partially remain, the radicalism has waned. In recent years the neighborhood transformed significantly due to the gentrification. Although coined much earlier by John Irwin (1977: 66) referencing a "post hippie" who moderated overtime politically or culturally, a similar but different meaning is conjured by a satirizing critic calling a new upper class of pseudo

bohemians, “Bobos” (Brooks 2001) or “bourgeois bohemians.” Both Lloyd (2006: 100) and Florida (2002: 225-226) point out the cultural significance and critical role “third places” play in the rise of bohemian communities, districts and lifestyle enclaves. These third places, such as cafes, taverns or bookstores, have historically provided publically open locations for social interactions and intermingling amongst the community members. They also lead partially to the blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure. Reiterating many of the now almost trite sociological observations of the Fin de Siècle and the twentieth century, Ray Oldenburg (1999) reminds us that this modern era brought in a flurry of cultural and social changes, unprecedented in cultural history. Suburbanization, fragmentation, atomization, greater social isolation and a decline of public life have been increasingly omnipresent throughout the rise of modernity. The social realm which is the basis of community, for Oldenburg, resides outside of the other two spheres of modern institutional life: the domestic and occupational spheres. These “third places” of varying forms have provided a means of satisfying the social needs of communities and have existed as far back as preliterate societies and the obvious examples in the Greek “agora” and Roman “forums.” Even though they existed in the latter half of the twentieth century in larger quantities, their impact, inclusion and size decreased in western cultures overtime (1999: 3-19). Today they range from coffeehouses, cafes, and bookstores to taverns, main streets and pubs.

The third place is a “neutral ground” where life’s difficulties, stressors and anxieties can be relieved, at least temporarily, away from the other two spheres, work and one’s domestic situation. Voluntary membership and entrance requirements are inclusive and minimal, acting as a social “leveler” according to Oldenburg. Conversation, pleasure and entertainment are a *sine quo non* of the third place. Typically, these locales keep long hours, have a fluid daily membership and generally keep a fluid schedule in terms of activities. Regulars are ubiquitous in each third place, and are often characterized as giving each place unique charm and character,

but newcomers and strangers come, go, and stay as well. These third places keep a “low profile” but are playful at their social core, distinguishing their temporal expectations from the domestic and occupational spheres. Finally, third places, as Oldenburg describes, provide the “roots” people need socially and can potentially heal, albeit temporarily, the psychological and emotional issues one suffers in the two other spheres (1999: 20-41).

Oldenburg explores these third places as to the patterned personal benefits they provide individuals who attend and participate in the activities of the locale. In contrast to the often boring routine and everyday drudgery in the workplace, third places provide rich, diverse populations in an informal, often somewhat unpredictable and novel way compared to the other spheres of life. Modern bureaucracies have increasingly pushed people into more compartmentalized and specialized positions lacking communication with people who are different in lifestyles and culture. Third places provide a place to interact with others who are different, thus potentially providing people with a less restricted and myopic perspective on their life and worldview. Then, they cannot only see others’ experience similar difficulties and heartaches, but revel in the joys and successes of life, providing a quasi-collective form of therapy through humor and camaraderie. Consequently, spiritual, emotional and cognitive means of connecting to themselves and others is strengthened and renewed. Expressiveness through various forms of “amateurism” is “encouraged” in these settings which lead to greater “association” amongst the participants (1999: 43-60).

Oldenburg addresses what he qualifies as the “paradox of sociability.” This paradox represents the deep social desire of humans to interact with others, but simultaneously, have a degree of protection and seclusion. Recognizing that “instant communities” and amorphous networks of friends don’t always provide ample substance to people’s lives in urban settings, Oldenburg argues that third places provide complimentary relationships to more primary and

intimate ones. Essentially, this helps fulfill both weak and strong, or casual and intimate relationships that humans in today's western world need. These "sets" of accumulated friends are sometimes more reliable and available than "closer" friends (1999: 60-65). The redevelopment and proliferation of third places in urban settings and their multiple roles in facilitating the rise of creative industries, the creative class, and amateurism is essential to this narrative in application to open mics as *musical* third places. Amateurism, as a blooming leisurely phenomenon, needs greater elucidation to more vigorously discern how these concepts connect to popular musicians and musical open mics in New York City.

### **Serious Leisure and Participatory Culture**

As outlined, New York City is a city steeped deeply and reliant upon the culture industry which includes the construction of the arts, music, fashion and food. In other words, some of the largest social worlds of leisure that currently exist. Leisure-based activities have increasingly become predominant in the western world since the latter half of the nineteenth century. Concomitant with the growth of the leisure worlds and popular culture in the everyday lives of Americans has been the debate on consumerism and its cumulative effects on the larger culture and society as a whole. A countless number of social theorists (e.g. Veblen [1899] 1994; Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 2001; Baudrillard [1970] 1998; Ritzer 2005) have argued that Americans and other westerners live in a consumerist culture in very passive, non-participatory ways, unaware of either deeply engrained messages or mechanized processes that exploit and manipulate all those incapable of decoding the proper underlying message or processes of their own behaviors. Since the 1970s, the minor explosion of reception studies (e.g. Radway 1984; Ang 1991), as with other dissenters became increasingly evident. They challenged the traditional hegemonic assertions in the social sciences that Americans or humans in general are completely

passive, mindless “cultural dopes” to isomorphic externally coercive social forces and built-in meanings (Garfinkel 1967).

This paradigm shift included the creation and expansion of another school called the Centre for the Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham which embarked on the beginnings of a new interdisciplinary approach called cultural studies. Among other things, they revitalized research into subcultures (e.g. Clarke [1976] 1990; Hebdige 1979; Hall [1980] 1991) of which the Chicago School had once made a primary focus. The ongoing influence of modern cultural ethnographers and theoreticians (e.g. Geertz 1973) on sociology and micro-sociologists (e.g. Becker 1963; Goffman 1963; Garfinkel 1967; Blumer 1969) played a pivotal role in facilitating a newer direction of cultural research on participants’ practices, meanings and associated social contexts (Edles 2002: 4-12).

Recent research indicates Americans and westerners are becoming increasingly participatory in their consumerism, which translates to a panoply of different social and cultural practices also varied by degree of interest and the meanings attached to the practices (e.g. Ostrower 2008; Tepper and Gao 2008). One aspect of this is the cultural creation and explosion of “modern amateurism” in areas that have become increasingly professionalized in the last century. This process has forged newer and larger industries for participants that exceed the typically acceptable level or definition of part-time work (Stebbins 1992: 8). Worth noting is David Riesman’s (2001) prescient observation in the mid twentieth century that “craftsmanship” was changing dramatically due to the gradual cultural shift from the “inner directed” social psychological type to the “other-directed” type. This other-directed “cosmopolitan” (Riesman 2001: 25) type is more prevalent in “metropolitan centers” (2001: 32), such as NYC. This newer brand of leisurely “craft hobbyism” by other-directed amateurs use “peer group taste exchanging” as a reflective and comparative measuring process for self assessment and

progression. The inner-directed craftsman worked independently pursuing something for personal interest and more practical reasons (2001: 292-293). The open mic provides this peer or reference group “interactive check-in” for popular musicians.

Leisure at its core is, “uncoerced activity engaged in during free time, which people want to do and in a satisfying or a fulfilling way, use their abilities and resources to succeed at this” (Stebbins 2007: 4). What this particular study pertains to is the rise of what Stebbins (e.g. 1982; 1992; 1996; 2001; 2007) termed “serious leisure.” This contrasts with two other forms, “casual and project-based leisure” (Stebbins 2007: 5), which will not be particularly germane to this study, because these musical endeavors and participants are clearly within the serious leisure domain. This former neologism of “serious leisure” that others (e.g. Elkington, Jones and Lawrence 2006) have investigated as well describes a social phenomenon whose genesis in the twentieth century and augmentation in the twenty-first century is increasingly apparent and profound in the lives of those enmeshed, at whatever degrees, in various leisurely activities (e.g. music, sports, arts, science, crafts). Stebbins has taken both a theoretical and empirical lens to these growing social phenomena and categorized serious leisure into three types: career volunteerism, amateurism and hobbies. Amateurs are differentiated from the activities of professionals by Stebbins vis-à-vis the degree of dependency on income and time; however, they both frequently and simultaneously encounter the same “social world” (i.e. professional-amateur-public) in relation to their pursuits and audiences or the “public” (Stebbins 1996:9). In one way or another, those involved systematically integrate these “leisurely” pursuits to acquire special skills, situated recipes and tacit knowledge (Schutz 1972). On the continuum of seriousness, amateurs are closer to professionals and hobbyists are further away. These social worlds do not always include professionals nor do they always come into contact with each other. Often a very small number of publics show an outside interest in viewing the pursuits or

activities, too. Volunteering is on that other end of the spectrum, where people typically work “uncoerced” to ostensibly help others and receive no financial gain (2001: 3-5).

For Stebbins there are six important qualities or social characteristics inherent in serious leisure, no matter the subtype. The first is the social importance of “persevering.” In other words, the roles of dealing with “danger”, negotiating “embarrassment” or “managing stage fright” are important to their status in each context. The second quality is the real-life everyday transformation of the leisure into a “career,” necessitating various stages or rituals of achievement or progression. The third quality according to Stebbins is that all of these pursuits require tremendous effort and “acquired knowledge, training or skill” for some type of perceived success. The fourth are the “durable benefits” such as the ones previously mentioned in addition to social rewards like “social attraction”, “group accomplishment” and the “maintenance and development of a group” and forms of “thrills and psychological flows”(Stebbins 2007: 14-15). Participants are usually deeply involved and “identify” with their membership in the activities. Finally, a centrally “unique ethos” develops within the social world, subculture, scene or community of participants (2001: 6-7).

Within the professional-amateur-public or “P-A-P” model, there are different types of amateurs as defined by their degree of participation in the activities, knowledge of the techniques, and whether they were serving the public. These subtypes are as follows: dabblers, novices, participants, devotees, pre-professionals and post professionals. Dabblers barely fit into the system, rarely acting within the area and resembling a member of the public rather than an amateur. Novices are exactly that, beginners that may one day be amateurs or professionals even, but they have exceeded the dabbler phase because they are consistently working on the activity. They will rarely label themselves as an amateur.

Devotees are the first type of amateurs. They are decidedly “dedicated to their pursuits.” Participant amateurs are not as dedicated as devotees but are much more dedicated than dabblers. This group usually outnumbers devotees but not always. Pre-professionals are amateurs “who intend to join the professional ranks” (Stebbins 1992: 46), and unlike other amateur subtypes either want to become a professional or have yet to fail at becoming one. Finally, the post professional was once a working professional, retired to a certain degree but still wishing to participate in the activity on a limited level (Stebbins 1992: 42-48). Since these earlier works, Stebbins’ system has been revised, in some select cases to accommodate recent research (i.e. Yoder 1997) indicating the older system was no longer conceptually exhaustive, inclusive and representative of the data that has engaged the material. Stebbins’ revised system, the “C-PC-AP” triangular model, which stands for ‘commodity agents-professionals/commodity agents and amateurs/publics,’ shows that the world is becoming more complex, but the older P-A-P model is applicable here to these popular musicians performing in the open mics. Stebbins confirmed that the older system is still applicable to most entertainment areas (Stebbins 2007: 7).

Benefits and motivations, according to Stebbins, generally fall into two categories, social or personal. Serious leisure thrives where people meaningfully and voluntarily seek out benefits such as self-actualization, self-image, self re-creation, and self-expression, to name a few personal benefits. Social motivations may include social attraction to other participants, group accomplishment and the senses of contributing to the development of a group (Stebbins 2007: 14). One final point by Stebbins is worth noting. He mentions the phenomenological component of “thrills or high points” that occur at the apex of the activity, such as the social moment of musical performance in this case. These can be related to self-enrichment or self-expression that manifests ideationally in the “flow experience” of the interactional event or activity (Stebbins 2007 15-16). Some have called flow, “a form of optimal experience,” (McIntyre 2003), but



Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), who coined the term, describes it as an “autotelic” experience and sensation that contained eight identifiable elements: “A sense of competence in executing the activity, a requirement of concentration, a clarity of goals of the activity, immediate feedback from the activity, a sense of deep focused involvement in the activity, a sense of control in completing the activity, a loss of self-consciousness during the activity and a sense of time is truncated during the activity” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 3-5,54; Stebbins 2007: 16). Although this research has not focused primarily on the phenomenological practices of musical performance, other research has previously shown its salience in the field (e.g. Berger 1999).

These qualities of experience, transgressing the Cartesian sentience and sapience divide, are relevant when discussing the importance of musical performances, because these open mics provide a social platform for these performances. As Harris M. Berger points out, the notion of the “loss of self” that occurs during musical performances has long attracted and intrigued the attention of scholars delving into these issues (2004: 47). Berger also notes, in his complex phenomenological study of musicians’ performances, that the process of flow and “loss of self” are not complete without some self-consciousness or reflexivity. In other words, experiencing the surroundings outside of the focus and foregrounding of the participants on the auditory and visual components of the musical performance, either by the performers or audiences, occurs (2004: 80-81).

This chapter will conclude with one final point regarding the landscape of musical production in New York City. One recently published report by NYC Performing Arts Spaces (2007) may also shed a contributing conditional variable that should not be overlooked in the mesoanalysis of the city’s geographical, cultural or socio-economic influence on most musicians. Pecuniary issues unavoidably essential to the bars and musicians’ costs or benefits in either hosting or participating in the open mic will be addressed in greater depth, but this sets the stage

for such a discussion. This aforementioned report entitled, “Where Can We Work? A Report on Workspace Availability for New York City Musicians,” begins with a premise turned insider reaffirmation, proclaiming “New York as the cultural capital of the nation...” (2007: i) as quoted from Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Incidentally, this phrase “cultural capital” which is recurrent in limitless forms is a convenient foreshadowing in its double entendre for this analysis and should not be overlooked as a powerful discursive form embodying and packing significant ideological and cultural power and hegemony.

This report focuses exclusively on “professional” musicians and many of whom are in different genres such as classical or jazz which are not represented in my study, but as demonstrated, the professional-amateur categories are problematic and blurred. “Performance opportunities” and entries to various “performance venues” are waning particularly due to rising costs for “rehearsal space” and the not so surprisingly nor new, “high cost of living in New York” (NYC Performing Arts Spaces 2007: 1-5). This may have a greater impact on a slightly different segment of the creator status group of New York City than the musicians represented in most of the open mics. As I will demonstrate, professionals do play the open mics, as do many “semi-professionals.” If professionals who usually earn more money cannot afford the costs of venues and entry fees, amateurs are far less likely to have access, making open mics potentially useful for activities that use to occur in studio spaces, when bands took higher priority. The open mics are populated primarily by amateurs of various degrees mostly in genres outside of these two “high-brow” (Levine 1988; Peterson 1996) forms. One way or another, they are all interconnected within the musical art world (Becker 1982) and “field of cultural production” (Bourdieu 1993b) in New York City.

### CHAPTER III

#### OPEN MICS IN NEW YORK CITY

##### **Open and Closed Open Mics**

The following observations focus mainly on four primary open mics at distinctly separate public locations. Two of these four bars are located in Brooklyn and two in Manhattan. Of the 18 open mics attended, nine are in Manhattan, eight in Brooklyn and one in Queens (Appendix C). Mondays and Wednesdays are the most frequently used nights on which bars schedule open mics, with seven on each. Of the remaining four, two are on Sunday and two are on Tuesday. Of the total number of locations, 17 of the 18 open mics occur weekly and one is bi-monthly, occurring every other Monday. These four will be used as interpretive and comparative examples to describe and discern different observable sociological characteristics that are variably evident at most or all of the different locations.

Of these four primary open mic events, all occurred at an establishment that would fall into what Sherri Cavan (1966) termed “nightspots” in her ethnography on drinking establishments in San Francisco. Nightspots are bars that typically have some type of pre-programmed activity or “production” for the patrons at the bar and the norms of the setting require a certain level of attention to that activity, which is usually advertised to the public in some way(s). A drink minimum or cover charge is an often required exchange between the bar and patrons. It typically has a sizeable turnover from one night to the next depending upon the activity. Cavan also identifies that the socio-spatial distinction between the performer and audience in the activity is minimal and informal, compared to larger, formal concert halls. Noise levels from conversations are generally low during the performances, but increases during the breaks. An expected level of involvement and deference to the staged program requires

conversations to be low and unobtrusive to other patrons' focus (1966: 154-170). One slight nuance is the closed open mic for the homebody regulars share some of the qualities of Cavan's ideal type of "home territory bar" (1966: 205). Bartime exemplifies this type most closely. These locations signify an important place to their identities and they have ongoing relationships with other regulars and bartenders. Cavan describes these types of places as a "second home" or "private retreat" for the members. Although most of the homebody regulars at these open mics rarely attend the bars on other nights, their attendance on other nights is more likely at the closed open mics (1966: 206-206). These basic distinctions characterize not only the primary four but the majority of the 14 open mic locations in this research, although not all fell into this category.

These four open mics will be placed on a theoretical continuum with one end conceived, ideally, as an "*open*" *open mic* (OOM) and at the other end a "*closed*" *open mic* (COM). As with all real life "units of analyses", none of these open mics fit precisely into these ideal types, but fit along the continuum. These two ideal "poles" are based in two primary sociological facets to coexist and often mirror each other at their theoretical end points: structural or organizational systems and symbolic, cultural boundaries of the participants and the musical genres that are generally represented in these locales. This heuristic device will help discern parallels between the theoretical constructs and the empirical qualities, as induced from the qualitative data. These two systems, social and cultural, are interactively represented, and negotiated, and they fortify these open mics in terms of issues of cultural hierarchy and classification, social prestige, legitimacy for the participants, and genres and locales within and across the New York City musical landscape. The concept of "symbolic boundaries" and cultural differences as practiced through aesthetic and cultural tastes has mostly been used to define and discern practices of cultural consumption (e.g. Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Fournier 1992; Peterson 1996; Mark 2003).

This study diverges from the tradition of consumption orientation and focuses ostensibly on cultural producers (i.e. musicians) exclusively; however, the intriguing and unique twist to this study is the open mics events are dominated by producers, who participate as both performer and audience, or producer *and* consumer to the performances within the same social context. This is the uniqueness of the musical third place, because it defies previously created separations. Cultural producers have historically segregated their aesthetic careers spatially, much like how the modern western world separated the domestic and occupational spheres solidifying in the Industrial Revolution. Performance and practice were typically constrained in two separate spheres. Practice was confined to a more domestic or private location while performance demanded a more public or work related one. These musical third places reflect a blending of these boundaries, in some ways, but not in others. It is potentially indicative of greater changes to come in terms of musical space, musical producers and how practice and performance are constructed.

In terms of these two qualitative polar measurements, a more general refinement would typify the OOM locations as having a different set of cultural practices embodying a more open, fluid, receptive, and inclusive ethos and ideology as opposed to a more closed, static, hierarchical, competitive, commoditizing ethos, and ideology in the COM settings. These characteristics are imbued in the organizational practices, interactions between audience and performers, diversity of genres, leadership styles and performance negotiations. The former settings have a better theoretical fit with Oldenburg's concept of a third place. They act potentially, both ideographically and nomothetically, as a *pre-scene*. As will be presented and argued, once a location or collection of locations form to create a "local scene" (Peterson and Bennett 2004: 6-8) and a *scene circuit*, greater "homophily" is apparent. This observation is obviously not ground breaking and buttresses previous scholarship (McPherson et al. 2001;

Mark 2003). The COM settings have a closer theoretical connection to a local scene. The *pre-scenes* are more ephemeral in membership and leadership, but not so in their lifetime or event existence, as many pre-scenes are long lasting. Intriguingly, at the OOMs the groups of “regulars” that participated at all locations to varying degrees of size and involvement are more diverse and more heterogeneous in a variety of ways, including race/ethnicity, age, level of musicianship, and genre or style of music usually performed. The use of these social categories and theoretical constructions, however, should by no means convey these are isomorphic settings with no diversity in participants, practices or genres. Also, worth noting are that forms of resistance by musicians are recognizable and patterned either verbally, non-verbally within the setting or exemplified by not returning again to that open mic. These differences will be elucidated in greater depth and breadth as this analysis continues.

The following pseudonyms will be used in discussing these four primary open mics: (1) *Bar Time* for the bar in Park Slope Brooklyn; (2) *Ruby's* in the East Village of Manhattan (3) *The Knot* for the bar in the Greenwich (West) Village (4) *Namu's* for the bar near downtown Brooklyn (Appendix B). These are sequentially listed as having the most closed open mics in the former locations to the more “open” open mics in the latter. Bartime represents the closest COM and Namu's the closest OOM. Unlike the argument made in my initial study on one open mic (Aldredge 1999; 2006), not all these musicians who attend open mics are on the periphery or margins of the musical art world. Professional musicians in addition to various levels of amateurs play these open mics and therefore, these musical third places reside within the musical art world and its system of organizational relations (Becker 1982) or “field of production” (Bourdieu 1993b), through varying positions and marginality.

Open mics vary in their lifespan, some having been actively running for years in the same locations and others having a more tenuous and ephemeral shelf-life. If the night does not

prove to be successful for the bar or if the bar closes down, the open mic likely ceases to exist, although according to some informants, it is not unheard of for an open mic under the direction of the same host to move from one bar to another. Of the four primary sites in this paper, all had been continuously running for a number of years, so they are relatively stable. According to the most senior host and long standing regulars, the open mic at the Knot in Greenwich has been running “for at least 10 years” and at Ruby’s, according to that host, the open mic has been uninterrupted at the same location “for over 3 years.”

The two in Brooklyn, Bartime and Namu’s, have been running an estimated two to three years and six to seven years, respectively. All of these open mic events are at bars and not cafés or coffee houses. Of the four, all offer varying degrees of live music or other events on other evenings of the week. Only Bartime and the Knot consistently have live music during the weekends. In terms of the exact nights of the open mics, the Knot’s is on Monday night, the two in Brooklyn are both on every Tuesday night and Ruby’s is on every other Wednesday. The vast majority of all open mics occur between Sunday and Wednesday nights. Of the estimated 110-120 ongoing open mics in the three boroughs of New York City (i.e. Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens), only a handful are on Thursday through Saturday evenings. Very few occur between Thursday and Saturday night because these bars often have formal live music bookings or other events during the more customer busy weekends. Geographically, the majority of the operating open mics are in Manhattan, which has an estimated 70 locations. Brooklyn has an estimated 30 currently running events and an additional 10 are in Queens (Appendix D). Less than five listings have appeared in the Bronx and Staten Island combined and those numbers fluctuate frequently. In terms of neighborhoods, in Manhattan the largest concentration is in the East and West Villages, Midtown, Harlem and the Lower East Side. In Queens, the majority are in

Astoria and for Brooklyn the majority are in Williamsburg, Park Slope and other neighborhoods closer to downtown Brooklyn.

Finally, research projects are increasingly mapping cultural scenes, events and practices within urban locales to supplement ethnographic, qualitative and other forms of mixed methodological approaches. Richard Florida's research has focused tremendously on the geography of cultural aggregations specifically the creative classes and how and where they concentrate. Also discussed has been the growth of bohemian concentrations, neo-bohemian neighborhoods and the burgeoning creative class concentrations in NYC. A recent article shows how newer geographical mapping projects continue this trend by looking at how different creative economies (i.e. art, fashion, music, film, theater, and television) manifest within the New York and Los Angeles urban landscapes (Ryzik 2009). Mappings (Appendix B and C) have shown residential concentrations of self-identified artists and other "creative class" accumulations in addition to the added locations of the open mics (Brock 2007). The latter two maps although based on almost 10 year old census data, for purposes of this study, show not only the residential concentrations of artists in NYC, but where the open mics attended reside in relation to these concentrations. They are mostly located in the boroughs (i.e. Manhattan and Brooklyn) and neighborhoods or adjacent neighborhoods (i.e. Village, Soho, Lower East Side, Williamsburg, Downtown Brooklyn area, and Park Slope) to these concentrations. As will be discussed later, the majority of the interviewed musicians live either in Manhattan or Brooklyn with a considerably smaller percentage in Queens or outside of NYC, altogether.

### **Social Roles of Participants**

The role designations within the open mics are consistent across all the settings, but not all types appear at each setting. Building a theoretical model to demonstrate the organization of



relations within the setting will facilitate the analysis of the open mic social structures. These terms are etic, or researcher terms, and they are chosen to best and most clearly represent each respective position. These terms attempt to use or reflect terms or descriptions of these roles by the participants. There are two ubiquitous social status groups in the setting of the open mic event: “workers” and “patrons.” Of the workers, there are two important positions: the bartender and the open mic “host”. The patrons are broken down into six social types: “performers”, “scouts”, “networkers”, “friends”, “drop-ins” and “hangers-on.” In at least one of these cases the owner is periodically present, but is minimally involved in the open mic sequence or cycle and in the other open mic the host is the spouse of a co-owner.

Interestingly, the bartenders are the only paid workers by the establishment in almost all these settings. Their involvement in the open mic process is minimal. As mentioned these locations are some type of nightspot catering to patrons offering alcohol and a few offer bar snacks or a bar menu, like Paninis or other types of sandwiches. At the Knot, the bartender rarely gets involved with the open mic, but he does collaboratively share booking the bar’s live music for other evenings or events. Very rarely does he draw from the open mic to fill regular gigs, and the open mic was not created or sustained for that reason. This twenty-something Irish native and bartender discuss this process more precisely: “If they don’t bring people or I think they won’t bring people, they won’t get a gig....if they do get a gig, they may start on a Sunday. If that goes well then Thursday, Friday and Saturday in that order of importance.” Besides this, the bartenders usually get a “call out” from the hosts, who actively request and remind the performers and audience over the PA for to purchase drinks and “tip the bartender.” Otherwise, bartenders typically remain in the background of the open mic process, working separately from the host, who generally does the job *pro bono publico* for the bar. This sort of quasi-volunteering

often comes with obvious perks, such as free drinks and the opportunity to play music themselves, sometimes more than once and in particular slots of their choosing.

In all four of these cases, the host is also a musician, but only at Bartime was the host never seen regularly performing during the open mic sequence or cycle. Thus, there is a notable fluidity that is present among some of these status positions and groups, namely the host and performer, performer and friend, and scout and performer. Although the host at Bartime has never been observed playing during the open mic night, she said on my first visit, “The Open Mic is great. The level of musicians here is really good. They often go to 4 a.m.; towards the end of the night they have an open jam where I sometimes play as well.” At Ruby’s, the Knot and Namu’s, all the different hosts play at least once, if not more, over the course of the event. The senior host at the Knot, who is in his mid-40s, has been attending and hosting there for years and travels in after work from Long Island. This patient and sage-like grey haired host, who lovingly shared his knowledge of Jacques Derrida and Husserl’s phenomenology with me, discussed the open mic and how it’s essential to his experience to also play percussion or drums:

Wow....I have always been aware of them [open mics], but before I started going to the open mic at the Knot I was going to a regular open mic but in Huntington, Long Island. I don’t even know how I started going there but I liked it and it’s probably where I started doing my usual open mic thing, that when I am playing and I sing along with my percussion...Well, I wouldn’t have started this [hosting at the Knot] or gotten into this without doing the file thing [a side project to record people’s music] online and that is what got me in the bar to do the recording. My fun comes from playing percussion with others with others cooperatively. People don’t feel threatened unless I play guitar or something, it wouldn’t be the same. With drums there is no discussion at all. People could not speak English and I could play along.

This host’s enjoyment and sometimes self-deprecating approach in the process is always evident whether he is playing or hosting. His musical style of playing an African djembe drum and singing original compositions, for his solo performances, is quite unique and the regulars know and often sing along with his songs.

Performers, as a social role type in this study, are musicians and/or songwriters, comedians or poets who are planning on or do perform that evening at the open mic. Most performers usually succeed in playing by the night's conclusion, but not always at the larger open mics where lists sometimes exceed 35 people. The largest open mics, with the highest weekly attendance, often go for over six hours if not more, which means they stretch very late into the weeknight. Consequently, many who also have jobs or other obligations either leave if assigned a late "slot" or try to "wait it out" and eventually leave later in the evening, not having made it to the stage. Some get frustrated because they made every effort to make it to the sign up on time and still get a late slot. As a whole, this is a small minority of the performers. When this does happen, some blame nepotism and those breaking the "rules," such as having others sign up for them in their absence, as pointed out by one musician who acrimoniously scratched his name off the list and walked out with his guitar case in hand: "I'm not waiting any longer...It's a bit frustrating. Mike [friend] was here at 6:30 but was number 21....I got here at 7 and was much later." Mike a frequent companion agreed and left with him, "20 people were not in front of me in line. People are signing up their friends....doesn't seem quite fair." Nepotism for regulars and friends of the hosts is evident to varying degrees, across most settings, but it varies and seems much more evident but less up front in the closed open mics. It is more common in the COMs, but more is done to hide it at greater lengths and degrees. There is also a certain level of pressure on the hosts from the regulars to provide them with more perks. The senior host at the Knot discusses the more transparent process, as opposed to other events, of negotiating this issue:

...I keep some empty slots. I call them reserve slots or house guests and that is to ensure I have a fudge factor, so that if anybody comes in late and should really play or who I want to play, or is really good or is just in the city for a week, [or] on tour from somewhere. Whatever I feel, so I have a few open slots so I can put somebody in and they still get to play before 2 in the morning. Other than that, once the list comes out at 7 [pm] and I give my talk, I get out of the way and set up the equipment. That is the scariest part of the night for me, knowing that there will not be anybody complaining or anybody feeling like they cannot go on and often people do. It works out...

A host at an open mic “scene” not in these main four conveyed, as some performers have contemptuously and fervently suggested, shows that a certain amount of favoritism does occur toward those who play at the open mic consistently and participate in the “community.” The host justifies these practices as helping sustain a community by “rewarding” those who stay, by encouraging them to come along with other musicians, and participate no matter what slot they ultimately get. Needless to say, most performers who attend these events play, but differences do exist and will be elaborated upon further as to how these issues are negotiated by the host and performers.

Friends are patrons who are not performing that evening, but are specifically there as an audience member to see a friend perform. Sometimes they are spouses or “significant others” and other times they are performers’ friends who are also musicians and aren’t playing that night for whatever reasons. Friends usually show up to see their performing friend play and leave with or without the friend shortly thereafter. These unique circumstances are typically framed, as a quasi-gig, by the performer and the friends who attend and participate as audience members. As previously mentioned, musical performers make up the majority of the audiences in all these open mics. Typically fresh novices to the open mic and regulars do *not* invite friends to witness them perform at the open mic. This has much to do with the “framing” (Goffman [1974] 1986) of “the definition of the situation” (Goffman 1959: 9) and the performer’s status as a musician within their aesthetic career to be discussed later. Usually, a beginning open mic musician will invite or allow friends to attend the open mic and see them play when he or she is either a “newcomer” who has been coming and playing alone for a brief period to prepare, or he or she is completely new to that particular open mic.

Most novices begin with the “practice frame” and subsequently invite friends to see them perform after they have practiced and worked up a comfortable performance. The beginner

musician does not want a friend to see him or her perform at an open mic until he or she has a few tunes “down” and they feel more comfortable on stage. Taking specific personal steps not to invite anyone is a form of “impression management” ensuring the audience are a co-operative “team” practicing his/her performances for a short stage within this “backstage region” (Goffman 1959). Once these beginners get further on the trajectory of perceived experiential development and possibly achieve the important rite of passage of booking a gig, they usually stop inviting friends to see them play open mics, even if these performance frames for friends were previously infrequent. Within the larger musical art world, an open mic is framed by most professionals as geared for beginners and not for those who have regular gigs and bookings. One host at Namu’s played at prestigious bars and clubs and was about to leave for Paris to perform for a few months. He explained open mics no longer have an important place in his musical development, though he hosted and played one open mic, on and off, over the years:

I really have no need to play open mics like I used to. I am playing lots of gigs, plus you go and sit around all night and might not play until late into the night. I have a gig in DC tomorrow night and at Joe’s Pub this weekend. I use to play a lot of open mics and I have played the subway for probably 5 years...It’s tough but good. You learn a lot about audiences and I met a lot of contacts in the subway. I met a guy from Korea that ended up taking me to Korea for a few weeks. They were all over me when I played over there, it was wild! I have sold thousands of CDs in the subway, too.

At the same open mic, another acoustic singer/songwriter who is a professional musician who regularly tours with an internationally renowned band, also periodically comes in and performs. He started the open mic at Namu’s six years before and discusses its role in his aesthetic career today:

I am proud to see it going so well still. I am on the road all the time but when I come home it’s a cool place to come and play without the pressure and no concern for money...and get some practice in. The talent is still good here. We raised the bar back then in terms of talent and it still holds.

Other professionals, who rarely if ever play open mics anymore, provide more critical and elitist perspectives of open mics. One engaging performer, having moved to New York from Atlanta to

pursue a music career over five years ago, sang at the Knot's open mic with a visiting songwriter and acoustic guitar player from her former city of residence. Now in her mid-forties, she currently has her "own band filled with session players" and eschews the open mic as no longer germane and helpful in this stage of her musical career:

Feeling I don't need to network anymore, or feeling like my time is better spent elsewhere....it's [open mic] really not a good use of my time right now. The only reason I went was because of a friend. I am at a completely different level. That was years and years and years ago, so I am busy worrying about my CD release, publisher and what I am going to wear in front of photographers....and these things are important. What is not important is to get on a stage and sing a song, you know, for twenty-five musicians who are greener than me. What is important is practicing for singing the national anthem in front of six thousand people who have never heard me perform. Priorities keep shifting, you know and you have to keep it in perspective, that is not to say it doesn't have value, it's just not important to me right now.

One of many symbolic boundaries in the musical art world of New York City is the one between those who play open mics and those who refer to them as more useful for inferior or amateur musicians. Many professionals and semi-professionals still play them and some are even dominated by amateurs much further along than beginners who are deeply invested and share many of the other qualitative elements that incrementally shift someone's amateur status to a higher position. In addition, a few unique open mics, particularly the closed open mics, fit the local scene construct and have a much more homogeneous concentration of "great talent," as one traveling "open micer" once emphatically declared. We will see this discursive ideology throughout this study in a variety of ways as well as how it is challenged, altered, and sustained across multiple sites.

Scouts, on the other hand, are musicians who are "scouting out" or conducting silent reconnaissance of a certain open mic. Musicians scout for three different reasons and circumstances. The first is because the musician is a beginner performer and has never played publically. One mid-forties woman who regularly attended the poetry open mic at Ruby's was attending the musical open mic for the first time said:

I just started playing acoustic guitar in the last year or so. I just bought an electric guitar this year and this is the first time I've been to an open mic. I want to see what it's like. I might work my way into doing this...I am here to see what's it like. My guitar teacher is playing here tonight, so that is another reason I am here.

A second type of scout is a musician returning to playing from a long musical hiatus who has never played an open mic and is curious as to how it works and what to expect from the host and other musicians. Not only is this neophyte interested in how the process of the open mic actually works, but is also interested in the performers' levels of musicianship and the genres performed. It remains daunting and frightening for many performers, even after they play for a while, and want a safe place to publically christen their "musical selves." A newcomer to Ruby's didn't spare words expressing the fear many beginner and newcomer musicians experience:

I've found that when you go [to an open mic] you are mostly playing for other musicians. It's hard to get rid of the fear! I am always shaking when I play. Do people ever get over that? Especially when you are playing for other musicians...

Like many indicated, scouts determine if they want to come back and potentially play the open mic in the future, as this scout at the Knot explained:

I came to check it out...this is the first open mic I've been to. I started playing music again...recently and I've been playing here in the city for the last few days. I live in Boston, but go back and forth. I wanted to check it out, even though my friend couldn't come. I am surprised by the hip hop at it...

This last musician quietly and solitarily watched and listened to the performances from the back of the dark, candle-lit room, maintaining a removed level of anonymity. Such scouting expeditions are in many ways a quasi-ethnographic approach, using anonymity and personal observance to gather an empirical sense or overall feeling of the setting and the participants involved. These quotes come from open mics not within the COM designation.

The final type of scout is at least a somewhat-experienced performer and musician and is feeling out the open mic setting to see if they like the crowd, the host and the music that is played. They may be new to the city, which many are, or they are branching out to play different

open mics. As one performer emphasized at the Knot, “We came last week to scope it out and see how things were...they actually listened and care about the music [here] unlike Baltimore.” He was not a novice performer but new to playing in NYC. His friend, who sometimes accompanied him, agreed that the behavior of those in the audiences at open mics in Long Island often “didn’t care.” Scouts are generally not looking for somewhere to play just once and never return, but a place to potentially come back and build relationships and perform routinely.

Networkers are a potentially amorphous and partial role type because the networker can also be a friend or scout, concurrently. This category, although theoretically separate, is not always an exclusive role type. The reason for including networkers as a separate role type is based in the need to exhaust all possible social roles that appear anywhere in the entire open mic landscape. The networker is a musician or a person claiming to be in the music industry who at least partially if not primarily attends the open mic to meet and network with musicians who are performing. For example, at the Knot in Greenwich Village, James was a notorious regular who claimed to be in the music industry, specifically a “manager searching for talent to sign,” but many of the performers were very skeptical of his claims and his constant self-promotion, often prompting frustrated if not angry responses from some of the performers. One regular homebody, later turned host, commented on James’ industry claims and almost weekly appearances:

He approaches mostly newcomers, most of the regulars know of him. He says he is a manager and can sign people. I don’t believe him but I think he believes himself. I humor him...it’s not my nature to be mean, so I talk with him. He mostly approaches women, tells them he can sign them and do even modeling stuff, too.

One of the infrequent regular performers became inflamed at his constant inquiries as to her desire to talk with about needing help with promotions, “I told you already....!” she yelled. “I have demos, posters and gigs! If you want to manage something or go further, let me know!”



She later told me she was just pulling his chain and didn't believe any of his claims to be a manager and was tired of him "bugging her: and just wanted him to leave her alone.

The other type of networker is a musician seeking to connect to other musicians, possibly scouting out an open mic, or there to see a friend or friends perform. Intentions for coming certainly can be multi-dimensional, but some do come without knowing anyone well or caring to play that particular open mic. At Bartime, a self described "professional musician" who was lounging on one of the couches well past 1 a.m. freely told me, "I'm not playing tonight but you need to get out there and be seen...you know...out of sight, out of mind." He pointed over to one of the regular performers and said he was a really good "professional musician who has his own sound and played Joe's Pub last week." As to his musical status and career, he was trying to decide what to do and what course to take, "I am a bass player...trying to decide whether to get a steady job or try to live completely on steady gigs,...some might think I'm crazy but this [performing] is what I have decided to do, I think." He was also scheduled to defend his PhD in music studies in the forthcoming months.

Finally, "drop-ins" and the "hangers-on" are patrons whose intent in coming to the bar is not to participate in the open mic event in any pre-designed manner. As the labels for the social role types imply, hangers-on are patrons at the establishment eating, drinking, or socializing prior to the beginning of the event and who stay during at least a portion of the open mic. This role type should not be confused or associated with the term referring to an early form of "groupie" in the jazz subculture (Irwin 1977: 54-55). Some of the hangers-on or drop-ins may be watching a ballgame on television in the bar or just drinking and socializing with others in the bar. They may become interested in the open mic and turn their attention to it at times, but they do not have "strong ties" (Granovetter 1983) or social obligations to any of the performers, friends or scouts, typically. In a similar vein, drop-ins are typically patrons who also are not

there specifically to attend or participate in the open mic; however, it is plausible that a tourist or any interested party may drop in if they see the sign out in front of the nightspot advertising the open mic for that evening, but this occurs infrequently. Most are either regulars who come to the bar on other nights as well or they just want to get a drink and socialize with a friend.

Nevertheless, as will be discussed later, this group is generally small, but is symbolic of the distinctions and boundaries between the open and closed open mics in terms of audience quantity, treatment, and involvement.

### **The Performers**

Performers can also be grouped in terms of their historical participation or frequency of performing in each specific open mic. Building on my previous work (Aldredge 1999; 2006) I have further refined these role types. Performer categories are: “permanent regulars”, “infrequent regulars”, “temporary regulars”, “infrequent familiars”, “local newcomers”, and two types of “temporary newcomers”, “temporary local newcomers” and “temporary nonlocal newcomers.” These subcategories of performer musicians exist abstractly as performers *in situ*, and often transition from one category to another, although some boundaries are more difficult to cross than others. Like all social and symbolic boundaries, the most precious ones are guarded and protected, specifically the boundaries describing a “regular.” Regulars are typically seen at the open mic every week and often know each other by name and frequently interact throughout the course of the evening. In some locations they perform with each, other forming “hybrid combos,” and often seek advice or perceptions of their performances from other various types of regulars. The infrequent regulars are seen at least twice a month and usually know the other permanent regulars and infrequent regulars. These two sub-types of performers combine to comprise the main, relatively-static clique and “reference group” (Macionis 2005: 167) that is

evident at every open mic. It is worth noting that there are also marginalized regulars who come frequently or infrequently and never become integrated into this in-group. Typically they leave due to these difficulties and thus become the last type of regular. Temporary regular musicians come in and quickly become accepted and partially integrated into the regular in-group, but also for various reasons never return. Some of these musicians are professionals and some are amateurs.

There are two general types of temporary newcomers to open mics: “nonlocal” and “local temporary newcomers.” Temporary nonlocal newcomers appear in two sub types: visiting nonlocal and touring nonlocal newcomers. Local newcomers also appear in two types: “temporary local” and “troubadour local newcomers.” Temporary local newcomers represent musicians who temporarily relocate to NYC for the summer or a brief period and are testing the waters investigating if they want to permanently move to NYC to possibly pursue music and/or other creative pursuits. They may be staying with friends or family during their temporary stay and they venture out to different open mics trying to get the lay of the land, exploring different scenes and open mics as a newer, yet temporary member of the NYC creator status group. Troubadour local newcomers are locally based performers who visit different open mics yet don’t return.

Visiting nonlocal musicians are musicians who are visiting NYC for other reasons besides musical pursuits and want to play an open mic, on the side. They may bring with them an instrument, they may borrow one from another musician, or they may use a house instrument like a piano, but their overall purpose in NYC is not to perform as a musician. On the other hand, touring nonlocal musicians are performers on some type of musical journey or tour, either for paying gigs or they are touring different regional scenes or locales around the country primarily playing open mics. Occasionally, touring acts will stop by an open mic and play a few songs to

warm up or advertise for a paying gig at another local location. In other cases, musicians tour different cities exclusively playing open mics. This is common in New York City. At the Knot, two Australian musicians who were staying in NYC just for the summer became integrated into the regular in-group, after impressing the regulars with their musical compositions and performance. As with this case, temporary local newcomers can become temporary regulars. Temporaries can often cross the boundary and become regulars much more easily than other performers because regulars know their stay is temporary and thus their personal status, prestige and power are not threatened. Some performers never become accepted by the in-group and eventually leave. This is most frequent when the in-group is more static and rigid at the COMs. Although it's difficult to quantify and variations occur, typically at the COMs the regulars comprise a more rigid, hierarchical structure. There is more fluidity, acceptance and openness across, between, and within these performer types in the OOMs.

The fourth type of performer is the infrequent familiar. The infrequent familiar has played and performed this particular open mic before but doesn't come regularly or semi-regularly as do other regulars. Infrequent familiars may come once a month, every couple months or even once a year. This is one of larger role types, especially at open mics with more average weekly performers and a smaller in-group. Out of the four primary locations, the Knot and Ruby's have sizable numbers of infrequent familiars.

