

Sustainable and unsustainable semi-professionalism: Grassroots music careers in folk and metal

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**Abstract:** Sociological research often treats small-time music-making as a step toward a professional music career. However, some music scenes facilitate long-term small-time music careers. I compare career trajectories in two local music scenes: the folk and heavy metal scenes in Toronto. While small-time metal musicians generally cease public performance by their early 30s, many local folk musicians remain active into retirement without professionalizing. Based on 63 qualitative interviews and 70 instances of participant-observation, I highlight two features of these music scenes that make small-time careers more sustainable in folk than in heavy metal: *stylistic conventions* and the organization of *music-making spaces*.

Keywords: music careers, small-time musicians, semi-professional musicians, heavy metal, folk music, stylistic conventions, music scenes

Many musicians are not easily classified as either professionals or amateurs. Local, grassroots musicians rarely earn a living from music or pursue music full-time (Hracs; Lee), which scholars often consider key markers of professional status (Finnegan). Yet, these same musicians are more than hobbyists who play in private for their own enjoyment. Small-time musicians are often highly skilled, with established careers, stable fan bases, and regular gigs. Literature on local music scenes often refers to these not-entirely-professional but not-quite-amateur musicians as “independent” (Hracs), “small-time” (Bennett), or “semi-professional” (Tunnell and Groce)<sup>1</sup>. Scholars often treat these musicians as aspiring professionals (Aldredge; Lee), and frame their small-time careers as temporary. According to this viewpoint, small-time musicians will either “blow up” (Lee 476), or give up on music entirely if their dreams of success are unrealized. Of course, this assumption is problematic. **Many local, independent musicians sustain small-time music careers throughout their adult lives (Finnegan).**

But, why do some musicians and not others develop these sustainable small-time careers? In this paper, I analyze two music scenes in Toronto: the heavy metal scene and the contemporary folk scene. **Both are grassroots music scenes where performers are passionate about their music and state that they are motivated by a pure love of the music rather than money. These are precisely the kinds of musicians that we would expect to continue their music careers, even in the absence of financial success. Yet, small-time metal musicians typically “blow up” (Lee 476) or give up by their mid-30s, while folk musicians commonly build lifelong small-time careers.**

How can we explain such divergent outcomes? Through a comparative case study I highlight key aspects of how these two scenes are organized, which create different possibilities for small-time music careers: different *stylistic conventions* and differently organized *music-*

*making spaces*. Heavy metal musicians produce original, technically complex, and heavily rehearsed music. Keeping up with these stylistic conventions requires musicians to make large, continual investments of time and energy. The heavy metal scene also lacks low-stakes, informal music-making spaces suited for casual playing. As they age, heavy metal musicians often find this intense level of commitment increasingly unsustainable. In contrast, stylistic conventions in folk foreground simpler music played collectively and often allow folk musicians to cover folk standards rather than writing original music. The folk scene also contains many casual music-making spaces such as open stages and song circles. Because of these less demanding stylistic conventions and opportunities for casual music-making, folk musicians can make less intense commitments to their music careers, which renders these careers more sustainable over time.

The link between scene organization and individual music careers is not a simplistic or one-way causal relationship. The organization of a music scene certainly shapes the career trajectories that are available to individual musicians; but, the actions that individuals take (including their career choices) also reproduce the stylistic conventions and music-making spaces that made those career paths available in the first place<sup>2</sup>. Less demanding stylistic conventions and more casual music-making spaces make long-term semi-professional music careers in the folk scene quite attainable; and, the abundance of long-term small-time folk musicians encourages scene participants to create and maintain casual music-making spaces like song circles in church basements. We can view scene organization and individual music careers as mutually constitutive. In this paper, I focus on how local music scenes shape possibilities for individual careers; however, it is important to recognize that individual career choices also contribute to the organization of local music scenes.