This is the local newcomer. As connoted by the descriptive label, they are newcomers to a specific open mic and are locally based. The local newcomer could be a musician who is either a beginner open mic musician, has recently relocated to New York or is a musician hoping to play a different open mic than they he or she has played previously. The local newcomer is much like the troubadour but the musician becomes either a regular or familiar. This difference is based on whether the musician returns to that particular open mic again. As will be

demonstrated, many musicians come through New York touring the country or region playing different open mics as touring nonlocals or visiting nonlocals. These usually stay with contacts or friends and seek out open mics in the city to play for a few days. The temporary nonlocals perform more often at the larger more well known open mics, especially at COMs scenes. They often advertise before they play on stage, like one tall, long blond-haired woman, in her mid 20s at Bartime said one evening: “Hi my name is Holly and this is my first day in New York. I am from Louisville, Kentucky, but I am just passing through.” After finishing her two songs, receiving a loudly supportive applause and praise as she walked to the back of the bar to put away her guitar, I engaged her in conversation. She was most focused on finding other “good open mics” she could play in the city before she left in a few days.

Another conceptual means to typify musicians’ who perform at open mics is to look at how they selectively approach open mics outside in terms of their own personal musical and biographical scope at a given period of time within their aesthetic career. Open mic musicians usually fall into 4 broad categories in this regards. At one end of one continuum is this previously mentioned “troubadour” who is an open mic explorer going to four or more open mics per week, usually not becoming an entrenched permanent regular at any one location and often going to new locations. He or she may become an infrequent regular but continue to perform different open mics from time to time, not keeping an exact routine from one week to the next and not making many substantive connections with other regulars at all the locations. Such “multi-regulars” run a personalized *open mic circuit* of mostly the same open mics week to week, maintaining a noticeable degree of consistency, playing two to four different open mics. Importantly, if these open mics share in common a dominant musical genre and approach to music, they may point to the temporal persistence of a *scene circuit*, sharing other homogeneous cultural milieux such as social networks, demographics, playing styles, the uses of certain

equipments and a similar cultural set of “subcultural capital” (Thornton 1996) and dominant participant “habitus.” The third distinction is the “semi-regular” who is regular at one open mic but branches out and plays other open mics from time to time. He or she could play one to three additional open mics per week or one other open mic every couple of weeks. This category is made up of a considerable portion of the open mic musicians in New York. The fourth and final category is the “homebody” who plays just one open mic, either regularly or rarely. He or she can be a regular who performs every week, or a familiar, who performs every couple months, but the vital definitional characteristic is the performer plays an open mic exclusively. The homebodies are more often than not beginners or seasoned musicians who have previously played at various open mics over their aesthetic career and have decidedly settled down with one. This latter group is prevalent at the local scene at Bartime.

A third and final way to theoretically taxonomize the open mic musical performer is to draw out the biographical patterns that most open mic musicians develop over the course of their aesthetic careers. This by no means suggests that musicians develop in only one progressive or linear direction, order or sequence. The typical sequence of phases as to how the open mic fits into musicians’ aesthetic careers will be explored, but as with all of these typologies, exceptions occur. These types are made to better interpret the structures and processes in the contexts of how they are all organizationally interrelated to musicians’ musical biographies. These theoretical constructs help elucidate how the open mic intersects with the lives, biographies, discourses and narratives of the musicians and the cultural scenes as they change over the course of their aesthetic careers. The beginner or novice open mic musician typically enters the open mic landscape as a scout and then eventually a permanent regular homebody. As the novice becomes more self-confident and experienced in the process of constructing, modifying his or her “cultural tool kit” (Swidler 1986; Faulkner 2006: 115) of performance strategies, or building

a performance repertoire, the musician eventually ventures to other open mics. This is where a diversity of patterns often occurs and where many musicians want to reside, expanding one's creative and aesthetic career. Richard Florida's concept of the "creative class" and a cultural ethos toward expanding one's experiences, incessantly pushing the boundaries, building more social capital and building a more eclectic reservoir of situated knowledge and recipes fits here (2002: 166-189). Experimentation and transformation are valued qualities in not only developing the creative self, but in expressing and distinguishing the self from others.

As musicians begin to book gigs, their participation may wane or continue in different patterns. The musician potentially meets and networks with other musicians, possibly forming bands or ensembles. Many amateur musicians have an off-and-on participatory history with open mics, after they become more experienced and begin to work with other musicians in additional settings. For example, some musicians may start coming back to open mics after a band they were a member of dissolves, hoping to explore new music they've written, or to start to write their own music or just meet other musicians to potentially pursue new musical avenues. Therein lies two other possible musical phases besides novices, the "in-between" and the "side-solo" (Aldredge 1999: 24). The in-between musician is between bands or musical projects, having recently left or completed some endeavor and wanting to form a new band. The open mic provides a setting to practice new work and possibly meet other musicians and contacts. The side-solo is a singer-songwriter who is currently playing with a band or multiple bands, but who continues to work on other material and prefers to keep a partial musical identity, separate from that band of which he or she is a member. The final phase, which many do not enter, is the "ritualist open micer." I borrow the term "ritualist" from Robert Merton (1968), but apply it somewhat differently. The ritualist open micer is usually in a phase of his or her aesthetic career in which he or she is not pursuing the goals of obtaining gigs at bars or other higher status

performance situations. If the performer does, it's not the primary focus in his or her aesthetic career. The ritualist likely has a full time job and would fall much closer to the hobbyist designation, but is much more experienced, proficient and knowledgeable in musical matters than the hobbyist label might imply. This performer plays the open mike regularly for the social and psychological reasons elicited from performing music and participating in a group of friends and perceived "community" that shares his or her musical interests. As a whole, open mics, as a third musical sphere, are quickly transforming into a critical pedagogical and networking institution in the musical art world.

As a social process, the open mic formats mostly follow a patterned sequence that shares similar ritualistic stages and norms. It has a definitive beginning and end to the process. Some are cyclical in structure, usually in the smaller, more open locations. The sign up process is dictated by the host, who begins the sign up usually an hour to half an hour prior to the beginning of the open mic performances, though time lines vary. At Bartime and the Knot, for example, the sign up process is standardized and monitored closely by the host or co-host. At Bartime, a "pre-sign up" of a first-come first-serve basis occurs, and then an official first-come first-served sign up happens an hour prior to the beginning. This usually benefits the regulars who know this nuanced element to ensure he or she isn't 30<sup>th</sup> on the list, slotted to play the lowest status times after 1 or 2 a.m. At the Knot, the host begins the sign up precisely at 7 p.m. and a line usually forms 20 to 30 minutes prior. Subsequently, the sign-up sheet is set on the wooden bar next to the controls where the host usually stands, making it accessible to both the host and any musician either coming to sign up, or just wanting to look at the sequential progress. This access and openness allows for accountability and dialogue between the performers and hosts. Performers frequently walk up and pick up the clipboard holding the list and visually check the progress and where they are in relation to the current performer. At



Namu's, the sign-up sheet is set next to the door on a stool, unguarded, allowing access by anyone in the bar at anytime to sign up or read. Although there is no formal sign-up process, like the Knot, both bars share the open access of the sheet to all patrons. This provides oversight of the process and empowerment for the performers who are there to play that evening. Often at Namu's, the host will ask a performer to check the list and state who is playing next. This practice reduces status differences by making the roles more inclusive and less hierarchical. Ruby's also has an open list that is kept in a book on the bar, directly in front of the stage. It is open for people to sign up when they enter and remains on the bar counter throughout the open mic event.

At Bartime, the circumstances are patently different. The sheet is always kept by the host or co-host. Free access by the musicians is not usually allowed, and thus the ability to potentially question any of the elements of the open mic sequence of performances is curtailed. This allows the host to make changes to the list or add certain people to the list without any awareness of or dialogue with the performers. Such practice is a frequent complaint by musicians about open mics, that certain hosts often display favoritism to regulars, as one female local newcomer "country" singer-songwriter at the Knot said:

I dislike how there is sometimes favoritism and when you are on the list, their friends come in, so they put somebody high up on the list because they are their friend...it benefits regulars more often, they kind of form a little clique. This one I went to, I was the only one playing country songs and [the performers were playing] all these weird poetic songs that didn't make any sense, I was like what is this, I was like 'they are not writing commercial songs here'...this was somewhere I didn't fit in.

In addition to holding on to the sign up list, the host at Bartime goes up to each person during the performance prior to his or hers, and quietly informs or reminds him or her of the play slot, keeping the list in her clasped hands. Bartime has no formal announcement over the PA, like almost all other open mics do. Namu's normal list size is relatively small, ranging from two to eight players per event, averaging around six to seven performers per event. As a consequence,

the open mic at Namu's usually cycles with all the musicians playing again in the same order. Out of these four primary sites, only at Bartime is the list kept under the secure control of the host. So, usually the performing musician(s) at all these events, with the exception of Bartime, is aware they are going up next. This can be helpful because many musicians will exit the immediate space and go to tune or prepare by quickly running through or rehearsing the song before they play on stage. In other words, many of these locales have a "backstage region" (Goffman 1959) that is used for the musicians to prepare for their performance, often outside of the bar on the street or in a back room that is far removed from the stage and main performance site. This is a point worth noting because as previous research (Aldredge 1999; 2006) has argued open mics as a whole share many characteristics with the backstage region. There are patterned distinctions to these back stages and how they are used buttressing the OOM and COM model, which will be explored with each respective site.

The host position at the Knot and Namu's is more fluid, than at Bartime and Ruby's. According to observations, interviews, and online documents, the host at Bartime has served as host for quite some time, if not for the entirety of the open mics' history. She also hosts another open mic at an additional bar owned by the same person. At Namu's and the Knot, hosts have come and gone over time, though some have been there for long periods. At the Knot, two hosts served over the course of the open mic event. The primary host describes the help of adding another host to take over later in the evening:

I was very fortunate that I got John [pseudonym] to do that, I wasn't sure I could get that to happen. It's probably coming up on 2 years that I took over for Frank and often the last Monday of each month Harry takes over and we still do that. Harry used to hang around a lot when Frank ran it and he had the reputation of being "last up" Harry for just hanging around and when it came time to take over for Frank, he liked the idea of hosting once a month and I liked the idea that I get the night off.

In the time I was at the Knot another late night host stopped hosting, but "trained" a longtime regular to become the next host. He continued to periodically come by the open mic afterwards,

but said his day job and band was taking too much time; but as he says, his position wasn't formalized:

I really don't have a formal one [position at the bar] per say, I have never seen the owner and I have never been hired and I don't have a pay check coming from there....technically, though I am in charge of the Monday night post-Open Mic Jam Session, but I also take over the second half of the Open Mic.

The current host at Namu's is leaving to play music in Paris for three months, so the previous host or "someone else, I hope", as he said with some doubt, will fill in for the meantime. This organizational potential and fluidity of status that changes between regular performers and hosts at both Namu's and the Knot does not appear at Bartime or Ruby's.

An important organizational distinction between Bartime and Ruby's, compared to Namu's and the Knot, is that Bartime has an organization of musicians called the "Regular Respondents" who have been at least partially organized by the host and co-host. As mentioned, Bartime's owners also own other bars in Brooklyn and hold open mics hosted by the same host at another bar in Williamsburg. The front-page of Bartime's website states:

Regular Respondents is a supportive community for independent artists based in Brooklyn, New York. We encourage creative individuals to connect and work together as an urban family. Our combined efforts push us all too new levels of achievement. Please join us each week for showcases, open mics, and more.

The Regular Respondents have put on weekend long festivals stocked with its members and showcase these performers at the other owners' bars, too. They have a recording compilation of these member musicians, which include a few songs by the host. Such organizational components do not exist at the other open mics, with the exception of one, which is a local scene not included in these four primary sites. The Regular Respondents and this open mic are both known by many musicians who currently do not attend Bartime's open mic. Two separate hosts and a few other performers from different locations brought it up in discussion.

As one host said:

...It is not viewed as a place where, from what I can tell, where a lot of people go to...where a lot of green people go. There are a lot of people who have found their voice, particularly a lot of people who played The Top, but in a sense, graduated. Sometimes you don't want to come back because you feel like you are in the same place, personally, though I don't think it matters. I totally get it. You want to feel like you are moving on or going somewhere and you don't always want to sit through...there are a lot of people trying stuff out here. We listen to some crappy people here sometimes. Sometimes you want to go somewhere where you know everyone has found their voice, so a lot of people go to Bartime for that. Yeah, it's more exclusive there...

A few very seasoned musicians had some disconcerting experiences on their second trip or third trip to Bartime to perform. A musician, who is in his mid forties and plays "soulful" music, unlike the folk style more prevalent at Bartime, describes his experiences at the open mic:

Yeah, they were welcoming to me because the first time I went I went with the host at Namu's who is friends with the host at Bartime. We showed up at like 10 o'clock at night and it was first starting and we were like first and second on the list. There was only...nobody was there....this was like two years ago and since then it has really developed. I really don't feel welcomed there anymore. I am just like a number. She doesn't particularly like me or my music...there was no standard interest.

The second important category to be explored is songwriters and performers at the open mics. These performers are what Herbert Gans called "cultural creators" in this social world and particularly at the open mic. These performers are not just cultural creators but also "cultural users" because the open mic provides an event used by different musicians and songwriters for a few reasons, including being an audience member to others' music (1999:7). As one musician/host from the Knot states:

I think it does different things for different people. I think number one, it's getting a chance to perform on a nice stage with a nice sound system and nice monitors and if you are going to get stage fright, it's enough of a stage to get frightened.

This infrequent regular singer/songwriter typically doesn't play open mics anymore, but she played the Knot to expose a young visiting friend to a stage in New York City. In reflection she discusses what an open mic can offer to musicians:

It is a real opportunity to get up there and try out a new song on an audience. An opportunity to get some stage time, to get some kinks out in a song, get some feedback...it is an opportunity to raise awareness of who you are, and meet with other musicians and people hosting open mics.

This homebody regular musician and songwriter from the Knot discuss other potential reasons for playing open mics:

I think it can be anything from a place to play material, a chance to join a community of players, a place to show off how good you are, or a place to hone your material or stage presence...what I consider it for this time is different than in the past.

This musician who had started playing Bartime just a month or so before had also played at other open mics in the city and provides a few thoughts as to what an open mic does for musicians:

It's an expression without making a date...I think it's a great way to learn your craft and get comfortable with performing...you shouldn't be afraid to debut songs that you have just written, even if you are uncomfortable or little unsure, you should put yourself out there into the unknown.

The reasons vary depending upon the level of musicianship, exposure to performing, and overall musical career of each performer. In discussions, as alluded to by one musician, reasons for musicians change as they become more seasoned as performers and songwriters, and enter into new and different open mic scenes and pre-scenes.

Performances by musicians during the open mic can be categorized into four basic types: "solos", "hybrid-combos", "combos" and "bands." The solo is by far the most common performance type, consisting of one person playing an instrument(s) and usually singing. This performer signs up as a soloist. The hybrid-combo is when more than one performer, each of whom usually plays as a soloist, play together as a collective musical ensemble. The hybrid combo is signed up as one performer typically and other performer(s) join them to play ad-hoc or as they have done previously. More often than not, the hybrid-combo is made up of various types of regulars who know each other and have or are in the process of building relationships within the setting. There are two subtypes of hybrid combos: a *collectivist hybrid combo* and an

*individualist hybrid combo*. As the terms imply, the collectivist hybrid combo is when multiple solos play together in a collectivist fashion, not favoring or giving higher status to one player. All in this quasi-ad hoc group have similar status on the stage and during the performance. The individualist hybrid combo is when the combo has some type of lead performer, usually the one who signed up, and a team of supporting performers all giving deference to the lead. The combo is more than one person, each of whom enters the open mic together, exclusively. The combo usually signs up with the multiple names of the players, but not always. Combos at one open mic may have formed as hybrid combos at a different open mic. Finally, the band signs up with a band name and plays only as that band. In terms of quantity of appearances, these performance types descend in order in terms of their appearances in all the open mics, but some are more common in certain open mics than others.

### **Bartime**

Bartime sits quietly and inconspicuously on a corner in a relatively tranquil upper middle class residential neighborhood in Brooklyn. The bar's black and unadorned exterior walls blend to the surroundings in the evening, especially when the neon-sign jutting out from the corner of the building isn't lit up. The darkened windows all along the front of the bar are often spotted with various posters and flyers advertising forthcoming gigs, the weekly open mic on Tuesday, and other specialty nights when live music isn't the main attraction. The bar is open late into the evening, unlike practically every business around it. Bartime sits on a main strip amongst a few bars over four or five blocks, a variety of ethnic restaurants, high end liquor and wine stores, and sundry other retail establishments; however, these other retail and culinary businesses are usually long closed before Bartime reaches its peak attendance after midnight on open mic night. Consequently, the signs on the windows asking patrons to be quiet in order not

to disturb the neighbors and the pointedly agitated words of the host, who occasionally comes outside to tell patrons to quiet down as they smoke or play on their acoustic guitars, illuminate the conflict between the bar and the nearby residents that had brewed. Many of the musicians put their cigarettes out and come back inside, as the door rarely shuts for good, especially in the brief two minutes that frequently separate one performer and the next.

Usually when the open mic begins at Bartime the sun is still shining upon the streets of Brooklyn as professionals walk home from the subway stop a number of blocks closer to the city. At 7 p.m., when the twentysomethings are climbing the few steps into this small and cozy bar to sign-up on the list, Park Slope is still showing off much that has become the community image and commodity to be sold to the affluent creative class. Tree lined streets with beautifully adorned late nineteenth-century brownstones, juxtaposed with early twentieth-century buildings, line the streets in this noticeably youthful and gentrified enclave of Park Slope, which has demographically changed since the mid 1990s. Park Slope, once a lower middle and middle class neighborhood of ethnic diversity, has seen significant changes toward greater ethnic, economic, and political homogeneity with a few hip bars, lots of restaurants, some live music joints, an army of baby strollers, and a large lesbian community (Bahrampour 2000; Mehta 2005; Cossey 2005). Unlike Greenwich Village, Park Slope has not evolved from an older bohemian neighborhood or into a newer “neo-bohemia” (Lloyd 2006) like the East Village or more recently Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It does share some cultural and demographic characteristics as more of the young professionals and “creative class” (Florida 2002) have moved into and altered the community landscape in the past 15 years.

Many performers and musicians who may play or attend Bartime come from different neighborhoods, different boroughs, or even different cities, thanks to the mass transit serving NYC. But overlooking the contextual surroundings of this bar would overlook some very

tangible cultural and community resemblances to the open mic. For the city of New York and the borough of Brooklyn, the symbolism of American diversity is widespread not only among New Yorkers but most Americans; however, we also know that “ethnic villages,” “ethnic communities,” and “immigrant enclaves” dominated the cultural landscape of New York for over one-hundred and fifty years, placing many people of different racial and ethnic groups living mostly with people similar to themselves (Logan, Zhang and Alba 2002). Recent data isn’t available, but according to the 2000 census, before changes were as widespread as they are today in this particular neighborhood, whites comprised roughly 68 percent of this neighborhood’s occupants, and the median age and household size were slightly lower than average for the U.S. In the neighborhood, 53 percent of the population has a bachelor’s degree or higher, which is around double the U.S. average and median household and family incomes are significantly higher than the U.S. average. Finally, the median value of single-family owner occupied homes is more than three-times the median value in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Briefly, these numbers paint a picture of neighborhood that is compositionally different from the larger ethnic and class landscape of New York City as a whole and that difference is also reflected at the Bartime open mic. These trends have continued and the 2010 Census may indicate a more ethnically and economically homogeneous neighborhood 10 years after these numbers were compiled.

Bartime’s inside space is small in size compared to most American bar standards, but medium sized for NYC standards. Set up to share qualities with a comfortable lounge or café, Bartime has couches and chairs to compliment the wooden bar stools that line the bar’s slick countertop along one side of the glass backed bar. The pastiche of different types of sofas, including a few that conjure images of turn of the century France, are set up around tables and lamps generally facing the risen wooden stage that sits in the back of the exposed brick room.



Behind the empty stage that typically holds a few microphone stands, mics, and a piano that was added later are a number of oil-painted portraits of notoriously iconoclastic musical figures such as Johnny Ramone, Iggy Pop, Johnny Cash, Bob Marley, Ray Charles, Bob Dylan and Sid Vicious. As a semiotic whole, these paintings seem to share a closely contrived proximity and represent uniformity in commonly perceived socio-musical innovation, personal turmoil, and loneliness in both the depictions and each respective biography. There may be multiple messages to be decoded from this pastiche, but one salient encoded message is a deep and sacred ideology of “expressive individualism” (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton [1986] 1996: 32-35) that plays itself out on the stage every open mic.

Every Tuesday evening, come rain or shine, the sign-up begins at 8 p.m. and the first musical note is struck at 9 p.m. sharply. The list is always full, usually well over 30 people scheduled to play, and the room becomes increasingly difficult to breathe in or sit comfortably in. Guitar cases are scattered about, usually unguarded, in idiosyncratic patches. A higher than normal level of trust among the musicians in the location is implicit given this common practice. Although there are many regulars, it’s quite unusual to see such open trust in the presence of many strangers in a public location in NYC. The host and unpaid co-host, both women in their late 20s or early 30s, usually begin the evening with a “pre-sign up” which plays out to favoring the regulars and ensuring they will perform before the witching hour of midnight, not that many wouldn’t stay around to drink afterwards. In a very important difference from other open mics, the host does not publically address, guide or interact with the musicians throughout the event aided by a microphone and PA system. The first performer would get up on stage by 9 and the engineer running the sound system would non-verbally motion to the musician who would plug in and prepare for their performance. Once given an affirmative, the engineer, with his high-tech

computer-driven set up, would turn down the commonly played non-mainstream alternative or independent music emanating loudly from the PA.

The music engineer, who sits at a mini 'control desk' rarely speaks with or to the performers before or after they play. He is in charge of controlling the music both on stage and the tunes that play between performers. Besides the host and bartender, he is the only other full time worker at Bartime. Much of his communication is through gesturing across the room, with an occasional comment that the musician needs to "turn up the guitar" or is "good." On at least a couple occasions over the course of the night, problems with the chords or the sound inevitably occur. Unlike all other open mics, the performer is on, sink or swim: no introduction, no questions, no verbal guidance or safe voice of support from the back or stage. The instances in which the engineer, a bass player who often has friends talking with him in his mock cubby hole, talks is when something goes wrong and he gets visually and verbally frustrated "Turn up! Jesus!" he yells at a musician, who is on stage, one time. The musician, possibly new to Bartime, is having problems reconciling the multiple cords strung out like snakes on the stage, his volume controls on the guitar and cannot hear his guitar through the PA. The only other time the engineer interacts with the performer is at the end of the two-song set, when the performer usually needs to unplug from the PA and he subsequently turns up the background music in between the performances.

Usually, the seasoned amateurs and professionals know or do not forget the typical protocol for a musician concluding his or her performance on stage, seen practically at all open mics. This process begins by looking at the engineer after finishing the song and receiving applause to get a nonverbal or verbal cue to unplug. If the open micer forgets or is not aware of this ritualistic process, he or she may unplug before the PA is turned down and a very loud screech subsequently ensues. Like many potentially painful sensory stimuli on an unexpected

audience, various forms of startled jumping or exclaiming “Ouch!” unavoidably follow. This is a major faux pas across most of these open mics and novices typically learn this cultural and contextual practice quickly, especially if they receive a sanctioning response from the audience members and engineer.

The host at Bartime often sits at the bar, speaking with friends, regulars, the co-host and other musicians, while routinely getting up to intently seek out and privately inform the upcoming performers of their upcoming performance slot. Keeping the clipboard close to her chest with both arms, she looks around and quietly walks over, leans in and conveys the information with a very succinct and smooth motion. Needless to say, this set of practices by her and her co-host, who occasionally talk secretly to each other, like they are sharing covert spy information, fosters a setting that is far less democratic than most of the other open mics. She often enters the bar later than normal, when the co-host stands in for her conducting the structured pre-sign up and sign up process. She takes an immense amount of pride in the bar’s success in the numbers of performers and staging “great talent.” On a few occasions she explicitly asked me to stay when I was about to leave well past 2 a.m. because the “next few performers are really good.” She is a cheerleader for the bar and frequently a cheerleader for her friends and regulars, often coming to the front to watch them ‘shushing’, the crowd when one of the Regular Respondents or friends was playing. The co-host would mimic this periodically shushing the crowd for a friend one moment and talk exuberantly while the next performer was on stage playing. Concomitantly, a few regulars have complimented the host and wouldn’t hesitate to emphatically articulate on how good “the talent is here.” One regular who is a seasoned singer/songwriter who plays a quirky urban folk style on acoustic guitar sometimes aided by an array of harmonicas, said:

I like the host, but I don’t think the bartender likes me because I couldn’t drink and all I had was water. I like this bar [Bartime] because people listen here and the talent is good.

I float around....At many open mics are high schoolish [sic] because they are cliquish. At the Knot, it's more people who hate their day jobs and want to get away from all that. This place is different. People are trying to break into it.

Contextual structure and organization at these open mics can be better illuminated through a number of different social categories and social types. Observing and coding “frequencies and magnitudes” (Lofland and Lofland 1995: 123-148) have always been a critical step in the qualitative research process, albeit only one small component of it. Frequencies and patterns in pertinent units, aspects and topics such as performance types, musical instrumentations, musical genres, race/ethnic representations, gender and education are all salient sociological factors enabling the construction of a more lucid text and narrative at Bartime. Thus, it also helps for the necessary comparison to other open mics within the larger text or narrative of this ethnography.

Roughly 99 percent of all the performances at Bartime were musical, with one observed comedian who performed late one night, when practically all the patrons had left. At Bartime, the solo performer is by far the most common performance type, constituting an estimated 95 percent of all performances attended. Regular combos made up roughly four percent and one percent was hybrid combo performances. In terms of the various forms of instrumentation by the musicians who performed, 75 percent of all the performances were musicians playing with an acoustic guitar exclusively. That translates to roughly 71 percent of all performances were solo performers, male or female, singing while playing an acoustic guitar. There were only a few cases where the performer played the allotted two songs or eight minutes without singing in instrumental fashion or singing without any instrumental accompaniment. Playing the acoustic guitar, singing, and playing a harmonica were the second most frequent form of performance instrumentation, with 6 percent in this category. Performers playing the piano and singing also represented roughly 6 percent of all performances. The electric guitar was played in 4 percent,

and the banjo, ukulele, and singing through the PA with the accompaniment of a CD being played each represented 2 percent of the performances at Bartime.

Solo playing singer/songwriters made up the vast majority of the performers and most also played within the fragmented and often ambiguous subgenres of “urban” and “anti-folk” music (Bessman 1994; Petrusich 2008: 233-260). These newer genres of and renditions of folk music grew substantially over the years and potentially developed out of genre called ‘anti-folk’ music that is often said to have ‘created’ and blossomed out of an open mic in the East Village of New York back in the 1980s (Kot 1989). This folk revival with and punk, alternative and urban rock twist has rejuvenated folk music from its decline since the 1960s. In all, rediscovering “American Roots music” has taken a serious nostalgic stride in the last 10 years, with an explosion of musicians redoing older versions and supplementing them with newer revisions and amalgamations of older genres in American popular music. This is has been both evidenced and reflexively perpetuated through not only musical experimentation and innovations in bars and clubs, but also in festivals (Markels and Silver 2003) mainstream blockbuster films like *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Moon 2001) and a PBS documentary (Liddell 2001) about United States’ glorious and diverse “roots” musical history. Some critics have argued that genre boundaries are blurring within these roots-oriented musical traditions but at Bartime, folk remains the most salient influence on these singer songwriters, in all its newest hyphenated incarnations (Petrusich 2008: 233-53). Few of the performers who played at Bartime’s open mic exhibited either in their song writing or playing, a serious connection to other forms of “roots music” that generally include genres such as blues, country/honky-tonk, jazz, bluegrass, Native American music, gospel or zydeco.

That is certainly not to say a few performers did not play blues-or-jazz informed music, like one affable twentysomething year old Puerto Rican man who played a small acoustic guitar

and sang with an effervescent smile and vitality. Donning a straw brimmed hat reminiscent of a much earlier day and a white Guayabera shirt on his tall frame, he openly talked about how he just started playing guitar six months prior to playing this open mic: “I’m just trying to learn how to play out. I had gone to Washington Square Park and hung out with some older cats who taught me some tricks and skills. I’ve been dealing with some heartbreak lately and I’m trying to get out of the closet and meet new people and work on playing.” He grew up liking older blues and country music, influenced by his fathers’ taste, and also wanted to learn how to play harmonica. He, unlike most at Bartime, played only cover songs, mostly old blues and folk standards from musical icons such as Lead belly and Blind Lemon Jefferson.

Playing only or even one cover song is a symbolic marker among musicians at open mics. If the musician only plays covers, it signifies he or she is most likely a novice to playing and is likely “not playing out.” Not playing original material that the artist did not “write or co-write,” according to many critics, fans and singer/songwriters, makes the musician less “legitimate” (Green 2002: 53; Cusic 2005: 171-172). This is certainly an interesting paradox, given that many musicians learn their instruments by copying covers (Green 2002: 74-75). Although these expectations and boundaries vary from one open mic to the next, devotees and pre-professionals were often the most adamant about these practices. One pre-professional musician who was a permanent regular at the Knot was seen visiting another open mic held at an Irish pub in midtown Manhattan. Suddenly and unexpectedly, when this thirty-something female acoustic guitar player began playing another song after sequentially performing both a Rolling Stones and Amy Winehouse song, a musician I was speaking with exclaimed, “Wow.....! You can’t come to an open mic and only play covers!” After listening a bit more, he said “Ok....I don’t think it’s a cover....I actually think it’s hers, and it’s good.” At Bartime, that included playing any covers because original music is highly regarded and valued by the folk-

oriented accomplished amateur to professional singer/songwriters that dominated this open mic. On the few occasions when covers were played by non-novices the performer levied a caveat or disclaimer before playing, such as this: “I am going to break the open mic rule and play a cover song.” This caveat is not at all unusual and its importance should be emphasized as deeply ideological as evidenced by articles written to justify playing cover songs (Cusic 2005) and playing them strategically in calculated moderation (Leyland 2007). The man who loved playing the old blues tunes was never seen playing this open mic again after the first few times. Such transience seemed remarkably higher for performers from non-white ethnic or racial groups and novices. During his two-song “sets” many of the audience members, overwhelmingly performers who were playing that evening, talked, drank from their glasses, and ignored him. This was unavoidably noticeable and distracting for anyone trying to listen during any player’s performance, because of the small space of the establishment. Moreover, as far as the music that was performed is concerned, the more eclectic, alternative, and esoteric the music or performance was, in addition to being “folky” in some manner, the more noticeable applause and collective veneration one could receive.

The aforementioned Puerto Rican man’s absence was noticeable in the crowded one room bar at the height of the open mic night. Those performing and attending made up an undeniably homogeneous event in terms of racial composition of the attendees. An estimated 93 percent of the performances were performed by whites, 4 percent by blacks, 3 percent by Asians and 1 percent by Hispanics. It is extremely problematic to assign someone’s ethnic or racial background based purely on external, physical and visual indicators. This has been shown in innumerable ways. As is widely accepted in sociology today, race and ethnicity are cultural constructs that incorporate values, frames and practices, discourses and power in their everyday construction and reification. With all this being said, it is easier to induce one’s culturally

assigned racial category, as typically defined by the cultural constructs most people rely on, as opposed to participants' ethnic and cultural histories and biographical nuances. Consequently, these frequencies and theoretical constructs are used with caution but can still illustrate the patterned organizational and cultural elements of these settings while allowing some degree of potential error and oversimplification.

Paying heed to the previous caveats regarding race and ethnicity, the same applies to the constructs of sex and gender. 72 percent of the performances were made by male performers and 28 percent by female performers. Female performers across the four primary sites fell within a small range from an estimated 23 percent to 27 percent of the performers of all the performers. Studies focusing on gender discrepancies and inequalities have been few and far between, but a limited number of investigations have recorded and explored not only the disparity of female performers, but also the meanings women encounter and construct as female popular musicians working in a male dominated art world (Groce and Cooper 1990). Sara Cohen suggested new ethnographic research should buck past trends by not continuing to privilege dominant groups such as professionals and male youths as the primary focus of research (1993: 126). Worth noting are a few recent studies on popular musicians focusing on other topics but indicating slightly higher though similar percentages. Lebler's (2008: 200) research roughly had 28 to 30 percent females as participants in an educational program under investigation over a two year period. Creech et al. (2008: 217) compared classical and popular musicians of which 35 percent of the popular musical participants were females. One recent qualitative study (i.e. Clawson 1999) has found women in "alternative" rock bands have begun to "specialize" in certain instruments, such as the bass guitar or drums, but not as much in guitar.

Women have historically been associated with and gained greater integration as singers in classical, popular and folk music (Green 1997: 33; Clawson 1999: 194-195) but have not



made the same strides in playing higher status instruments, rock, and popular music. The rise of punk rock in the 1970s saw a rise of all female bands in England and a limited integration of females in punk-influenced alternative rock bands and the “Rriot girl” movement in the late 1980s and early ‘90s, but this movement has been limited internally and externally to the larger rock culture. In 1987, roughly 23 percent of 61 bands and solo acts that produced “the top 100 best albums of the last 20 years” had women in the band. As a whole, women constituted roughly 5.5 percent of all the total members of these musical acts. *Billboard’s* best “modern rock” songs in 1996 showed three solo artists out of six as women, three of the 25 bands “fronted” by women, two of which played guitar and one band with a female bass player (1999: 195-196). These newer forms of alternative folk musical genres have shown a DIY ethos, drawing from the discursive history of punk and American folk music. Representing an intriguing and social amalgamation of folk and rock, some minor strides may have been made on a grassroots local level, but other studies have shown substantial inequalities when it comes to gender representations and symbolic boundaries within other popular musical communities (Ollivier 2006: 113). Comparatively then, the percentages of female performers seem to be similar to other recent studies on musicians in other genres and professions. Most of the women playing in open mic settings are playing guitar in addition to singing, so positive advancements when it pertains to more women playing high status instruments seems to be occurring; however, the advancements have been incremental and issues of equity and equality for female musicians remain profoundly observable.

Age distribution of the participants, also problematic without definitive answers from the often transient participant pool of the event, ranged younger on the continuum compared to other locations. The estimated majority of the patrons and workers would fall from the mid 20’s to mid 30’s range. In addition to these sociological variables, there appears to be a very small number of

novice or dabbler amateur musicians at Bartime every week. Most performers seem quite seasoned and much later in their aesthetic careers, placing them in Stebbins' continuum somewhere from participant to professional. Therefore, the most common social type of performer was a white male playing originally penned urban folk music on an acoustic guitar with the second most common type being a white female playing urban folk music on an acoustic or electric guitar.

The beginning of the open mic at Bartime was always very punctual and often with little sequential notice. The first player would often get up on stage, stand behind the mic and begin playing with little notice by the crowd of other musicians. Each performer was allowed two songs or eight minutes to play. After they finished, many would reiterate their name, a personal MySpace webpage and forthcoming gigs. They would look back at the engineer hoping to get the nod that he had turned down the PA, so they can unplug the guitar and swiftly walk off the stage. Making haste sometimes for the next performer, who was sometimes standing right next to the stage, was a routine with amazing efficiency and calculability. As a whole, usually no more than two to four minutes would go by, while the sound man would turn on some quirky alternative music over the house PA, before the next performer was on stage, plugged in and testing the sound of his or her instrument.

Over the course of the night, Bartime would become noticeably overcrowded, making even finding a place to stand a serious participant dilemma. Musicians and songwriters would go in and out the front door, and frequently form small gatherings outside talking, smoking, and practicing, playing songs or tuning up their acoustic guitars before going on stage. At the end of the evening, the tables and bar would often be covered with not only drinks and glasses, but with flyers, cards, and pamphlets advertising forthcoming gigs by many of the performers who had played that evening. This would buttress the observation that most of the performers were well

into their aesthetic careers. Crowd noise would lower and increase dramatically at times, often decreasing the most when a regular would go on and either the host or one of her close friends would “Shush!” the bustling audience. Periodically at the end of the open mic, regulars who were also members of the Regular Respondents would play songs, switching back and forth. Even though the host told me “jams” occurred at the end of the open mic frequently, I never observed one.

Among the four primary open mics discussed, and many of the others that I attended, Bartime had the fewest non-playing musician audience members and friends. Drop-ins or hangers-on were very few and far between. Of the patrons in the bar, performers, networkers, and friends constituted the vast majority of the audience, ranging respectively in size from largest to smallest. Occasionally, drop-ins would walk in off the street, see what was going on and how crowded the bar was and leave quickly thereafter. One very memorable instance had two drop-ins talking on a couch during a regular’s performance. The room was especially quiet during the performance, similar to the response given to high status regulars. Eventually, their deviant behavior was responded to quite harshly by the host and the bartender. Before the bartender actually came over to the couch where they were sitting and conversing to berate them, many of the regulars did not hide their grimaces and visible disdain for their violation of the norms in Bartime. Their deviance was sanctioned quickly and after complying quietly for the rest of the song they left not too long thereafter. Sanctioning was far more frequent at Bartime than at other locations, but was implemented by the higher status workers and regulars unequally favoring the regulars.

There were other noticeable differences that Bartime didn’t share with other open mics. Bartime had by and large the largest amounts of performer flyers, cards, and leaflets left all over the bar from singer/songwriters who performed the open mic. Many of these paper cards or

flyers, ranging in size from 3.5 x 2, 3x 5 or 4x6 inch formats, were advertisements for the songwriter's forthcoming gig(s) at another bar or club somewhere in the NYC metropolitan area. Often displaying a personalized photo with other commercialized information such as a website, MySpace page, or an advertisement of a CD, these personalized marketing tools were typically scattered about, sometimes covered in beer, on the tables, chairs or even the floor. Sometimes they took very unique paths in trying to distinguish their marketing from others, like one that looked like a "Hello My Name is" decal that had a name and a request to check out "For New Music and Show Info!" at their MySpace page listed on the back. Others were advertisements for bands these performers played and a few that were found were just business cards like one that said the performers name and as their professional status listed "Singer/Songwriter/Acoustic Guitarist" and beneath it "Solo Engagements" and "Wedding Ceremonies" along with a plethora of forms of contacting the musician. Other variants included the larger but more flimsy paper flyer that one may expect to find plastered on a wall, light post, or window of a bar. Needless to say, there was something impersonal about how many of these personalized flyers were left to soak up beer or whiskey or just be swept up later that night, when someone unimpressed tossed it on the floor. Bartime wasn't the only open mic where these marketing tools were used, but unlike Bartime, they were often personally handed to select people and not methodically laid out all over the bar with unabashed, but quotidian self-promotion.

Finally, this will be touched on in the next chapter in much greater depth, but in terms of performing, noticeable differences apparent at Bartime either absent or significantly diminished at other open mic events was the advertising and marketing performers used. They verbalize this on stage either before, in-between or after their two song allotment. Many, who would have upcoming gigs or performances either at Bartime or other locations, would announcement them while often announcing their webpages and/or mentioning the bands they may play with or other

musical collaborations. In sum, the performers on a greater frequency advertised and promoted their musical endeavors outside of the open mic similar to how a performer at a ‘real gig’ may announce future gigs at the conclusion of their set.

### **Ruby’s**

Sitting close to the symbolic boundaries of Manhattan’s East Village to the South and Gramercy Park to the North, Ruby’s is the site of a bimonthly open mic every first and third Wednesday of the month. The sleek, modern décor inside can be seen through the exterior windows. The front doors are frequently kept open during the warm months, for pedestrians to venture in with little effort. A luminescent, yet slightly opaque multicolored backdrop to the bar holding the rows of booze directly faces the small, closely approximate stage. Thick dark drapes outlined the windows and minimalistic furniture lined the long bar and the sides between the stage. Somewhat oddly out of place is a bright red felt pool table sitting alone in the back near the restrooms. The decorations and overall style make Ruby’s a uniquely different place from most other open mics. More often than not, open mics are in nightspots that have live music or other live performances many nights out of the week and a different, less swanky appeal, is more characteristic. Ruby’s is not alone, though. It also breaks the mold by having a poetry open mic every Monday run by the same female host in addition to an “Up and Coming Artists’ Showcase” that advertises everything from spoken word to hip alternative rock and Hip Hop on every Tuesday night. This all is advertised on the bar’s website.

The host, a gregarious middle-aged female of indeterminate age has been running the open mic for over three years in addition to the poetry open mic for over six years at the same location. She, who will be called “Ruby,” is quick to share her biographical history in Greenwich Village’s “open mike folk scene” in the 1980s, loquaciously talking about how the musicians,

including herself, "...use to wear down the path between Folk City and the Speakeasy signing up for both." Ruby, also a musician who formerly played and worked at the Knot many moons ago, is very quick to wax poetic about the good times in the past. On open mic nights, she frequently approaches newcomers with a noticeable zeal and introduce herself and seek conversation.

Usually wearing a radiant smile, she exudes passion and love for folk music and poetry and takes most opportunities to discuss not only her enthusiastic love but her long time relationships with many pivotal players in the folk scene. As the host, Ruby also does all the organizing for the open mic and regularly sends out emails on a listserve providing updates for upcoming feature acts and reminding past musicians and performers of the bi-monthly musical open mic. Given the time and effort spent on the poetry and musical open mics, her personal and social identities are deeply enmeshed with her positions in both. Consequently, problems either perceptively small or systemic, often takes a toll on her, but she is typically successful in masking them at the open mic.

Ruby's open mic does not have a dominating or noticeable inner clique of regulars like the other three open mics. Partially because it is not a weekly event, continuity in players and performers is shaky at best, with just a few that are permanent regulars with more infrequent and temporary regulars. The patron group from one event to the next is quite fluid with many infrequent familiars, local newcomers and even tourist newcomers making up an open mic where the host and the young Asian female bartender are the most dependable participants from one event to the next. A typical number of open mic performers at Ruby's per night can range from five to ten performers, usually falling around six to eight signed-up performers per night. The open mic does not always start exactly on time but usually within a 15 to 45 minute window from the advertised start time of 8 p.m. Sometimes waiting around the front door to meet people as they come in, the host is very friendly and interactive with the musicians and other patrons.

On one occasion, long past the official start time, the host expressed her anxiety over the turnout while trying to remain positive: “This is the hard part. Waiting for people to come, but they will trickle in as the night goes on.” She began the open mic not too long afterward.

When the host decides it is time, she will help set up the gear onstage, including the mikes and an amplifier. The room is long and rectangular and the stage faces the bar’s side, so most of the audience either sitting on bar stools facing the stage or off to either side, are in close proximity to the performers. After setting things up and possibly helping the feature act prepare their gear and equipment for the performance, Ruby usually grabs her acoustic guitar from the gig bag and makes her way up to the stage and settles in behind the mic. Breaking the audiences’ talking and ushering in a moment of uncluttered sound, Ruby gives a quasi-standardized introduction for each open mic event. In a five minute monologue, she would lay out the basic rules, expectations, including some gratuitous marketing for other events at the bar such as the poetry open mic, and the requested drink limit for the participants. This is a snippet of the introduction one night when a few hangers-on not there for the open mic began a pool game minutes before she was going to start the open mic:

Okay...let’s try to be respectful of those playing music tonight and keep it quiet please. Welcome to the Artists Lounge Open Mic for singer/songwriters. We have some great musicians here and a wonderful feature act who will be playing some great Hawaiian oriented music. Please keep it to three songs unless you are playing ‘Along the Watchtower’ and then keep it to one song, so not too long.

Immediately, a voice from the audience said “Can we play covers?” and Ruby quickly responded with a smile, “Sure, covers are fine just if you are going to play something long like ‘Free bird’ keep it one song. I will start it off with a few songs.” Prior to the host sanctioning the pool playing, many of the musicians in the bar had turned their collective heads and fixated on the three women with a slew of disapproving looks. After the comments obviously directed toward them from the stage, these patrons stopped and went back to the group who had been in the bar

drinking for over an hour and sat down quietly before leaving shortly thereafter. The host usually plays two songs but allows other performers three songs, with the exception of the feature act, which would play usually in the middle of the list.

A feature act is a performer or performing act that is scheduled, like a formal gig, in the middle of the open mic sequence. Unlike the three other primary open mics and most others that were attended, Ruby's regularly had a "feature act" each week, often bringing in many more friends and drop-ins. Comparatively, Bartime is the only bar I observed that never had a feature act at the open mic event. The Knot and Namu's both had feature acts on a few occasions, demonstrating greater fluidity in scheduling, but are not regular stages or phases in the night's sequence of performances. As a consequence, this is not an unfamiliar format to most experienced open micers, although it is not the most common format in the open mike sequences across New York City. All the feature acts are set up by the host mainly to ensure more people come to appease the pecuniary concerns of the owner, if the open mic doesn't draw very many people, and to ensure the survival of the open mic as the host Ruby's discusses:

We were going to get kicked out of there. The manager didn't think it was doing that well and I was like 'We really don't offer anything to the musicians other than the open mic and the feature.' However, I know in the past it [feature act] was an enticement... There was one guy who came in and I wanted to feature him, and he was a rap artist. It was really innovative and great stuff! I have [had] him feature twice and he brought like 40 people and they all drank! It keeps the manager happy and it means they made some money that night and it wasn't all from donations. And it helps the bartenders who are all sweet and wonderful and they are just barely getting by and they need tips and most open micers don't tip very well. It's important; I like the bar to make money.

Unlike the other open mic performers, the feature act performance would last eight to ten songs, not too dissimilar from a true "set" a performer may play during a booked gig. As the feature act was finishing, the host would typically walk around the bar with a "tip hat" to collect donations that would pay the feature act and a little for her too:



They get the tip money especially to help them with transportation, unless sometimes they say ‘I only need 15 dollars.’ Sometimes they [feature performer] are like that you know. But usually if it is over 30 or over 50 dollars I’ll take some. This is the way it’s done. The manager of the bar doesn’t realize this is how it’s done, so you have to convince people.

“Featuring” is often viewed by performers as a gig, as this one Asian woman in her early to mid-thirties who was the feature act one night said regarding her featuring compared to playing a previous open mic:

I haven’t been out in quite some time and tonight is the first gig I have had in a while. I did this open mic in Atlanta that is like a competition and the winner won the chance to play with Willie Nelson on a cruise boat but I didn’t win. My music didn’t go over too well down there, they are looking for something else, but it was still a good experience and people were nice to me.

Feature acts frequently display more dressed-up attire, a genre connecting argot possibly and a different performance demeanor on the stage than most open mic performers. They often invite and bring friends to see them perform as if it is a gig. Even with these regular features the open mic at Ruby’s resumes and finishes usually before midnight.

Ruby’s, much like Bartime, had a preponderance of solo performers, which includes the feature acts. Of the totality of performances, 82 percent of the performances were solos, 8 percent were combos, 5 percent bands and 2 percent combo hybrids. Before further description and analysis is presented it should be stated for comparative reasons that because Ruby’s only met twice a month and had much smaller turnouts of performers per event, the sample of performers is smaller than Bartime and The Knot, although multiple months were spent attending this open mic. With that research caveat duly noted, the percentage of solos was smaller compared to Bartime because a larger percentage of musical collectives of various forms performed. One noticeable difference is the percentage of bands that performed, which Ruby’s had the highest across all the settings. The caveat is these bands, more often than not, played as

the feature act, as opposed to the regular open mic. This speaks volumes regard the band format and its atypical appearance in any of the open mics.

In my previous research (Aldredge 1999; 23-25), I noticed that bands were the smallest performance type but had larger representations compared to open mics today. 65 percent of the performances in the aforementioned case study were solos, 20 percent combos and 15 percent bands. Overwhelmingly across all the open mics attended during this ethnography, bands were the smallest performance type, often completely nonexistent. For a variety of reasons, including economic and cultural ones, bands were scarce at open mics. Financially, it would be extremely costly and troublesome for an entire band to go and play an open mic just for two songs, especially in NYC where many bands travel by cab or subway to their gigs or performance destinations. Secondly, this change could be indicative of the changing culture of the open mics, by increasingly sanctifying the “singer/songwriter,” by levying greater “subcultural capital” on those who obtain greater individual acclaim. The sole and individual performer embodies and displays the ideology in individual originality, self-expression and “finding one’s voice,” as a few musicians repeatedly stated. The relatively stable band, as an ideal form of popular music making, may be losing more of its prestige. Given the dominant genre of various forms of folk alternatives, it could be reflective of the organizational practices that often go in tandem with certain musical genres, although collective music making was historically associated with folk in the 60s with the hootenannies.

The list at Ruby’s was always open and accessible to anyone in the bar to sign, read or monitor. This sign-up list, set in a book the bar kept, was placed out on the bar directly across from the small stage and remained on the bar until the event concluded. A pen sat in the sketch book crease for any performer to come in and sign up, or scratch his or her name out at will if s/he wanted to leave before playing. Few to no performers went outside to practice, warm up, or

tune up before playing. This is very similar to Namu's, which will be discussed in greater detail later. More often than not, performers would quietly sit on a couch or bar stool and tune up prior to playing, without exiting. This may symbolize the lack of a strong nucleus regular in-crowd who often use the outside not only to practice and tune-up, but to talk shop. It may represent a stronger practice-orientation of the open mic, too, demonstrating how these open mics typically vary along a continuum.

Over 95 percent of the performances at Ruby's were musical in nature, with the few remaining ones being poetry or poems integrated into musical sets. This is attributable to the synergy connected to the host's very popular poetry open mic. A sizeable variety and diversity of musical genres were represented across the performances at Ruby's. Although there was a slight tilt toward folk and rhythm and blues, other musical genres that were played or integrated into musical performances included: jazz, soul, pop, bluegrass, country, rock, alternative/punk, Hawaiian, and instrumental variants of all the above. Feature acts were just as diverse as the walk-in performers. Concomitantly, instrumentations were more diverse than at Bartime as well. Acoustic guitars accounted for roughly 75 percent of the instruments played, with 10 percent being electric guitars, 10 percent represented by a hodgepodge of instruments such as resonators, violins, banjos, electrical "loopers", pedals and the remaining 5 percent were keyboards. There was no "house," or club owned piano, but a small number of performers brought their own keyboards to play. Cover songs were commonly played, unlike at Bartime. Cover songs by various popular artists such as Johnny Cash, Tom Waits, Abbey Lincoln, George Gershwin, Buddy Guy, the Violent Femmes, The Cars, and a large number of folk, blues, jazz and bluegrass standards were all played.

Unlike Bartime, which had a much smaller range in amateur statuses, Ruby's had performers ranging the full gamut from novices who had never played an open mic to

professional folk players who had played and recorded with folk greats such as Nanci Griffith and Suzanne Vega. One feature duo was made up of a female singer and keyboarder and a German-born man playing electric guitar with a pedal board, who was trained at the very prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston. Likely in their mid to late thirties, she had previously taught dance school and he had worked for years as a professional musician on cruise ships in the Caribbean. Earlier that evening before they played, one of the few permanent regulars, who was undoubtedly a novice, had played. Tentatively sitting down on a chair with a music stand in front of him, obsequiously praising the musicians who played before, this musician would sit and play his electric guitar, frequently messing up, stopping mid song and apologizing to the audience. The host would walk and stand in front of him in the attempt to nonverbally communicate that his time was over whenever he played longer than his allotted time. After finishing the song, the few remaining audience members paying attention softly clapped and he said, "I saw Ruby [host] trying to wind things down. Sorry for going too long and thank you again. I look forward to hearing more great musicians tonight."

Ruby's also had a patron and performer contingent that ranged in age from the mid-twenties to the sixties. The diversity across ages, and musical experiences varied greatly. Besides the much larger range in age, was a greater racial and ethnic diversity that lacked at Bartime. Although whites constituted the majority of performers, the majority was smaller than Bartime's with 79 percent of the performers being white. 16 percent of the performers were black, 5 percent Asian. No Hispanics were observed during the period of observation. In terms of gender, the host at Ruby's was a female as was the bartender, but the performers were overwhelmingly male with only 26 percent of the performers being females.

In significant contrast to Bartime, the performers at Ruby's never handed out or laid out any musical flyers, cards or pamphlets for marketing purposes. On a very limited basis,

musicians verbally advertised CDs for sale, gigs or an optional mailing list, but the vast majority of these marketing tactics were used by the featured act, which is a norm in a gig-like performance. Very few websites were mentioned and only one mentioning of a MySpace page was recorded by the researcher. Performers typically did not speak of other performances or gigs, but it certainly did occur, especially the feature acts and a few of the open mic tourists from out of town who had gigs at other places in NYC.

### **The Knot**

The Knot has become a Greenwich Village mainstay. Easy to pass by, because it stands next to many other bars, ethnic restaurants and delis, the Knot's black wooden facade and white marquee stand within a stone's throw of the NYU campus and just a few blocks from iconic Washington Square Park. A few informants, who were long entrenched in the open mic and folk scene in the Village, confirmed that previous bars of a similar vein that also held open mics were in the same location before the Knot in years past. The Knot also sat within shouting distance of the famous Bleecker Street row of blues, folk and jazz clubs that once were the epicenter of New York Bohemia that spawned or consistently showcased the likes of Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, Pete Seeger, Aretha Franklin, John Coltrane and the beat poetry of Alan Ginsberg. As a culturally commodified space, Greenwich Village and its bohemian narrative are a critical product, producer and piece of insurance as an ideal location for a musical open mic. Pedestrian activity on the Village streets is usually bustling prior to sign-up at 7p.m. every Monday night. The musicians queue up on the street often carrying their full gig bags over their burdened shoulders, who scatter off the trains and down the few steps into the dark front room of the Knot.

If one enters into the Knot minutes before the 7p.m. sign-up, ones sees a burgeoning line of musicians, ready and willing, with instruments in hand, to sign-up and eventually play or

perform. The Knot has all the markings of a good live music joint, with two rooms, the sizeable back room built around a spacious stage against the back wall. Long black tables with candles and wooden chairs regimentally face the stage that always has a full drum set and a plethora of microphone stands, cords and amps. A full lighting apparatus above and slightly in front of the stage electronically adjoin the noticeably large mixing engineer table that sits at the open entrance to the back room. These items helped vitally provide a more “true stage-like” setting for performing musicians, as a few musicians particularly emphasized. The back room probably holds 60-70 people and the front room and middle section connecting the two can add on an additional 50, making the Knot a nice sized nightspot that geared toward musical entertainment.

Much like Bartime, the Knot’s open mic sequence begins precisely on-time practically every week, unless some type of unexpected problem develops. On a few occasions, the host started a half an hour earlier because he saw a longer than normal sign-up and wanted to get a jump on the list so it wouldn’t run any later into the night than it already did. Each performer is usually given two songs or 10 minutes, but sometimes the host alters that by a minute or two, always with advance notice, to try to expedite the often very lengthy list of performers and sequence of performances. After the initial sign-up was completed, the sheet, usually sitting on a clipboard, is placed on the bar next to the Host/engineer board, where the host operates for much of the evening. The sheet is always accessible to any performers or patrons in addition to the host at all times. The host usually picks up the list, calls out the upcoming performers’ names and scratch out the names of those who have already played to show the sequence’s progress. The ones who do not answer when their name is called often gets their name circled, in case they are still present and didn’t hear their name called. An opportunity to play without waiting until the end of the list was often offered. This allows musicians to freely and periodically check on their status, as to when they are playing.

The Knot has multiple shifts of hosts for each open mic. The primary host, Eli, is usually affable and helpful to the performers. Prior to the sign up, he begins each open mic with a “spiel” or monologue that includes in no particular order: an introduction, rules and expectations that include drink minimums and time limits, and encouragements for beginners. Much of what Eli does during his “spiel” is make tacit knowledge more explicit, like his suggestions on, “why it’s good to go on late.” Playing later in the evening, according to Eli, allows a musician to spend time hanging out, specifically listening to other musicians perform and developing beneficial connections and relationships that may procure musical projects in the future. Eli tries to verbally and actively create a friendly environment for all musicians:

I generally like to take whatever flack people are having like if people are having a hard time I would rather they have a hard time with me than anyone else in the room, which is why I often go through the spiel ‘if anything happens in this room it’s my fault’ and I did that to joke but to also want people to come and talk with me and tell me if they are having a problem....I am someone who can do something about it.

Here is an example of one of Eli’s opening “spiels” one evening prior to the sign-up:

Ok....we will start the sign up for the weekly Knot open mic here in a few minutes. Between seven and eight we have a guest player tonight to play. She is from the meet-up group that occasionally meets here. She is going to do some keyboard stuff and there she is. Where you sign up on the list is where you play. There are a few reserved slots, please leave those reserved. Those are my fudge factors. Please respect people who have been here waiting a while. I know there are still people coming in. I don’t bring the sign-up sheet out to 7, so people don’t sit here from 2 in the afternoon looking for the list, but I want to be fair to everybody if anyone has any hardships or problems please come talk to me. I might not be able to do anything, but I will be very, very [sic] sympathetic. Let’s see....two drinks, we like people to drink, it’s a bar, the bar allows us to be here, it’s a wonderful stage and a wonderful room. It’s a friendly place. It’s the least hostile open mic in New York City. I will stake my reputation on that any day and that is all I can say. So for you guys, who know who you are, like have been here to start. I [would] like people to come up here and sign up [on] the list and move out of the way rather than take the list and move it around the room. So you guys need to identify who was here early. My name is Eli, your bartendress [sic] is...I don’t know who that is. Heidi. Hi Heidi and I assume George [regular bartender] will be here soon? He is usually here around 7. Please be very good to your bartender and bartendress and all the people doing the work here, otherwise this would not be possible. The Knot is a wonderful place and you can come here any night. If you have not been here to the Wednesday night Bluegrass Jam it is pretty....pretty [sic] wicked awesome. We need each person to sign up for each self, okay? Also, if there are going to be one group of

people where two people are performing together, you can only do two songs. Otherwise, it sets us back and we get too far behind. If that changes how you are going to do your presentation on stage, you can do that. [The] Piano is here because of Christina. If the team is going to be on stage together, the team can only do two songs. We had a couple groups last week that sort of pushed the envelope, so it's just not you guys, it's for anybody. Please sign up and move on please and for those people who need the keyboard please make a notation on the sheet if you need it to play, because Christina brings the keyboard and you need to play before she takes it. In the meantime, we will get the performer on the stage when we get things together.

At the beginning of the study, a “pre-open mic jam” regularly occurred, with many open mic participants playing. As time passed people played it less and Eli began integrating quasi-features and an online “Meet-Up group” that would have numerous musicians perform during the hour leading up to the open mic. This fluidity in format is worth noting and is more emblematic of an OOM than a COM. Eli’s methods and approaches are consistent, patient, supportive, and diplomatic which help make the Knot more accessible to a diversity of genres, styles and musicians at very different stages of their aesthetic careers.

The second shift for the host usually begins after 10:30 or 11p.m., when another host, or two different people over the course of this study, would come in and replace Eli, so he could drive back to Long Island where he lives and works a full time job in computer support. Eli, like all of the hosts who participates, is a musician and frequently plays hand percussion, specifically drums like the African djembe or congas. A fourth host fills in for Eli once a month when Eli attends a monthly open mic in the neighborhood that he had been a regular at for years. These are all unpaid volunteers who host at the Knot, like most other hosts at open mics, unless of course they are related to the owner, like the longtime host at Bartime. The second shift goes until the open mic finishes sometimes as late as 2 or 2:30 a.m., when a “post-open mic jam” sometimes ensues if enough performers are still present and willing. These open mic jams at the Knot are open to anyone “who played the open mic earlier” and although regulars often dominated, newcomers are reminded by the host and others to join in and many do. When the



open jam occurs, either pre or post, the hosts frequently join the regular musicians playing familiar cover songs or original songs from select higher status regulars. That musician usually guides the other musicians as to the chords and structure of the song. Some of the musicians take these jams very seriously and even prepare songs for them, as one regular said when she found one night the pre-jam was cancelled because the host wanted to begin the open mic early: “It’s a shame that there is no prejam tonight. I wrote a blues jam just for tonight.” When asked why she wrote a blues jam, this fortysomething woman quickly added, “Because it’s easier to follow!”

The hosts publically introduce and address the musicians through the public address (PA) system, so most people in the bar, especially near the stage, are privy to these interactions as the primary “noemic focus” (Ihde 1976: 38; Berger 2004: 47) within the setting. At the Knot, a fairly standardized approach was evidenced by the main and secondary hosts. Like most other open mics, the hosts have a set of ceremonial scripts and progressive talking steps providing a verbal, cognitive, and emotional means of structuring their interactions with the performers when they were publically interacting with them. The following is a good example of the turn taking script and sequential responses by the performer on stage:

Host:	[Clapping] Give it up for John one more time! [Clapping again]
John:	Thank you! [Clapping slowly dies off after 10-20 seconds]
	[Performer looks up at the host, receives the nonverbal nod and unplugs from the PA, and walks off the stage, with guitar in hand]
Host:	Up next...Frank, then Rachel, then June...
Frank:	[From audience] That’s me!
Host:	You’re Frank?
Frank:	Yeah, that’s right...
	[Frank makes his way up to the stage with his guitar within less than a minute and plugs into the PA with the cord that is either laying on the stage or hanging from the microphone stand that some performers do as etiquette for the next performer. He looks up toward the mixing board usually squinting because of the lights and begins to strum the acoustic guitar]
Host:	Almost ready....[Host adjusts the knobs and sound levels to accommodate instrument]
Host:	Okay....are you ready, Frank?
Frank:	Yep!

Host: Give it up for Frank!  
 Frank: Thanks! My name is Frank and I have a few songs I want to play you tonight.

This is a normal sequence between the host and performer but there are examples of personalized variations by each host, but the sequential structure remains mainly the same with a call for the performer, an acknowledgment they are present and ready, a confirmation between the two the performer is ready, an introduction from the host to the audience and a concluding request for applause by the host after the final song. Sometimes the hosts ask performers if they had played the Knot previously and often gave advice to temper outwardly obvious anxiety. Eli frequently tried to calm people's nerves and anxieties by saying, "Remember, any problems that happen over the night are all my fault" or saying repeatedly "This is the least hostile open mic in New York," while also reminding many of the musicians that open mics are about learning and changing as musicians. One night during the open mic introduction before sign up, a musician joked loudly about the fear of playing in front of others at open mics and Eli quickly responded, "Fear? Good! That's what this is all about!" Eli would from time to time encourage greater socializing with comments like this one made during some down time between performers, "You all should try to talk to other musicians you don't know, you never know what will happen." On a few occasions a performer approached the host before signing up and asked, "Can I play even though I don't have an instrument?" "Sure you can sing. This is an open mic!" said Eli, assuring the performer that all musical forms were welcomed at the Knot.

On only a few occasions when the talking exceeded normal levels, he said over the PA, "We have performers pouring out their hearts on stage. Let's give them our attention!" Unlike the "Shushing" that happened more frequently at Bartime and only during regular's performances, these requests were infrequent, during non-regular performances and were done more tactfully and respectfully. Worth underscoring is they were heeded with much greater

conformity by the audiences at the Knot, not necessitating follow-up requests or sanctioning afterward. This is not to say that talking during performances didn't occur, but the overall crowd noise was generally lower. This was partially due to the size of the nightspot and the ability for audience members to extricate themselves to further reaches of the bar away from the main performance room to talk at the bar or in other locations, as well as an overall quieter audience.

It's worth noting all the hosts at the Knot were generally more accommodating than at other COMs. They usually helped the musicians with various technical issues onstage and off. Technical issues developed more frequently because of all the in-house equipment and diversity of instruments that were played and needed tweaking. The hosts, typically Eli, generally spent the time after sign-up and before the pre-open mic jam preparing the stage getting all the equipment and sound up to par and ready for a long night of use. They also would frequently leave the mixing booth to help musicians on stage, with issues with their guitar, the chords, the keyboard or the lights, if they were too bright and hot.

At a lower observed frequency than the previous two locations, roughly 74 percent of the performances were soloists, but these soloist "singer/songwriters" are the most common and come in many different stages or phases of their aesthetic career. As one twentysomething local newcomer, who never played the Knot before, but currently played other open mics in Williamsburg, Brooklyn shared, "Open mics are great. You could just show up, play or not play and you don't have to do promotion!" Her punky, distortion heavy electric guitar playing and singing, as a soloist, was unusual for the Knot and she was never seen there again. Others are more open about what they are consciously working on as an open mic musician. This temporary regular, who was coming regularly for a few months, commented on what his current goals were at the open mic, "I am currently working on my presence on stage. To make sure I have a good tone and to work on the projection of my voice through the mike."

Of the remaining performances 13 percent were combo-hybrids, 11 percent combos and 2 percent were bands having signed-up with a band name. Although like all the open mics where solo performances were the majority, hybrid-combos and combos were far more likely at the Knot than Bartime and Ruby's. Many of the regulars collaborated, some more than others. Those who were the most likely to participate in hybrid combos were of higher status, either the hosts or other permanent regulars who showed great musical prowess and would be asked by others to play with them. Many of these hybrid-combos were individualist, but not all. Sometimes newcomers, either local or not, would ask other musicians to back them up. One musician, a fortysomething Park Avenue attorney by day, started playing the Knot's open mic during the study. He began by playing as a solo, for the first three to four weeks and then asked one of the permanent homebody regulars, who frequently played with many others, to play back-up to his blues songs: "After I got over the initial stage fright, I wanted to come and play the open mic every night. I asked him if he would "sit-in" with him and he said yes and now I am gaining more confidence to express myself."

Although most open mics had a few examples of non-musical performances, 100 percent of all the performances were musical in nature at the Knot. Although the majority of performances in the primary and secondary locations were musical, this was the only location at which all the witnessed performances were musical in some capacity. Instrumentations at the Knot were much more diverse than Bartime and Ruby's with 54 percent of the performances by performers playing acoustic guitar, 15 percent played electric guitar, 10 percent were keyboards, and 7 percent some type of percussion or drums. Of the remaining performances, 7 percent were singers singing to a CD or iPod that was played through the PA, 2 percent played bass guitar, 2 percent acoustic guitars with harmonicas and 2 percent were performances by performers playing harmonica exclusively. Of the remaining 1 percent, the following instruments were seen

being played at least once at the open mic: bullhorn, harp, saxophone, sitar, and a sampling machine and electronic looper. As to be expected with the diverse instrumentation, a diverse blend of musical genres and styles were blatantly apparent, although there was a slight tilt toward folk, pop-rock, and blues music. Besides this slight skew toward these three musical genres, alternative, urban folk, rock, hip-hop, and country were also played and mixed by many of the performers who played at the Knot. This was the only site where a substantial number of hip hop/rap artists came in and sang to a recording that was played through the PA. In addition to the more diverse genres of music that were played and explored, many more covers were played at the Knot than Bartime and Ruby's. Many covers were played ranging across a full gamut of the genres, styles, and periods, including songs such as the Tennessee Waltz, songs from the rock band R.E.M., many different traditional blues covers, Lynyrd Skynyrd, songs from Bob Dylan, Sam Cooke, Phil Ochs, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and the Beatles.

In addition to musical genres, instrumentations, performance types, and age ranges, racial and ethnic diversity, increases along the continuum from COMs to OOMs. For the Knot, which is closer to the OOM end, the diversity in all these areas, with the exception of gender, was far greater than at Bartime and Ruby's. White performers accounted for 68 percent of the performers and blacks accounted for roughly 25 percent, with heavy concentrations coming from hip hop and rap performers. Hispanics made up 4 percent and Asians made up the remaining 3 percent. Ethnic and racial minorities did make up a sizeable number of the regulars at the Knot and one African-American male became a host during the period of the ethnography. This particular participant was heavily involved in hybrid combos, playing with many of the other regulars, familiars, and newcomers. Gender is the one categorical variable that defied these aforementioned trends toward greater diversity. Men made up an estimated 73 percent and women 27 percent of the performers at the Knot, which is just a few percentage points different

from both Bartime and Ruby's, which had men making up 72 percent and 74 percent of the performers, respectfully. Across the board, women were less likely to participate in hybrid combos with other performers and more likely to perform as solos than their male counterparts, even when the large proportional differences were accounted for. A greater age range was apparent amongst the performers at the Knot, ranging from one performer who was 17 years old and sometimes came with his father, to men and women in their mid 50s. As previously demonstrated, many of the musicians who attend and perform at the Knot are novices and relative newcomers turned regulars. Many others including one host, who has been playing open mics for years, were well into their late 40s or early 50s. On a few occasions he became acrimonious toward what he perceived as a sizeable number of performers who would come, sign-up and leave before returning a few hours later just to play and leave again: "Many of the regulars and others sign up, leave and then come back around 9:30 or so. So, everyone playing between 8 and 9:30 had no one to play to." He then took a pen and quietly wrote down on a sheet of paper the following statement before handing it over to me like a clandestine, but prized possession: "You should not be a traveling community at the expense of those who need an audience."

Generally, the amount of musicians' flyers, cards and pamphlets that were placed or given out was much smaller than Bartime, but larger than both Ruby's and Namu's. The majority of the flyers advertising future gigs were handed out from regulars or others after having some type of face to face interaction. In other words, unlike Bartime where many musicians often impersonally distributed the flyers and cards by leaving them on tables or chairs, these musicians were much more personal in their distribution. Furthermore, most of the flyers came from permanent or infrequent regulars and homebodies as opposed to familiars, troubadours, and multi-regulars. They seemed to pass them out to people they knew and people

they thought would have a good chance of attending the gig in contrast to a mass flyering approach. Unlike Bartime, a few of the flyers that were handed out at the Knot were a bit less polished or had less a commercialized, finished design and look. Also worth noting were other similar practices by performers on stage. The number of MySpace and webpages that were announced was small compared to the proportions at Bartime, as was the number of gigs that were announced by performers either before or after their two song set. Usually when these pages were announced, the performer was younger in age.

### **Namu's**

Attending most open mics across New York's five boroughs usually translates to a fairly predictable schedule beginning no later than 8 p.m. Most time-conscious open mics begin the sign-up process an hour or so prior to the first performer going on stage. Beginning early is essential for many locales. Even though an 8 or 9 p.m. start time and large crop of musicians who frequently enjoy burning the midnight oil may seem tenable, performers still end-up performing the mandatory two songs at 2 or 3 in the morning. Namu's defies the former trend, not the latter. Namu's is also different in terms of its geographical position. It resides in a somewhat ambiguous location, not quite identifiable by neighborhood, which is quite important to New Yorkers. This is not to say that patrons or workers don't have their ideas as to where it sits. Their suppositions just don't always converge. Situated in close proximity to downtown Brooklyn and the neighborhoods of Boerum Hill, Brooklyn Heights and Carroll Gardens, Namu's defies the other three open mics in many ways, besides just the start time and location.

Walking up to Namu's around 10 p.m. on a Tuesday night for the 10:30 or 11:00 start time reminds one that finding a singular and isolated place in New York is achievable presuming when and where you are located. Predominantly residential and on the borders of more gentrified

neighborhoods, Namu's location is just half a block off a main thoroughfare, typically bustling with many antique stores and pedestrian activity during the day. Around the time Namu's life begins to ratchet up, other signs of life except for the customers at a nearby Caribbean Café disappear. Namu's inconspicuous exterior could easily be passed if one is not paying attention. A one story building among the normal three story apartment buildings and brownstones, Namu's outside façade is made of brick with large windows usually blocked from the inside with thick, soft red curtains. The front door entrance, also guarded during the winter with the same thick curtain, opens one up to a one room bar of modest proportions. The dimly lit room with a swanky, hip ambiance has a rarely seen amenity in New York establishments, a working fireplace that seemed to be fed plenty of wood during the winter months. The bar area is immediately to the left when one enters, with the stock bar stools lining the bar counter to its conclusion on the back wall. A short dividing wall between the bar and a larger sitting area reveals a small mixing board, turn table and PA system to run the music, both live and piped, at anytime. Comfy couches that one can sink into, tables and chairs mark the other side of the room, somewhat aligned to face the front corner of the bar, next to the fireplace, where the musicians play. Modern art, black and white photographs of tattooed multiethnic hipsters, and candles give Namu's even more distinctive character. With no lifted stage, the corner is demarcated by the one microphone stand, cords and a few amps that all face out to the bar's seating area.

On most open mic nights, the bar is often scantily occupied, silent and calm at 10:30, but by 1:30, the room is full of patrons, playing musicians, and drop-ins, scouts and others joining them in conversation, and the occasional marshmallow roasting. The night usually begins with the host beginning the open mic with a brief introduction and with songs of his own, ranging



from two to four. Sometimes this sequence of events is restructured on the spot for mitigating circumstances:

Thanks for coming out to Soul Acoustic Tuesdays. We always have good musicians in the house. Plus a DJ, so please stay and enjoy. I am not feeling well, so I am not going to talk through the mike. DJ man, take it over and we will be back soon with some more music. So who's up next?

The sign up list sits usually on a small table near the front door and there is no formal sign-up time or process. A sheet of paper with an adjacent pen sits waiting for musicians to sign up next to one of the numbers as they walk in the door. With as few as three to eight or ten performers per event, the open mic at Namu's is generally small in performer attendance, much like Ruby's, and less like Bartime and the Knot. The list and the sign up processes were always transparent and accessible to the performers, even to cross out names who had played, which was rarely a task open for negotiation at other open mics.

The hosts would sometimes allow performers to switch spots and negotiate when they were going, contrary to the list. In one situation, a temporary regular wanted to wait for his friends to come before he played and asked the host if this was possible. The host subsequently asked the performer that was slotted next, "Would you want to go next?" The following performer, a tall African American man, who was a high school teacher by day said, "Sure, I have to work tomorrow. So, the earlier the better, plus it doesn't give me time to drink too much like I did last week." Because of the intimacy of the bar, the size of the normal performances and the efforts of the hosts, they usually got to know many of the performers more personally. Before leaving for France, the first host said the following, "It's great seeing people come in and develop over time. [I] see them improve musically and gain more confidence in their music."

The host kicks it off and plays, and then roughly 10 to 15 minutes between each performer is a small break when the DJ at the mixing board plays a variety of tunes, ranging from '70s punk to '50s and '60s Motown. As a whole, the musical genres represented lean

toward rhythm & blues, soul music and hip hop, but '80s and alternative music are represented as well. Unlike most of the other nightspots that are attended in this study, Namu's had live music only on one other day of the week, when they had a bluegrass band that played Sunday afternoons. The rest of the night's entertainment and programming by the bar came through a DJ or music piped over the PA.

Bartime and Namu's share very little in common with the exception of a few notable things. They were the closest in actual size and they are both within a few miles of each other in Brooklyn. Although this may seem inconsequential, one observable difference between Namu's and Bartime were the practices of eating. At Namu's, the host, the owner and the bartender were all observed eating at least once. At the Knot, the hosts and performers occasionally brought in food to eat while they either took a break or waited to play. These eating practices were not observed at either Bartime or Ruby's, suggesting that certain musical third places were more fluid and receptive than others to different cultural practices, such as eating. Worth noting is the social connection between casual meal-time eating practices and the domestic sphere (DeVault 1991). The domestic sphere has been historically associated with musical practicing more so than musical performing. Although these musicians are "dining out" in the public sphere, these OOM settings indicate a place more open and relaxed to different practices, such as eating. Eating in the presence of others also reflects a certain level of closeness and intimacy (Wood 1995: 81). The host at Namu's would introduce each performer either from the mixing board mic or more frequently, from the microphone the performer would use on stage. Welcoming each performer and giving a friendly and auspicious introduction to this fluctuating group of many regulars, the hosts had a very *laissez-faire* approach but also directed the open mic, which was beneficial to most performers. One of the hosts said the following in his introduction to one newcomer: "Next up we have Erica and this is her first time playing at the open mic. Let's give her a round of

applause!” A regular would often elicit an introduction similar to this, “Let’s give a warm welcome to one of our great regulars, Stacy!”

There were two different hosts and one guest host that worked during this study. The first was filling in for the other because he was temporarily in India. His return from India conveniently coincided with the first host leaving for France for a three month tour. Initially, the returning host had to readjust and on his first night back said the following after playing first: “I don’t the exact rules from the Soul Acoustic Tuesdays, but four songs is a lot for an open mic and there is good talent in the room so stay and have some drinks and enjoy the open mic at Namu’s. Hit it DJ!” The returning host, who was temporarily in India, renamed the open mic upon his return and make a few other changes including giving an introduction at the beginning much like at the Knot and Ruby’s. Moreover, sometimes he would occasionally remind the audience what was happening well into the event:

Give it up for Johnny again! That was great, man. Welcome again to Namu’s International Open Mic and we are here every week, rain or shine or fiery balls coming from the sky! Up next we have Wendy who just came in and Frankie is on deck! Remember, have a drink and tip Jacqueline our great bartender well! Hit me DJ!

Sometimes, the host even iterated an ideological and discursive distinction from other open mics, publically to the audience. This is not too different than what the hosts would say periodically at the Knot:

Thank you for coming to Namu’s International Open Mic. What separates us from other open mics in the city is that we are supportive of our musicians here as an audience. So please give yourselves a round of applause for your support!

As with all the open mics, the sequence of performers proceeded according to the written list, but unlike most others, Namu’s would usually cycle. Happening more often when the list was shorter, once all the performers played once, the host would cycle back through the list again offering each performer, in order, another chance to play more songs for the audience. This very performer friendly environment was evidenced in many ways. Besides providing introductions to

each performer and asking the audience to give additional applause to the performer, the hosts always provided technical assistance to the performers in need. If a cord didn't work, or the PA wasn't loud enough, the hosts were there to assist. Frequently the hosts would give words of encouragement to newcomers and let those who had troubles to restart songs or "play another one" if things went amiss.

Namu's open mic was the most fluid and diverse of the four primary locations. The name or moniker for the open mic changed with the hosts. The initial name "Soul Acoustic Tuesdays" under the initial host changed to "Namu's International Open Mic" with the returning host. Usually there were just the performers and the DJ playing music in-between each act, but on one occasion a feature act occurred with one of the mainstay professional musicians. Having been the person who started the open mic at Namu's over six years prior, this musician, who played guitar with an internationally touring act, occasionally came in later in the evening and played five to six songs during the open mic. On one night he brought in a well known underground musician to perform six to eight songs. In very short notice and by "word of mouth" the news spread of her appearance and the bar's audience was overflowing onto the sidewalk, with at least 60-70 people inside, making it difficult just to find a place to stand, much less sit. Cluttered with revelers and photographers, the event didn't prevent the regular open mic from proceeding as normal after their brief but highly attended feature event. Starting time and ending time varied far greater than other locations, often starting when "people got there" as opposed to a definitive start time. The host had greater leeway but showed less constraint lacking any hardened or rigid set of rules he imposed upon the performers. The number of songs played per performer was usually three but sometimes varied from one night to the next, one performer to the next, and when the performer was playing in the sequence or cycle. Usually by 2:30 or 3 a.m. the performances end with a final jam after cycling through the list a few times or the

performers relinquish their playing for drinking and the open mic ceases with little pomp and fanfare.

Namu's was most distinguishable from Bartime in terms of performance types. Soloists were the largest performance type, as with all the open mic events comprising roughly 65 percent of all performances. This is the lowest number of solos across the four primary sites and all the major open mics that were attended. Hybrid combos was the second most frequent type, making up 25 percent, combos 10 percent, and zero bands. These numbers are also vital in distinguishing these open mics across this continuum. Namu's had the lowest frequencies and occurrences of solos and the highest number of hybrid combos, while still having a notable number of combos. These patterns manifested in discernable ways.

Periodically throughout the evening, with hybrid combo would often spontaneously develop during a soloist's performance. Many of the performers knew each other and would frequently join in playing with them on the house floor drum or join as singers and guitar players. In addition, jams often fluid in membership would happen toward the end of the evening when everyone else would play. These two latter patterned phenomena were most common at the Knot and Namu's. Because many were regulars to varying degrees and knew each other's materials, it allowed each to play back-up in an individualist combo hybrid. The jam at the end of the evening would be more of a collectivist hybrid combo when covers often were played. Covers put most of the performers on equal footing and allow each to have equal status within the performance, unlike when a performer is playing his or her original music and others are following *ad hoc*.

Roughly 99 percent of the performances at Namu's were musical in form and performance, with a few observed examples of poetry and spoken word. No comedic performers were witnessed. Similar to Bartime, where the soloist had an unrivaled domination, there were

no bands that were witnessed and much of this is probably due to the spatial constraints of the bar, PA system and size of the stage and not due to ideology, genre, and culture. Although the sample size is smaller from this location, almost all of the soloists were “singer-songwriters” playing acoustic guitars and other instruments. Instrumentations, as to be expected, were very diverse, too. The instrument most frequently played was the acoustic guitar, accounting for 43 percent of all the performers’ instruments. The second most frequently played instrument was percussion or drums, accounting for 20 percent, which signals the vitality of the drums and percussion in hybrid combos and the ability for percussion to accompany other instruments with minimal conflict or usurpation of the primary performer’s status. Often, other permanent regulars and infrequenters would just grab the house drum and join in without provocation or any type of visual or auditory request by the soloist performer. The next most common was the acoustic guitar accompanied with a harmonica, or “harp,” which accounted for 17 percent, and 10 percent of the performances were singing without the accompaniment of an instrument. For example, one infrequent regular, an African American man who recently moved to New York from Nashville, sang many songs *a cappella* and asked the audience on one occasion whether he should sing the song for tryouts for the popular television show, *American Idol*. Of the remaining instrumentals, tambourines were used in 3 percent, often in hybrid combos, keyboards accounted for 3 percent, which were brought in by the performers. A “percussion box” was used in 2 percent and the remaining 2 percent included instruments such as the electric bass, stand up bass, trumpet and a few instances of poetry and spoken word performances.

The most commonly performed musical genres at Namu’s paralleled the genres played by the DJ when he spun the records, including soul, Motown, R&B, urban folk, blues, alternative and jazzy-oriented folk music. There was also a Caribbean and South American influence in some of the music that was performed from time to time as well. The majority of the performers

were regulars and semi-regulars, with only a few first-timers, who usually progressed overtime toward semi-regulars at the very least. Consequently, there seemed to be a lot of genre cross-pollination, with different performers playing different genres of music at different times, expanding their repertoire and becoming more experienced at different musical styles. Most unlike Bartime and more like Ruby's and the Knot, very few performers mentioned MySpace pages or advertised forthcoming gigs when introducing themselves. The handing out of flyers was not witnessed with only one flyer or advertisement observed. Only one flyer was seen in the bar and it was passed out personally like the common practices at the Knot. The few times performers mentioned upcoming gigs or MySpace pages, they were newcomers to Namu's and rarely returned. Much like Bartime, covers were played by performers including hosts who played. Covers represented a variety of artists and genres, such as George Gershwin, Aretha Franklin and Radiohead, whose songs were played on multiple occasions by different people.

Another notable distinction between Namu's and specifically Bartime and the Knot is that very few to no musicians went outside to practice. As previously noted, this was a very common practice at Bartime. This happened also at the Knot, but to a lesser degree because some would tune up in the bar's front far away from the stage. Also at the Knot unlike many of the other bars, those who did go outside and play on the street often played with other people, forming *ad hoc* jams of two or three guitarists and/or singers playing together sometimes. Usually during the 10 to 15 minute intermission between each performer, at Namu's, the following performer would go and set up, tune up, and leave the instrument there until the host and the musician verbally agreed on the time for them to play. Usually the host would initiate the process, but would look or speak with the performer confirming before the music was turned down by the DJ and in the few cases when the DJ was absent and the host turned it down himself.

The ethnic and racial composition of the performers and other patrons at Namu's was the most different from Bartime and by far the most diverse in this ethnography. It was quite diverse with about 46 percent of the performances played by white musicians, 27 percent by African-American or black and 25 percent from Asian or Asian Americans and 2 percent by Hispanic musicians. One temporary regular, who was originally from India, had been attending Namu's just for a few months but really enjoyed it:

I am originally from India but I went to graduate school in Texas for eight years before moving to New York. I am more Texan than New Yorker, but I have lived in New York for 11 years. I moved to New York to be a bohemian living in Greenwich Village.

A friend had told him about it and encouraged him to go long before he eventually made it. He currently isn't attending other open mics, like many newcomer novices to the open mic. He "pays the bills doing software development, working on two different startup companies" and apparently keeps his frequent flying miles high by going back and forth between India every three to four months. He also plays with musicians in a band in India and here he explains the benefits of the open mic to his musical pursuits:

I do it for myself. It's really a selfish intent. I get inspiration here. It's motivating to come here and hear all the good music. Plus, it helps me prepare and work on my songs. Otherwise, I would procrastinate. I write songs to play for the open mic. I use it to try out new stuff. I also play in a band in India where I hope to play much of this music. The other guys are real professionals, not like me, but I am working on writing and trying out songs and this is a great place to do it.

In terms of ethnic and racial diversity, the first host was an African-American male in his early forties, the second host was an Indian man approximately in his early thirties, and the regular bartender was a white woman in her early to mid thirties. Because of the high degree of musical collaboration in combo hybrid regulars of different racial and ethnic groups played with other regulars quite often. The large percentage of collaboration between regulars, although slightly skewing the numbers, still represented a very diverse open mic and patron population. It is also worth noting that unlike the three other locations, the owner, an African-American man, was



occasionally in house for part of the event, helping the bartender and a guest-host one evening. This is seen also in the musical genres that were most prominent, with traditionally black and African-American musical genres being very influential in the music of the performers as with other traditionally non-white based genres.

Interestingly, in terms of gender discrepancies of performers, 23 percent of the performers who were women represented the smallest number of performances performed by women across the sites in this particular study. This is undoubtedly worth noting given the ethnic and racial diversity, but as seen, the percentages between the lowest and highest is quite minimal with all of the four sites within about a 5 percentage range. In addition, the range of musical abilities represented at Namu's ranged from novices to highly skilled, prominent working professionals. A diversity of age range was also quite apparent, ranging from the early 20s to the mid 40s, with a sizeable number a bit older in their late 30s and 40s, compared to locales like Bartime. Unlike at Ruby's and the Knot, women participated in some hybrid-combos, albeit not very many. Women at Bartime almost exclusively played as soloists. More women played in combos at the Knot, coming in to the location with the person they would play with. but not very many in hybrid-combos. At Namu's, although it is difficult to accurately compare given the large disparity between male and female performers, women played more in both combos and hybrid combos than at other locations, but then again, so did males.

### **The Other Open Mics**

Of the remaining 14 locations observed, many of the patterns I noticed reappeared in similar forms and various combinations. I looked at many other locations in the ethnography to help inductively provide a more wide-reaching, meso-structural understanding of open mics in New York City. A historical rationalization and "McDonaldization" (Ritzer 2000) across most

open mics has seemingly occurred with similar organizational structures (i.e. host, bartender, performers), time and song allotments (i.e. 8 minutes or 2 or 3 songs), the sequence of events (i.e. signup, wait period, perform) the days of the week (i.e. Sunday through Wednesday), but variations within each setting do persist. Of the remaining locations, six are in Brooklyn, seven in Manhattan and one in the Astoria neighborhood of Queens. No open mics are found in the Bronx and only a few are in Staten Island so those two boroughs are not explored because Manhattan and Brooklyn combined account for over 90 percent of all the open mics in New York City. In Manhattan, different neighborhoods are represented in the ethnography. Two of the open mics are in the Lower East Side, two in the East Village, two in Greenwich Village and one in the Gramercy Park area on the east side of Manhattan. This is not to suggest open mics in Manhattan do not exist in other neighborhoods and parts of Manhattan, because they do. Choices are partially based on suggestions from other musicians and where the majority of open mics persist, which is in the Village and downtown area of Manhattan, which as discussed has a long and varied history with artistic and bohemian subcultures and scenes. The Village area, including Greenwich and the East Village, which is just north and contiguous to the Lower East Side, has much higher concentrations as do the Lower East Side. Other open mics persist in midtown and uptown but none are visited in significant depth for this particular study.