This paper contributes to the sociology of music by theorizing how the organization of

music scenes shapes the opportunity spaces where individual musicians build their careers. Previous literature outlines typical music careers and conventional ways of producing music in many genre-based music communities (Finnegan; Grazian; Peterson). **But, we need more research that compares the organization of different music scenes (e.g. typical arrangements of social networks, stylistic conventions, institutions, and resources) to explain why different career trajectories are more or less attainable.** In highlighting underlying social mechanisms that render small-time folk music careers more sustainable than small-time metal careers, I point to broader social dynamics that may also organize other music genres.

### *Music Careers in Grassroots Scenes*

**Classifying musicians as “amateur” or “professional” is fraught with conceptual problems because no single characteristics separates amateur from professional musicians (Cottrell; Finnegan).** For example, many people believe that amateur musicians become professionals when they are paid to play music. But, even this standard is ambiguous. Consider someone who usually plays the violin as a hobby, but is paid once or twice to play at a wedding or community event. Is she an amateur or a professional? Do musicians have to earn their entire income from music to be considered professional, or does a steady part-time income count?

Professional music careers can also be defined by non-monetary standards, such as how regularly a person plays music or how seriously she takes her craft. Musicians who play regularly over a long period of time and invest in skill-building are often considered professionals, regardless of their earnings (Finnegan). We also might consider whether a musician is integrated into a local music community. A musician who is recognized as a competent practitioner by her peers and who is regularly asked to perform her music might be considered a professional, even if she is rarely or poorly paid.

Finnegan (12-15) outlines multiple definitions of professionalism, many of which conflict. She concludes that amateurism and professionalism are better viewed as a continuum than a dichotomy. Calling someone a “professional musician” does not actually signify how much money she earns, how much time she spends playing music, how skilled she is, or the level of peer recognition that she has achieved. Rather, it suggests that she is more like an ideal-typical professional (i.e. a highly skilled full-time musician who earns a living at music and is recognized by her peers) than an ideal-typical amateur (i.e. an unpaid, unknown hobbyist who is still developing her musical skill and has not yet achieved peer recognition, or who perhaps only intends to play as a hobby).

Distinguishing between different criteria for professionalism—payment, regularity of musical activity, self-understanding, peer recognition—allows us to analyze when these standards align and misalign. In particular, many low-earning musicians perform music regularly, and have achieved peer recognition and built stable careers within local music communities (Finnegan; Leblanc; Lena and Peterson; Weinstein). We should not assume that these musicians are simply not professionals yet. Certainly, some small-time musicians hope to professionalize, and move from a local scene into a national or global music industry. But, others write and perform regularly without ever seeking to advance their careers.

Previous literature on music scenes suggests two different understandings of small-time music-making. First, the *stepping stone* model, where local musicians move steadily toward a professional career. Musicians typically start out experimenting and playing informally, in private. Then, they often perform at open mic nights or local bars where they play covers rather than original music. Then come shows of original music in local, grassroots scenes, or perhaps a regional tour to nearby cities. Ideally, musicians will eventually professionalize or “blow up,”

(Lee 476) and break into a national or even global touring circuit. Importantly, musicians drop off this career path at every step; some never transition from open mics into the local circuit, or from the local scene to a regional or national one<sup>3</sup>.

But, the literature also suggests a second model of small-time music-making: *sustainable semi-professionalism*, where individuals create music on a long-term basis without seeking a professional music career (Finnegan; Nash). For example, some musicians in “garage bands” (Bielby 4) are content to perform in their local music scene (Cohen, *Rock Culture in Liverpool*). This is particularly true in punk scenes, where many older punk musicians continue to play shows while parenting young children and working non-musical jobs (Nevins). Other long-term small-time musicians play in less-popular genres of music such as bluegrass, where most performers stay at the small-time level because professional careers are simply not available—yet, they remain active as local musicians for decades (Tunnell and Groce).