Brooklyn also has higher concentrations of open mics in specific neighborhoods, but once again that does not preclude or minimize the importance of open mics in other less dense neighborhoods. What is worth noting is that the majority of open mics across the city persist and seem to thrive in areas that are predominantly white, middle to upper middle class and are at some stage of incremental gentrification or a “neo-bohemian” state. In Brooklyn, Williamsburg, Greenpoint, and the Park Slope areas have larger concentrations than most other neighborhoods, and thus accounted for the open mics that were attended. Williamsburg and more recently

Greenpoint, once the heart for the Polish community in New York and now also boasting a large Hispanic population have become very prominent neo-bohemian neighborhoods in Brooklyn in the last 15 years (Cohen 2008) and Park Slope has gentrified tremendously leaning toward a slightly different neo-bohemian, parental hipster demographic (Brooks 2007). Finally, Astoria, Queens has slowly gentrified in the last 10 to 15 years changing the once very Greek dominated neighborhood into one that has integrated the younger artistic creative class demographic as well (LeDuff 1997; McGeehan 2007). Astoria's relatively cheap rents for NYC and close proximity to midtown Manhattan have catalyzed this change.

As mentioned before, all of these open mics occurred in the evenings or late afternoons from Sunday to Wednesday. All but one started after 6p.m. in the evening. All but a few are nightspot bars, with the exception of three locations. Of these three, one is a café and two are mixed coffee bars serving coffees, teas, wine in addition to beer and liquor. These types of "mixed" coffeehouse/café/bar, third places have increased over the years (Evatt 2008). All of the open mic events showcased musical acts during the open mic for over 90 percent of the performers that went on stage and the majority were either close to or 100 percent music. The few exceptions across these multiple locales that were not musical were all comedy performances. No one open mic place had more than one comedian per event at most, so comedy still constitutes a marginal performance style in these open mic settings. Musicians were usually given two songs or ten minutes but in a few locations, three songs were the norm for performance numbers.

All but one location had patterned and somewhat rigid bureaucratic structures with an identified host, bartender(s), musician patrons, sequences, and norms that have standardized the open mic phenomena. All but four had what has been categorized as an 'open list', where performers could access the sign up list at any time to check their status in the open mic

sequence and ask questions of the host. One was partially open and partially closed at different moments of the evening. Only two outside of the primary four had a host who spoke publically to the musicians and patrons through some type of microphone and PA system. One interesting correlation was that of all the open mics including the original four, that did not have an open list to the musicians, usually didn't have a host who cooperatively helped the musicians with problems on stage with technical matters. In addition, at many, although not at all, of these same open mics the host did not play anytime over the course of the evening. Musician's flyers were more evident in some of these same locations. Obviously, some of these sites did not always correspond. Of the 14, only three had some type of feature act and of the 10 of the 13 that had identifiable hosts also had hosts who performed music in some way over the course of the open mic sequence. Not only did the majority of the hosts perform musically, but they all performed first in the sequence of the open mic as well.

These observations were based on more limited fieldwork in each location, but the other sites had patterns seen at the primary four sites and differences as well. Solo performers dominated the performance types across all the open mics. Outside of the initial four, the lowest observed percentage of solos was 78 percent. Most of the sites that were visited had solo percentages in the 80s and low 90s. Hybrid combos and combos were obviously more sparse at most of these locations than the Knot and Namu's, and bands were nonexistent at almost all the locations; however, combos and hybrid combos were more common in locations that had larger ranges of musicians in terms of their amateur status and where they stand within their own aesthetic careers. Higher percentages of solos translated usually to higher concentrations of instrumentations and genres of music, unless the locations had built in musical differences like house pianos. Acoustic guitars performed by singer songwriters dominated the open mic landscape. Genre differentiation also corresponded with racial and ethnic differentiation. There

wasn't one location where whites were not the largest racial group represented in the setting.

This doesn't mean that such locations do not exist in New York City, but none were observed for this study. Many open mics like a two in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, had very high percentages of white performers. Both had higher percentages of solos, but one was much higher than the other. The one with a larger number of hybrid combos and combos had more novices and younger, less experienced performers. At this particular open mic in Williamsburg, the performers were playing many more covers, including one performer who did the unthinkable for many seasoned performers: he played only covers for an open mic set that included Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire" and the Violent Femmes' "Blister in the Sun." Across all these settings, the percentages of women performing was the highest at 44 percent in one location in the East Village, but no other location came close, with the majority of the gender discrepancies more similar typically falling between 20 to 30 percent female performers.

All of these open mics had a wide variety of musicians playing as singer songwriters. As genres have become increasingly hybridized it has become more difficult, especially to the lay person, to distinguish between the panoply of folk-hyphenations, such as "anti-folk," "urban folk," "freak folk," "free folk," "indie folk," and the more ambiguous catch-all "Americana" that is sometimes employed these days (Petrusich 2008: 233-260). Nonetheless, these are the folk hybrid forms that seem to dominate the "singer songwriter" form across most of these open mics. Other genres played by musicians at these open mics, such as country, blues, hard rock, pop rock or hip hop, can be typified, with slightly greater ease outside of the realm of these increasingly ambiguous folk genre subsets. As discussed before, the "anti-folk" musical genre had its roots in a resurgence of punk minded folk music in the early 1990s (Bessman 1994) of which the East Village and Lower East Side spawned early foundational artists in this genre's emergence (Billboard 1994). This bricolage and fusing of folk styles with other genres today has only

proliferated, guided by the DIY ethos once ushered in with punk rock subculture or scene in the 1970s.

These recent alternative renditions and amalgamations of folk of the last 15 to 20 years are considered by many, especially the younger generation, as being on the margins of popular music today, but even some of these beliefs and practices are waning as newer genre hybrids develop on the margins of popular music. Consequently, these styles coagulate at certain open mics in certain neighborhoods more than others, such as Bartime in Park Slope and other open mics in the Williamsburg, Brooklyn and East Village/Lower East Side of Manhattan. Without falling or relying on the sometimes pejorative term “hipster,” that has been applied to many musical producers and consumers across multiple artistic genres over the years (Leland 2004), this is roughly the “scene” of “alt” folk music that dominated most of the closed open mics and performed in larger numbers at most open mics in this study. These singer/songwriters pull from multiple sources including folk, punk, post-punk alternative rock, hip hop and other, often historically marginal, musical genres of the past and present. One host at the Knot typified these styles of music as the following but also recognized they were not as predominant at the Knot as they are at other locations: “Its singer songwriter guitar stuff, but that is really not a genre of music because I wouldn’t say its country, country [sic] kind of stuff. It’s like New York folk, whatever that is...” A host at a COM in the East Village characterized the music at this cutting edge and very popular open mic as follows:

That is some natural shift. Ever since the anti-folk think kicked off, this has become a place where there is a large percentage of guitars but there are some spoken word people and some really good ones and we try to focus on diverse people and keep them coming back, just to try to keep things interesting...there are a lot of people who continue to play here who you feel the reverberations of that in hearing echoes of their style and a lot of those artists who made it big earlier on in this decade, so that is probably one of the reasons they might come here and naturally come into the fold, genre speaking...I feel like where we fall in line with what people play here is not necessarily style as people who are taking risks with their art and being experimental and pushing themselves.

This host also intuitively recognized the power of the host in influencing the “idiocultures” (Fine 1979) of the open mics, especially the open mic local scenes:

It ultimately comes from the host. Those people feel welcome here. They feel like taking risks and we let them take risks, so that is a vibe we see, so those people keep coming back, because they will get that here, that welcoming...

In the subsequent chapter, the competitive element within the performances and open mics will be explored. This host recognizes and highlights the competitive element that is evident at this aforementioned COM, but as with most open mics and especially at COMs, judgments by the host and other performers do occur and play an important part in sustaining cohesive frames:

The open mic is a crossroads for some people. For everybody involved it is an open mike where they can feel safe to experiment and do anything they want on stage with no restrictions and no judgment. There is some friendly competition and a little friendly poking at the ego and there is a little bit of...I guess, that kind of attitude...a bit of filtering of the people who come here.

This competitiveness and filtering was most common at the COM scenes and was a defining set of processes that construct these scenes and their boundaries. Anyone could come and perform, but performers were not free from judgment and symbolic restrictions. One encounter with a musician at one of these settings reflects these scene boundaries but also show how these boundaries do not go unchallenged through methods of resistance and manipulation. I struck up a conversation with one twentysomething, black musician who was sitting quietly in the back of the room one night and listening intently with his acoustic guitar jarred between his legs. Few blacks, African Americans and other ethnic or racial minorities were seen attending this COM scene that had many of the identifiable qualities associated with this alternative folk scene. He was definitely not in a setting that reflected openness to his music, identity and performances and he knew that, but he still returned somewhat regularly. As he described, he came to this COM because, “It’s good for me to come and play here, because I don’t fit in. My music doesn’t fit in. That helps me as a musician.” Although not symbolically welcome, he was far from passive

using the circumstances to further his aesthetic career in a way much different from most others in that setting.



## CHAPTER IV

### PRACTICING AND PERFORMING

Andrew Keen's recent polemic *The Noble Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing our Culture* argues with fervent enthusiasm that an increasing "democratized system," due to the Internet and more accessible technologies of musical recordings, for example, is contributing to a growing artistic amateurism. In quoting the famous playwright George Bernard Shaw that "Hell is full of amateur musicians" the author's thesis is this cultural change is dumbing down western culture by killing the expert and the "creation of wisdom" (Keen 2007: 36-37). Although possibly incorrectly attributing T.H Huxley as the author of the now famous and cynical "Infinite Monkey Theorem," Keen asserts that the rise in amateurism is a type of "mob rule" leading toward a value trumping of experience and knowledge with ignorance and innocence (2007: 1-2). His premise rests on the belief that the number of cultural producers is accelerating at unimaginable proportions, but other research paints a different if not more nuanced picture. The manufacturing and purchasing of musical instruments provides some insight into this debate in terms of illuminating consumer demand and use. For example, piano sales in the U.S. peaked in 1909 at roughly 365,000; the same year 350,000 phonographs were sold. By 1933 piano sales had plummeted to 33,000, while by 1919, 2.2 million phonographs sold, and by 1929 4 million radios were purchased by consumers in the U.S. (Ivey 2008: 4). Cultural consumption practices were surpassing cultural production in a variety of areas including the practices of music.

Research has shown the number of amateur and professional musicians and artists has proportionately declined in recent years. It has indicated that amateur and professional music making has decreased in recent decades, even though more children are exposed to it earlier in life (Green 2002: 2). Other research has indicated a rise of amateurism in the last decade, and

also shows a growth in “participation” or DIY consumerist practices in the arts as well (Tepper and Gao 2008: 41). One way or another, amateur participation in the arts is diversifying, becoming more accessible and “serious” in very informal and individual-oriented ways. As Lucy Green argues, “informal music learning practices” where youngsters or other neophytes teach themselves and “formal music learning practices,” such as formalized pedagogical settings with teachers, curriculum and students, do not coexist as mutually exclusive entities but rather sit on a continuum often with blurred boundaries and overlapping intersections (2002: 5-6). As a totality of musical third places, these open mics blend both formal and informal traits. Learning musical practices is important to the open mic musicians as are learning performance practices. In other words, these musicians are learning “learning practices” and performance practices, as a situational gathering for “metapractice” in this third musical place. Variations and differences occur across these settings as will be discussed in terms of musical practicing, learning, and performances for the musicians within and across these open mics. This section focuses on the very important intersection of musical performance and musical practices. Learning has been historically associated with practicing, but this chapter will underscore how these musical third places are changing these historically constructed separate spheres of performance and practice and how learning occurs within them.

### **Performance Practicing and Practicing Performance**

Similar to Green’s assertions on learning music practices across a continuum from formal to informal practices is a theoretical perspective on performance. In Ruth Finnegan’s *The Hidden Musicians* (2007), she describes the basic organizational conditions for musical performances. Artistic live performances need to be coordinated and scheduled but also fall on a continuum with two endpoints ranging “between informal playing on the one hand and, on the

other, the formalized public occasion.” The essential parts of a performance are the performer of the art, an art form itself, a setting and an audience “wider than the performers themselves” for the performance. According to Finnegan, “people” need to play for more than “themselves” and all performances are an imperative for music making. In other words, performances are the social psychological and cultural apex of musical playing; however, one vital question for this research is exploring what Finnegan intended by the use of the words, “people” and “themselves.” If she meant all the people as one totality of performers the concept of performance would not fully apply to these open mics because they are comprised mostly of individually separate performers. This is not too dissimilar to the sociological conundrum: how does a community of individuals differ conceptually from an individual community? As it applies here it would be a group of mostly soloists, not a solo group. The first three aforementioned requisites—a performer, art form and setting, are met during “practice” so the audience is the first of three essentials for an event to qualify as a performance, according to Finnegan. Besides the audience, performances need to be “set apart in socially recognized ways,” or framed, and have some type of preparation prior to the event by the musicians. With that being said, Finnegan uses examples to show how variations across these elements occur depending upon the different musical worlds, genre, and the amateur status of the performers, but they all still meet the minimum prerequisites (2007: 143-151).

The audience needs to frame the musical event as a performance and expressively participate in the interactive process. The setting needs to be demarcated by the workers as a distinctive and meaningful event by announcing it publically through some type of advertisement, and the musicians typically practice distinguishing themselves from the audience with some type of costume or argot. The latter requirement is difficult to decipher for this study. The status overlap between audience and performers does not warrant performers to dress

significantly different to distinguish themselves from the other people in the setting. Most of the performers, in fact, do attend the open mics wearing everyday, informal clothing. Some dress up, but it's a rarity. A set timing or itinerary to the event is important as are a minimal "ceremonial exchange" between the organizers, audience and performers and a set of conventions to guide and structure the sequence of the event for all the participants. The condition is not all these elements are necessary in combination to distinguish performance from practice. As indicated, the differences between the two musical forms are relative and reside across a continuum. The studio recording process, and its recently more private democratization, is used as one viable example for showing how a performance frame can be used, and not all the elements are met, but also recognizing how "live music events" are the "epitome of musical enactment." The final requisite for a performance, for Finnegan, is the recognition by the actors that the event is actually a performance. If the participants deem it a performance, it's a performance (2007: 152-159). Most open mic performers meaningfully distinguish the open mic from "a gig," but some recognize also that other musicians use it or deem it as such. What always compliments musical performances are musical practices and that necessitates further exploration.

A few notable studies on musical practice by popular musicians will help elaborate previous research on the nature of subcultural and organizational definitions of practicing. Ruth Finnegan (2007) also spent time outlining the various modes of what constituted musical practice in her ethnography. In contrast to the more formal mode of training and practice that is historically found in classical music, or the "high arts," popular musicians usually "learn on the job" relying not primarily on reading musical scores in formal pedagogical settings, but on peers, teaching themselves and sometimes supplementing their practice with private lessons. Practicing includes experimentation, learning how to "play by ear" and long hours of personal and sometimes solitary work in addition to learning within band settings. Recording oneself and

listening to the recording was often employed to supplement these other methods and processes. This is not to say these learning practices are not used by classical musicians and Finnegan recognized that some popular musicians had also been classically trained (2007: 133-142). Another scholar, H. Stith Bennett (1980) also spent a considerable amount of qualitative research and time looking at the practicing methods, elements and definitions specifically for rock musicians in bands.

Touching on similar points but with slightly different angles and musical focus, Bennett points out the theoretical connection between practicing sites as “backstage” places, but focused mainly on bands rather than singer/songwriting individuals who make up the vast majority of the participants in these open mics. Unlike the group of rock musicians who needed special circumstances to accommodate a group of people and fully amped instruments and percussion in both space and noise levels, these singer songwriters mostly play acoustic guitars or instruments that can be played in the tight quarters of New York living (1980: 59-66). More importantly, Bennett’s rock musicians typically kept these practice sites as “restrictive” backstage regions, showing a compositional and organizational parallel with these open mics, informally preventing or not encouraging most non-band members from attending or watching. An unpalatable tension often developed because the musicians found it problematic for others or “outsiders” to attend and witness the behind the scenes work the musicians put-in to hone their musical craft. Involved in this process were “criticisms, rearrangements, shaky run-throughs and many mistakes” that also happen at the open mics. Moreover, “mutual consent” on correcting these problems and situations of “embarrassment” could arise if outsiders were privy to these backstage activities (1980: 66-68).

These are the temporalities where “confidence” and “competence” are negotiated and constructed as a socially interactive and meaningful process. This, Bennett points out, is

qualitatively different from “jamming” which according to the rock musicians is for the “sociability.” To be able to perform, these musicians need to negotiate, construct and affirm the knowledge, recipes and rules for future “onstage” performances. Consequently, Bennett argues that practicing as a musical form is an “elitist event” because band practice entails planning future performance actions to purposely direct the audience to a desired finality. Paradoxically, these formulations help perpetuate the belief that performance is magical and ostensibly spontaneous. (1980: 66-70). For this study, the open mic is where the performance frame of expressive mystery, romanticism and myth, held by many audiences, is worked up, reformulated and refined. It is where the presumed authenticity of *performing the muse* is practiced, negotiated and reconstructed. Also worth noting are the spatial differentiations between practice and performance. Private places, like the home, have been a place for practice for popular musicians for many years, unlike more public locations for performances (Finnegan 2007: 193-195). This is exemplified by many open mic musicians who, in discussing the merits of playing the open mic said, “...it gets you out of the living room or bedroom.” This also exemplifies how these open mics are musical third places resting on a theoretical continuum between the “two spheres” of private and public and practice and performance.

Lucy Green’s (2002) voyage into the autonomous, but not solitary, learning practices of popular musicians can also shed additional light on the processes and meaningful practices of popular musicians. Drawing from her sample of participant in-depth interviews, she found that musicians could range from practicing zero to six hours a day, depending upon their moods and social or musical commitments, but it often hinged on their sometimes moment to moment enjoyment of the practices. Most “played” songs as opposed to playing scales or other “technical skills.” The differences between playing and practicing were not completely distinguishable for the musicians and clearly the evidence of a deep “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi 1967) on how

musical techniques, technicalities and instrumental prowess showed up in their inability at times to speak with great clarity as to how and what they knew (2002: 86-97). Clearly, there were some patterns. “Purposeful listening” specifically refers to the methods the musicians used to listen, learn and emulate others playing their instrument, for example in recordings or live events. More importantly for this study is what Green qualified as “less conscious and systematic approaches to learning and copying” (2002: 64).

The category Green calls “just listening” includes “attentive and distracted listening and even hearing,” which is often difficult to fully understand or describe as learning processes by these musicians (2002: 64). This ranges from playing in cover bands and thus listening, copying, and learning the songs of famous bands, to listening, watching, and copying various musicians as they play their instruments live on a stage, to reading and learning from music books or magazines. Nonetheless, because these practices are typically not viewed as formal methods of learning, this is one of the places where the notions of “authenticity” and “naturalness” in terms of skill, prowess, and ability develop (2002: 59-76). “Peer-directed learning” and “group learning,” the second and more germane form for this study, formally defy the notion of solitary learning, but constitute other learning strategies and practices. These can range from private practices with a teacher, to playing in an *ad hoc* jam with friends to teaching fellow musicians in a band setting. These are the learning methods and practices that Becker illuminates in the primary thesis of the “art world” (Becker 1982): that artists and musicians do not live, work, and make their art in isolation, but interact and construct beliefs, values and knowledge through relations with others that directly influence their art and music. Finnegan’s metaphor of “learning on the job” reemphasizes this sociological maxim. “Casual encounters,” “first bands,” “group rehearsal,” and “watching” others play are the primary ones Green touches on. Finally, Green

sees these social and implicit practices as absolutely central to learning, what is for all intent purpose the tacit knowledge of doing music (2002: 76-83).

Other recent research (Lebler 2008) has empirically buttressed these notions, showing how popular musicians use multiple interactive relations and methods for learning that includes implicit and explicit communication from band mates, audience members, friends, listening to recordings and teachers. The open mic as the musical third place fits into this social continuum. It is a blending of formal and informal practices of practicing and performing, depending upon the frames that are employed and it is increasingly being integrated into the stock of practices popular musicians use to learn and hone their craft. This is especially true in urban settings.

These open mics are social events and they redefine musical performances. These singer/songwriters actively attend these open mics and perform music to an audience ostensibly similar to musicians who perform to other audiences in other cultural and social contexts, but there are some unique and noteworthy distinctions. One, is that these musicians are performing to audiences primarily composed of popular musicians or the same creator status group. The composition of the open mic patrons necessitates readdressing Finnegan's condition that a performance needs an audience outside of themselves. A more precise requirement would be the performers of one musical entity or group needs out-group members to better construct a performance. Over the course of the open mic event, the performer and audience member switch roles in a contextual quasi-form of "role reversal" (Romano 1946) showing how both roles are necessary for the practices of performance to occur. It is a practice of musical chairs facilitating identity construction. Both roles importantly contribute to the performer's musical self by allowing them to see their own performances and self through the position of both performer and audience, allowing for further reconstruction of the self in the process. Overtime, the performer experiences greater reflective and reflexive abilities in the process from these interactions and



routines. It may be conceptualized as a dueling process between George H. Mead's conceptual notion of "taking the role of the other," (Mead 1934) as noted in previous research on the topic (Aldredge 1999; 2006), and a hyper reflexive process of *taking the role of the self as other*. This also shares conceptual similarities with Anthony Giddens' concept of the "double hermeneutic" (Giddens 1990: 54), which is worth noting for theoretical and comparative reasons.

It is worth highlighting how these meaningful micro-processes differ across the settings and events. These performers belong to a *creator status group* of musicians that is very diverse and wide-reaching, but even this generalization is oversimplified. Drawing from Herbert Gans' notion of the cultural "creator" (Gans 1999: 7) and Weber's concept of "status group" (Weber 1946: 186-187), these musicians form a fluid and amorphous group of publically practicing, working and performing amateur and professional musicians and singer/songwriters in NYC. These musical peers are in different stages, phases and trajectories of their respective aesthetic careers, also placing each in different social places in terms of knowledge, schema, and identity construction. Goals change as their aesthetic careers and biographies progress in regards to learning music as well as how to practice and perform, and the interactive dialectic that drives this process. This section will explore two primary areas of the open mic: the performances and the audiences. These issues are inextricably connected to other pertinent areas such as musical composition and practicing, and will be discussed in tandem. Because the performance takes precedence, an interstitial framing congruence between the audience, host, and regulars becomes the dominant frame in that particular context. Framing plays an important role in the economy of prestige and power across and within open mics. Different and somewhat contrasting frames dominate on this open mic continuum, ranging from a closed to open open mics. In closed open mics (COMs), the dominant frame is the performance frame, which will be termed *performance practicing*. Although categorically different, the term as conceived and applied here shares some

sociological similarities with the classical musical notion of “performance practice” (Jackson 1988; Behague 1992: 172-177) but differs in others. In the open open mic (OOMs), the dominant frame is the practice frame, which will be called *practicing performances*. The dominant frames do go challenged and negotiated by participants and possibly change. Thus, they are not completely homogeneous and isomorphic in these constructions and cultural framings.

### **Performance Theories**

In addition to Finnegan’s writings, the discussion of performances will mainly draw from three other writers on performance: Erving Goffman, Richard Bauman and Lisa McCormick. Erving Goffman’s earlier dramaturgical works on performance have often been conceptualized through a symbolic and metaphorical lens as opposed to a literal one. The dramaturgical theories attempted to discern human interactions as representations and meanings of the literal everyday interactions of the participants. This study’s application of these concepts lead to a reflexive blurring of these theoretical constructs, types and categories with the interactions and knowledge of the actors *in situ*. With his constructs in mind, an initial interpretation or “textual reading” (Clifford and Marcus 1986) of these open mics may go as follows. Ostensibly, as a “backstage region” (1959: 112) of performers, these open mics are at their foundational core a form of “audience segregation” (1959: 49) by popular musicians as “teams” (1959: 77), extricating most non-musicians, families and friends that would typically make up the audience of a “gig.” As discussed, this differs across the settings, although not enough to radically change the setting as a whole. Like many backstage regions, this is where teams and their members work and “privately” get schooled in the strategies and “technique of impression management” of performing a status (1959: 112-113). This potentially helps protect and save face by the musicians to non-musicians. Goffman argues that social performances are

about negotiating what is given off and what is concealed in the attempt to control or have some power over the “definition of the situation.” This is partially what this process is about for most over the course of their aesthetic career: learning how to reflexively conceal problems and regulate contamination of self. (1959: 67). Furthermore, as Goffman argues, the backstage is usually reserved for more instrumental actions and the front stage more “expressive ones” (1959: 124). This however, should not be misinterpreted as ideal opposites that are isomorphic and clean. Goffman also argued that any region or space could be transformed to a backstage region, just like in these musical third places; they act on some nights qualitatively more as front stages for gigs and back stages for open mics. In addition, pure cases of either rarely if ever exist, reminding us once again that we are not examining a bipolar Cartesian model (1959: 128-129).

The seasoned performers who go outside a bar to practice or warm up at certain locations could be viewed as crossing the meaningful and symbolic boundaries into Goffman’s third possible region, “the outside” (1959: 134-135); however, they are not ending their status in the open mic to other performers who interact with them outside, but to the pedestrians outside the bar. In a city where sidewalk performers are very common, especially in certain socio-geographical sections of the city, certain performance gestures and cues by performers “key” (Goffman [1974] 1986: 43-44) these performance frames common to most sidewalk musicians, such as facing the sidewalk, opening up the guitar case for tips and engaging the potential audience in some meaningfully recognizable way. These cues were never witnessed by the musicians at the Knot or Bartime when they were on the sidewalk. They would often turn toward the building, look down or sit down ignoring any passerby. No additional “props” or signs requesting tips indicated this performance frame by the open mic musicians suggesting the “outside region” to the open mic or a different “front stage region” by the musicians within the sidewalk space outside the bar. The sidewalk may actually become a backstage region to the

open mic within the bar which lends to smaller gradations of this model. This possible ambiguity suggests typifying these open mics unequivocally as backstage regions as problematic for all musicians in all the settings. With these possible ambiguities in mind, these open mic settings are contexts that are under construction, conflict, and negotiation by the actors, specifically in terms of whether they constitute front, back, or outside regions. More importantly, these interactive constructions and conflicts center more precisely on the issues of how performance and practice are reconciled by the musicians, non-musician audiences, and workers within these settings.

One of Goffman's ([1974] 1986) last works *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* helped usher in the concept of "framing," with the profound help from anthropologist Gregory Bateson. The primary concept of framing, and its complimentary concept, "keying," will prove to be very influential in the analysis of these open mics in NYC. Frames are "definitions of the situation" that coincide with the norms and practices that constitute and constrict the social organization in addition to bounding and formulating the subjective experiences by those involved within that setting or contextual event ([1974] 1986: 10-11). Goffman calls "primary" frameworks "schemata of interpretation" that are the dominant means of constructing meanings for the participants or observers. These frameworks help "guide" people's "doings" with background understandings in addition to expectations of behavior. As formulating organizations of meaning, these frameworks reside in cultures and also typically integrate cosmologies in addition to practice expectations ([1974] 1986: 21-27). Keys represent systematic "transformations" of the preexisting primary framework into a different set of meaningful and organizational settings. The participants usually rely on "cues" to discern these transformations or changes in meaningful organizations. There are five different types of keys: make-believe, contests, ceremonials, technical redosings [*sic*] and regroundings. Make believe constitutes a playful activity where little practicality motivates active participation.

Contests are typically sports related or combative relations among the participants. Ceremonials are formalized rituals or events, such as marriages or funerals that are often scripted with serious preparation. Technical redoinings are activities performed outside of the normal setting for a similar performance, more for instrumental reasons. “Run throughs,” simulations and rehearsals exemplify this type. These forms “recouple” the events as a form of practice outside of the normal primary frame. A fifth and not common type is called “regroundings.” Regroundings are performance activities that integrate motives that vary and often differ from typical reasons for action. Charity or participant observation are two examples given by Goffman ([1974] 1986: 40-76).

Keyings vary in their impact and are always susceptible to being rekeyed. What is important for this analysis is Goffman’s assertion that even when primary frameworks are rekeyed or altered from the initial key, the primary framework remains. Without the original frame, any rekeyings would lack a comparative meaningfulness unless the primary key looms in what Goffman called a “layer or lamination to the activity” ([1974] 1986: 82). In other words, a rekeying displaces the primary frame to the “rim” or perceptual edge but it doesn’t negate it. The rim is the “outermost lamination” or layer to the activity that connects the “activity” to the “real world.” The frame that is typically referenced for Goffman is the rim or primary framework but the rekeying remains very important ([1974] 1986: 77-82). Multiple frames coexist in other words, even after rekeying and that is how these “performances” at the open mics across all locations, open or closed, *are* performances as their primary framework. These open mics are usually put on in the same locations as gigs or “real” performances with the same or similar built in props, equipment and technology. Therefore, the primary frame for these nightspots is twentieth century notions of popular musical performances; however, at all the locations they are typically rekeyed by performers in different ways displacing the perceptually “purer” form of

performance to the rim that is usually the primary frame on other nights for regular gigs. In addition, there remain multiple layers of frames as a whole, differing between OOMs and COMs, each also having a greater preponderance of certain keying than the others.

This continuum of differences specifically applies to two of the five types of keyings: contest and technical redoings. Contests are keyed more at COMs, with performers viewing their relationships with other performers and performances as more competitive. This is usually apparent where the hosts use the open mics as tryouts for regular gigs, which are far more common at COMs than open ones. Bartime was one example of a bar that draws from open mics to book gigs for other evenings, as did another well known open mic in the East Village. Both of these open mics have “festivals” annually and competition plays an important role in forming the groups of regulars who receive better treatment and insider perks. At one COM in Manhattan many practices symbolize an exclusive event, including having a “lottery system” where performers draw a number for their slot. This allows the hosts some wiggle room to make adjustments. A tip jar is walked or passed around by a host sometimes chastising performers to contribute and the number of songs performers can play changes unexpectedly in the middle of the sequence to supposedly speed along the process. Also, at this COM, hosts often use sports metaphors to address the audience throughout the open mic sequence. For example, when performers are scheduled to play next the host would say they are “on deck” using a baseball metaphor.

Two different subtypes of technical redoings occur more commonly in COMs and OOMs separately. Goffman distinguished between two separate types of technical redoings: an instrumental or “utilitarian” form of practicing and rehearsing and “demonstrations or exhibitions.” The purpose of practicing is to give the “neophyte experience in performing” and “muffing and failure can occur” ([1974] 1986: 59). The interesting juxtaposition for Goffman is

that certain “expressive behavior” is not expected to have been practiced or worked on. This implies that within the interactions behaviors are in one sense, more genuine or authentic. This research demonstrates performance techniques and recipes are practiced, reworked and added to the cultural tool kits of the performers with the help of other musicians. This challenges the romantic notions of authenticity that are attached to the autonomous, creative genius. In the COMs, these presumptions of authenticity are more apparent than the OOMs where most recognize the performances of the musicians are under construction. Unlike practicing that is more common in the OOMs which allows for more “protection from the anxiety produced by incompetent performances,” (Goffman [1974] 1986: 65) exhibitions and demonstrations are more dominant in the COMs, where in the primary frame the performance is usually demonstrated for someone who is not a performer. In the case of the COMs with an autocratic host, who is judging, critiquing and considering future gigs:

I feel an open mic that doesn't have more to it [e.g. offering gigs] is doing a disservice because some of them [musicians]...they are better than they realize and they need someone who is listening to them who gives them a gig they didn't expect. And that has happened here, where they just came in here to play their two songs and they got a gig and they ended up pursuing their art in ways they never thought they would.

This exemplifies how a COM host can act as an arbiter of taste and gatekeeper within a local open mic scene. These subtypes are usually performed by those who are more experienced and proficient. Goffman asserts that demonstrations or exhibitions usually show or express less compared to a primary frame performance. In these circumstances, it is perceived by these performers that less “dramaturgy” is best because demonstrations procure greater “embarrassing ambiguities” for the actors ([1974] 1986: 66-68). As will be described, this is more apparent in COMs than OOMs. Verbal utterances and non-verbal behavior are an important component to the performances and will be explored further in this analysis.

Richard Bauman contributed substantially to the definitions and early elaborations of “verbal performances” and relied heavily on Gregory Bateson (1972) and Erving Goffman ([1974] 1986) to do so. In his demonstrative book, *Verbal Art as Performance*, Bauman (1977) argues that verbal and cultural performances are frame-based in their interactive and communication based constructions. In the framing process, the performer is typically held accountable by the audience to the implicit and explicit codes outside of the content of the performance itself. Consequently, the actions of the performer are potentially under “evaluation” in terms of the perceived skills, competences and strategies employed and the overall effectiveness of the presentation. To meet the categorical marking, the performance and communicative act is done under the pretense of enhancing the experiences and enjoyment for all those involved as expressive and possibly aesthetic acts. Drawing from Goffman’s ([1974] 1986) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, performances can invoke or shift these “metacommunicative” frameworks to different keys (Bateson 1972; 188; Bauman 1977: 7-16).

As discussed thus far, in the cases of these open mics, verbal performances are important cues for the process of keying. These performers do more than just perform music. They participate in “stage talk” (Bealle 1993) during their performances and their talk interactively forms and represents one discourse within these contexts. The inclusion of Bauman’s work here helps illuminate the other elements present in these open mic musical performances. These frameworks are keyed through a variety of ways according to Bauman including, “special codes, figurative language, parallelism, special paralinguistic features, special formulae, appeal to tradition and disclaimer to performance” (1977: 16). Examples of special codes include linguistic devices like storytelling or poetic semantics. Figurative language describes verbalizations that are creative, expressive and potentially novel appropriates or uses. Parallelism



addresses the issues of regularities, repetition, structures, and ritualism in utterances. Special paralinguistic features are features typically outside of the text made by an observer about the performance text. Special formulae are linguistic “markers of specific genres” that are familiar and frequently used within that community, that may include a reference to the differences between an audience and performer. Appealing to tradition is recognizing some aesthetic standard of which the performances have been and still are judged or critiqued. Finally, a disclaimer to performance is an explicit announcement given by the performer regarding the forthcoming performance. Often “competence” is denied as a tactic of recognizing the contextual norms where “self-assertiveness is devalued.” It keys the performance and is a moral gesture to “counterbalance the power” of the performance (Bauman 1977: 16-22). No special combination or frequencies of these keyings display a performance and some may potentially not display them at all. So, each ethnography should explore each community and look to better discern each culture or setting uniquely with these keyings in mind. Greater homogeneity in range and regularities within the different economies of performance across these continuums suggest differing degrees and intensity of performance, which are apparent in the different types of keying (1977: 22-24).

Performance practices by musicians historically correlates with specific genres within certain communities and subcultures. Examining social contexts in addition to genres and the situated behavior within these contexts by performers and audiences are all important in ascertaining a deeper understanding of performances. The “event” is a critical component in fully describing and situating performances with the larger subculture, community or scene. These events are usually interconnected within more bounded systems of meanings, forming what is often the most important and visible performance within a community, a “cultural performance” (Singer 1972; Bauman 1977: 28). In this particular musical landscape, the open

mic as a musical third place is a form of cultural performance. The open mic is a cultural performance residing between the two historical spheres, regions and frames, practice and performance. More precisely, these cultural performances are formally restricted in settings, schedule, and usually include proficient performers. Performance events are comprised of participants, performers and audiences and the roles associated with each (1977: 25-29).

Not all performances are duplicates or pure bi-products of these structures. They are “emergent” and “accomplishments” in the interactive constructions but also dialectically influence future constructions (1977: 37-40). Participants’ competences, cultural repertoires, goals by the participants and contexts all work to formulate the variations that occur, making performances unique. Furthermore, when the performances garner or elicit the full attention of the audiences, forming a social bond between the audience and performer, the social prestige and status of the performer is augmented, gaining greater control over the audience. Lastly, for Bauman, this is where the potential for change can occur and the political economy of power and distinction becomes most omnipresent. With greater power, the performer is both “admired” and “feared” for the performer’s artistic merits and the ability to subvert or undermine the social or power structure (1977: 40-45). Herein are the social relations between the different levels of performances throughout the open mic setting. The open mic, as a social event, has become a cultural performance within the musical creator status group and landscape. The multiple performances by the multiple performers on stage at each open mic, in addition to the performances by the audiences to the performer and amongst themselves all act as smaller negotiations on the performance—practice continuum.

Five theoretical framework layers of performances are occurring with the musical open mic in this ethnography. The cultural performance of the open mic within the larger American culture is a discursive product of the semantic history of the “open mike” over time. The open

mic is also part and parcel to larger cultural discourses that represent and actively perpetuate the diffusion of a growing participatory and culturally democratic landscape. Other tangential forms include the previously mentioned growth and diffusion of Karaoke (Drew 2001; Drew 2004), Guitar Hero, and the now popular television show *American Idol*. The third is the performance of the open mic phenomena within the musician creator status group as a musical third place for performers to meet other musicians, participate in “shop talk” (Bennett 1980: 4), and practice their performance skills. The fourth is the potential local “scenes” within this urban musical landscape and finally the actual performances that occur within the sequence of each open mic. To better explore this complex landscape, the critical status and role of the host within the setting and sequence will be explored first, but before this is addressed, one final theoretical analysis will be provided to better elucidate these performances.

Lisa McCormick’s (2006) recent article, “Music as a Social Performance,” reiterates many of the common themes seen in the writings provided thus far by Goffman, Bauman and Finnegan in terms of defining parameters and representations of performances, verbal performances and musical performances. Paying heed to the sociological assertion that performances are not a “final stage of production” in the musicological journey or lineage of aesthetic, symbolic texts, McCormick begins with the premise that musical performances are “social performances” that are ritualistic and never fully “complete.” Rather, it is final only in so far as contextual human meaning is final when co-constructed. This is also the central theme and thesis of Becker, Faulkner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s (2006) edited volume, *Art from Start to Finish*. By appropriating Alexander’s (2004) notion of the “social performance” and applying it to “musical performances” McCormick touches on some recurring elements. These musical performances contain six identifiable components: “systems of collective representations, actors, observers/audience, means of symbolic production, mise-en-scène and social power” (Alexander

2004). McCormick purports that this matrix addresses all the salient issues such as the text, context, and actions of those involved. She also believes this conceptual scheme can be applied to all forms and styles of musical performance, formal and informal, by professionals or amateurs in all contexts (McCormick 2006: 121-123).

Systems of collective representations include scripts of symbols and meanings, which include everything from genres, texts, and vernacular to the “background structures” such as context that help shape these systems of meanings and performance differences. Myths that feed and form important narratives, such as the romantic belief of the musical genius working autonomously against the will of a misunderstanding world, also reside within these symbolic systems. The second element is the actors, performers and cultural creators who “encode the meanings.” These performers have a stock of knowledge and basic competencies, especially the “composer/performer” who is typically viewed as more “authentic,” which demonstrates, according to McCormick, the “privileged position of the singer/songwriter in folk music and the lower status of cover bands in rock music” (2006: 123-126). This particular “myth” is a symbolic one in the open mics among many singer/songwriters, especially musicians who frequent COMs.

The third element is the requisite observers or audience of these performances, but the audience can be either present or imagined. The audience has an interactive “power to reject, subvert or transform the meanings” and is typically both “fragmented and stratified” in today’s western societies. As to being stratified, the author says this means multiple interpretations of the performance can occur in “unpredictable” ways. This is because according to the author that any audience can contain people hold multiple statuses ranging from “critics, professional musicians, friends and family of the composer or performer(s)...” that could influence divergent or “incongruent” perspectives and interpretations (2006: 126-127). This has a significant implication for these open mics because, as we know most of these open mics are relatively

homogeneous in their audiences, comprised from the performing musicians, but some or more heterogeneous and thus more receptive to non-musicians, friends or family members attending. The author recognizes this possible congruency when audiences share more in common than otherwise. More fragmented audiences depend more on genre and context and can vary, but potentially would less likely become fragmented if performed for “significant others” like what Milton Babbitt ([1958] 2003) argued back in the late 1950s. His elitist argument proposed a similar argument to Adorno’s mass-culture arguments that the general public was incapable of truly appreciating good, substantive music, due to a lack of knowledge, and thus should inspire musicians to “restrict performances” to an “audience of specialists in the university.” Ever increasing technology would only worsen this allowing more and more people to listen to “contemporary serious music” (McCormick 2006: 126-129). As seen across all the open mics, they remain backstage regions where the majority of the audience members are the performers, but the COMs are more restrictive to non-musicians and less experienced musicians who often do not play the same genres as well.

The means of symbolic production include contextual, material props such as clothing, instruments and the location of the performance. The internal material technology and how they are arranged within the space collaboratively work to stage the performance as well, and these range from the stage, the lights, tables and chairs to how the room is amplified. This is the material “architecture” of the performance. What instruments that are used play a pivotal role on a variety of cultural meanings and products, such as genre, style and those who participate (McCormick 2006: 129-133). All of the COMs had smallish stages, making full bands with full amplification, like a rock’n roll band, a difficult if not discouraging task to manage. For solo acoustic singer/songwriters, they were an ideal size. As always there were exceptions, but the

OOMs typically had larger stages and often were shorter making the audience and performer on a closer vertical level.

The fifth element, the “*mise-en-scène*,” is somewhat elusive, but refers mainly to the “style” or “performance practice.” This “ability, or failure, to understand how to perform a text in a way that is meaningful to the audience” is the crux of this entire study. It reminds us text and textual interpretations are never complete or absolute. The processes include the ability to read scores and communicate texts in a “contingent performance situation” which requires technical mastery and knowledge as to what “expressive tools” that will be employed (McCormick 2006: 133). These notions are cradled within what Taruskin (1995) called the “authenticity debate,” where a very modernist, objective notion of authenticity is contrasted with a “vitalist” perspective. For classical music, the vitalist looks, in contradistinction toward emotion, affect and spiritual muses to guide the style of the performer and performance. The other approach to learning is “performance traditions” that are typically passed on from teacher to students (McCormick 2006: 133-138). This is a critical area of divergence for these open mic musicians in this study. The COMs have more “pre-professional” amateurs holding to stricter definitions of style, but rather than relying on notions of one, true authenticity, most of these performers define authenticity as being a combination drawn from uniquely personal, expressive individuality and technical prowess. The authenticity notion of performance practice in classical music deifies and uplifts the composer as the authority, unlike the vitalist notion which equalizes performer with composer. The authenticity notion of performance practice in popular musicians deifies and uplifts the composer, who is also the performer, and practicing performance, which is more common in OOMs, uplifts the social process and opportunity of learning a *mise-en-scène*.

The sixth element is the distribution and economy of social power and prestige, of which McCormick pulls significantly from Pierre Bourdieu for theoretical insight. Praise and reputation

are not given out to musicians equally and accumulations of such can lead to more “symbolic capital,” which can be converted into other material forms of capital, like instruments, recordings or larger social networks. This leads back into more cultural or subcultural capital for this study. In addition, stratified systems of power and prestige play themselves out in musical venues and how the process of “gate keeping” within the organizational structures of musical production (2006: 138-140).

In sum, McCormick argues how this nexus of theory and methodology supplant both production and consumption oriented studies of art and music, including the production approach of Howard Becker (1982). Furthermore, her attempt to demystify Becker’s “demystification” of art, artists and creative communities is based in her notion of “performance practicing” and “practicing traditions” (McCormick 2006: 141). These concepts do not fully cover or sufficiently allow for the place of practicing performance that is seen in this study. Although within the classical notion of performance practicing, elements are shared like higher status and notions of authenticity, it does not adequately explain the performance practicing in how authenticity is conceived and constructed by the participants. Furthermore, not all performance strategies that accrue in the tool kit come from a teacher, some come from historical “scripts” the comprise performance conventions.

There is a pattern of salient themes that define the parameters of an artistic/ musical event or performance, but there are some divergences, too. Bauman (1977), McCormick (2006) and Finnegan (2007) all recognized that for a musical production to be deemed a musical performance it should have three basic requisites: an audience, performers and a contextual means or mechanisms to put on and set apart the performance. The last requirement is the most divergent of the three, with Bauman using the term “setting” (1977: 4), McCormick using the phrase “means of symbolic production,” (2006: 129) and Finnegan suggesting that a set of

means of setting apart or framing the event as a performance (2007: 152-153). Finnegan and McCormick's third criteria are both more inclusive to just a setting. All three also recognized that some type of art form or system of symbols was necessary. Bauman's "art form" condition was more simplistic than Finnegan's "prior preparation," (2007: 152) but Finnegan accounts for the importance and connection of artistic style to practicing or preparatory methods, McCormick includes these in her "systems of representation" criterion but expands upon the "art form" (1977: 4) as connected to scripts, symbols, beliefs and myths that shape genres and the cultural meanings for the participants. Her section on *mise-en-scène* (2007: 133) conceptually overlaps with Finnegan's preparation requirements and McCormick's recognition of an economy and distribution of social power and relations (2006: 138) is not met by the other authors but is certainly addressed in my research.

In terms of their nuanced differences, Finnegan argues that for an event to be deemed a performance the audience needs to be composed of people outside the performers, which is problematic for open mics as already discussed. This is the primary difference of open mics from other more traditional performances, making even the performance-oriented performance practicing at COMs not a fully fledged performance. Finnegan's "preparation prior to the event" and McCormick's *mise-en-scène* is slightly problematic because not all the performers specifically practice prior to playing the open mics but some do, especially those new to the open mic. As musicians build up their personal repertoires, both musical and verbal, they become less likely to practice prior to the open mic, but do practice outside, especially at closed open mics. This potentially signifies a more performance frame at COMs. In addition, as previously discussed, the "styles" employed by the musicians are more solidified and constructed, signaling to the audience at the COMs that they have "found their voices." As discussed, the distinctions that appeared most salient were within the COMs and from musicians who regularly attended



COMs toward those who didn't. As totalities, the symbols, practices, roles, meanings that are co-constructed within COMs differ generally from the OOMs and they begin with the role of the host.

### **Performances in the Open Mics**

A very important role within the open mic performance event, beyond each performer's performance, is the host. Because the host and the performers interactively and meaningfully co-construct the primary frame, the host contributes significantly to keying the primary frame in each open mic. The host at every open mic is the leader of the primary procedural and sequential activity and potentially the person who can give the performer a future gig. In open mics across the New York City musical landscape are a few common statuses and roles that are the foundation for their organizational structures. The host, a status position known to all open mic performers across most sites, shares similar expectations in terms of authority within each open mic setting, but they differ in certain ways as well. The hosts' "instrumental leadership" (Macionis 2005: 165), which is typically more common in secondary groups, is very important in directing the open mic event and ideally facilitates a smooth sequence to the process. A few hosts expressed their favorable desire for a smooth sequencing of the evening, because it minimizes potentially negative, troubling, or upsetting interactions with frustrated and potentially bellicose musicians. One of the hosts at the Knot who regularly worked once a month when the primary host was absent attending another nearby open mic had the following to say after he had encountered a difficult evening. His comments also underscore the importance of how the open mic list is negotiated in terms of access and openness:

I want it to be noted that I now know why most open mic hosts keep the list away from the musicians. Most do. I've been to many open mics in the city. We let them see it and look at it here, unlike most places, but this is what we get....them

crowding around me and getting crazy about the list. 100 people have asked me when they are playing.

Most of the hosts at the Knot and Nabu's do have a more democratic and *laissez-faire* approach and it shows up in the ideology they espouse regarding the open mic and what it does for the event. One of the host at Namu's describes what a good host is:

A good host to me is to entertain the people, as a host, and get all the musicians up to play and be as fair as possible. It doesn't always work that way but you got to be as fair as possible. I think that just comes from me being a musician for so long, getting crapped on, I don't want to see that happen to other people, that is the way it should be.

Other hosts, who use a more democratic approach, don't necessarily see their role as entertaining the audience or musicians, but do believe they have a pivotal role in helping the musicians take advantage of the event. The primary host at the Knot, having learned from other hosts in the past, encourages musicians to "talk with other musicians" that may potentially lead to "collaborative opportunities" and sees his role of getting "people to applaud when they [performers] get on stage and when they leave stage" as critical to helping the musician have the audience's "attention at the beginning of the set." The observable, external flow and internal "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) for each performer's performance and the overall coherence of the sequence of performers over the course of the event are very important to the event as a whole, and the host plays an undeniable role in these often delicate interactions. The host can also provide other "expressive" components by giving performers additional opportunities when unexpected problems arise, but it is usually veiled as more instrumental action to help save face for the musician. An integration of these roles usually goes better with certain leadership styles than others. The democratic leadership styles are more adaptable to the instrumental roles integrating some expressive components to it and these are more prominent at Namu's and the Knot. The democratic leadership at Namu's was slightly more *laissez-faire* than that at the Knot. Autocratic/authoritarian leadership styles are far more amenable to instrumental roles in every

capacity and is the style employed by the host at Bartime and a few other open mics that are more closed (Ridgeway 1983; Macionis 2005: 165-166)

Bartime immediately appears to be led with a *laissez-faire* form of leadership from the female host who always works the event. She, unlike all other hosts, remains publically quiet and has a minimal amount of verbal interactions with most of the musicians, unless they are regulars, especially when they are performing. Consequently, the flow of the performer's autonomous performance begins immediately at the entrance to the stage with guitar in hand, rather than being interactively constructed with an introduction, assistance, influence, and possible help from the host. Sink or swim, the performers are on their own and the frame is pre-existing and more rigid than other locations. If unexpected problems develop, the performers have no one coming to her or his assistance, unless it's technical and the engineer may help, sometimes begrudgingly. This type of scenario best emulates the frame of a regular gig, concert or preconception of a musical cultural performance. The host's very instrumental role in this situation is countered with the complete relegation of any expressivity dependent on the performer on stage. This is indicative of a more authoritarian and autocratic leadership style, because the host's lack of public and verbal interaction with the performer places the performer into a potentially difficult position, with little possible help from the host available if needed. In open mics that had interactive hosts who offered up intros, advice and help from the beginning of the evening to their actual performance on stage, a more expressive contingent performance by the performer is tempered, allowing the performer to have a more practice-oriented instrumental frame if that is befitting.

The open mic has become a cultural performance, as a performance event; however, some open mics display, as a whole, more performance-oriented frames than others that have more practice oriented frames. The former, often with the help of an authoritarian host style, and

instrumental role of the host keys a more rigid frame as a form of *performance practicing*. The latter has a more fluid frame which I call *practicing performance*. Open mics fall somewhere on this ideal continuum, but some fall closer to the endpoints of this continuum. Bartime fits much closer to the performance practicing frame and Namu's closer to the practicing performance frame. The performance practicing frame is more expressive as a possible "scene" within the creator status group landscape and is instrumental in its enactments by the performers. The practicing performance frame is potentially more important within the musician creator status group and more fluid and expressive for and by the musicians who play it. These endpoints coincide with the continuum of closed open mics being more instrumental internally, with more performers participating in a form of performance practicing and expressive externally. The open open mics are framed more expressively internally as performed by the performers in a greater diversity of forms including more practicing performance and instrumentally externally to the event. Although a certain degree of rationalization and "McDonaldization" (Ritzer 2000) exists across all these open mics, the closed open mics usually display more organizational structures of McDonaldization, greater predictability, efficiency, calculation, and control than open open mics. These typifications do not go without problems because the Knot has a considerable amount of McDonaldization in some ways but also allows for greater expressivity, fluidity and heterogeneity than Bartime, too. These typifications can be seen more clearly with the patterns of verbal expressions in addition to the already described performance types, genres and performer categories, while on stage.

As an ideal type, the OOMs display greater fluidity and diversity in terms of performance types, genres performed, the race and ethnicity of the participants, the amateur statuses and performer frames co-constructed by the hosts, audiences and performers. The hosts and the performers at these OOMs are more varied and aware of the diversity, whether it is the

diversity of music played or the diversity of each performer's aesthetic career. The novice often enters the open mic and may potentially, if she continues, to learn many meaningful tools and schemas for performing by practicing how to become a performer. Initially, the performer's goals may be just to overcome or deal with "performance anxiety" or "stage fright" (Parcutt and McPherson 2002: 47) like this novice performer from the Knot explains:

When I first came to the Knot, I hung out and watched and saw that people clap no matter what...if they were good or bad. I then realized that I wouldn't get booed off the stage no matter how badly I played. First, it was about getting over the fear. Now, I listen to the audience and seek out people's thoughts about my music. I have confidence now and I am mature.

As time goes by and the performer's conscious work on her music and performance negotiations become more nuanced, deep, and adept, goals at the open mic for each performer likely changes. This performer, unlike the last who had never played in a public setting, had been a long time classical musician; however, he was inexperienced with simultaneously singing and playing popular music in a performance setting. He was working on other issues after regularly playing the Knot for a few months:

Playing is a lot about projection and confidence. It can sound good if they are just confident and project themselves well. It's not particularly a virtuoso thing, like playing classical music. That sounds good, too, but you can get great technicality and not come off well on stage.

Then, there are performers who seek out and search for places that will challenge their knowledge and abilities with the hope of developing better performance skills. This process of accumulating a larger cultural tool kit and repertoire to better prepare one's self, including intentionally placing oneself into difficult circumstances encountering different cultures, norms and "others" for "unsettling habitus," has been noted as a burgeoning "cosmopolitan" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004: xii) goal and ideal for many well educated cultural "omnivores" (Peterson 1996) who live mostly in urban centers (Aldredge 2009). A young, black hip-hop performer who came to the Knot for a while, even though most performers were singer-

songwriters doing very different styles of music, did so because, “It’s like a real performance because of the stage and it’s in front of a diverse and different crowd. If you want to be a good performer you need to be able to play in front of diverse crowds.” The software designer who went back to India after playing Namu’s for a few months mentioned a similar benefit to playing the open mic: “Every songwriter writes for an audience in mind. I like playing open mics because it’s better to play for strangers as opposed to friends because strangers are more honest. This is where I practice.” Discursively, the word practice is a common term used by performers in open open mics, especially in the OOMs. The professional musician who was a host at Namu’s said this about working and playing at the open mic there: “I like it here, though. It lets me try things out and practice and I have met some great people. It’s been cool watching some people come in and really improve dramatically. That’s cool, too.” These examples solidify the notion that a level of “reflexivity” is often augmented and increased overtime. As these musicians play more open mics, they interact with other musicians, and thus, meaningfully sharpen their tacit knowledge and tool kit of performance recipes. Specifically, they expand and refine their performance strategies and techniques as in terms of shaping their musical compositions and managing and constructing their musical identities and performances.

Nicholas Cook’s treatise that the fields of ethnomusicology, sociology, and performance studies now look well beyond the music as just a written text to be reproduced, now stands in deep contrast to what the renowned classical composer Igor Stravinsky once opined, that music was to be executed, not interpreted. Music and performance are connected through a socially and meaningfully interpretive and interactive process. Interestingly, Cook discusses the breaking away of theater studies from literary studies and this analogy provides a plausible parallel between the historical traditions in theatrical performance and the inner performances at these musical open mics (2003: 204-205). Drawing from this analogy, some of what is occurring

across these open mics is conceptually similar to what is called “breaking the fourth” and “fifth wall” in theater studies.

Breaking the fourth wall is when the audience is recognized as a participating member of the performance and the metaphorical fourth wall separating the audience from the stage and performance is blurred or made malleable. This textual and performance strategy of violating a presumed “separation between real and fictional worlds” (Thomson-Jones 2007: 92) has been accelerating for decades as a burgeoning “meta-criticism” in theater (Canby 1998) of the older socially constructed conventions, but dates at the least as far back as Shakespeare and Elizabethan theater. The fifth wall is a progressively reflexive performance strategy where a performer in a theatrical performance breaks from the temporal character and role and references their personal life or experiences (Genzlinger 2006). These two tactics in theater can shed some light into the variants and degrees of performances within and across these open mics. As these concepts pertain to open mics, OOMs show greater fluidity with more breaking of both walls, especially the fifth walls and COMs show more framing proximity toward the modern twentieth-century separation between audience and performer in musical performances.

The influential writings of Herbert J. Gans on popular music and its distinctions with “high culture” add an additional worthwhile dimension. As Herbert J. Gans (1999) first argued in the early seventies, “high culture” is “creator oriented,” rather than “user oriented.” The creator-oriented perspective developed from the mass culture theorists who exalted “high culture” of the past and viewed popular culture as homogenizing, alienating and harmful. Amongst others this cosmology traces back to Matthew Arnold (1993). These “high arts” typically included the “fine arts,” such as classical music, opera, and ballet. The users of the music, or the audiences, should “bend” to the values, knowledge and beliefs of the creators and thus only come to the art form or music interpretively on the creators’ terms, because the artists paternally knew best. Gans

reminds us that the “public” or audiences and the “creators” or performers of high culture particularly, have historically and still remain, more homogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, education and class, for example (1999: 35-36). On the other hand, user-oriented “popular culture” attempts to “satisfy audience values and wishes” differing from high culture, which usually included the “avant-garde” (1999: 96). High culture attempts to achieve a higher aesthetic value and not place the audience as the ultimate arbiter of taste (1999: 74-77). The creator orientation of high culture of the past gave a higher status and prestige to the creator as opposed to the performer of the popular cultural user-oriented creations, often painting them broadly as demonstrating little discerning aesthetic values borrowing from many sources and lacking true artistic or intellectual originality.

The “auteur theory” (1999: 103) of cultural products has since been dismantled and deconstructed as with the older western hierarchy of high, popular and folk cultures. Clearly, this ideology attempted to sustain a cultural and symbolic hierarchy of distinction, placing more diverse, heterogeneous popular taste cultures at lower rungs, as opposed to high taste cultures that were seen as far superior. These distinctions are applicable, in an altered way, to open mics. The creators constitute the majority of the participants in these settings. Most of these musicians, other than the ritualists, usually play gigs outside of open mics. Ritualists rarely if ever play in the company of “mixed contacts” (Goffman 1963: 12) or audiences that include a sizeable number of non-musicians. The closed open mics provides an intriguing hierarchical and symbolic parallel to the creator oriented high culture. They are typically more exclusive and homogeneous in categories such as race, age, gender, education, instrumentation, amateur-professional status, performance type, performance frame and genre.

Furthermore, Lawrence W. Levine brilliantly showed how the historical process of “sacralization” of high culture helped further divide the professional and amateur continuum that



had once been blurred, but became rigidly bi-polar and hierarchical by the early twentieth century (1988: 138-140). The “arbiters” of culture drove this “sacralization,” which also helped separate genres and performance forms, and helped create a rigid demarcation between audience and performer that was not there in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1988: 208-242). This sacralization seems to persist between these musicians and open mics and the genres that are played. This is exemplified in both interactions and ideology. Worth noting also is how “stage talk” (Bealle 1993: 63), that includes utterances by performers, such as apologies or disclaimers on stage, existed in stage talk prior to this sacralization and functioned significantly to separate and demarcate people based on education and class. The disappearance of stage talk in the late nineteenth century, as Levine argued (1989) was a system of shifting authority and power to the directors and producers (Bealle 1993: 84). These distinctions appear in these open mics, where the authorities in COMs are more powerful and performers less talkative and vice versa in COMs where performers have greater power to display their fallibilities and mistakes.

For example, the “talent” that plays at Bartime is very important to the longtime host. She expressed performance mistakes as something very negative, especially in how other musicians see and think of them: “It’s more difficult to play in front of a bunch of musicians rather than people who are not. The people who aren’t musicians won’t hear mistakes and just go along with the music. Musicians hear it if you miss a chord.” This ideology was mirrored by the co-host who apparently use to play other open mics, including the Knot, but stopped attending them because “...the musicians were not serious enough, too many green musicians.” She worked in the music industry and also did a multitude of independent work supporting the musician’s group tied to Bartime, in addition to trying to start up a few personal musician related projects, helping musician’s book gigs and set up web pages. When she played every open mic, she said very little on stage. Another regular who boasted playing open mics all over the country

said, “Some people like places like the Knot or other places but I think they have less talent at those. The Knot is like Cheers, people are not there to listen to music as much. I like Bartime because people listen here and the talent is good.”

Performances across these settings vary and also vary more so within the OOMs as opposed to the more closed ones. The organizational and symbolic distinctions between these two extremes also appear in the dominant framings that occur within these settings, as well in terms of the performances of the musicians. The OOMs have a more dominant “practicing performance” frame as apparent in the various components of the musicians’ performances. Host participation is very important in setting and maintaining these frames. In addition, other strategies and forms of communication utilized by musicians during their respective performances, such as different forms of discourse in stage talk, clothing, and other props are also very important in cueing frames or different keys.

Bartime is the closest to a COM and best represents the performance practicing frame in terms of the majority of the performances over the course of the events. As mentioned before, the genres, performance types, and instrumentations are more homogeneous and the host does little to verbally intervene and interact with the performer during his or her performance. Bartime as a third musical place has the contextual constructions that work toward a more traditional performance frame. Having live music on other nights, the bar is set up and geared almost exclusively for live music entertainment. Signs advertising the live music on other nights, the weekly open mic, and the music festival buttress the importance of formal gigs within this particular locale. Incidentally, one of the most prestigious open mics in the entire city developed the concept of a local “music festival” featuring musicians drawing from the open mic for the musicians (Light 2006).

Although this open mic was not a primary site in this ethnography it is in the same scene circuit as Bartime and likely provides the festival idea Bartime owners and host simulated. The stage at Bartime is physically elevated, distinctively demarcating and separating the audience from performer, unlike at Namu's, for example, where there is no risen stage at all. The engineer rarely speaks with the performer, but signals nonverbally across the room emulating once again a more live music gig setting. Unlike all the open open mics, the host never plays maintaining a social distance from the musicians and not allowing them to have the power to critique or scrutinize her performances. In many ways, these patterns represent a musical performance setting where the "fourth wall" within the performance and event is more rigid. There was far more sanctioning handed out by higher status people at Bartime than at the other locations, specifically the quieting of audience members when high status musicians were performing. When regulars were performing, it was often one of the quietest places observed, and some regulars, would characterize it as a good open mic because it was both filled with "talented musicians" and "they listened." They did listen, but not for everybody. More importantly, the identifiable patterns meet most of the requirements provided by Finnegan for a musical performance, reaffirming the notion that Bartime as an approximate version in this ethnography of a closed open mic where performance practicing was the primary frame and rehearsal and competition important rekeyings.

At Bartime, the many seasoned devotees and pre-professionals that played throughout the long night started and finished like clockwork, with most performers ready to go on stage within seconds of the last performer concluding the last song. More often than not, little was said by the performer, besides introducing herself, possibly giving a website and announcing upcoming gigs at other nightspots. Stage talk was typically kept to a minimum. In some ways, it was almost like a well prepared and regimented commercial. Musicians who performed at the

Bartime open mic rarely complimented other musicians on stage, although this was not practiced at noticeably high levels anywhere, it was exhibited the least amount at Bartime. One of just a few examples of this occurred when an unknown older male newcomer performer from Denmark played a very eccentric handmade percussion instrument with a bass guitar. His roaring applause afterwards was subsequently complimented by the next performer, who was a female regular insider and good friend to the host, who on previous night told the audience “Why don’t you be quiet already!” in between her two songs. After this Danish performer finished playing she yelled, while setting up her guitar on stage, “Where is my friend? The one who played before me...man...you rocked!” This set of interactions within the frame and circumstance could represent the regular attempt to recapture or co-opt the power from this Danish performer. He had come in and garnered a small bit of acclaim with his esoteric performance, which was highly valued and deeply supported within the expressive ideology of the locale. It was possible that by labeling him as a nameless “friend” she was fighting to “define the situation” potentially “altercasting” (Weinstein and Deutschberger 1963) him as a quasi-opening act to her own upcoming performance. This speaks not so much of the actor but of the meaningfully comparative and often competitive creator-oriented “habitus” predominant in these closed open mics vis-à-vis subcultural capital amongst the musicians.

Mistakes are a common occurrence in musical performances. Many musicians learning the craft of performance would initially provide all sorts of communication to the audience signifying their musical blunders, even if they were barely noticeable. Dabblers and novices would sometimes stop playing and start the song over. Overtime, musicians usually learned how to “manage information” (Goffman 1963: 42) and the mistakes in their performance interactions with the audiences would signify negative connotations and lower amateur status. This rarely happened at Bartime, because dabblers and novices represented a very small percentage of

performers and returnees. If a performer did acknowledge a mistake, it was done sardonically and cynically in an attempt at nonchalance, to distance him/herself from any derogatory interpretations by other musicians in the audience. One female regular said, after the applause for her song one night, "I've never had applause when I fucked up so much," and another male regular after finishing his second song flippantly stated, "Now I can continue to drink beer without the fear of fucking anything else up!" "Being drunk" is often used as an excuse to save face, but rarely was it used at Bartime. These were a few techniques of "role distancing" (Goffman 1961) for possible negative critiques by other musicians without ostensibly coming across to the audience as caring too much about their interpretations. Other examples of preemptive role distancing such as "I haven't played this song in a long time," or announcing through the microphone "I've haven't played the piano in 12 years," before playing it were used by a few performers in an attempt to reframe the audience's possible interpretations.

One other frequent form of stage talk used by performers across the open mics, but rarely exhibited at Bartime, was "self-talk" and "response cries" (Goffman 1981) during the musician's performance. In most contexts self-talk is deemed deviant but response cries are generally much more acceptable. Particular settings "favor" different conventions for self-talk, such as a speaker at a podium or giving a live broadcast, be it a technical malfunction or a textual issue. This breaking the frame of "role as speaker-to-an-audience" (Goffman 1981: 92) can possibly demonstrate their concern and responsibility to account for the problem. Moreover, Goffman suggests that self-talk signifies cognitive recipes or "modes" of speech that can be drawn upon to seek empathy in a troubling situation, but some situations are more "excusable" (1981: 96-97) than others. The examples in the open mic of these ritualized self-talk can vary from a performer going "Oh, God, I forgot the words!" to, when looking at his or her guitar

while playing, saying “Ok....wrong key.....let me start this again.” More shortened versions of response cries can be various expletives like “Shit!” to words such as “Oops!” or “Ahh!”

As Goffman (1981) reminds us, different subcultures have different taboos on words, and it's safe to say that various curse words are relatively normative in these bar settings (1981: 115). Some of these utterances work to deflect or downplay immediate problems, but ultimately intend to demonstrate poise and competency in the face of unexpected and potentially damaging information (1981: 109). These representative forms of self monitoring and “remedial work” by making “accessible to witnesses what he chooses to assign to his inward state” (1981: 89-90) was not as apparent at Bartime and Ruby's as the Knot and Namu's. This buttresses Goffman's general theoretical point, that these forms of “ejaculatory expressions” are a “flooding of relevance in” not a “flooding of emotion” outwardly and thus are products of specific social situations and occasions with generalizing functions (1981: 121-122). In terms of the application to this study these “forms of talk” (Goffman 1981) and framing methods were situationally employed by novices and less experienced musical performers more within certain settings. The musical third places that were more closed had fewer novices and thus fewer instances of these forms of talk. Furthermore, as musicians become more experienced by working and learning how to manage their expressions, information and emotions, they learn how to disguise these inner dialogues and monitor their monitoring system, so to speak, and they sometimes move to locations where fewer musicians act in such manners. These practices also frame closed open mics as performance practices rather than practicing performances.

Less forms of talk or discourse by performers at Bartime during the performance exhibited musical repertoire, prowess and ability to play things on short notice. These extant examples demonstrate more forms of “role embracement” (Goffman 1961) within this setting and the performance practicing frame. Unlike at many other open mics, especially at the OOMs,

rarely did performers produce a lyrics sheet or use a music stand on stage to facilitate the performance of the song. Unlike jazz, where using a music stand to hold lyrics or scores during a formal gig is conventional, musicians in other popular musical forms typically don't do so. To many seasoned amateurs and professionals, this signifies inexperience and thus lower status within the status groups and especially at the closed open mics. As mentioned before, far more musicians would announce their gigs at other bars before or after playing. Musical prowess and versatility was demonstrated by asking the audience questions before playing, such as "What should I play next?" or "I need a Marlboro light....and what kind of song do you want to hear: slow, medium or fast song?" The last few questions came from a troubadour that I encountered at five different open mics. Another example came from a temporary regular whose audience was talking incredibly loud during his performance, and this may have been an attempt to regain some power and control in the situation: "What should I play next....an educational song? Not that it matters because no one is listening." Needless to say, he never showed up again during the period of the study. Other shorter versions included, "Should I play a piano song or a guitar song?" demonstrating instrumental prowess and "I haven't played this song in a long time," potentially demonstrating some depth to the musician's personal and original repertoire of songs. As mentioned previously, original compositions are highly valued among singer/songwriters, especially at the closed open mics, representing a deeply ensconced ideology of expressive individuality and belief in a "personality" authenticity. This is exemplified by many musicians who talked about the importance of "finding one's voice." Other examples that included a gig advertisement would also include a reference to other musical endeavors such as this female musician's comments after her two songs one night, "Come see me and my full band. We are playing at the Key's this Friday night!" Not only does she advertise playing in a full band, besides her solo performances, but it was "her" band.

Besides the aforementioned abundance of musicians advertising, there were a considerable number visiting or stopping through New York City and playing the Bartime open mic. Of the few tourist newcomers that were spoken to, they all either found out about this open mic online or it was recommended by another musician at another open mic. There was an online article that had been written about the open mic providing favorable press that most open mics never received. “New songs” were rarely advertised unlike other locations and a higher degree of eccentricity often led to more attention by the audience and applause at the end. One additional practice observed at many other locations, but not at Bartime and another closed open mic, was the borrowing and sharing of instruments, especially guitars or keyboards. Very rarely did musicians share at Bartime, and if they did, only friends and regulars were trusted to do so. Often at other locales, musicians were much more giving of their instruments or guitar picks to other musicians who wanted to play but didn’t have an instrument. Jams were never present with little collaboration. As a whole, performances were far more similar and “performance like” as opposed to “practice like.” These characteristics present in the performances and organizational and cultural compositions point toward very serious and tacit symbolic boundaries and a creator status group hierarchy within the larger open mic landscape of New York City.

As one travels across this continuum with these musical third places, from COMs to OOMs, practicing performance to performance practicing, incremental changes are readily apparent and distinguishable. It is not a clean set of gradations, but as a whole, these four primary open mics represent different places on the continuum previously elucidated and this applies to the framing of performances as well. At Ruby’s, the stage performances included slightly fewer solos with more combos and bands with the help of the regular feature act every other week. Racial, age, instrumental, amateur-professional status, and genres, for example, were more diverse than Bartimes’ but more homogeneous than the other two. In addressing Finnegan’s



points, Ruby's had a schedule, but it was often fluid and changed in terms of when it began and ended each event. Having one of the smaller groups of regulars contributed to an interesting dynamic with the host directing the open mic with a greater democratic style than at Bartime, but she could be at times, obtrusive and micro-manage the sequence over the course of the performers' performances. The host, who never changed, often exhibited the desire to make a welcoming place for the performers meeting them at the door, introducing herself to each one and sometimes asking them to provide personal information about themselves while they were on stage; however, these interactive practices are often interpreted in the blasé northeastern urban setting as invasive and trying too hard. The host once called the open mic, "My own private listening room." She was very expressive, enthusiastic and complimentary, but often exhibited a very loquacious demeanor. She usually gave a five to ten-minute long introduction at the beginning of the open mic that almost always included a plugging of the weekly poetry open mic she hosted at the same bar.

The host sometimes made unanticipated judgments as to when the feature act would perform, potentially putting people off as well. This is not to say the event wasn't well attended, but the higher than normal drink requirements likely hurt the frugal musicians. Nonetheless, she introduced each performer and maintained an open list and allowed musicians to play three songs as opposed to the normal two, which many musicians liked. She helped some who encountered technical issues, but also sanctioned a few patrons for talking and playing pool. She would regularly pass the hat for donations, personally walking it around to everyone, to pay the feature act. This practice may have contributed to turning off musicians from returning consistently, because it slowed down the open mic sequence. Over the course of the night, the audience was very quiet and outwardly attentive which was favorable to most musicians.

Although the host's style was more democratic, it entailed some authoritarian elements as well, helping set the stage for a more performance oriented frame.

Ruby's had a sizeable range of performers in terms of experience, but with the influence of the feature act and the host, it had a more performance practice frame, but much so compared to Bartime. A few novices played Ruby's, including one regular. There was a lifted stage, but it wasn't as high as the one at Bartime, the lights were bright and the audience was close to the stage. Very few performers ever went outside to practice, tune up, talk or play. Music stands were used by a few novices, even by the host, but not often. The borrowing and loaning of guitars, picks and other equipment was more frequent than at Bartime. There were a higher number of compliments and deferments levied by musicians and host toward other musicians, which rarely happened at Bartime. This is what one regular novice said after performing his third song:

It's always so great to hear all the great music and musicians here. This night means a lot to me. To come out and hear all these great musicians. I have been playing guitar for a while, but just this past fall I started writing and singing, too. Thanks to Joan (the host) for letting me come in and work on this.

After one infrequent African-American regular played an impromptu individualist combo hybrid with the feature, the female feature said, "Give it up for Matt! It's amazing. He has never played any of these songs with me. He's amazing. Please excuse my profanity, but he is the shit!"

Dealing with on stage mess-ups or pre-emptive attempts to saving face were infrequent in totality and happened least often at Bartime. One time, the host, after giving her intro monologue, began playing but was out of tune and stopped: "I forgot to tune my high e-string. I am a bit embarrassed that I can't do this so quickly, because my longtime teacher is here, which by the way is a wonderful teacher, so if you are looking for some help, I would really recommend him." Announcing new songs were one type of trying to mitigate potentially negative critiques by fellow musicians. The host overtly references this typically unsaid rule,

“This is a new song. I just wrote it. I guess this gives me an excuse if I mess up.” Pre-emptive disclaimers were given such as this one from a male singer/songwriter who was a member of a combo: “This is really for all intent and purpose the first time we’ve played out together.” Musicians would occasionally ask the host if they could “play one more song” especially newcomers unfamiliar to the process. A few novices were forthright in telling the audience they were new to the open mic format as this musician stated in a matter-of-fact way, “This is my first open mic and really the first time to perform.”

As mentioned before, little advertising occurred, but the instances that did, were usually from the feature act. On one occasion, after an audience member abruptly told a newcomer that the performance was short, he responded as he was moving the chair from the stage, “If there is one thing I have learned about open mics is to keep it short and simple.” In terms of breaking the fourth wall, far more talking between audience members and the performers occurred than at Bartime.

Storytelling, one of Bauman’s criteria for a verbal performance, occurred with musicians prefacing songs with a meaningful narrative behind their creation. In sum, Ruby’s performance practicing frame was predominant, but far from the exclusive internal frame. An externally instrumental frame allowed performers more expressive room to employ the practicing performance frame than Bartime, but the feature act by bringing in more non-musicians and friends into the audience helped frame the open mic as a totality as a performance practice.

These changes toward a more practice oriented frame show up with the next case, the Knot. The Knot represented a very intriguing case setting in this study. In some ways, it had the makings of a performance practicing context, but other conflicting elements that were evident countered this. The Knot was even more diverse than Ruby’s in all the aforementioned ways, including musician categories such as race, age, instrumentation, performance types, and genres.

Performers did not market as much, and participated in other activities that were more indicative of a practice oriented frame. The practice of onstage guitar-tuning rarely happened at Bartime, because most musicians took care of this pre-performance activity outside the bar on the sidewalk or quietly in the corner before going on stage. Although some went outside or in the room near the front of the bar, onstage tuning was practiced more frequently by performers at the Knot. Similarly, borrowing and sharing guitars and other instruments represented greater collaboration in many hybrid combos and jams as a part of a practice oriented frame. As these open mics become more open and more practice oriented, performers feel greater instrumental freedom to also play covers and work on their expressivity. This is not to say the performance practicing frame never occurs in these settings, but the host usually acts as a facilitator in framing the experience for the performer and performance.

On many occasions, performers stepped on stage and before playing, announced to the audience their neophyte status to the particular open mic or novice status to the open mic in general. As one young female acoustic singer/songwriter said, “This is only my second open mic ever....so I am very nervous.” A newcomer to open mics in New York City self-depreciatingly said, “Thank you for enduring that. This is my first open mic in New York City. This is a work in progress.” Musicians did not compliment other musicians very frequently, but the hosts were usually very expressive in their compliments to the musicians on and off the stage. This is one of only a few instances when a acoustic singer/songwriter complimented the performers as a whole, “People are so talented here. That’s why people are here, I guess.”

The most frequent types of comments were expressions of either anxiety or excitement, downplaying or trying to pre-empt mistakes, and the announcement of singing a new song or using a new instrument. Some also were combinations, like this regular performer said before playing her keyboard and singing, “I hate playing new songs. I am always scared I will fuck up.”

Others verbalized excitement, like this female performer who before playing guitar and singing with an accompanying friend declared: “I am excited! We have never done this before. I just love to play, anyway I can.” Verbalizing to the audience that one is drunk is a frequent strategy for role distancing, covering or saving face as seen in this example, “I guess I will experiment because I am drunk,” or questions made to the audience by the performer such as this one, “Who gets drunk and fucks up at the open mics like me?” The performers would ask the host or audience open ended questions like, “Am I in tune?” or more specific questions directed to the host, “Can I bring my boyfriend to play with me? He is in the audience.” In this case the host quickly responded, “Sure! It’s an open mic!”

Mistakes were a frequent topic of talk by performers on stage at the Knot. The following are examples of verbal recognitions of musicological or performance problems: “I just choked!”; “Do I get another song? I fucked up!” and “I messed up! Can I do one over?” The following was the host’s almost rote response to the last question, “Sure! It’s an open mic!” The following are a few examples of verbalizations referencing new songs: “I’m trying to write new songs, I hope you like them!”; “I’ve never done this song before at an open mic”; “I am going to play a new song tonight, a blues tune. Nothing exciting but another song I need to play out” and “This is a new song and you will be the first it will be inflicted upon.”

This is not to say other forms of talk occurred, such as asking the audience what to play or making complimentary comments about other musicians, such as this one that also includes an act of verbal deference, “That last guy was great! I don’t know if I should go next.” The few examples of asking the audience what to play usually came from regular very seasoned performers exhibiting musical prowess, such as this one from a long time regular and former host who played acoustic guitar and sang, “Should I play a blues, rock ‘n roll or country song?” Sometimes musicians would admit to problems or openly talk about onstage adjustments. This

performer said the following while already playing his electric guitar and singing: “I am going to cut out the third verse. I always mess up on this one line.” As demonstrated, the open mic at the Knot provided verbal and performance context that exhibited a greater diversity of verbalizations and reflexive interactions on stage by performers, some well seasoned and others much less so. This fluidity and diversity of utterances reinforces the differences between the practice-oriented frame dominant in the OOMs.

Namu’s represents the closest to the OOM of the four primary sites in this ethnography. As already mentioned, it was very diverse in terms of participants, instrumentations, and genres. It was fluid in the organization and sequencing, allowing for more variability and changes. Although roughly 99 percent of the performances were musical, poetry, spoken word, “beatboxing”, and singing *a cappella* that all were observed at Namu’s were rarely seen at other locations. Collaboration on stage was very frequent with many hybrid combos and jams occurring all throughout the open mic night. The hosts were very helpful and complimentary of the performers typically. The hosts would always announce the upcoming performer or act and ask for applause at the conclusion of the three song set. In terms of performance discourse or stage talk, Namu’s had a tremendous amount of fluidity and diversity, including complimenting other performers, announcing new or revised songs, apologies, disclaimers, soliciting of audience critiques or help, response cries, self talk and the questioning of hosts. This less formalized setting and organizational sequencing emulated the performances of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, before systemic methods were used to separate the audience and performer, with both social and symbolic boundaries affecting the content of the performances themselves.

New or revised songs were announced quite often and a transparency of the work that goes on becomes more open and recognized. For example, here is what one regular female, who was in her early 20s said before playing one night, “I am going to play a couple songs I have

played before, but one of them in a slightly different way, that I have been reworking for a while now. Then I am going to play a new song that I have only played once before.” One Indian man who was a temporary regular paid heed to the suggestions of another performer on stage before playing a song he had reworked with his suggestion, “I am going to play this a bit slower by Tom’s suggestion...”

Apologies for “mess-ups” were frequent, and sometimes performers would admit to being nervous and seek help from the audience: “Now....I am nervous, I just wrote this [song] last week, so if I mess up....Can you hear my guitar real well in the back?” Audience members would often jump in with comments such as, “You need to turn down your mid’s too, they are a bit loud....” The performer subsequently thanked the other regular and asked if the guitar sounded better after fiddling with the controls. Other examples of covering were more prosaic, such as how this acoustic guitar playing singer/songwriter said, “Ok....wrong key....let me start again. I have had way too much to drink tonight!” In some instances performers would even admit to forgetting the words because they were “new songs.” In one instance a very good and seasoned musician forgot the words to a new song and continued to strum his guitar as he said the following on stage, “How does this song go? Sorry....I can’t remember the words....I can’t believe I forgot the words! I’m done....” The host quickly jumped in from the back and said, “Do one more song for redemption!” The musician agreed, played another song and then pulled out his lyrics sheet from his back pocket as he was leaving the microphone to see what he was forgetting.

Performers would often solicit help or perceptions from the audience. One very busy night, when a feature act had played, a regular who was going to fly back to India in a few days asked me to hold a candle and his lyrics sheet in front of him so he could read it and play because the stool he often used was gone. The man who started the open mic years ago, who

would often come in and play, once asked a few regulars after he had already started playing, "...would one of you guys want to put down some percussion or drums for me here?" Others may just ask if their voice sounded good or offer up requests from the audience, but that latter was very infrequent, only recorded once during the fieldwork at Namu's.

In terms of other important patterns seen at other open mics, Namu's varied tremendously. For one, not one performer was observed mentioning they were "new or visiting" New York City, as seen at other open mics attended, especially at Bartime and some at the Knot and Ruby's. MySpace Internet pages and gig announcements were rarely given by performers, but this did not mean the performers lacked upcoming gigs. Many of the regular musicians had ongoing gigs and shows at other locations, but rarely announced them during their performance time. CD's and flyers were non-existent for the most part; I saw one flyer that was handed to me by one infrequent regular who differed from most of the performers in many ways. Cover songs were quite frequent, ranging from bands like Radiohead to George Gershwin, and Aretha Franklin. Instruments, particularly the drums and percussion, were shared almost from one song to the next among performers.

All and all, the performances within the sequencing of the open mic at Namu's reflected a more open, receptive and informal practice-oriented open mic. Namu's maintained a more practicing performance frame, with the help of various verbal and non-verbal cues of the practice key as opposed to the exhibition or demonstration key more frequent at COMs. The host's more *laissez-faire* approach facilitated this less formal practicing-oriented process, where the sign-up sheet was always accessible and even changeable by the musicians themselves, emblematic of a more egalitarian setting than most COMs.



### **Performers as Audience**

Minutes before the first act was to begin playing at 9 p.m., two open mic performers in their late 30s were sipping beers at Bartime and discussing, with enthusiastic excitement, their travels and memories across the open mic landscape over the last number of years. One, who later told me that he had had a bad experience at Bartime and had never returned, sipped from his pint of beer, turns his head and said with little apprehension or apologies:

I'm 38 and I don't expect anything to come from this. I enjoy doing it because I get to meet people who are very different and creative. I use to have a desire to travel a lot but not now. I have a job I like and that's what I will do.

The music started soon thereafter and the room immediately quieted down. For the first four to five performers, the audience was overwhelmingly quiet and attentive, only talking in the two minute interim period between performers. This would change.

This performer from Bartime was later seen at Ruby's where he made the observation that the audience behavior at Ruby's was more accommodating to newcomers in comparison to Bartime. With his differing experiences as an example, one final but critical component to describing the settings is the patterned actions of the audiences. The vast majority of the audiences across all open mic settings are popular musicians and performers from that evening open mic to be precise. At the closed open mics, the audience is more homogeneous, having fewer friends, drop-ins or hangers-on. As mentioned, the COMs emulate the historical notions of high or creator oriented culture. This also applied to the audiences. Audiences of the creator or high culture forms of entertainment became distanced from the performers, conventionalizing a gap that included a more "passive audience" (Levine 1988; Gans 1999; Conner 2008: 109-112) as opposed to the more "active audience" at the OOMs. This was previously touched on in discussing Levine's (1989) analysis of how audiences became increasingly passive since the late nineteenth century due to segregation driven policies. This likely had much to do with the higher

level of “purposive” and “attentive listening” practices as opposed to “distracted listening.” Purposive and attentive are more focused listening modes, such as when an audience is focusing on learning or analyzing musicological elements. Distracted listening is when music is relegated to the background as a quasi-soundtrack to an ongoing interaction or activity, for example (Green 2002: 23-24). All these types of listening occurred at all open mics, but the more focused types on this continuum occurred at COMs, but that didn’t always last for all on-stage musicians. Stage talk, for example, often helped audiences participate actively with the performer. This was more common in the OOMs than the COMs. A few performers, the host and co-host, all shared similar perceptions about the audience behavior at Bartime: the audience was very listener-oriented and supportive and rarely talked during performer’s songs.

At the beginning of every open mic, the noise level and collective attention to the performers by the audience was relatively unanimous. Audience members were generally quiet, attentively watching and clapping at the conclusion of each song. Bartime was smaller than most other locations, so people’s talking was magnified compared to larger, more open places. As the night progressed, patterned audience behavior represented an incremental increase in alcohol consumption, loud talking, and movement in and out the front doors, where musicians would practice, smoke, and congregate to talk all things musical. Alcohol consumption was relatively minimal at most locations, compared to weekend nights. Most of the bars had a two drink minimum that many open mics not only imposed, but hosts frequently reiterated to the patrons. Compared to other locations, during specific player’s performances, Bartime was extremely quiet and attentive even later in the evening or early morning; however, this usually occurred when either a higher status regular, seasoned out-of-towner or a musician eliciting noticeable deference from perceived eccentricity or authenticity was performing. Workers would occasionally try to quiet the audience, but this usually happened during the performances of

friends, regulars or higher status musicians. In addition, audience members distanced from the stage would talk more than those within easy surveillance of the performer playing on the stage. One noticeable patterned practice across open mics that included Bartime, was that talking would wane right when a new performer began her or his performance. During the breaks, talk would reach its apex and then wane as the performer or host signaled the beginning of the next performance.

Typically, the performer and/or host would speak to a quiet room, introducing themselves and then the performer would begin the musical performance. After an estimated 30 seconds into the song, a moment of intentional contingency would occur with many audience members, especially those further away from the stage. That is an important empiricism in regards to audience receptions. Erving Goffman's conceptual notion of "effective involvement," or the involvement in the interaction others can sense from outwardly appearances and behaviors (1963: 38), can help potentially elucidate this socially patterned phenomenon. Observations of these patterned changes suggest that an aesthetic or cultural judgment of some type occurred at this general moment within the flow and sequence of the song of many performers. A possible "decoding" (Hall 1991) of the musical text and symbols and performance signs, as Bauman pointed out as representative of a performance, occurred and either the audience members would slowly and incrementally begin to talk with their close neighbor standing or sitting next to them. In other words, an intentional form of purposive listening would shift toward attentive or distracted listening types after some kind of aesthetic judgment was levied. In the case of Bartime, patrons would also turn to go outside or order a drink, but typically the noise would incrementally increase to the point of making the ongoing performance a background to any potential listener.

Dabblers, novices and less experienced amateurs would often receive the worst treatment, having to play in the face of a rancorous and unresponsive audience. Hosts in select locations, including Bartime, were not immune to participating in such behavior. In addition to the incremental increase in talking, many of the same audience members would either stop talking briefly, while simultaneously clapping when the performer finished the song, only to resume shortly thereafter. Many wouldn't even stop talking to begin clapping.

These audience responses represent the conscious auditory and visual fields and structures that Don Ihde (2007) identified as "focus," "fringe," and "horizon." Focus constitutes the sentient stimuli that are experienced with greatest "intensity" and direction; fringe represents the things that are "grasped with less intensity" and horizon signifies the very edge of conscious reception or experience. In addition to these structures, sensory experience can be cognitively placed in a "foreground" and "background" within the social contextual situations in which we interact (Berger 2004: 47-48). The participants across these open mics and within each open mic encounter and progress through these experiential and conscious processes. Most audience members begin by foregrounding the performer's performance in a focus. When the performer's music doesn't possibly fit the person's taste, or they decode the signs of an inexperienced performer, or the performer isn't a friend, for example, audience members begin backgrounding the auditory performance by focusing and foregrounding other sensory experiences. As Ihde suggests and Berger reiterates (2004: 47), a ratio between focus and fringe can be controlled, allowing the audience members to clap when the performance ends while maintaining their primary focus on the conversational partner(s). One way or another, a patterned change within the audiences changes the focus of the audience members during the performance and "gathering" (Goffman 1963: 18) indicating some divergence of the "definition of the situation" not only between the performer and audience but within the audience members as well.

A fluctuation of “involvement” (1963: 33) of the audience members within the situational relationship with the performers potentially leads to fluidity between the audience and performer. As this increases and people slowly move away from the “gathering at large,” clusters of people create a new focused interaction. Erving Goffman called this “drifting,” where people’s focus changes toward other interactions, which sometimes also include methods of trying to conceal these diversions, called “involvement shields” (1963: 173-178), which allows people to be mutually engaged and still potentially shield their inappropriate behavior. The most commonly recurring examples were talking quietly to people as they continued to look at the stage, clapping for the performer, even though they were talking throughout the performance or turning their attention to something related to their own musical concern, like tuning an instrument or jotting down lyrical notes.

These audience responses and the fluctuations that occurred represent, on a larger conceptual scale, situations where the ambiguities and fluctuations in the performance frame allowed for greater fluctuation in aggregate actions and interactions. Hosts’ lack of sanctioning allowed these interactive actions to persist in many locations and at other locations, demonstrating a hierarchical and nepotistic favoritism. As a whole, the audience behavior and individual reception was quite variable across all the open mics, within these identified patterns, episodes and trajectories. The expectations for the performers were more normalized within each context, even though the primary status of these performing musicians didn’t change when they switched from performer to audience or vice versa.

By no means is this suggesting audiences or audience members were completely unruly or chaotic, because that was clearly not the case. The majority of the audience members, especially those closer to the stage, paid close attention and listened quietly or with low and sporadic talk. One other positive and noteworthy observation was that friend musicians who

were also performing that evening would frequently relocate to the front of the seating area directly near the stage, if possible, to give attentive support to the performer. This was most noticeable in regulars who had the largest and strongest ties within the setting.

Most performers also went outside or far away from the stage to tune or warm up, and overt and directly malevolent treatment of performers by audiences was never observed, even when audience members were offended by the content of the performance. One performer at the Knot, who was seen on two separate evenings, came in and sang to popular songs played on a CD piped through the PA. He would dance around the stage in a very animated and whimsical way, and sing sardonic lyrical revisions to the actual songs, much like Weird Al-Yankovic was known for in the 1980s and 90s. Yet, his songs transgressed many people's ideas of acceptable singing about getting "turned-on" by 10 year old girls and other lascivious content. One African-American regular homebody said the following regarding the performances of this man: "I am a very non-violent person and I wanted to go up there throw him off the stage, so I instead choose to walk outside, have myself a cigarette and not pay attention to what was going on inside." In some cases, where the musical genre was not favorable to audience members, they would leave the immediate area and go outside. This fortysomething attorney who loved the blues but didn't like hip hop said, "I really couldn't handle any more of that kind of energy. I really don't like hip hop. I don't know if I would have stayed here if this was like this three months ago when I first came. It's really not that safe and welcoming." Besides demonstrating the obvious likes and dislikes of musicians' own tastes for music, it strikes at a core cultural and ideological theme in this ethnography, specifically that musical genre is a very important and often determining factor in where musicians attend and perform. This performer's use of the word "safe" may conjure questions of possible racism, but this performer was connoting his overall fear of performing in a place, that may have had a musical text and presentation that was much more aggressive than his

much shier and reserved demeanor. A few other performers sometimes went outside when these hip hop performers played, including one African American regular who this attorney-by-day played with almost weekly.

Seeking the opinions and perceptions of other musicians in the audience of one's performance was a frequent pattern by audience members, and often a means of segueing into discussing music and other forms of shop talk, including possible collaboration; however, many musicians entered these interactions with serious skepticism if not cynicism, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter. Although people certainly talked at COMs, once I said I wasn't performing often meant the conversation would cease at Bartime, for example. Many who were not in the in-group were left to fend for themselves, where the "sociability" was more comparative in terms of one's achievements, situated knowledge and other insider signs of subcultural capital.

In sum, these patterned practices by the audiences appeared across the open mic landscape, but varied to a greater or lesser degree in certain places. At closed open mics, the audience generally awarded greater deference and quiet attention to higher status performers and regulars than those showing signs of being a novice. Typically audience members were more attentive and exhibited more involvement in the performance the closer they were to the stage. The further away, the looser the norms became in allowing greater drift and less involvement, even though many would still indicate the backgrounded performance were still within the fringe of consciousness. At more OOMs, especially in smaller places, deeper involvement in the performance interaction and frame, maintained an overall "involvement contour" that was more unanimously attentive to the performers than at COMs, unless higher status members were playing. They would get the passive deference while the unimpressive newcomer or novice would get a wall of talking, barely allowing for listening.

One could say that the audience is not only a part of the performance, but is also a performer as Erving Goffman writes, “As countless folk tales and initiation rites show, often the real secret behind the mystery is that there really is no mystery; the real problem is to prevent the audience from learning this too.” This speaks directly to the open mic context. The audience at the open mic is the performer and vice versa. Therefore, the audience theoretically has already “learned” or is in the process of negotiating, reworking and learning these very mysteries and secrets. A magician doing tricks for other aspiring magicians needs a minimal amount of knowledge as both performer and audience member. Therefore, the secret isn’t so much out of the bag, but all the people are in the bag where the secret is created, reworked, and reified. A seasoned late twentysomething guitar player said the following about what constitutes a “memorable” performance and how he observes, focuses, and learns from other’s performances, but also reiterates the “ideology of authenticity” (Green 2002: 103):

Obvious factors...professional mastery of the instrument, vocally, the raw talent they have. A song can be good and with a good voice but it won’t stand out. The first reaction is toward the voice and music. I have forced myself to look at what others play, to look at what stands out, for example. I need to perform for me, though. People need to be who they are, if that is the case it will be better.

As already discussed, performance is a set of practices based in audience/producer separation, not only spatially, but in terms of grounded roles and associated identities. These aforementioned secrets include, but are not exclusive to, the modern “mysteries” of authenticity and performance as sole authorship, which has been discussed in much research as ideology residing in various genres like rock (Green 2002: 99), blues (Grazian 2004) and country music (Peterson 1997). Notions of authenticity come from the distinctions between motivations in nature as opposed to culture. A regimented and “disciplined” learning of music is assumed with classical music when some (e.g. Scruton 1996) still argue musical skills and knowledge comes from “osmosis” (Green 2002: 99). When classical music is performed, it is thought to be



regurgitated, unlike popular music, which is deliberately and overtly interpreted for individualistic and expressive distinctions. Therefore, it is more overtly cultural in its performance as opposed to its learning, but the notions of authenticity remain and are generalized into all facets. If performance was an exorcism in popular music, the extraction of the demon would prove positive the existence of the spiritual world. Without previous proof to the contrary, this modern religion of authenticity has been ideologically constructed and worshiped for years, especially by the musicians or priests in this analogy. More precisely, the ideology of expressive individualism and the modern notions of artistic autonomy as the source of creative authenticity: the art speaks or mirrors each artist's unique and autonomous perspective and therefore is authentic. As demonstrated by a harmonica player who occasionally played the open mic at the Knot, a tremendous amount of pressure on one's self is often common and rooted within the ideology of the authentic individual's capacity for autonomous learning and expression:

That's hard. I have one student now. I will start marketing that, the teaching element. It may not be financial, but you will always get something else. If you love what you do, work hard. I can focus on excuses but I worked all last week on my chops. I will find out tonight if that work paid off. If it didn't work, I will go back and do it again. You can always learn and make yourself better. Always blame yourself for not working hard enough.

This increasingly becomes the case as musicians become more experienced and more learned, so to speak. For some, this ideology contradicts with the co-constructive processes of the open mic and thus creates, for some, an inevitable tension. This occurs in varying degrees but is most prevalent at the COMs, because these orchestrated scenes are an attempt to institutionalize and legitimate a collective embodiment of something that strikes to the foundation of the soloist or singer/songwriter: that they are not the sole author of their music, identity and methods of performance. Participating in both roles and being an audience member as a learning performer makes this hard to avoid completely, even if it is difficult to reconcile.

## CHAPTER V

### BIOGRAPHIES AND INTERSECTIONS AT THE OPEN MIC

When I first started playing out around 23, I was playing out in the streets, like I played in Washington Square Park and then after that probably when I was 24, I started playing at open mics. So, that was like '83. There were open mics then. Monday night there was songwriter's coalition at the Cornelia Street Café and that would go from 6:30 to 7:30. After that you could go over for the 8 p.m. sign up at the Sun Mountain Café. And at the Speakeasy that no longer exists on MacDougal Street and there was one other place on Bleecker. People would shuttle back and forth between the three venues and they would play all night, you know. Those were the good days for the open mics, man. They were wild. --Anonymous singer/songwriter/host interviewed with Aldredge 2008

Fond remembrances of Greenwich Village open mics from the early 1980s flowed proudly from two fortysomething year-old women still actively playing or hosting NYC open mics today. Both women and a few other Knot regulars recounted stories from Sand Mountain, Speakeasy, and Folk City all well documented and discussed in a previous chapter. These personal recollections and experiential evidence further validate the newspaper sources in terms of these particular bars as the formative open mic locations concentrated in NYC's Greenwich Village in the late 70s and early 80s. By the early 1980s open mics were common events on the NYC musical landscape, as well as in a limited number of other major cities. The concentration in other cities was likely in the corresponding bohemian areas where folk influenced music either continued flourishing over the years, or experienced a similar revival. These participants' meaningful involvement provides historical breadth and narrative depth to this ethnography. This provides a good historical cradle to begin exploring the biographies and social characteristics of the musicians who participate in these open mics today. As C. Wright Mills once proclaimed, social science needs to focus on the intersections of "biography" and "history" with "their intersections within social structure" to continue the direction of the "classic tradition" (2000: 143). This section hopes to explore the musicians' biographies, their respective social

intersections within history, and the organizational structures that are constructed within the larger musical art world.

As mentioned, 21 musicians participated in the in-depth, semi-formal interviews. Of the 21, 5 were current hosts at the time of each interview and a sixth musician eventually became a host at the Knot. One of the hosts did not work at any of the four primary locations, but worked at another open mic location I attended on a limited basis. His involvement was sought because the location and weekly event was renowned within the musician status group of NYC as a long-standing music “scene.” A theoretical sampling technique (Glaser and Strauss 1967) drove the process of choosing participants to interview, but as with most ethnographic and qualitative approaches, the participants’ willingness to meet and participate in an interview made the process difficult and the sample potentially less representative of the larger open mic population; however, the purposeful sample is diverse in many ways and does reflect a substantive representation of the musicians across these open mic sites.

There are 21 participants who completed an interview out of 33 participants who initially agreed to an interview: 12 interviews did not materialize for a variety of reasons. This group of 33 came from a much larger number of participants who were initially informed of the research and provided an information sheet (Appendix A). This sheet provides an outline and summary of the research and mentions the possibility to the participant an interview may be requested later into the project. Although an exact number of how many information sheets were dispersed to participants is not known, the number exceeded 75 based on the number of sheets printed over the course of the fieldwork and how many subsequently remained. The conversational interview covered a wide range of topics focusing on each musician’s musical development, musical trajectories, musical changes and alterations, and his or her meaningful evaluations, experiences, and perceptions of playing and participating at open mics. Finally, the

majority of the interviewees were procured from participants at the Knot, Namu's, and Ruby's. Of the three interviewees met at Bartime none were permanent or infrequent regulars at that time. It was difficult obtaining interviews from workers and regulars at Bartime, supporting the general thesis of its theoretical description as a closed open mic in this study. This represents the difficulty of outsiders, including me, of penetrating the rigid symbolic and organizational boundaries of the in-group dominating this locale's event and scene.

### **The Biographical Basics**

Demographically, the sample of participants interviewed mirrors many of the basic statistical sociological attributes of the performers at the primary and secondary open mics from this study. The percentage of women musicians who performed at the four primary open mics ranged between 23 to 28 percent. Accordingly, six of the 21 of the interviewees are self-identified females constituting 29 percent of the sample. Recognizing the problems in assigning and using racial categories, this category was used for theoretical sampling purposes. It should be noted that the frequencies associated with racial and ethnic categories likely represent the diversity in these locales, but provide an approximation of those represented in these settings. Recent findings indicate that racial stereotypes and their constructed associations with particular musical genres, music industries and musical art worlds remain (e.g. Peterson 1997; Grazian 2004). The racial distributions of performers ranged from the most homogeneous at Bartime with 93 percent of the performer population during researcher field time assigned racially as white to 46 percent at Namu's as white. Namu's had the smallest number of weekly performers, especially compared to Bartime and the Knot of which 68 percent of the performers were categorized as white. Thus, without having a precisely accurate statistic as to the racial breakdown of participants across all NYC open mics, it can be induced the majority of the

musicians who play open mics fall into the racial category of white. There is at least one hip hop and rap open mic that has a notably high percentage of African Americans and blacks who attend according to a few informants, but it likely does not skew the very large open mic population of the creator status group in NYC. A salient connection between racial group and musical genre remains apparent even with the notable and recorded stylistic variations integrating different musical influences in with the dominant American folk music traditions at these open mics.

Consequently, 18 of the 21 of the interviewees are white accounting for 86 percent of the sample. This falls into the higher end of the range observed at the primary open mics, but not significantly different from most secondary open mics attended. Eight of the 14 secondary open mic events had white performers accounting for over 90 percent of all the performances. Of these 18 interviewees, 11 self-identified as Caucasian, three as white, one as Jewish, one as Italian/Austrian, one Ukrainian, and one Serbian. Many of those who used Caucasian or white also used secondary descriptors, such as Jewish, Italian or Russian to supplement the racial designation with an ethnic differentiation. Of the remaining three participants, two self-identified as African American and one as black. No Asians or Latinos/Latinas were formally interviewed although some were engaged during informal interviews in the field. I made a concerted effort to diversify the sample in terms of racial and ethnic categories of performers, but obtaining and completing interviews with non-white participants was a recurring problem. Due to this recurring problem with obtaining formal interviews, a concerted effort was made to engage ethnic and racial minorities for informal interviews in the field.

For comparative reasons, Lucy Green's (2002) sample of English popular musicians was more homogeneous of which all 14 musicians interviewed were white and 12 of the 14 were men (2002: 12). Besides this study, very few qualitative studies have studied racially diverse musician populations, communities or scenes primarily because most musical genres remain

racially homogeneous in terms of the musical producers. Popular and local audiences for musical genres historically created and performed by ethnic or racial minorities such as blues, rap and hip hop (Grazian 2003: 236) have become more diverse after becoming commercialized; however, the creator status group of musical producers for these genres, although more diverse now remain predominantly black or African American.

The ages for this sample of musicians ranged from 21 to 48 with a mean age of 34. This was not too dissimilar from the age range of the 14 musicians Lucy Green interviewed, which ranged from 15 to 50. As Green asserts, this wide range of ages provides greater variety of possible intergenerational and subcultural differences that may exist, and it ensures to include musicians at different locations or stages within their musical development and aesthetic career (Green 2002: 8-9). Two of the open mic performers declined to provide ages, but estimations place one male singer/songwriter in his mid-thirties and the female guitar player in her mid-to-late forties. This would have slightly elevated the mean age a few years, but the overall average would have remained in the mid-thirties.

NYC is a city where many musicians, artists and other creative class migrate from all over the country and world, and this is apparent in this small sample. In terms of birthplaces, these musicians represent a diverse array of geographical locations. Only seven of the musicians, or one-third, were born in NYC and 11 in the metropolitan area, including two from New Jersey. Of the remaining 10, two were born in Ohio, two in Texas and one each in Boston, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Germany. The vast majority lived in NYC at the time of the interview, 18 of the 21 to be precise, with the largest concentrations in Manhattan and then Brooklyn. Generally representative of the creative class, this sample is a different slice of the U.S. population in terms of educational attainment. All but two of the participants have at least a college degree. Two have masters' degrees and one has a J.D. Of the 19 participants with

bachelor degrees, five have degrees in performance arts, including music and theater, five with different humanities degrees, four in the social sciences and two in education. As a sample, these musicians have a heavily skewed liberal arts collegiate training, which is not surprising given their creative tracks, interests and pursuits. The 90 percent of this sample who hold a college degree differ radically from the larger U.S. population. Roughly 26 percent of the U.S. population above the age of 25 were college graduates (Macionis 2005: 275) in 2002 and 27 percent in 2004 (Bishop 2008: 131). To reiterate, recent data is showing an increasing educational and economic segregation not only between cities and rural locations, but between cities themselves with some benefiting with higher concentrations of the creative class. NYC is one of the top cities that also include cities such as Washington, D.C., Seattle, San Francisco and Austin (Bishop 2008: 134-35). Although there were no explicit questions regarding personal or family income for these interviewees, educational attainment still represents class distinctions, cultural boundaries (Bourdieu 1984) and general parameters for socio-economic privilege (Macionis 2005: 528). This sample is highly educated and thus represents, as a whole, the upper middle class and cultural segment of the U.S.

Only five of the 21 participants were currently married at the time of the interview, accounting for 24 percent with a similar number having been divorced and currently single. The remaining majority has never been married. This does not mirror the larger U.S. population, but it's not entirely unique to NYC's growing creative class, which constitutes a sizeable percentage of the more educated, younger cohort present in most U.S. cities who are remaining single longer into their lives (Florida 2002: 295). Previous research (Finnegan 2007: 257) indicates marriage and/or parenthood inhibits band involvement given the possible time-conflicts from other requirements expected from each potentially conflicting role. Close to a quarter of the participants remarked positively on their single status at some point during the interview. Being

single is viewed particularly as important in allowing greater “control” over one’s musical and creative endeavors. This does not account for romantic cohabitating partners, homosexual or heterosexual, which likely factors into some these participant’s lives and was not probed in these questions. One fortysomething, professional musician originally from Texas, recounts a meaningful story speaking to the influence of one’s marital status on one’s identity and membership in a band:

I am single and I don’t even have a plant I have to water, so a lot of people are really hampered by husbands, children and family and things that are in competition with their time for music. I have a great story. The husband who was in my ex-husband’s band had a wife and child and she just couldn’t do it and thought it was a waste of time. She made him make a choice: either quit the music or I am out of here. Obviously, he quit the band but one interesting point was that when he started he was all clean shaven, he was an architect, when he left the band he had grown his hair really, really long and had a full beard and the day he came to say he was out of the band, he had shaved everything off and he had cut his hair. I thought it was really symbolic and so a lot of people have home issues that dictate how much they can move through this process.

Besides demonstrating the significant ramifications on having conflicting roles, this musician’s story symbolizes the salience of bounded musical identities in people’s everyday lives and how it can transform one’s larger social identity in relation to their roles. She told the story to evidence why she purposely remained single. A younger male musician summed up his take on remaining single as a strategy in life because pursuing a musical career is so demanding in terms of time and emotional energy:

Who would be a good partner if you were a good musician? Playing music is possibly one of the most flakey things anyone could do. It’s important to be single if you are going to pursue your music because it takes all your time, even when I am with somebody, I am not fully focused and that is so sad but that is what it takes.

Although the former perspective is more common, there are a few married musicians who have different circumstances and more positive perspectives on marriage. Some single musicians verbalized no overt aversion to marriage or possible long term romantic relationships. One female performer in her early 30s describes her “unique” position for a musician, having to



juggle the stress inducing “role conflicts” (Macionis 2005: 143) that easily come from being married, working a full time job, and pursuing her musical interests:

It is not easy and that is my biggest frustration how to make a living at it. I want to get a publishing deal so I can write songs for a living and focus on that and my family. That is all I want, not to be a millionaire. I write a song almost every couple days and then I have to go to a day job and I am like...it’s really a pain in the ass. It’s different being single, I would probably go to....every night somewhere, if I wasn’t married. My husband is really supportive and understanding about it.

Another important sociological facet in people’s everyday lives is their primary occupation or employment. Of these 21 musicians, only five self-label themselves a “musician” as their primary occupation. Seven others of this sample named musician as a secondary occupation. This supports the assertion that many musicians fall on different career locations and with different trajectories in the amateur-professional continuum. Slightly less than 50 percent do not identify being a musician as one of their occupations. Some musicians participate in a variety of musical activities accruing money, such as giving music lessons or get paid small amounts for gigs, but not all performers deem these activities as coronating them a professional. Other occupational titles include a sizeable number of computer-oriented positions such as graphic production, web developer, or computer support. Others work in the restaurant business, as a publication editor, teachers, non-profit organizations, and actors. Close to a quarter of the interviewees name more than two occupations, linking multiple creative activities and endeavors, like one 23 year old host from the Knot who not only plays professionally but works for a musically oriented website writing about music. Nearly half mention going to various trade schools or obtaining certifications through auxiliary schooling or training, ranging from computer graphics, guitar lessons, paralegal studies, or crisis counseling. Usually these educational updates facilitate occupational changes or advancement. One 24 year old male and college graduate singer/songwriter includes being not only a musician and screenwriter, but acting and doing production work all as different occupations. Not overlooking his plausible

youthful exuberance, this continued trend toward diversity and fluidity in occupational trajectories is a common characteristic in the U.S. population in general, but in the creative class to a much greater degree.

### **Musical Beginnings and Open Mics**

Most of these musicians are not novices to playing musical instruments, as demonstrated by many of the sociological and biographical indicators thus far. A limited, but noticeable number of performers are relatively new to the open mic phenomena, or new specifically to performing different instruments having previously become proficient on others; however, a certain level of musicological knowledge, skills and competence is almost always apparent and almost required for a musician to enter, sign-up and play an open mic as one musician from Namu's discussed:

...it's [the open mic] a safe haven for people who have reached a certain plateau when a bedroom no longer can hold their talent; they want to share their talent; they have put in enough time in the woodshed, done their work and now want to share it. [It's a] safe place and supportive and you are not out of your league. People are respectful of your art and the time. [It's an] opportunity to work with mikes and work with amps, things you might not be using in your bedroom. It helps you finish what you are doing...they [audience] give a round of applause and encourage and reinforce you.

Besides the last musician's slightly overzealous review, this socio-musical prerequisite does not dissuade some open mic musicians from openly critiquing and downgrading novice or less experienced musician's abilities, performance techniques and music. This is usually done openly when trustworthy friends are nearby. Indicative of other remarks, one young, male acoustic guitar singer/songwriter pontificates as to how open mics and the democratization of technology have contributed to the watering-down of what he considers higher musicological standards. As this native New Yorker rationalizes, he is currently playing open mics for other reasons:

Right now, I don't have a booker, so I don't have access to all the gigs, so it [open mics] fill gigs. While everyone thinks they can do it now with more available

technologies, it has also made a lot of really mediocre music. No gatekeepers and even though they let through a lot of crap and shove it down your throat, they let through a lot of great artists. The tastemakers are no longer there, there is a sea of mediocre music and it rears its head at the open mic scene, because it's all the people with Pro Tools at home who pitch their stuff and walk on stage and feel like they have something. That is what is so gross about the networking thing going on at these places, everyone wants to tell you what they have going on and I am repulsed and I do it, too.

One 44 year old performer laments how it is the "nature of the open mic" to have performers who are "...so green it's almost impossible to listen to." Many performers secretly express skepticism of the genuineness of positive, post-performance praise from their open mic peers. Paradoxically, many admit to giving false-praise to other musicians.

Passing comments in the background of a performance come from many directions and at most locations. On one night, a Berklee College of Music trained, blues guitarist and regular at the Knot, was standing and sipping a whiskey while talking to a friend. Partially listening to the performer on stage, he suddenly interrupted and blurted out the following about the unknown performer's lyrics: "It's just brutal! Real artists know how to work around these cliché's!" The nearby friend nodded with apprehension and the original conversation resumed. On another occasion at the Knot, I complimented a newcomer on her songs after her performance when she was packing up her guitar. She stopped and looked at me with a quizzical look and said, "Really?" and I quickly responded, "Yes, you have a great voice and your guitar playing was very crisp and lively." Still, with a facial expression communicating uncertainty, she said, "Thanks. Are you a musician?" I responded, "Yes, but I'm not playing tonight." The young woman, likely in her mid 20s looked relieved and with a relaxed smile said before leaving to go to the bar: "I don't always trust musicians. They could be just saying that." With that instance in mind, this male regular pop singer/songwriter from the Knot described his measured distrust and ambivalence toward other musician's positive remarks as: "...people blowing smoke up people's assholes by telling somebody that they liked their music and they really don't. There is this

degree of fakeness. Not too often, but sometimes.” This is not to say similar instances do not occur at other locations, as a number of disparaging comments have been heard at Bartime about performers on stage. Greater researcher integration into the group likely would have produced greater exposure to these conversations. With tighter quarters and more closed interactions at Bartime, such comments were monitored with greater scrutiny and restricted to trustworthy friends or acquaintances.

The range of musicians’ experience and locations within an aesthetic career is largely represented at open mics, but no musicians new to playing musical instruments have been observed. Novice musicians may attend but they are few and far between. The musicians and singer/songwriters interviewed represent a diverse cross-section at different ages, junctures, and trajectories in one’s aesthetic career. All, but one of the interviewees who plays the harmonica, go to open mics with some oeuvre of originally written and composed music to try out and perform. This mid 30s African American harmonica player is a traveling, professional theater actor. He approaches an open mic differently than most performers, by signing up and scouting for proficient blues guitarists who play earlier in the sequence. After observing a musician who meets his criteria, the self-described “blues apprentice” asks if he or she would play with him in his already assigned and upcoming slot. This is not to say he does not compose original compositions, but he currently relies mostly on other musicians to co-perform blues songs in the open mic settings. This is the case especially if they play a blues standard or cover, allowing him to play and improvise, rather than leading the other musician with a “harp” based composition.

Although these unique biographies diverge in many ways, the majority of the musicians and singer/songwriters performing at these open mics converge as multi-instrumentalists. Roughly 75 percent note some level of competence in more than one instrument and sing vocals, too. Even the few who play one instrument often add one of the two stipulations: they sing,

which they consider a different instrument, or they have “dabbled around with other instruments” in the past, and want to learn others in the future. Close to one-third of the musicians actively “wrote” songs on multiple instruments, often switching back and forth depending upon the song or the environmental factors of the setting they were performing. At the open mics, pivotal factors may include the size of the performance space, type of PA, style of the dominant genre, and the existence of a house piano. The two most commonly played instruments among these open mic musicians are the guitar and piano/keyboard. The acoustic guitar is by far the most common instrument performed by the singer/songwriters. The piano or keyboard is the second most common and drums or percussion, the bass guitar, and violin are the next commonly played instruments in descending order. Other secondary or tertiary instruments played include the trumpet, woodwind instruments like the flute or saxophone and other stringed instruments like the dulcimer, mandolin or ukulele. The ukulele has developed an American and NYC revival and “scene” (Shapiro 2006) in recent years, and a few ukulele players were observed all at COMs.

The brass, woodwind, and stringed instruments are sometimes the first instruments the musicians learned. Overtime, these instruments become relegated to a secondary place after the performer moves on to guitar or piano which provide greater songwriting freedom and opportunities, among other reasons. Those who play multiple instruments specifically articulate that playing the guitar at the open mics takes higher priority over others, because as an instrument it is portable and easier to carry. This practical observation is not worth overlooking in NYC, where most people rely heavily on mass transit and live a pedestrian lifestyle. Most of the open mics do not have house pianos, but those that did have more musicians playing the “keys.” The COMs had house pianos. Of the fewer musicians who favor or exclusively play piano, this is a very important factor in determining which open mic is chosen to perform. A

sizeable number of performers across multiple locations either bring in or rely on others to bring in a keyboard where no piano exists. The Knot's keyboard was brought in every week by one regular. To some degree, this influences the musical compositions of the performers at open mic locations.

Close to 75 percent of the performers began their musical or aesthetic careers early in life picking up their first instrument in their formative, childhood years. Supporting previous findings (Green 2002: 24-25; Finnegan 2007), the majority of the musicians attribute a parental or close family member as at least somewhat influential in helping spark their musical passions and pursuits. This is heavily apparent with the open mic musicians. These influences came in three particular ways in descending order of frequency for these NYC musicians: a parent or close family member played an instrument and had one in the house, a parent or close family member loved and frequently listened to music, and parents explicitly instructed them to take up an instrument at an early age. Ruth Finnegan adds the contingency that other sociological factors such as gender, income or class also influence children's adoption of playing instruments, because these factors structurally limit or increase opportunities (Finnegan 2007: 136-142) Close to half of the open mic musicians who picked up an instrument in childhood also performed or played in a "battle of the bands," or talent show during middle or high school which has appeared in previous research (Green 2002: 147).

Over half of all participating musicians admit to taking formal lessons usually at an early stage of their musical development in childhood. A higher percentage is possible, even though many describe their playing abilities as "self taught." Just less than half of the interviewees have taken some formal music theory in a pedagogical setting, and a similar percentage at one point in their childhood participated in a choir or chorus, be it school or church based. Over one-quarter has participated in other forms of expressive artistic mediums, such as theater or musical theater.

The average age these musicians participated in their first public, musical performance of any type was 17, slightly higher than Green's musicians' average age of forming first bands (2002: 79). Green's findings seem commensurate with 17 as an average age of a first performance, because that would put the forming of bands a few years before.

Even the few musicians who did not begin playing instruments early in life often attribute their parent's passionate listening, consumption of music, or artistic participation of some type as influential to the picking up an instrument and pursuing music. Many of the performers are experienced beyond just popular musical performances, frequently trained in classical music composition and performance. These musicians have participated in other expressive, cultural practices likely inspired and promoted within their families. Supportive families coupled with having the socio-economic means of promoting and supporting children facilitated the strong musical and performance foundations, many of these musicians experienced.

As far as their overall status today, close to 80 percent of these performers at the time of the interview are not playing in an ongoing, stable band. Most have maintained a fluid musical status over the course of their aesthetic career, entering and existing different musical endeavors at different periods of their lives. Of those not currently playing in a band, there are three general status areas the open mic musicians fall into at this time. The most common status is playing solitarily in all musical settings or formats. This usually means the musician primarily plays his or her original music at open mics and any other performances. Some of these musicians convey the desire to someday participate in a band, but nearly half adamantly express their ambition and goal to remain singular and independent from others' musical influences, aesthetics or demands. The next common type, constituting about 30 percent describes a career status similar to one musician's succinct description, "I am my own band." This frequently translates to the musician

paying “sessionists,” asking friends, or posting calls on websites like Craigslist to stage a “band” for a gig. Sessionists, usually defined as “professionals,” are musicians paid for playing gigs, making recordings, or other types of “sessions” with musicians who hire them on a “gig by gig” basis. The membership for the subsequent gigs is sometimes variable, as a consequence. The smallest status phase for these musicians is working independently with other bands, possibly as sessionists in a fluid position or performing with multiple bands as periodic fill-ins when requested. As demonstrated, musicians and singer/songwriters at different stages, phases, or junctures in their aesthetic careers play open mics. Often these musicians maintain a fluid open mic membership coming and going overtime addressing different personal needs at different times. One relatively firm function of these musical third places is providing a socio-musical place outside of the “bedroom,” when a gig is not obtainable, desirable, or “booked.” Some musicians use open mics as a rehearsal for an upcoming gig. As a whole it enables musicians to interactively construct and achieve musical identities, work on performance techniques and musical compositions. One musician describes the open mic as an “intermediary” place:

It’s a place where anyone can get up and play anything they want and workshop material and try [sic] to get confidence and network with people. Get into a scene of likeminded people and to get gigs. Sure, it’s a good intermediary between performing on your own and warming up yourself and get comfortable in front of people.

All of the hosts interviewed are musicians and have been witnessed performing at least once over the course of the open mic events; however, their definitions of what constitutes an open mic differs for the performers, mainly in its simplicity. The hosts that were interviewed view or frame the event in more practical terms typically. The open mic is a place where musicians come to play for an allocated “amount of time or songs” and are trying to get “networked and connected” with other musicians. Hosts characterize the open mics as predominantly comprised of “singer/songwriters,” “soloists,” and “amateurs.” Albeit more



technically simplistic, the hosts' use of particular discursive patterns hit all three of the commonly interconnected facets the performers describe in aggregation, with greater scrutiny and meaningful detail.

The performers describe three primary sociological facets of the open mic: the context, the social action and the text. The "place" or venue where the open mic occurs is often described as a place for "opportunities" and "chances" for the individual's musical "expression." These social places stir up ideological notions of spatial uniqueness and distinction, which in the discourse of many beliefs of artistic performance authenticity fits well. As Gary Allen Fine (2004) describes for "self-taught artists" the members within the "outsider" art world organized around these "outsider artists" co-constructed critical ideologies solidifying beliefs in a "naturalized" authenticity. Their homes are often viewed as "real places" representing a specific grounding of the authenticity (2004: 58-59). "Expressing oneself" in a "public" setting is used by many performers in their descriptions. This recurring language signifies the long lasting western ideology uplifting personal distinctions through expressive individualism. In these cases as with other musical differentiations, they are framed through the assumption in a naturalized, authentic individualism. This modern ideological discourse is based in the belief of the isolated, artistic genius. The artist may learn some methods of musicological or artistic construction, but that occurs early and the rest is done completely on his or her own (Green 2002: 101-102). Performance methods, recipes and tactics are primarily believed to have been formally learned; therefore, they are perceived as emergent, intrinsic manifestations of the creative, musical self grounded in a "real" place. Thus, within the true biography, the art or music emerges as a pure reflection of the artist's unique, isolated, original, and genuine form of expression (Fine 2004: 54-98). Unlike the actual homes for Fine's artists, these musical third places are spatially differentiated from home, using words like "couch" or "bedroom" to describe where practice

occurs. It is viewed that this is where an autonomous, almost “purer” form of practicing, is rooted. This is another set of embedded beliefs, that practicing is often a solitary event different from performing, which is ostensibly social. As will be seen, these open mics are viewed as contexts for practice, too.

Open mics are favored because nothing is “pre-set” and one can just “show up unannounced.” These musicians’ preference for autonomy and having less commitment to open mics, other open mic musicians, or a musician community coincides at least partially with a theme in the literature since the beginnings of sociology (e.g. Simmel 1971: 143-150; Tonnies 2001). These favorable conditions derive from the same social causes as the negative ones, such as the final but recurring theme which is according to many musicians “some places were more friendly [sic] than others toward the spirit” of free and open expression. Zygmunt Bauman once addressed this paradox: “Missing community means missing security; gaining community, if it happens, would soon mean missing freedom” (Bauman 2001: 4). This also touches on the beliefs in authenticity. As before, place is associated with authenticity. If place is not rock solid, but replaceable and fluid, so is the self and its corollary autonomy as a creatively authentic product. Acknowledging the learning process that occurs at open mics catalyzes the collision between the *geist* or spirit of authentic expressionism and its socially co-constructed nature.

The social interactions are the second facet described by these performers. Many performers referred to the process of playing as “getting up there” denoting both the physical layout of stages and the social demarcation between the performer and audiences. An elevation of the musician in relation to the ground level audience connotes a legitimization and reification to the process and product of original music making. Many musicians speak of “learning” as an important and instrumental process, with the use of phrases such as, “learning about crowds,” “learning how to make eye contact,” “learning how to read responses,” and how to “get

feedback.” The third common discursive group references the social need for the “other” or audience, to accomplish these interactive, performance goals. These answers included phrasings such as, “needing” responses and reactions to help musicians “test” or “rehearse” their music. A number of musicians stress how the open mic is not a perfect performance setting, but that can be used to their benefit in some capacity. Problems can develop with things such as personal and stage equipment, or they may take issue with their own playing or the audience reactions. This is precisely what the open mic provides many musicians is an imperfect setting for learning, reworking music, and tweaking performance strategies, techniques and recipes. Unexpected problems help musicians hone their craft, sometimes in the face of adversity. One open mic singer/songwriter describes this benefit from playing open mics:

When you decide to do a thing, I’m doing...playing solo, the first place [the open mic] you go to see if it’s all working then you realize probably not and then you work on it; you use the open mic. Then you establish connections. You can sit at home practicing, but instead you see what you have in front of people to see. It’s a great situation because it’s completely not an optimal situation, to test what’s going on and see if you’re on. You can work on two or three songs every week at open mics. It accelerates the process. You can learn about crowds and you learn to make eye contact.

The fourth recurring theme is the importance of “networking” and “meeting other musicians.” “Social capital” (Bourdieu 1984; Putnam 2000) is a common gravitational reason hosts and performers emphasize, as to what draws musicians to perform at open mics. Meeting other musicians and the procurement of more social capital is also a common means of finding different open mics and other avenues to perform. Using [openmikes.org](http://openmikes.org)’s listings and reviews in tandem with “word of mouth,” helps musicians learn and confirm open mics akin to their likening, be it in terms of the day of the week, the host’s practices or reputation, or genre domination.

Many of the participants express varying degrees of distrust and skepticism about other musicians’ motivations, which may explain why collaboration is infrequent or ephemeral. Close

to 3 out of 4 of these musicians say they do not typically collaborate with other musicians for a few primary reasons. The biggest reason is their personal desire not to play others' original music and only play their own, original compositions. There are exceptions to this in varying degrees. If a jam occurs, which is usually seen in more open locations, a cover song is often chosen, because it allows for an easier and more fun performance. More than just one person potentially knows the song and personal ownership is not threatened by sharing or misinterpreting music, if a cover song is chosen. Jamming incorporates a fluid membership and cover songs also facilitate this, too. Originals are jammed, but less frequently. Some musicians frequently play with others at open mics but not outside of the open mic, while others do neither or both. Other musicians do not play with others inside the open mics, but play outside formats or locations with other performers. The most common pattern is musicians who do neither, not playing with others in the open mics and outside of the open mics. Different patterns of these practices are indicative of specific open mics and where they fall on the openness continuum. One twentysomething male from Bartime said the following regarding playing at open mics and musical collaboration with others over the years:

You are out on a limb by yourself. There is comfort to have someone on stage. It takes the pressure off you in a way, but I kind of like it [being alone] though. I am comfortable with performing, but there is some amount of edginess, I wouldn't say anxiety necessarily but excitement to go play and when you are by yourself it's like 'ok, let's do this!' and you have to say to yourself 'the responsibility is on me.' If I fuck it up, I fuck up. It's kind of exciting.

Open mics more open to collaboration foster more collaboration outside of the open mic. Most of the singer/songwriters who attend play the guitar and/or piano and if they looking to put together a band they are often looking to recruit from the two most highly in demand musical instrumentalists: drummers and bassists. Unfortunately, for the musicians searching, these two specialists rarely attended open mics. When asked about this observation, a few musicians express their befuddlements as to this disconnect. The final point many musicians make is the

importance of “talking shop.” Talking shop allows for the exchange and accumulation of various forms of symbolic or subcultural capital. A common set of discussion topics include anything musical for the open mic musicians. These topics range from instruments, guitar accessories, a newest software for managing promotional email lists, or the newest CDs by shared musical interests. Keeping up with the latest in instrumental, technical offerings, or the cutting edge of released musical recordings helps maintain cultural beliefs and practices and expand musical knowledge. It also works to structure, organize, and distinguish musicians according to forms of symbolic capital.

The final element of open mics that these musicians identify is the “text” or musical compositions performed at the open mics. Many describe the predominant type or genre of music at open mics as folksy and “singer/songwriter” music. In many ways, as it applies to these musicians, the term “singer/songwriter” has a double entendre. It is both a methodological and genre description. It reaffirms the links between instrumentation, musical practices, genre, and the content of musical compositions. Form and content are inextricably connected supporting previous arguments put forth on “artistic classification systems” (DiMaggio 1987). As for the musicians, many opine about how open mics encourage “practicing new songs” and “getting your stuff out there.” These two benefits are mentioned very frequently, but a few performers at the Knot add the qualification that open mics are not a “collective thing.” This exemplifies the individualism more common at the OOMs. A few of the musicians recognize the important role others play in the co-construction of the musical text and performance. A regular at Namu’s talks about how the open mic is beneficial, specifically in terms of the audience’s reactions in helping co-shape the music:

Well, first of all, you get inspired by other musicians, which is [sic] going to help you write your own songs and challenge you to do a better performance the next time. That is the main thing. It’s all about the exchange of information. You can write great songs in your room by yourself but you can write better songs knowing who you are talking to

and knowing how they respond to it. It's like 'they really didn't respond to that.' It's constantly changing the way I write to accommodate, what I'm trying to get out of the situation. It's not like I am trying to please people, but I am trying to get out my feeling across most effectively. I don't care so much about pleasing people as I care about expressing myself. Sometimes they just don't get it and that is fine.

In sum, it's difficult to conceptually and empirically separate these three interconnected elements identified in piecemeal by musicians, but each represent common and salient interactional spheres of open mics. More importantly, they exemplify how these are social parts and processes that reside in the meaningful actions, practices, and co-constructions by the participating musicians and hosts. The musicians are aware of these attributes and their importance to varying degrees, although they identify them in different ways. More importantly, these musicians increasingly learn how to use and manipulate them to benefit their musical growth and aesthetic career.

### **Open Mics: The Good, the Bad, and the Ambivalent**

Ruth Finnegan in her ethnography of urban musicians in England discussed the idea of "pathways" that musicians took over the course of their non-linear aesthetic careers. Social contacts and networking are important, but anonymity and "impersonality" is also common themes in the musicians' trajectories and everyday experiences. The musicians who did create links and networks did so through commonly shared symbolic groups and "social practices" (2007: 297-305). There is one topic these New York musicians and singer/songwriters are almost in complete consensus on: if you are a popular musician and have achieved a certain "plateau" in one's musical development, the open mic is not a bad place to go for further development. The bountiful metaphors regarding the open mics' utility include: as a catalyst to "cut your teeth," "spread your wings," and "bounce your music off people." The former phrase is repeated multiple times by different people. A few musicians said it allows them to transition and

overcome recurring problems. A few shared similar sentiments to this particular musician's statement: "It's been very beneficial for me. Getting over my stage fright in terms of playing guitar and singing in front of people and trying out new songs and new material to see how people react to it." Trying new music and boosting confidence are frequently heralded as benefits, in addition to, the ongoing theme of the co-construction of their music. On that topic, one musician added, "...and sometimes [it's] a good place to get influences by hearing other musicians."

There are some common themes expressed by many of the open mic musicians on the topic of what they specifically "liked" about the open mic(s). Much of this supports previously presented data. "Hearing others' music" and "others hearing your music" are most commonly cited points, in addition to, receiving good support, networking and obtaining "stage experience to practice material." The former two play a noteworthy role for comparative processes, but most musicians are not as forthcoming. A few musicians are more explicit about these aesthetic and performance comparisons. One younger female performer from the Knot who moved to NYC within the last year said: "I silently compare my musicianship to what I am hearing. It gives me a gauge as to where I fit with that particular group of people on that night and how far I have come in music."

These musicians' dislikes as to the open mic are not as common or pronounced and some musicians even say nothing is disliked about open mics. An interesting juxtaposition of the "dislikes" that are expressed is they are often part and partial of the same ideology and practices producing the areas of articulated affinity. A few examples of the most common dislikes are "selfish people that don't listen to others," "sitting through terrible musicians and their bad music," "competitive and annoying musicians," "forced or faked praise from others," "having to wait," and "favoritism by hosts to friends or regulars." Maybe the most telling and emblematic

of these complaints comes from one musician who very succinctly stated, “I hate the isolation of it.” It undoubtedly can be very isolating, especially for the beginner open mic musician and/or musicians who do not fit the stricter aesthetic standards and meaningful sociological boundaries more stringent at more closed open mics. The comparative processes many musicians found the most helpful and likeable are also the same comparative processes that create and perpetuate greater anxiety, isolation, frustration, and distrust of their fellow musicians.

From a slightly different angle, but with the intended purpose to flush out and further clarify what attracts musicians to open mics, the musicians were asked how the open mic helped them as musicians. A similar discursive theme to the last appeared. The most common phrase is “gaining confidence by practicing,” but the second most common idea was “comparing yourself to others,” because it challenges one to perform better. One participant explicitly stated that he garnered “inspiration by hearing others to write.” Audience responses to their music are helpful to “fine tune or test” material. Learning to play and expressing oneself are also repeated as important, but “camaraderie with other musicians” or anything similar is only mentioned once. This is not worth overlooking with the tremendous emphasis placed on “networking” by most musicians. These quotes demonstrate the crucial role others play in the open mic process. The open mic is far from an autonomous, solitary event for each musician, even if they only perform alone. The comparisons persist across all sites, but the invidiousness of the comparisons differs. For example, an African American host and professional musician from Namu’s discuss his interactions and appreciation for a less experienced musician at the more open mic:

It makes you stronger! Your abilities, I have seen it many times, especially those who come all the time at our open mic. I have seen it, they come every week and they get better and better, but he [one regular] is a really great songwriter....not was, he still is, he is a really great songwriter, but he would stop, when he messes up. He would stop in the middle of the song. You know, and I would be like ‘No....No.... don’t stop, don’t stop! Keep going!’ But he came every week and next you know he was playing and he is so good now, so tight. I actually cover one of his songs. He is a great songwriter...



Not all professional musicians see the open mic in such positive or even neutral way. The next quote comes from a self-described “professional” musician who does not play the open mic regularly:

It [open mic] helps with networking and meeting other people...stage time. You can learn a lot by listening to other people by watching and listening to how they perform, their style. You can learn a lot by observing and watching but the serious musicians are not spending their time that way, they have moved beyond it.

Like the last quote, a few musicians recognize that other popular musicians belittle playing open mics because they believe their skills and compositions are above and beyond the open mic, having surpassed a need for its use. Interestingly, some of these musicians have never played an open mic before but many have sometime in the past. Many of these musicians who are critical of it would not have moved on to the next stage of their aesthetic careers without playing it possibly.

About half of the respondents firmly believe the open mic format can not hinder a musician in any way, although these responses come more from musicians who are newer to the open mic phenomenon, early in their aesthetic career, or previously typified as “ritualists.” Of those who believe the open mic format can “hinder” musicians, the majority suggest any hindrance would manifest from the musicians’ misuse or inability to learn from the open mic process as it is intended. For example, a few of the singer/songwriters contest that going to an open mic dominated by a particular and identifiable style or genre similar to the performer would “make you the same.” Other musicians are more pointed in their criticism, saying that it hinders those only, “if you don’t work hard and learn from it,” “it becomes a trap and it’s suppose to be a tool,” or “if you play it too safe and don’t experiment.” One musician provides a scenario that would be a detrimental misuse of the open mic: “It could hinder you if you believe your own hype. If you go in one night and tear it up, and let some drunken college people tell you how wonderful you are you might not go home and get back into the woodshed, which is what you

want to do.” In all, many musicians believe the open mic is useful if the performer engages it critically and thoughtfully, reworking goals and not becoming complacent.

Close to 90 percent of the interviewees view the open mic as a transitional place with the long term goal of reducing or stopping their attendance. Reasons for the cessation of attending open mics fall into two broad categories. The most common are music related and nonmusical related reasons. Supporting the previous points, the majority of these NYC musicians believe some type of progression to greater musical accomplishments would prompt their permanent or semi-permanent hiatus from the open mic. The most common reasons include, “I move on to the next level,” “has regular gigs,” and “I find better use of my time, musically.” Some musicians justify short term absences because they did not have new material, gigs to promote or “no need to network.” This musician from the Knot, new to performing publically and at the open mic, admits to relying heavily on the open mic but does not preclude other possible reasons for never returning:

Either I suppose on the one hand, a positive reason, would be I do actually start getting a regular gig every week and I don't have much need for it any more...or maybe even a gig on a Monday night and it interferes or we have a gig on Monday nights or we need to practice or record, it just doesn't fit in. So you move to the next level and don't need it anymore. On the other hand, and I suppose, my wife gets pregnant again, I will have to just drop it.

This last section could lead to the possible application of the concept, “community of practice” (Barton and Tusting 2005; Green 2002: 185) to the open mics. This concept has garnered academic resonance in other disciplines, but these open mic settings don't meet the seemingly harmonious and collectivist “enterprises” that characterize these “communities,” although they do share with some of the “situational learning” (Lave and Wenger 1991) practices present (Barton and Tusting 2005: 1-13). The open mics seem to be more fluid in terms of membership and individually artistic expressions. As evidenced, these responses continue the theme that making performance and aesthetic comparisons with other musicians is a socially

important component to this event; however, as musicians progress through their aesthetic career they see it as a place to be used for different reasons. For example, at first it may be used to reduce and overcome stage fright and once that is addressed, new techniques are learned and integrated to reduce this fear, the musician can focus on augmenting other performance and musical recipes and techniques. Much of this is also contingent also on musicians' pursuits and successes outside of the open mic in terms of obtaining gigs, making recordings, distributing music or producing other "objectified" reifications of musical progression.

Similar meaningful patterns reappear in terms of how these open mic musicians view a "successful night at the open mic." Overwhelmingly, "good feedback" and "good responses" or reactions at the open mic symbolize a successful night for the largest plurality of musicians. Good responses are not always verbalized as a number of musicians emphasize. A different Berklee trained singer/songwriter who performed at Namu's describes the following as representative of a successful performance at the open mic:

I think real success is when you don't hear much talking at all. They all just turn and listen. They can clap for anybody and maybe they will listen to everybody and clap, but there is something ...you will kind of get a feeling when you are playing they react to you in some way.

Many of these musicians view some type of learning or "working out a problem" as some degree or measurement of success. But as outlined earlier some emphasize how success can change for them or others overtime, as this one experienced guitarist and performer soberly states: "Success changes, though. Three years ago, success was like, you got on stage and performed. That is not the case anymore." Another experienced musician from Namu's defines success through the changes one experiences in his or her aesthetic career: "For a person who has never performed before and they get up and do it, that's success and that is the beauty of it really. I think the nature of it is really trying new material, meeting other people. It's about connecting to an audience." Others describe other signs of success including "...adding names of musicians to be

on my mailing list” or a more didactic process such as: “It helps you learn to deliver your song to the audience, work with the microphone, it helps with stage techniques and things like that.”

Unsuccessful nights, as defined by many of the musicians, mirror these same definitions, highly contingent upon the audience’s evaluative process and signs toward each musician’s performance and music. The most commonly referenced fear and definition of an unsuccessful night is “indifference by the audience,” “no feedback,” or “no audience” at all. Other examples of negative scenarios include “falling on one’s face,” “didn’t play as well as hoped,” “I was too guarded,” or “I was not feeling it.” Success for these musicians is highly contingent on many qualitative and meaningful turns, very few of these turns they have tremendous control over. A few other musicians describe an unsuccessful night as “having not learning anything,” “getting drunk and couldn’t play,” or “frustrated over not getting gigs.” Nevertheless, the majority of these interviewees place a significant amount of power in the hands of other musicians to drastically influence how they gauge, interpret or judge their own successes. This affinity and frustration for both cooperation and competition persisting in these open mics is similar to David Riesman’s concept of “antagonistic cooperation,” consistent with other-directed peer groups (Riesman 2001: 81).

David Riesman’s concept of a “jury of one’s peers,”(2001: 73) a characteristic distinguishing “other-directed” social psychological character types, shares similarities with open mics and the musicians who play them. These singer/songwriters place a considerable amount of weight in others’ reactions, responses and feedback as to how they evaluate their own music and performances, which is a radical departure from former “inner-directed” musicians and artists. Riesman emphasized how this potentially manifests within practices of the production of culture or what he termed the “standards of performance” (2001: 76). David Riesman’s thesis that “inner-directed” types, who are waning throughout the latter half of the

twentieth-century, focus more on “production” practices unlike other-directed types who focus more on consumption practices. The other directed peer groups’ “unionizing” effects on “individualism” are most profound at the COMs, where a consumption of a *taste scene* becomes the “ends,” at the open mic, rather than a continued focus on the “means” more common in the OOMs (2001: 78-79). In their totality, these events are a blending of production and consumption practices, analogous to what is occurring with the practices of practice and performance. The COMs are more characterized by practices of consuming musical producers (i.e. mirror to their ideal selves) and the OOMs are more characterized by practices of producing musical consumers of musical production by focusing on the learning and reflexive process of practicing performance. Juxtaposed to the noticeable distrust many exhibit for their fellow open mic musicians, these sentiments paint a complex picture of many ambivalent open mic musicians who are often riddled with anxiety with their musical selves, careers and potential trajectories.

### **Open Mics and the Music**

Meeting fellow musicians, talking shop, getting and giving “feedback,” quietly evaluating, discussing other musician’s performances, and meeting others who share similar musical interests are common practices at these open mics. While waiting to play, many of the musicians listen, at varying degrees, to the music performed by other musicians. If a musician’s songs pass the aesthetic judgment of perceived worthiness, other musicians may approach them afterwards as they walk off stage and back to their guitar case and chair. Complimenting is a frequent practice, more so by regulars, but one that is viewed skeptically and with a certain level of ambivalence. From these interactions, “weak ties” (Granovetter 1983) are formed and social capital is potentially augmented. Social capital and networking is rarely forgotten in any discussion on the benefits of attending open mics. Meeting other musicians is frequent but

collaborating with them in different musical endeavors is not common. Close to 75 percent of the musicians indicate that although they meet other musicians and form some relationships from these meetings, they rarely collaborate with them. Only about 20 percent say they work with other musicians at least somewhat consistently outside of the open mic on musical endeavors. This musician, in his 40s and a full time attorney at a Park Avenue office is relatively new to the open mic, having begun a few months earlier. After performing solo the first month or so he is now regularly playing weekly with Joe, a high status musician, who “sits in” with him playing “lead” guitar to his blues rhythm and singing:

Musically, I don't get much from watching or talking with them [other musicians]. My challenges are my challenges. I know where I am going and I already have my vision constructed and it is basic to reconstruct, somewhere along the line, something like Lynard Skynard, and just rock the place. I know exactly what I am trying to do. I am feeling my way, step by step, so I am just going real slow, with the help of Joe.

Lucy Green spent a considerable amount of time interweaving the “importance of feel” into her study of popular musicians in England (2002: 32-33). “Feel” is vital to musicians in a variety of topics and layers. The most notable angle of feel includes the precision and overall sounds of songs when played, practiced, or performed. Feel can be used in at least two other ways, including how the interaction between a musician and the instrument’s technology is perceived and judged during the performance, and also what are the overall perceptions, feelings and interpretations of a performance venue and stage. The latter include the perceptions of the convergences or divergences of audience, performer and text during a performance. As Green clearly shows, the valued importance of feel does not preclude the importance of other more instrumental issues like skill or technical variables in any of these issues (2002: 107-111).

A related term and piece of discursive jargon in the musical status group is “vibe.” This is a semiotic sibling to “feel.” Vibe is used frequently to describe personal connections to sounds and places. In describing the open mic landscape in NYC, vibe reappears with undeniable

resonance often used to qualitatively distinguish how some open mics differ from others. Close to 90 percent of the participants believe there are noticeable variations and differences across different open mics, and one of the common answers is these open mics, “have different vibes.” Having different vibes meaningfully and interpretively include: different dominant genres of music performed by the open mic musicians and different sequential and organizational components like “feature spots” and “jams.” Some open mics are “more favorable to collaboration” and some allow for greater variety of mediums, such as poetry or comedy. More importantly for a considerable number of musicians are that some open mics are more open to novice musicians, like this singer/songwriter from the Knot discusses:

Yeah, there are different types. There are types that are really about performing and giving a real chance to people and then there are more closed off to regulars. You can't tell the first time you go, but by the second time you can see whether it's a place open to have people come in. It's much like high school.

Vibe is an ambiguous term, but it is a term connoting an affective and emotionally weighted interpretation. Therefore, it allows little room for questioning the validity by other people, because implicit to the term is a personal taste and perception connected to an indefinable feeling or “vibration” in style or flare. It communicates a few things, including the importance of feelings musicians' value as a partially ephemeral means of discerning their environment, and it is also acts as a linguistic device in connecting the discourse of expressive individuality and artistic authenticity to personal feelings and perceptions. The few notoriously known COMs, according to many of the musicians, are explicitly characterized as being “more pretentious” and “not welcoming” too many musicians interviewed. In using the term vibe, a few musicians refer to these open mics as having, “bad vibes.” Lacking diversity as evidence, these open mics are not very open, unlike the Knot, for example that according to one musician, “Has so much diversity. There are guys who do bluegrass, guys that do hip hop, but there are other places that do strictly certain kinds of music...”

The music performed at these open mics is not to be forgotten. The topic of musical styles and genres inevitably draw jocular scoffing, anxious laughter and the almost predictable “I knew this was coming” response. As previous research has shown, many contemporary, popular musicians today have “eclectic tastes” (Green 2002: 121) in the music they listen to and that likely influences their own musical work. Thus, these musicians mostly fall into the general “omnivore” (Peterson 1992) category in terms of musical and artistic repertoire of likes, tastes and influences. Characterized by a large and heterogeneous range of musical knowledge and tastes, omnivores are typically highly educated, and have replaced the high culture “snob” at the top of the taste hierarchy. For example, the omnivore can know, consume and enjoy a veritable hodgepodge of musical genres such as opera, jazz, country, and punk, for instance. Its counter weight at the bottom in the newer taste hierarchy with far less prestige and power is the “univore.” This social type listens to just one or a few genres of music placing these consumers toward the middle to lower end of the taste hierarchy (1992: 168-170).

The univore may love the blues and only to listen to the blues, but in the eyes of the omnivore, the univore’s tastes are provincial and potentially indicative of a limited world view and experiences. For this increasingly dominant “cosmopolitan” (Hannerz 1990; Riesman 2001: 25) and omnivore “habitus” (Bourdieu 1984) especially in the urban U.S., the mystique of authenticity for the musician resides in creating original songs and building one’s unique repertoire and “sound ” associated with one’s musical identity. The ability to personalize and construct a style that is difficult to define, categorize or label is an implicit desire in many within this status group, as seen in other popular musicians and research (Green 2002: 53). The difference with this status group, however, is this is even more individualized when the unique sound and identity is more collectivist, band oriented, or band driven. These personal



idiosyncrasies that distinguish musical persona and musical compositions from others are an important discourse and expressive goal at work.

A sizable number of musicians used terms like “undefinable [sic],” “unclassifiable,” “versatile,” “poignant or mature,” or they “don’t like to label” to describe their own music. When prodded, most resort to using commonly used genre names to best triangulate their genre influences, but rarely do they quickly or unabashedly state their music is one easily categorical genre or another. One male singer/songwriter goes so far to say: “Once you label music you cut off something just because...I put bands into categories, when you try certain categories it’s easier to place certain things, if pressed I would call it rock’n roll.” The few musicians who do define their music with genre descriptions, most commonly describe their music as blues, country or pop rock. Many used multiple genres and the most frequently used genres by these musicians in tandem with other genres include: rock ‘n roll, blues, folk, pop, alternative and jazz. As shown earlier, many performers provide multiple genres, qualifications, and some well known musicians to help delineate the nuanced exactitude of their musical compositions. Interestingly, no jazz per say is seen being played, but some integrate “jazz” influences into folk or rock music.

When asked what others at open mics play, the answers differ. Most of the musicians describe the music at NYC open mics as “singer/songwriter” and “folk” music. Other similar, but more vague and metaphorical descriptions are, “original music” and “storytelling.” Rock came in third and blues is rarely mentioned at all, as are jazz and pop. This is one performer from Namu’s description of the music played at Namu’s:

Just singer/songwriter stuff, I guess...some of it is more soul or R&B...mostly acoustic singer/songwriter stuff. I don’t think playing covers is frowned upon at Namu’s but usually most people play their original music.

Other descriptors used by more than one third of the musicians interviewed do not categorize the music into genres, but evaluate with negative and critical descriptions, such as one professional's summation of open mic music as, "[it's] average....amateurish, again, if you are at the open mic, there is a reason you are there." This is a more lengthy response from a young female singer/songwriter:

This is why I get so annoyed because everyone is just a singer/songwriter...guitar, strumming...you know, singer/songwriter...there's nothing really, sure there is something special to everything, but the same old shit over and over again. Okay, I am going to sing a sad song about my problems on my guitar, all the songs sound the same...and I love folk music, I really do love folk music. I listened to Jewel in high school and college...but then you get Ani DeFranco, she's folk, but in your face. She took folk music and did something with it...but these singer/songwriters just sing about their problems!

Singer/songwriter is gaining a discursive place as a musical description and genre, as more musicians work endlessly to combine, rework and construct personalized sounds as solo artists at open mics. The open mic musicians are very versatile in terms of instruments and usually hold a high level of musical knowledge allowing them to work and write across different traditionally historical genres or genre streams. Acting as cultural bricoleurs, these musicians blend and blur different genre boundaries and form nuanced permutations and hybrids that appear in the open mic landscape. This is potentially leading to the appropriation of "singer/songwriter" as a catch-all orientation, method of musical practices and broad genre construction. The negative comments support previous premises, also evidenced in aforementioned places. Many of these musicians interact with other musicians vis-à-vis the competition for the accumulation of different forms of symbolic, subcultural and social capital, often leading to ambivalent feelings from these settings of performance comparison and co-construction.

Continuing this theme of seemingly contradictory perceptions or ambivalence, all but one of the musicians believe the open mics in NYC are not "open" to different types of music. Clearly, many of the musicians believe certain open mics cater to certain aggregations, groups,

and scenes, with dominating sounds and genres. The research in this study supports these perceptions; however, when asked if open mics are truly open, the vast majority answers with the affirmative. A few even cynically emphasized that open mics are “too open” allowing just anyone to come in and play, devaluing the other more worthy musicians. Consequently, many of the musicians view “open” as legally or publically open to a person to walk in the venue and perform without any organizational impediment. Many provide conditions to this including the idea of gradations of “openness” based in genre dominant and “clique run” events, where the boundaries of privilege are far less penetrable. A few mentioned the intriguing observation that one has to return at least once to adequately see how open the event is for people who are possibly different or new. By listening and watching others listen and interact at the open mic, a number of performers suggest that one can “quickly realize that your music doesn’t fit in.”

When actively listening to others’ music, there are a few musical elements that attract the focus of their concentration. When discussing what constitutes a good or “memorable” performance by other musicians, two general categories of responses appear. The first is more instrumental concerns that come from ideas of hard work and practice. The most common answer from these musicians is a “good song.” A close second, third and fourth are if the performing musician has a “good voice,” a “mastery of the instrument,” they are playing, and “interesting lyrics.” What many of these musicians believe constitute a “good song” include issues of song structure, the chorus, the melody, and the good use of “hooks.” The second area, which describes more expressive oriented concerns, is dominated by the notions of feeling and vibe. According to many of these open mic musicians, if the performing musician is giving off a “genuine” or “unique vibe” demonstrating some degree of “charisma,” with the “ability to hold a crowd,” the performance is more likely to be memorable. Finally, this one performer’s

description of a memorable performance by any potential performer embodies these thematic ideals:

Some kind of genuine emotion coming from them, something that kind of moves me, you know, indescribable feeling, whenever you listen to a certain song, artist or album that hits you for a particular reason, it's more of a feeling than....there are a lot of great technical artists who do play a billion notes a minute and can play circles around....if the hair on your arms stands up, that's probably a good sign, so that is what affects me. I love vocals, or a good voice, an inflection or whatever....alot of that is if someone's voice grabs you and touches you...it's memorable. Technical is great, but it's best if you can.

### **Open Mics in NYC: Practicing, Performing, and Working**

One of the most important sociological themes in this study is the discussion of what constitutes practicing and performing in these settings. These open mics are a burgeoning musical third place where boundaries are blurring between these two distinctive sets of practices. “Open” and “closed” open mics are framed differently within different cultural and discursive layers and this plays a significant factor as to whether the event is indicative of practicing performance or performance practicing. Practicing performance is more frequent in OOMs and has closer characteristics to the practicing frame. Performance practicing carries a frame closer to the twentieth-century western form of performance and is more frequent in COMs. These open mics are backstage regions, but the COMs are more of a closed off backstage, allowing for less interlopers to cross the boundaries because the music most common is considered less “mainstream” and more cutting edge; however, because it has more of a performance frame, performers treat it more as a performance than performers at the more OOMs, who also vary greater in their aesthetic careers, musical genres, ages, and racial categories to name a few. The OOMs have more beginner performers who typically come in initially and use the primary performance frame all open mics begin work within. This frame goes with the musician's preconceived notions of a musical performance in a public, bar setting. They are less likely to

have played gigs or have formal performances in recent times, and thus, approach the open mic differently at first, but then transition quickly and rekey it into a more practice frame overtime.

OOMs are by definition more diverse having people at different points and intersections of the careers. This is partially evident in the perceptions of the musicians regarding whether the open mic is considered a “gig.” The *Grove Music Online* defines a gig as, “a term commonly applied to a musical engagement of one night’s duration only; to undertake such an engagement” (Macy 2008). Roughly 70 percent of the musicians say the open mic is not a gig, while the remaining 30 percent say it “can be” a gig or it is a “different kind of gig.” No respondent agrees that playing an open mic is equivalent to playing a formal “concert” or gig. In distinguishing how the open mic is not a gig, many of musicians agree upon what constitutes a gig. Unlike a gig, the open mic is open to anyone to participate and there is no requirement or commitment by the musician to be there at any specific time. The open mic is a “bridge between” places allowing the testing of new material and “checking in to see if you are on track” according to a few musicians. It is contingent and interstitial by definition, although the applications are proving otherwise for some open mic scenes.

A gig, on the other hand, is booked prior to the date of the performance and thus is preceded by some combination of marketing and promotional tactics (e.g. flyers, MySpace, emails list) by the musician and/or venue. A gig requires more personal equipment to be brought, rather than bringing the basic essentials and a “real set of songs.” Finally, the most important defining quality of a gig according to these musicians is some type of money or exchange for their performance. Here is one musician’s response to this question, and he also implies that a certain degree of exclusivity is another salient distinction:

No, because this is my opinion but it’s open to anybody. Anybody can get up there and do it. A gig is your time slot. You have an allotted amount of time, that you advertise for, that you may be have a cover for, you let your friends know about it and tell them to come. You may put up posters; you don’t do that for an open mic. You just go and drink.

For those not convinced the open mic shares nothing with gigs, a few musicians add that it depends upon the “level of the musician” and “what the definition of gig is” as mitigating factors. The musicians recognize that for “some musicians the open mic is a gig,” as one older and experienced performer and host from the Knot remarked. One performer points out the similarities, such as playing to “an audience,” but even though it may not be a gig, “it’s still business,” where you can get “people to see you.” The harmonica player from the Knot likened the open mic to a “pre-season football game.” It fills an intermediary position between a purer form of practice associated with different locales such as the home or a studio, and a purer form of performance as a gig in a live music venue with an audience specifically there to see certain performers. As these musicians clearly show in their definitional parameters, the biggest distinctions are the framing devices and meaningful practices musicians, venue managers and audiences use to co-construct and differentiate between these two spheres of live musical production. The open mic as a musical third place is becoming a set of new practices and meanings “bridging” these other two ideal spheres.

In distinguishing a gig from the open mic, “practicing” prior to either event as a meaningful set of preparatory practices, differentiating one from the other, is worth mentioning. Musical practice is a set of human practices preparing one or a social group for a future performance, which as mentioned, is the apex of musical production. If the open mic is a pure form of practice there should be no need for practicing music before practicing again in the open mic. On the other hand, if the open mic is a musical performance, practicing before the performance should be common and almost a ubiquitous form of preparation. Musical practicing and performing do not reside in a bipolar model, but rather are co-constructions in gradations relative to each other. Residing on a continuum, these practices became institutionalized in particular places, musical practices and meanings overtime as ideal ‘poles.’ After coming to a

cultural pinnacle during the twentieth century these boundaries are now blurring with these musical third places and open mics.

Close to 70 percent of all the performers in this sample use some type of practicing format, method or form prior to playing at the open mics. Of this majority who integrate some type of preparatory practice into the pre-performance routine, the most commonly used practice form is “running through” the songs usually before leaving home. These different practices are not mutually exclusive and most utilize multiple methods of preparation. The other more frequently used methods are deciding what songs are to be played, thinking or singing through these songs, and warming up one’s voice or lips before entering the stage. Many of the musicians note they always practice, on a day-by-day basis, making a practice session prior to an open mic a quotidian routine and nothing particularly special. A smaller number of the participants talk about forms of preparation that focus on body and mind relaxation, like doing yoga that day, or having one or two drinks prior to playing that evening. Depending upon the room, audience, and their location, musicians often exit the room or bar and tune up prior to their performance. Occasionally the musician may run through a song on the sidewalk, for example, and one young performer from Namu’s speaks of often warming up for an hour “in the subway” prior to the open mic. Needless to say, most musicians participate in some type of pre-open mic routine that prepares, sets up and frames the open mic performance in a different manner from regular practice.

Of the remaining 30 percent, the majority are seasoned performers across many formats including playing formal gigs and open mics. Saying they never practice before the open mic is not completely accurate because a few add the qualification that newer songs frequently necessitate practicing prior to the open mic; however, most of these musicians indicate a decline in pre-open mic practicing overtime. These musicians formerly practiced but slowly “gave it

up.” For many, losing the pre-performance anxiety removed the perceived need to practice before playing. Other changes among these musicians are an overall change toward promotion and song selection. In the past, some of the performers decide before the open mic as to what to play and now they sometimes decide in the moment. A few others nostalgically reflect on when they formerly brought “flyers, business cards and CDs” but not anymore. Developing the ability to “choose” a song on the spot and also feeling comfortable to do so requires confidence drawing from an extensive repertoire of not only original and some cover songs, but performance methods and recipes. Choosing is unlikely a random process. Often musicians play a new song in tandem with more dependable, already refined songs from their oeuvre. This compensates for the risk of the new with greater comfort and certainty in a “worked-up” song that they know from past experiences that audiences responds positively to it. As new songs are played and refined, they become integrated into the overall musical repertoire. Augmenting the performance tool box, on the other hand, includes drawing from numerous linguistic and nonverbal recipes in one’s ‘tool box’ to compile and perform the musical identity in the limelight of the event. This African American guitarist and singer turned part-time host at the Knot, describes his changes to preparing for the open mic overtime:

I used to, but I don’t even bother now...really! I found out that if I step onto stage without knowing what I am going to play, it causes me to be more sharp [sic] and then I may come out with something a little better in the song because I haven’t really over thought it. I use to sit outside and go over the song four or five times, before I left home I would do the same thing. People would look at me funny because I would do chord progressions in the air on the train, but I would get there and end up sounding stale...exactly like I hear over and over in my head. And now that I don’t prepare all these nuances that I didn’t think I could do, come out and this shocks me at times!

One common practice musicians recognize do prior to playing the open mic is deciding “what to play” that evening. There are a number of factors that musicians noted as being critical influences as to what they play, but a few are the most common. New songs that have not been played “out” in public take precedence for most musicians. As already demonstrated, most



musicians see the open mic as a “testing ground” and “new material” is ripe for being tested. As already shown, audience responses and reactions are monitored and gauged as the performer is on stage performing, and performers also frequently solicit, if not get without prompting, opinions or critiques from friends or acquaintances afterward. The second most common means is their “mood” or “feelings” at the time of performing. A few musicians discussed how they monitor the “vibe” of the room and choose a song according to the “tapestry of the night” as one musician eloquently phrased. For a musician to choose a song befitting to the perceptions of the nights’ aura, his or her repertoire must be relatively large, so this ostensibly precludes most beginner musicians from this set of practices on a larger scale. Other musicians discuss more practical reasons in factoring into the decision making process such as, “how many songs you get....two or three,” “depends on what songs went over well at that place,” or “I pull out my strongest songs when I first play a new place.” This is how one musician describes how and why he changed his approach overtime, and it exemplifies some of the previously noted trends:

I don’t know. Tonight I am going to do some standard tunes. I am doing ‘Crossroads’ tonight and I will play a new song called ‘Waiting.’ It depends...I use to be afraid to play new tunes but I can’t tell you why that is the case, but this other guy who comes here all the time told me to do that, otherwise I am not using it like I should. You need to work on your voice, but sometimes old tunes are good too because you know them.

Working as a musician in NYC “is not easy.” That is close to a consensus, but musicians continue arriving at the proverbial docks of Manhattan, dozens per day with romanticized notions of making it in the Big Apple. For others who grow up in the area the romanticism is slightly tempered, but not completely absent. This may have some connection to the growing social and class coagulation of the creative class. Here is one musician’s take on working as a musician in NYC:

It’s not easy. You just juggle it. Some days you play more and some days you focus more on work. For me I wake up early around six and hopefully play in the morning and write in the morning. I feel guilty leaving my dog, it’s not easy, but it all depends on what level you are. I use to try to practice certain things every day, like voice or lyrics,

but it became my life....a drill sergeant and I am not getting paid. I like to do other things, too.

Dealing with the rigors of juggling an aesthetic career in the arts or music with other, sustainable methods of staying afloat financially is easier when one is enmeshed in a status group that values and exalts these trials and tribulations. Participating in the sometimes grueling rituals of weekly open mics, while having to write songs, market one's self and work a full time job, is not an easy task. Most of these musicians didn't gloss over or minimize the lifestyle difficulties that come with these pursuits. According to these musicians it produces a significant amount of stress and anxiety, especially as it applies to juggling work with their music interests. To combat these difficulties, most formulate and keep fairly strenuous regimen, but that does not always last, either. Making writing and practicing routine through a considerable amount of self-discipline is punctuated in the talk of a number of musicians. Having fewer commitments, as previously shown, helps them concentrate on their endeavors, including going to weekly open mics. The open mics facilitate the musicians' position to compare, if not just sustain their musical skills, repertoire, identity, and performance abilities. This is one musician's discussion of the rigors and difficulties of working and practicing music on a daily basis:

I really try to play in my free time. We all go through our dry spells. There are times when the guitar sits in the corner, I don't want to touch it and I don't feel creative at all, but to get over that whole hump, you just have to do it. Even if you are going to write a song right now, even if it sucks and none has to hear it, it is a craft, so you have to work on it. Practicing and playing even if you don't feel creative you should go online and find some chords and play some covers you like. Just work through it, even if you don't want to. The more you play, the more you know chords, progressions, sounds, melodies you hear. Just playing is very important.

In addition to the routine processes of practicing and performing, these musicians also have to tend to a "business side" that many expressed a sincere degree of discontent about. Marketing their music and "networking" with other musicians and industry workers bleed increasingly across the newer mediums that accomplish all the above. The majority of the

musicians rely heavily on the internet and newer mediums for communication, such as email and texting on cell phones. In terms of finding and researching open mics across the city's landscapes, [openmikes.org](http://openmikes.org) is widely used as with "word of mouth." Each are often used to corroborate and check the other sources from the other. Close to 75 percent of the musicians have MySpace pages that provide a webpage within an extensive network that allow musicians to share pictures, music, and upcoming gigs with other members. Of those who do not have a MySpace page are typically older or a beginning open mic musician. Once the musician garners some gigs and eventually records some musical "tracks" or songs, he or she generates some type of web presence. Other occasionally referenced web sources are Craigslist, often used to advertise or request sessionists or musicians to play with them, Facebook and Youtube, where an increasing number of musicians are videotaping their performances and posting the videos online for others to freely pull up and watch. Email lists are kept to send reminders for upcoming gigs, new recordings or other noteworthy events worth sharing with others. Lastly, a growing number of musicians use cell phone numbers to send gig reminder "texts" to others' phones. This musician covers many of these when discussing the multitude of options now available to musicians online:

Craigs List is a big on. For my last gig I needed some musicians and I hired a bass player. Once you post you are going to play, it's not a problem and I actually post the amount, too. And I had more responses than I expected. I had like 20 responses. Bass players know they can play in bands and get paid easily. I used Facebook when advertising myself. MySpace is great and it's so easy to use and you don't have to play anything. I have a MySpace page. I think YouTube is fastly [sic] becoming a way if you have equipment. I think that is way more and more will get their music out through YouTube. I like [openmikes.org](http://openmikes.org). I've used it when I went to California.

As clearly detailed, working one's aesthetic career is far from a walk in the park for these singer/songwriters and musicians. Only half jokingly, if these musicians do walk in the park, it's quite likely they are carrying a guitar to find a comfortable, but well traveled route to set-up camp and play for passersby's for a while. Much of what these musicians do on a day-by-day

basis pertains to their creative and musical endeavors. Working in a different capacity is often a financial means to support this passion for music or artistic creation and expression. In an ever increasing commodity driven culture, these mostly solo working musicians ineluctably have to package, commoditize and commercialize their identity and music to promote and market themselves in the almost endless sea of NYC musicians. The open mic facilitates the processes of comparison, networking and the co-construction of musical compositions, performance kits and identity. Conflicting and ambivalent perceptions and feelings are generated and perpetuated in these setting's processes, but musicians return often for different reasons and in different periods of their aesthetic careers to address different goals typically, but not always ,with the desire to leave once again.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION: OPEN MIC PRE-SCENES AND SCENES

This ethnography is following academic calls (Frith 1982; Grazian 2004) to continue taking the study of popular music into the field (Cohen 1993; Grazian 2003) rather than conducting research from the library. This concluding section addresses the theoretical concerns and application of the concepts of subculture, scene, genre and how grounded concepts and empiricisms from this study shed additional light to the larger discourse within relevant academic fields. Lena and Peterson (2008: 713) recently reemphasized the importance of qualitative research to explore the meaningful and theoretical connections between genre and scene construction. A growing cadre of researchers have argued the concept, subculture, is no longer adequate in its ability to accurately represent the empirical world due to growing cultural diversification, hybridization and individualization within the late modern period (Bennett 1999; Bennett 2004: 224-225; Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004). This study demonstrates the application of the term subculture referencing popular musicians is problematic in its capacity to discern the empirical complexities found not only in the musician *creator status group*, but across different genres, musical communities and scenes. Thus, creator status group will be used broadly in tandem with *scenes*, *genres* and *neo-tribes* for this study. Moreover, by exploring concepts developed from this ethnography, a more nuanced application and interrelationship between these concepts will benefit the continued diligence to track the importance culture plays in the everyday lives of musicians and the music scene.

Notwithstanding the previously discussed research on scenes, another recent emergence of research on urban scenes has been sparked by factors including the “cultural turn” (Jameson 1998) and recent research (Blum 2003; Clark 2004) on the cultural significance of the culturally

consumerist and entertainment nexus in post-industrial urban settings. Silver, Clark and Navarro's research is indebted to Alan Blum's (2003) discussion of "scenes" within the urban landscape and particularly looks, with a more macro, quantitative methodology. These researchers focus is on what materially forges, identifies and constitutes consumption based, lifestyle driven urban scenes (Silver, Clark and Navarro 2007: 4-6). Will Straw (2005), considered one of the foundational scholars on scenes, recently contributed a piece describing "cultural scenes" as social and cultural phenomena part and partial of the urban cultural intersections and fringes of "institutions" (2005:416). In addition to the notion that cultural scenes appear on the edges or fringes of social institutions, the more prominent themes in Straw's exegesis of cultural scenes are the sociological concepts of "theatricality," "destabilization," "experimentation," "overproduction," "excess," and an insatiable "quest," or "pursuit" for new opportunities (2005: 412-419).

Daniel Silver et al.'s. (2007) paper represents a new theory and empirical approach to quantitatively analyze and categorize "scenes" in urban landscapes. Scenes are consumerist, and culturally expressive sets of organized activities and practices generally "embedded" and "clustered" in some type of geographical locale. Their framework attempts to typify scenes according to a set of three definable and empirically identifiable "dimensions" which are: legitimacy, theatrically, and authenticity (2007: 1-7). Silver et al. as with Straw (2005), Blum (2003), and Bennett and Peterson (2004), in addition to others already mentioned, pull from the dramaturgical, and frame-analysis lineage of Erving Goffman. This is a focus on theatrical in typifying the foundational values, organizations and symbolic praxis of scenes. Silver et al. (2007) divide theatricality into five "sub-dimensions" including categories such as "transgression," "glamorous," and "exhibitionistic." Legitimacy, the second dimension, is subdivided into the categories of: charisma, utilitarian, egalitarian, self-expression, and tradition.

Finally, authenticity is divided into local, ethnic, state, corporate, and rational. For the authors, these categories and the potential designations reflect a “grammar of scenes” and various dimensional permutations construct a “scene profile” for each potential scene. By analyzing cultural “amenities” or “analytical units,” such as “restaurants or museums” (2007: 10- 11) and their clustering within certain urban locales, scenes can be detected and categorized according to this conceptual map of urban “scenescapes” and “scene profiles” of particular areas (2007: 7-13).

Their preliminary analysis of Los Angeles, New York City, and Chicago produce interesting results and conclusions. The authors suggest that scenes in the Northeast and West are more self-expressive in terms of legitimacy and that scenes in the Northeast demonstrate more transgression, devaluing egalitarianism, and tradition. Scenes in NYC particularly are more charismatic with less “rootedness” in the local (2007: 14-16). Their findings buttress the qualitative conclusions of Lloyd’s (2006) descriptions of rising neo-bohemian enclaves as representing a more innovative and authority-challenging group, as opposed to the more “tolerant moderation” exhibited from Richard Florida’s (2002) creative class and Brooks’ (2000) bobos. Thus, bohemian scenes of yesteryear and the neo-bohemian scenes of today share more in common than otherwise, including a form of elitism, of which Silver et al. apply Baudelaire’s phrase “aristocracy of dandies” to describe the exhibitionistic scenes and values that encourage “members to keep their distance” from each other (2007:17-18). These authors’ findings are brought into this narrative not directly to refute or support the findings because this qualitative research seeks no such goals. Rather, the conceptual language within this work and others help shed additional light to this project by demonstrating some recurring and comparative themes in the research of scenes and how this research can compliment other research within this particular discourse.

Open mics as musical third places are increasingly filling an inter-institutional location for a growing DIY, “participatory culture” where musicians come together for reasons of “sociability” amongst other reasons. Musical third places provide places for popular musicians in the creator status group to come together, socialize for multiple reasons are including learning about their art and honing their craft through performance practicing and practicing performing. This female relocated from Nashville a few years prior and regularly played open mics and songwriter nights mostly in and around Brooklyn. She characterized open mics as this:

The open mic is a step and it serves a certain purpose but it is a big part of a bigger process and bigger picture. If you are trying to do is be an established singer or songwriter...you need to figure out what you are trying to do and if you want to be successful...on a grand scale, you need to learn what to do...It just goes to show in this self-taught industry that there is a lot of paperwork and administrative stuff that you learn by doing, by asking, and listening and paying attention. The more conversations....[the better].

Through these social processes and interactions musicians accumulate and use forms of symbolic capital transforming them into subcultural and social capital to help expand and ideally improve their aesthetic career musical development. These musical open mics allow for a variety of activities, as a whole, that include solo performance, fluid collective collaborations, and various forms of jamming that occur more frequently in some places than others. Consequently, musical third places reside in the interstitial location between the other institutional spheres, the domestic and the occupational, for musical production, historically associated with practicing and performing, respectfully. Being a working musician and singer/songwriter in NYC can be potentially isolating and daunting and these open mics provide new a new institutional blend that accommodates these musicians at different junctures in their careers, allowing them to continue “working” on their skills and creating, changing , or sustaining their musical identities.



### ***Closed Open Mics as Scenes***

Generally, the musical open mic is a backstage and increasingly institutionalized form of “self-talk” (Goffman 1981: 79) for musicians. Self-talk is the “stage-acting of a version of the delivery.... [of which] we briefly split ourselves in two, projecting the character who talks and the character to whom such words could be appropriately directed” (1981: 83). Self-talk in public is usually deemed “situationally inappropriate” and “threatens intersubjectivity” within the social setting and situation (1981: 85); therefore, it necessitates some level of performer or status group exclusivity or audience segregation, which is demonstrated to different degrees in the open mics.

The open mics can be viewed through the lens of George H. Mead’s writings, too. Theoretically, the open mic is a partially accessible and open “conversation of gestures” (1934: 46) with oneself for musical performers. The conversation of gestures is an integral process not only between people but within the human mind and individual form in constructing the social self. It represents an explicit dialectical conversation between the “I” and the “me” (1934: 192-200), in constructing, negotiating, or reifying the musical self and performances as a manifestation of that self, over time. The “I” is the “performer,” but the performer that creates anew from the me, changes as well, as the self changes from each performance. The “me” is the audience in both the self and “other” that alter from the continued experiences of performing in these settings. More precisely, the “me” is the “role” of performer and audience member that the performer augments, changes, and reifies (Mead 1934: 174-178; Irwin 1977: 187). Increasingly the open mic has become more popular and institutionalized; it has become a “rite of passage” for popular musicians. The open mic is becoming a ritual for popular singer/songwriters and musicians to publically learn, negotiate, and construct their musician self and renegotiate their aesthetic career as time passes and new moments change or alter one’s trajectory.

A “scene” as defined by Erving Goffman is a form of “uncontained participation” in which the participants in a social situation fail to contain an activity leading to a type of disorganizational “betrayal” to those involved. The “civil inattention” of a situation is broken and “feeling generated” within the setting “flows” out into the other, larger social milieu (1963: 185-186). Implied in Goffman’s conceptualization is how the ritual process of a scene disorganizes the current social situation, but that it is contextually temporary, too (1963: 185-187). Therefore, if a scene becomes normalized, conventionalized, or “routinized,” it loses its theoretical qualities as a scene and becomes a simulated scene. As the “interstitial” transforms into a new solidified institution, it loses its ability to be a scene. For G.H. Mead, a scene would be the “I”, at its inception: a creative, active, novel response to the “me.” The I laughs as it is the unsophisticated, untrained, and “naïve” part of the self. The me, on the other hand, is “sophisticated,” “censor” and this is where a feeling of “superiority” develops when the self identifies with a group (1934: 206-210). As the present creative “scene” from the situation becomes a recurring set of interactions, it reifies and constructs conventions and habits, and thus, creates a newer “generalized other.” Thus, a scene is no longer a scene, although it normally is not identified as a scene until this sociological phenomenon has occurred. Social change against the backdrop of the situation develops through the I (1934: 207), but as a scene, that by definition, is a transgression of a situation. This creates slightly new boundaries, values, and conventions, and it qualitatively becomes a new “me,” thus ceasing to be a scene or an I, in Mead’s terms.

In his influential book *Scenes*, John Irwin (1977) identifies a number of defining characteristics that remain thematic in this study and analyses of scenes by other scholars today. Scenes involve activities requiring collective and commonly shared involvement, comingling with others during these processes, some type of visual or physical stimulation and some degree

of physical or “reputational” risk for everyone involved. The scene must be at least partially available for people to join and is typically fueled on a shared purpose of personal expression (1977: 27-30). Irwin labels “lifestyle scenes” as typically centered and meaningfully connected to some area, locality or neighborhood, such as Greenwich Village or the Lower East Side of NYC (1977:61-62). Irwin suggests that scenes go through a series of four sequential phases from formation and expansion to corruption and stagnation. These phases seem ostensibly possible but not likely exhaustive (1977: 82-83). The I acts and creates a scene betraying the civil attention and eventually becomes integrated into the Meadian me. Irwin recognizes the importance of charisma as a form of “folk hero” legitimacy especially at the inception (1977: 102), a sense of what constitutes authenticity as conceived by the members (1977: 140), and omnipresence of theatricality (1977: 189) in the sociologically patterned elements in scenes. Finally, Irwin states that scenes are reflective of greater “self-consciousness” and awareness of the self (1977: 194). Such may be the case immediately following the scene’s construction, but over time as it becomes routinized, that self-consciousness and greater reflection gets lost as the scene’s means are idealized and reified by the participants. This is most applicable to the closed local scenes, especially the simulated ones that do not develop from a charismatic leader but are consciously constructed to simulate them.

The musical open mics in these musical third places reside in abstract places on an “openness continuum” in NYC. NYC like other *creative producer cities* has a much higher number of open mics compared to other cities, because of the very large *creator status group* of popular musicians and singer/songwriters. This continuum of open mics has two poles: closed open mics on one end and open open mics on the opposite end. Open mics closer to the COM pole are fewer on the NYC open mic landscape and likely fewer in most urban open mic landscapes. Those closest to the closed end or COMs are framed by the participants as

expressively unique locales, qualitatively different as local scenes and usually considered qualitatively better than most other open mics in NYC. Their perceived superiority, especially by its members and outsiders, believe it is “better” because “better,” more experienced musicians regularly attend, the demand to play there is higher, a particular genre or particular “sound” has become associated with the location, as with of the other sociological facets that have already been described.

Thus, local open mic scenes contain many of the similar criteria listed thus far. Local scenes as defined by Bennett and Peterson (2004) are comprised of producers, musicians, fans or consumers, a common or shared taste in music, and an identifiable “sound” or genre. Other distinctive cultural facets, such as ideology, politics and argot also coalesce within local scenes (2004: 5-8). Local scenes have a geographical or locally embedded flavor having been born from a clustering DIY and grassroots ethos and a small industry usually develops as well (2004: 5-6). These definable characteristics are all observable in these local open mic scenes with the exception of exclusive consumers or “fans,” although necessary for a scene is recognition of the scene by outsiders. These scenes have an interstitial or interinstitutional beginning having been born between social institutions. In these cases, these local open mic scenes are born between the practice and performance or private and public spheres. Silver et al. (2006) mentioned legitimacy as one critical dimension. In these local open mic scenes legitimacy is importantly tied to the authority and power structure of each scene, potentially manifesting in scenes with a charismatic leader and others with more traditional or a rational/legal forms. The scenes started by a charismatic leader or “folk hero” typically have a more solidified narrative. Local open mic scenes are more homogeneous and isomorphic in terms of race, age range, experience level, performance genre, performance types, and stage talk patterns, compared to pre-scenes. The primary outward frame of the locale of the open mic scene is an expressive frame, recognizable

and known to most other popular musicians in the city. Thus, indicating another social necessity for scene consolidation: the knowledge of the scene by others outside of the scene who shares being in the same status group. This was demonstrated over and over again by musicians who knew these few scenes but never or rarely attended or performed at them. In addition, these beliefs and perceptions of superiority, far more common in the COMs and local open mic scenes, reflect similarities with Mead's concept of me within the self.

For those who attend COMs more frequently as regulars, these scenes are considered to have musicians and singer/songwriters who are not only more experienced, but have already "found their voice," are more "quirky," and "risk taking" in their overall aesthetic approach to writing musical compositions and performances. In these open mics the COMs are dominated by urban or anti-folk music, a somewhat ambiguous genre type which is fragmenting in its "genre stream" (Ennis 1992) even more as time passes, but is primarily performed by soloist, acoustic guitar playing singer/songwriters, with a few exceptions on instrumentation. The instrumental exceptions include piano/keyboard, banjo, or ukulele. A few other instruments played include resonators, xylophones, or "experimental musical instruments" (Hopkin 1996) observed on a few occasions at COMs, but much less frequently. Eccentric experimental instruments are very rare, but carry a significant amount of scene or subcultural capital because they embody the ideology of individual expression at the very core.

These local open mic scenes usually have higher percentages of regulars and homebodies than other open mics and an ideology of aesthetic superiority is more ensconced amongst these members. Although some open mic novices enter COMs, many leave and don't return for at least a while after their initial performance experience. They rarely return because they feel intimidated, isolated, or unwelcome to express their music with equal accord to others. The majority of regular performers fall into Stebbins' devotees and pre-professional categories

which differ from the OOMs which usually have a larger dispersion of musicians' performance and musical experience. Many of these performers have been playing open mics for quite some time and are playing regular gigs or concerts in the NYC area. Their involvement in the COM has significantly helped their prospects in this regard. The accumulation of more symbolic capital and turning that into social capital, forming more social alliances and developing larger social networks work to their favor in garnering more gigs, too. Gigs at that particular bar or club happen because most COMs or local scenes use open mics to funnel and cherry pick performers to play on other evenings. The open mic provides a means for the host to book other evenings with mostly regulars from the open mic and thus strengthens the locality's synergy beyond the open mic. COMs usually have many more networkers who are not playing that evening but are looking to hang out, meet and talk with other performers building social and subcultural capital.

Local open mic scenes typically are more exclusive with fewer non-musicians, friends, drop-ins, or hangers-on. Interestingly, they are the most backstage region on the continuum emulating similar conditions the H. Stith Bennett recognized as parameters for practicing. Bennett argued practice was the most "elitist" event where the musicians actively learn to construct strategies to manipulate the audience and build the mystique of authenticity around their musical persona (1980: 66-70). The performance practicing as simulated performances are best kept in the backstage at the COMs much like practice. Attending these COMs for strictly, segregated audiences of other musicians, keeps the audience these performers are trying to build separate from their networks within the creator status group. This also helps sustain the image of the self-trained musician. As pointed out by Green and Bennett, musical practicing by many types of popular musicians is based in a social location from which the romantic ideology of authenticity of solo musicianship is born and reaffirmed. Practicing is typically viewed as purely solitary, even when it involves copying others or playing with or in front of other people in a

band-like setting. Authenticity is a crucial element of scenes as pointed out by others and it is most prevalent at these local open mic scenes, even though, they are sites for the overt construction of the belief as a group. Furthermore, in these scenes is where the beliefs in authenticity of self and group merge leading to the higher levels of ostentatious sophistication espoused by many members. This is where scene merges with the self in terms of legitimating the beliefs in expressive authenticity and the theatrical display of such.

A musician's performance is the apex of popular music production and it is the demonstration of "natural" authenticity essential to the continuance of expressive individualism. The performance frame as the dominant frame in these scenes creates a cognitive disconnect and ambivalence due to conflicting representations and discourses of performance practicing and expressive individualism. The theatricality of these individual performances and the performance of these scenes on the musical landscape of NYC is also important to sustaining notions of authenticity and legitimating musicians' participation not only in these open mic scenes but across other locations, too. Many musicians at other locations spoke, for example, about the Bartime and other COMs, but did not regularly attend either open mic.

Also noted by Straw (2005), excess, experimentation, and destabilization embody cultural scenes. These ideas are evident in these COMs and local open mic scenes. The two main COMs attended, including Bartime, had the two highest numbers of musicians and singer/songwriters signed up to perform compared to all the other locations. The lines are long to sign up and the numbers swell as the playing goes early into the hours of the next morning. Forming a *scene circuit* where musicians play a few of these particular open mics over the course of the week or month, these local scenes share much in common including dominant genres, greater homogeneity in terms of participants, closed lists, overwhelmingly solo performers, risen stages and greater rationalization in the process. Some of these musicians run

in quasi-tribes within these scenes, sharing similar cultural and musicological interests and tastes, politics, and worldviews. Recent research (Kayahara and Wellman 2007) has shown that people draw heavily from their networks for cultural information and that would in these cases help solidify more homogeneous networks and tribes, and the scene circuits that connect the local open mic scenes. Experimentation with instruments and musical composition is valued in these local open mic scenes but destabilization within the settings is quite limited given their increasing rationalization, through rigid norms and practices.

To control the lines typically at these two COMs and scenes including Bartime are a strict set of norms and practices regulating the behavior of the performers. These two locations were the only known locations of which the host is a paid employee rather than a volunteer like at most OOM locations. A bureaucratic system of workers existed at each location as well, with co-hosts, waiters, and engineers that also work at and during the open mics. Strict rules and sanctioning exist at both locations, but through different means. Both have autocratic hosts but they use different methods in their approaches. These scenes have festivals and, as mentioned, use the open mic as a quasi-competition to book the valued and prestigious weekly and weekend gigs. The Sidewalk Café, which was not attended extensively in this study, has its well documented “anti-hoot” open mic having been going for at least the past 20 years. This open mic was begun by a particular “folk hero,” who according to oral history and the widely known narrative among open mic musicians in NYC, experienced difficulties and forged ahead with creating his own East Village open mic and genre of music that eventually catalyzed the success of a few widely successful and popular musicians. This story and its profound influence forged and justified a “charismatic” form of legitimacy and authority (Weber 1968: 212-215). Over time, the charismatic leader and authority at the Sidewalk became “routinized” (1968: 1121) and integrated more traditional and bureaucratic structures into the organization of the open mic,



creating a system of authority rather than purely relying upon his charismatic power. Bartime, on the other hand, is relatively new and has “simulated” many of the organizational structures and practices of the other local open mic scene, like creating not only a annual musical festival with local musicians, but an outside forming an organization of musicians, a website and recordings. In other words, a small grassroots scene industry (Bennett and Peterson 2004) was created or simulated from others in the case of Bartime.

The increasing number and spread of open mics and musical third places has been shown to be widespread in NYC and around the U.S. Throughout this development and proliferation, a small number have formed into or out of particular local music scenes. The Sidewalk Café and the newer Bartime, for this study, share a particular genre now associated with the East Village and the Village’s long lineage of bohemian scenes. The East Village is particularly associated with the Punk subculture considered by many as born at CBGBs on the Bowery in the East Village or Lower East Side (boundary is debatable), but the folk influence of Greenwich is one of the other primary discursive influences in the anti-folk or more broad and updated urban-folk genre. Therefore, this hybrid genre’s genesis, coagulation, growing stream, and punk-folk narrative has some substantive geographical connection with NYC’s East Village even after the music spread outside of the city into other regions and cities in the U.S. This is not to say other places or regions had their own developments, but this particular location was one of the more formable locations for this music stream’s geographical grounding.

As to Bennett and Peterson’s (2004) defining components of a local scene, these local open mic scenes have developed differently over time, but have incorporated fans of the associated genres outside of the open mics and a scene industry, which remains a grassroots production, at least partially. The naming as a metaphorical coronation or ascension of the new genre was an important industry co-option and reification of anti-folk music (Verna 1991;

Bessman 1991; Billboard 1991). Lena and Peterson's (2008) recent analysis of genre types and trajectories did not include urban or anti-folk music among the many genres explored. Briefly, since the anti-folk inception and development, recent qualitative versions and permutations have taken on names such as "indie," "freak," or "free folk." (Petrusich 2008: 239). One article from the U.K. called this rising "New Weird America" a "groundswell of musical movement" (Keenan 2003) and other articles have cataloged its emergence in NYC and other regionally close cities (Bemis 2004).

David Hesmondhalgh argues that genre is a good cultural marker reflecting social groups, boundaries, and relational practices of production and consumption (2005: 32). Others have agreed that genres reflect cultural and symbolic boundaries related to particular communities, some of which remain bounded through traditional sociological variables, such as class, race, and ethnicity (Toynbee 2000: 111-112; Hesmondhalgh 2005: 33). Lena and Peterson defined four basic genres of music from twentieth-century United States: avant-garde, scene based, industry based, and traditionalist. Using their criteria and methods of analysis, anti-folk began as an avant-garde and transformed into a scene based genre (2008: 700-710). It has forged newer variations in a stream in recent years, but remains most dominant in a few local and trans-local scenes. One critical influence across most open mics is the stream has helped feed into a growing acceptance of solo singer/songwriters as one ideal musical performance form, rather than solid bands and their memberships. The solo singer/songwriter is the most valued status as performer in all these settings, but it is more valued, in these local scenes where performance collaboration is least frequent.

As expressive individualism remains a stable and widely influential ideology, singer/songwriters will continue to dominate the open mic landscape. This will likely continue destabilizing the band form within this larger creator status group. This will be evident especially

within particular genres, like the newer indie revisions of folk that foster beliefs in authenticity and theatricality as intimately connected to the celebration and sacralization of the individual as the primary mode of experimental and creative construction. As the creative class continues to expand and concentrate in certain urban locales and omnivorousness increasingly becomes a defining characteristic of the creative class, creativity in expressive culture will continue to reside increasingly within the individual. Although the “Highbrow” snob of the past is waning, symbolic distinctions and status boundaries remain (Peterson and Rossman 2008: 313). Popular writers have noticed how these free-folk singer/songwriters overwhelmingly perform for and to each other (Petrusich 2008: 240) and others have noticed the ideological and consumption connections with “avant-garde or experimental music” (2008: 241). These values and beliefs associated with this genre emulate the high culture of the past with many members placing themselves in a higher intellectually or musicological position than musicians who play other genres. These symbolic boundaries and hierarchies within the creator status group are reflected by the many disparaging comments from singer/songwriters who are outsiders to these scenes, although it is recognized that these status boundaries today are more subtle and complex than in the past (Erickson 2008: 344). Besides the frequent albeit brief descriptions of this scene’s members and music as “edgy,” “quirky,” or “snarky,” this one young male singer/songwriter who periodically played Namu’s added a bit more vitriol:

That place [COM] is the worst man. I have a friend who played there for the open mic and got a gig there as a result. He sort of endorsed it for a while, but I just couldn’t get behind it. It’s the anti-folk scene and the [former] host is like the king of the open mic in New York. That is like a scene thing and it is one of the only scenes in New York. Because New York has so many musicians so spread out and everyone is on the hustle, New York really doesn’t have very many scenes. At the Sidewalk they sit around and sell CDs to each other.

This also explains the frequent purposeful or attentive listening in the COM or local scene audiences as seen in other high cultural forms. Similar practices were instituted in the late

nineteenth-century to separate the classes with musical genres, forming what became called the highbrow culture (Peterson and Rossman 2008: 329). This may signify another defining characteristic of avant-garde and scene based genres; a greater level of purposeful and attentive listening by the audience members. In terms of the physical locations, a few distinct geographical hubs for this new string of free-folk of which Brooklyn, and I would say Bartime particularly, is one (2008: 244). For the future of these singer/songwriters, bands and other collectivities will not disappear, but they will continue to become more fluid in membership, relegating a commitment to a band as secondary to individuals' own aesthetic development, DIY exploration and varied careers.

An expressive and theatrical performance frame for scenes is paramount to the external cultural landscape of the scene, justifying its "dislodging" (Goffman 1963: 185), and construction from the earlier cultural conventions from which it departed. Discursive and cultural hybridism, experimentation, and boundary transgressions are some of the signifying processes in the "multiple articulations" that occur with these particular local open mic scenes in NYC. Even though social and organizational boundaries, practices, and relations correspond with this genre, it does not suggest a pure reflection or homology between meanings and the organization. The idea of "multiple articulations" suggests that musical genres or cultural texts can both reflect "existing" organizational structures and practices while also dialectically constructing newer ones, superseding both a "reflection" and "process" model with a more complex, hybrid interpretive theory drawing from both (Toynbee 2000: 32; Hesmondhalgh 2005: 35). The multiple articulations allow for change by the integration of newer, but tangential discourses into existing ones; however, it also shows how cultural texts are constructed over time and reflect pre-existing cultural, status boundaries, and distinctions, too.

### ***Open Open Mics as Pre-Scenes***

One of David Hesmondhalgh's critiques of the term, scene, is that it is too "imprecise," and thus should be questioned more seriously as a viable concept in popular music studies (2005: 29). This study seeks to clarify and refine the concept and its application, partially by juxtaposing what is not a scene within similarly comparative situations. Open Open mics are the more frequent type on the openness continuum in the open mic landscape of NYC. Open mics skew closer to the middle toward the open end of the continuum differing in various aspects, not placing many abstractly in the same location as others. Outside of the few COMs and local open mic scenes, most exhibit greater levels of openness. OOMs show greater fluidity and flux in the regular membership, but also vary depending on the typical event membership or participation in the open mic, the geographical location, and whether the event is weekly, bi-monthly, or in a few cases monthly. Hosts' rules and practices that encourage particular practices play an important role in influencing the idioculture that develops at each open mic. Legitimacy for the authority structures at these open mics are more traditional to rational in the Weberian (1968) sense, with leadership roles that are more adaptable to democratic styles of leadership. Leadership styles also reside on a continuum. No true *laissez-faire* leadership style performed by a host is observed, but some like Namu's are on the more *laissez-faire* end of a democratic approach. This is reflected by heavy participant involvement in decision making and governance of the rules and minimal domination by the host. Hosts who use more democratic approaches typically foster and maintain more open events, and sociability is a more saturated praxis of interaction, rather than the more invidious competitiveness found in the local scenes. Hosts typically use more democratic methods in the sign-up process, for example, including the allowance for greater surveillance and oversight of their own governing practices by musicians. These hosts allow musicians to restart songs or sets, and encourage musicians to start over if they make a mistake,

and not get discouraged. These hosts and the norms are generally more adaptable to changes within the sequence, as a whole. Hosts typically place themselves into a more empathetic role for the musicians to observe through these processes, and offer their help and adaptability to take pressures off the performer(s), when necessary.

OOMs have a greater diversity of genres performed by musicians each week. This is still the case even if the open mic is dominated by one genre stream, such as blues, rock-n-roll, or more traditional folk music. The plurality of musical genres represented over the open mic sequence is far greater than at COM scenes. OOMs have greater diversity in musical instrumentations, collaboration among the musicians in different forms of performance types and a more dispersed and diverse range of musicians and singer/songwriters in terms of each of their aesthetic careers, current situations and trajectories. Beliefs in terms of authenticity remain the focus on individualism, but the beliefs are more diverse and less rigid in ignoring the practicing components to the open mic. This form of practicing performance is viewed as an integral part of the process and reason for attending. Practicing performance includes playing and learning with and from others in various collective forms, like hybrid-combos and jamming. Fewer musician networkers attend these open mics, but they are more accommodating as they become more open, to non-musicians like drop-ins and hangers-on. The boundaries between performers and drop-ins or hangers-on, is far less rigid and meaningful for the participants in the setting. Performers often mix and mingle with drop-ins or hangers-on who may be watching a sports game on television at the bar or just stopping-by for a few drinks after work, because it is their favorite local bar. Regulars do attend OOMs and develop friends. Some even form smaller *neo-tribes* that may run around together, going to other open mics in an *open mic circuit* or attending or playing with each other for gigs as they materialize. Intriguingly, these performers often do

not share similar genre orientations, but enjoy the experience of gaining experience or just playing music at all:

Theoretically, these OOMs are more fluid, diverse, less embedded and more adaptable to change, and thus are representative of a *pre-scenes*. This is not to say interactive politics, subcultural capital, and competition are not evident at these open mics, but rather these modes are not the dominant frames as they are in the COM scenes. The greater diversity of musical genres, ethnic and racial groups, ages, and places on the amateur-professional continuum of the performers allow for a less subculture-like “homology” (Hebdige 1979) to formulate in these locales between a community and a set of semiotic representations. The concept of a pre-scene does not intend to communicate a forthcoming scene is either likely or inevitable, but rather the open mic is *possible* to congeal into a local scene, if certain sociological and cultural phenomena occur. This illustrates how scenes themselves are not destined to remain scenes, as Lena and Peterson (2008) have demonstrated in the historical changes that frequently occur with musical genres, transforming from one genre modality to another.

The external framings of these OOMs are not larger than the open mic format, remaining more instrumental in their external framing orientation. Musicians, singer/songwriters, and performers know and conceptualize the pre-scene OOMs as open mic events and locations, not as scenes that transcend or lift above the open mic landscape of NYC. Musicians may prefer or value these open mics for a variety of reasons but they are not preferred or valued for the built in scene industry that is usually present at open mic scenes. Referencing Daniel Silver et al.’s. (2007) three basic dimensions of scenes as theatricality, authenticity and legitimation, the theatricality of these OOMs occur mostly internally or within the locales, with performers focusing on the reworking of expression within. Framings in the pre-scenes are more diverse and complex not only within these locales, but across them. Unlike the COM scenes, where an

isomorphic alignment of framings occurs, these pre-scenes are not as settled, with one primary theatrical rekeying of the primary frame. With that being the case, the boundaries of performance are more fluid spatially in these pre-scenes, because they have a more practicing orientation of the performances. Particular beliefs and ideology surrounding the notions of musical or artistic authenticity, much like theatricality, is a driving component to scenes and late-modern, expressive popular musicians. At the COM scenes, these notions align much closer to each other, the expressive frame of the locale and the genre of music. At pre-scenes, a greater fluidity in these beliefs persists due to the greater fluidity of the membership and the stages or phases of the musicians' aesthetic careers. Pre-scenes have a larger and more diverse array of open mic beginners, dabblers, ritualists, in-betweens, and side-solos than local open mic scenes. Finally, although most open mics have some degree of bureaucratic, rationalized systems, the COM scenes are dominated today with routinized charisma and rationalization. Unlike the pre-scenes, the open mic scenes also have intricate scene industries that create and connect different organizational components expanding the open mic conceptually into different roles and functions.

This study has produced a series of interesting and notably paradoxical juxtapositions. All of these open mics work as backstage regions, but pre-scenes are less of a backstage region than the local open mic scenes. In these gradations, the pre-scenes are more open to "outsiders" and different rekeying of the primary performance frame, but they are also where a more practice-oriented rekeying occurs, which is historically associated with backstage activities. The continuum between Practicing performing and performance practicing like all the other continuums indicate that a bi-polar model for any of these conceptualizations is too simplistic, reductionistic, and presumes a "pure" or symmetrical reflection between society and culture.

As Wendy Griswold (2004) suggests in her interpretive tool and "schema" (2004: 19) of



the cultural diamond, this study looks at four conceptually different, but empirically interconnected phenomena: the cultural creator, receiver, the cultural object, and the social world. This study shows how interconnected these concepts really can be, when the performing musician or creator is also the audience member or receiver in the same settings and how that is integral not only to the construction of the texts or objects within the NYC open mic landscape. The importance of genre speaks directly to the interconnectedness of the social organizations, such as musical art worlds and the particular musical sounds, “performing” practices, instrumentalizations and the meanings in musical cultural texts or genres. Another possible connection is how pre-scenes can possibly connect to vaster or more diffuse translocal scenes within larger geographical boundaries, showing how these social worlds, pre-scenes and scenes do not exist in isolation, but are socially interconnected in their social practices and cultural meanings to others, too.

A number of OOM pre-scenes persist in Greenwich Village, where blues and traditional folk scenes still remain salient, but clearly transcend NYC and appear in geographical locations in the U.S. Needless to say, these pre-scenes are not scenes themselves, but feed and connect musicians into these larger genre-based local and translocal scenes that have lingered in NYC for years. One way or another, the pre-existing concepts used in this study combine with ground concepts that bring greater clarity and refinement to the larger topic at hand. Revising and refining concepts such as subculture, scene, genre, and neo-tribes through qualitative research can be done without completely removing or negating their intellectual importance for thoughtful engagement and discourse. Popular musical production and consumption are increasingly enmeshing and being reworked by the musicians with a more participatory and DIY approach to learning and honing their craft of musicianship. The open mic has left its interstitial position for a new musical third place facilitating musicians in their negotiations and reworking

of older ossified notions of performance and practice as separate institutional entities, and providing musicians a new means of actively working and sustaining musical identities and hierarchies of status and taste at different juncture in their aesthetic development.

## **Conclusion**

This study ineluctably dealt with what is often referred to as the “dramatic metaphor” (Blatner 2003: 107). Shakespeare’s famous phrase “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players” (Shakespeare 1975: 239) or Goffman’s retort and quasi-retraction from his earlier dramaturgical works, “All the world is not a stage—certainly the theater isn’t entirely,” (Goffman [1974] 1986: 1) exemplify the very salient, but theoretical problem of distinguishing practice and performance and the different sociological levels of literal and metaphorical meanings that exist accordingly. Shakespeare’s quote comes from a monologue that also waxes poetic about how people enter and exit the proverbial stage throughout their life with different roles and needs to fulfill. This parallels this study’s topic particularly in terms of how open mic musicians and the diachronic processes and practices within each person’s aesthetic career changes overtime in terms of how they encounter or use the open mic. In other words, practicing and performing practices not only differ across these open mic settings, but across people’s musical identities as they change and construct different meaningful definitions overtime.

I introduced this study with an autobiographical connection demonstrating the fluidity of open mics and how one particular open mic accommodated a band with three musicians at very different periods of their aesthetic career. The initial case study helped display the subsequent sociological need to take this qualitative study to a wider theoretical scope and a more diverse methodological approach. This study has drawn inspirationally from an initial urban ethnography

in Chicago of Taxi-Dance Halls (Cressey 1932) and a “culture of production” approach which began later the the sociological narrative with the works of Howard Becker and Richard Peterson, among others. This current research heeds the call by David Grazian (2004) to conduct research on popular musicians focusing on the production process, in addition to, the consumption of music in everyday life. Wendy Griswold’s “cultural diamond” (1994) was most helpful in conceptually facilitating the approach to open mics and its participants. The cultural diamond schema purports that sociological research needs to focus on four separate cultural facets: the creator, receiver, cultural object and the social world. Therein lays a major challenge to Griswold’s diamond in this study; the creator and receiver in these open mic settings within the musical art worlds enmesh, blurring the boundaries between cultural producer and cultural consumer. These open mic musicians are both cultural producers and consumers within the same settings that have emerged interstitially within the musical art worlds. The blurring of boundaries is important to the construction of the cultural object in these cases and it is foundational for the construction of local open mic scenes.

These open mics comprise a do-it-yourself (DIY) manifestation in the musical art world: a musical third place that allows for musical practice and musical performance to blend and blur. Residing on a theoretical openness continuum, these open mics fall on various conceptual locations relative to the two poles: open open mics (OOMs) and closed open mics (COMs). Using a variety of conceptual and empirical categories, open mics can be placed on this continuum relative to the ideal poles and other real life locations and events. The first category is comprised by the organizational and structural facets of the musical third places. This includes all the various organizational roles, patterned practices and processes, and performance types. All of the open mics share certain foundational organizational positions and practices, including workers and patrons, performance types, instrumentations, technology and spatial demarcations.

OOMs, in general, have more divergent and variable structures than COMs, with larger ranges and a greater diversity of participants in terms of hosts, performers, performance types, and the levels of musicianship, to name a few. COMs have more isomorphic structures that align with greater homogeneity with the cultural facets. Secondly, the cultural object or the performance form and content in these cases also help differentiate OOMs from COMs. Singer/songwriters are the predominant musician in all these settings and interestingly represent a new, amorphous genre stream of music, but open mics, as pre-scenes, are more diverse in terms of the music that is performed by the musicians, in general. COMs usually have a much narrower representation of musical genres or genre stream represented, and in these open mic scenes typically represent the anti-folk or urban folk tradition.

Musical practices within the musical performances are another facet, although all these categories are interconnected in everyday life. Musical practices include compositional methods of music, stage talk, and instruments used by the performers, for example. COMs have much higher frequencies of solos playing acoustic guitars, for example, and they typically spoke less in an interactive way with the audiences at the locales. A more rigorous management of information was evident at the COMs, unlike the OOMs where audience-performer interaction was more frequent, active and fluid. Audiences at the COMs were typically quieter and attentive to the performer on stage, unlike the OOMs which displayed similar patterns to the audiences of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when audience behavior was less passive and restrictive.

Erving Goffman's concept of the frame plays an integral part in this analysis and is at the very core of connecting all these various elements. A frame and secondary "keying" constructs an "organization of experience" ([1974] 1986: 13) and helps cognitively tie together cultural practices, definitions and the social organization. Performance practicing is the primary keying occurring within the COMs and practicing performance is the predominant keying in

OOMs. These are co-constructed frames by the participants and do not persist without challenges, but they play a pivotal role in allowing for greater fluidity and negotiation of the practice—performance boundary in OOMs and a more restrictive performance-oriented frame in the COMs. Finally, this is how a pre-scene transforms or is distinguishable from a local open mic scene. Local open mic scenes embody a greater homogeneity in all these components including having a performance practicing frame that emulates more of a rehearsal and competition in some cases unlike the more interactive, practicing frame seen more commonly in OOMs. The COMs are dominated more by the anti-folk genre stream which has become sacralized as embodying a crucial piece of ideology for DIY singer-songwriters, the notion of personality authenticity.

Legitimacy of the singer/songwriter is tied closely to the notion of authenticity. This manifests in many ways including the devaluing of cover songs to original compositions especially in COM scenes and repeated phrases such as “finding one’s voice.” A notion of ephemeral affect is ensconced in the discourse with words like “vibe” and “feel” that help describe musical practices, but also reaffirm expressive individuality as the ideal goal and justification. These participatory cultural practices are reflected in larger cultural patterns as seen with *American Idol* or karaoke, which also leads to the continued blurring of the boundaries between amateur and professional.

Finally, with all these unique points regarding these grounded stories and practices, the newly coined concepts of musical third places, creator status groups, creator producer cities, pre-scenes and scene circuits can provide a thoughtful engagement and addition to pre-existing literature. These terms work well with this data but can potentially be used to further elucidate other sets of cultural practices, new or otherwise. The one common theme in the development of these terms is cultural hybridity and a paradoxical cultural convergence. Furthermore, symbolic

and social capital remains important in constructing and reconstructing social hierarchies and social boundaries omnipresent in various forms of expressive culture today.

### **Recommendations**

Further research in the sociology of music should continue to integrate an interdisciplinary approach to academic research and inquiry. This study intentionally draws from multiple disciplines besides sociology, such as anthropology, psychology, ethnomusicology, and performance studies. This provides a more thorough analysis to the grounded data acquired through the qualitative research. This research intentionally pulls not only from past qualitative research and theory on popular art and music, but even current quantitative research in the area. Engaging the larger academic discourse on certain topics, such as “scenes,” should address and incorporate past research even if the research’s methodology and scope differs. It still sheds potential themes or meanings that underscore more broad and potentially more profound discourses deep within the topic of research.

In general, more qualitative research into popular musicians and the DIY ethos in musical production and consumption is warranted. With the direct and indirect help of new media, popular musicians are meeting, learning, interacting, and constructing new groups, in unprecedented ways. Greater hybridization continues through the global-local nexus that is becoming more salient by the day. The transformational process genres go through, into and out of scenes that Peterson and Rossman (2008) describe, needs further qualitative exploration. Urban scenes are demanding more attention due to the cultural turn, and the diversification and greater access to expressive cultures, whether it is music, art, or food, these practices and their meanings are at the center of these cultural phenomena.

As the U.S. continues to urbanize, the cultural changes and constructions related to the creative class and other tangential patterns warrant concern and qualitative attention. New York City is one of only a few creator producer cities, given its sheer numbers and concentration of cultural creators, so both NYC's creative landscapes deserve further qualitative inquiries as do other cities that do not attract similar numbers of cultural creators. Such comparisons provide a deeper understanding of the hows and whys of expressive cultural changes within and across different communities and the larger society as a whole. This could also provide greater depth and breadth to the discourses and systems of meanings that feed into larger political discourses and economies of inequality and symbolic distinction that always persist with art, music or any other expressive cultural set of practices. Finally, symbolic boundaries that continue to be constructed vis-à-vis cultural phenomena are more subtle but remain salient markers for guiding and restricting access to certain peoples and groups. "Traditional" issues and topics such as gender, ethnicity, and class constructions remain patently important to culture and need to be studied within the parameters of cultural and ethnographic approaches. Their meaningful alterations within cultural settings and practices have changed, but they are still very actively important in framing people's everyday lives especially as they encounter the discourses that cogently and dialectically connect them within the larger cultural milieu.

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## APPENDIX A

### Information Sheet

#### “Practicing Performance in Open Mic Scenes”

You have been asked to participate in a research study of musicians and other participants at musical Open Mic’s in New York City. The intent of the study is to understand how an open mic serves popular musicians in their musical pursuits. You were selected to be a possible participant because you are active within an open mic setting. The total number of participants will be about 100-150 people. The entire study will take approximately 2 years.

If you agree to be in this study, you may be asked to participate in an interview about your experiences at the open mic. Participation is completely voluntary. With your voluntary completion of a separate consent and audio/video release form, the interview may be conducted and possibly taped. The potential risks associated with this study are very minimal to nothing.

The researcher will respectfully work to protect your confidentiality. No identifiers linking you to the study will be included in reports or publications. Pseudonyms will be used in any publications unless you explicitly request otherwise. Research records will be stored securely in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home. Your decision as to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the researcher and Texas A&M University. If you decide to participate you are free to refuse to answer any question at any time and continue to participate in the research. In addition, you may withdraw at any time without your relations with Texas A&M University, the job setting and the open mic settings being affected.

This research study has been reviewed by the institutional review board—Human Subjects in Research, Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding subjects’ rights, you can contact the Institutional Review Board through Ms. Angelia M. Raines, Director of Research Compliance, Office of the Vice President for Research at (979) 458-4067 or araines@vprmail.tamu.edu.

You may contact the following people with any questions:

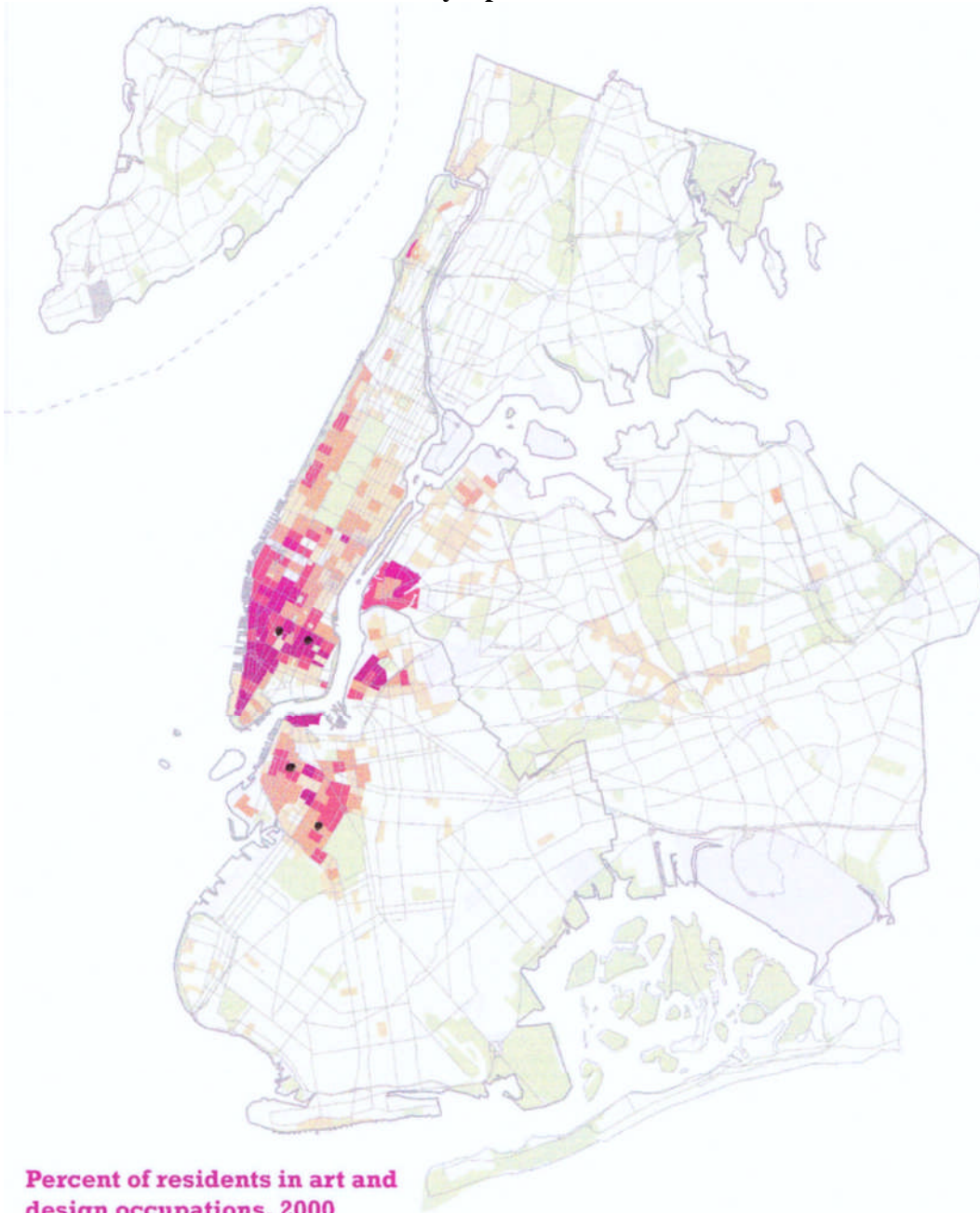
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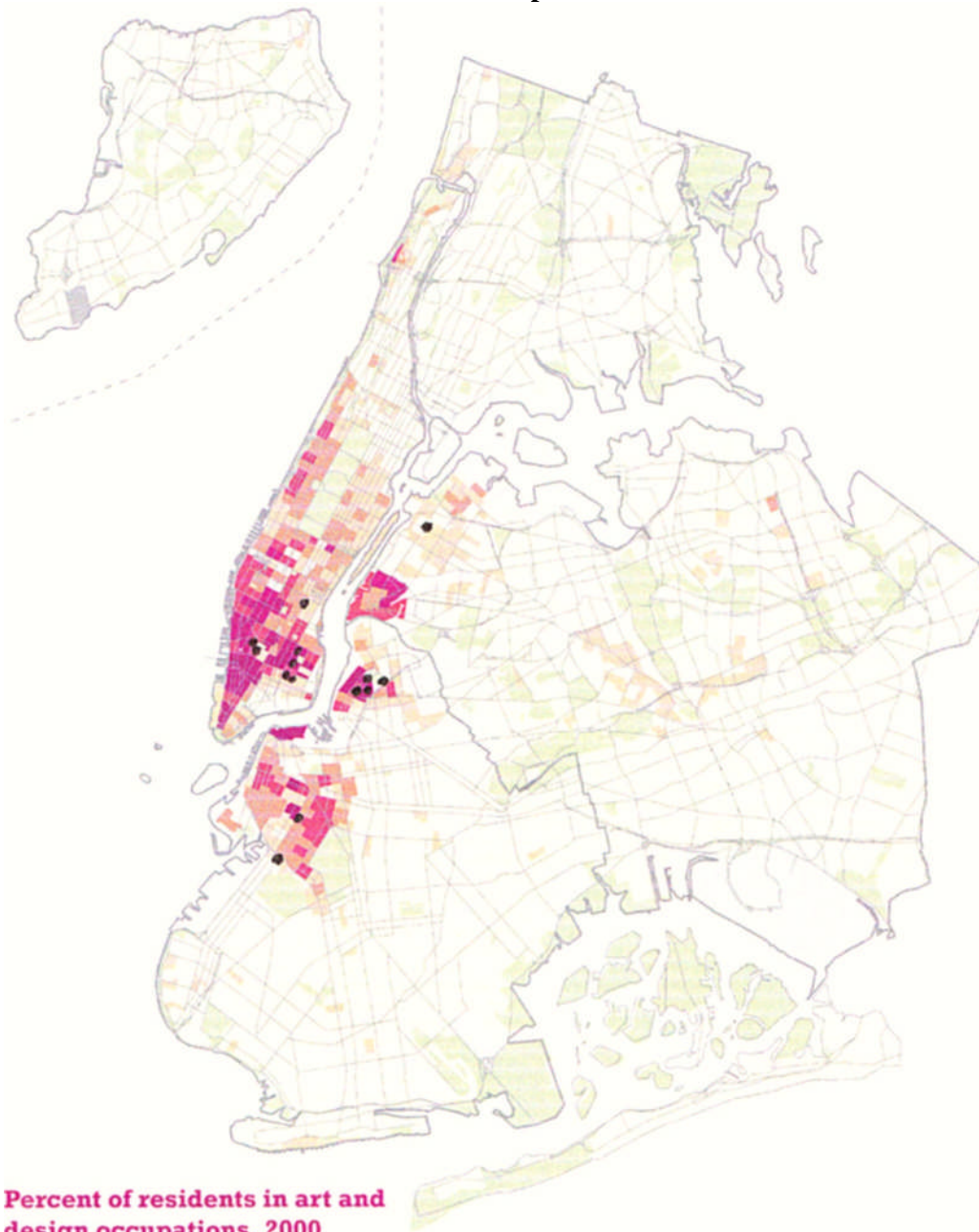
Feel Free to ask any questions and this copy is for you to keep.



**APPENDIX B**  
**Four Primary Open Mic Locations**



**APPENDIX C**  
**All Attended Open Mic Locations**



**Percent of residents in art and design occupations, 2000**



### APPENDIX D New York City Open Mics



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## VITA

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Aldredge, Marcus. 2008. "(Re)constructing and Negotiating the South as Other:  
 Southern Food Restaurants in New York City." *International Journal of Culture,  
 Tourism, and Hospitality Research*, 2, 2: 152-169.

Aldredge, Marcus. 2006. "Negotiating and Practicing Performance: An Ethnographic  
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 109-118.

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Aldredge, Marcus. 2009. "Heebsters: Community and Identity (Re) construction of  
 Urban Jewish Hipsters" Pp. 225-250 in *Co-opting Culture: Questions of Culture and  
 Power in Sociology and Cultural Studies*, edited by B. G. Harden and R. Carley.  
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