These long-term independent musicians generally build stable music careers. They play local shows and tour regionally on their vacation time or in between jobs. They write original music. Some do volunteer work in their local scenes, such as aging punks who organize girls rock camps (Giffort), older folkies who help to organize festivals (Cohen, *Folk Music*) or older independent rappers who mentor younger rappers (Lee). Yet, the question remains: what differentiates these musicians from other musicians who blow up or give up? Rather than answering this question by looking only at individual characteristics or choices, I argue that we can treat the opportunity space of available music careers as a feature of the local music scene.

Straw conceptualizes a scene as a spatially located site of musical practice, containing social and economic networks. The concept of a *scene* usefully locates people, networks, and practices in a specific geographic space, consisting of venues, rehearsal sites, record stores, and

other local institutions. Not all participants in a local music scene are necessarily known to each other; but, because they interact with the same networks, institutions, and contexts, scene participants develop shared norms and expectations which allow local practices or *conventions* (Becker, *Art Worlds*) to emerge. Music scenes—their local institutions, expectations, conventions and practices—are the immediate contexts in which musicians operate. This context shapes possibilities for individual music careers. This paper investigates how, precisely, they do so.

### ***Data and Methods***

This paper is based on 70 fieldwork visits and 63 semi-structured interviews in the Toronto folk and metal scenes. Data collection occurred between March 2009 and June 2013. My general sampling strategy was *maximum variation sampling*, which focuses on developing a heterogeneous sample of people and spaces to capture and describe “central themes that cut across a great deal of variation” (Patton 234-235). As my objective was to understand how the overall organization of each scene shapes opportunities for individual music careers, I collected data on the widest possible range of spaces, institutions, and practices, selecting both fieldwork sites and interview participants for breadth. I attended large and small festivals and shows, shows at different types of venues (e.g. for-profit bars and cafés, repurposed spaces such as warehouses, non-profit folk clubs in private homes, churches and community spaces, rural festival sites) shows that spanned different subgenres of folk and metal, and non-concert settings (e.g. conferences, skill-building workshops, informal jam sessions).

I conducted participant-observation at events including concerts, festivals, open stages, and industry conferences. I attended 30 heavy metal events and 40 folk events in sessions ranging from 1.5 to 8 hours and averaging 3.5 hours. I spent approximately 130 hours in the folk

scene and 100 hours in the metal scene, behaving primarily as an audience member and, when the opportunity arose (e.g. at folk festivals and industry conferences) as a volunteer. I disclosed my status as a researcher at the earliest socially appropriate opportunity. Scene members generally responded with interest, enthusiasm, polite inquiries, and unsolicited offers of assistance.

I conducted 63 semi-structured interviews with musicians, fans, support personnel, and critics in the two scenes, as described in Table 1.

**Table 1: Distribution of Interviewees by Scene and Status**

	Folk	Metal	<i>Total</i>
Musicians	17	13	30
Ancillary workers	11	10	21
Critics	6	9	15
Fans	7	8	15
<i>Total</i> <sup>4</sup>	28	35	63

Interviews were conducted on a scheduled basis outside of fieldwork settings and lasted between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours, averaging 90 minutes. Interview topics included how the respondent entered into the folk or metal scenes, preferences regarding folk or metal music, and routine practices within the scene; for example, how fans and critics evaluated musicians, how musicians learned to play, how musicians normally booked shows and promoted themselves online, and how critics decided which albums to review. Most participants were interviewed once, but I conducted follow-up interviews with 11 participants to ask new questions that emerged as the research unfolded. At the time of re-interview, I also collected updated information about interviewees' music careers and/or their participation in the local music scene. Additionally, I regularly re-encountered many interviewees during fieldwork visits, obtained updated information from them *in situ*, and observed how their careers progressed. When I did not follow-up with musicians via re-interviews or fieldwork, I followed up with them virtually

through email or by looking at updates on their websites or social media pages to confirm whether they were still active and what sorts of shows they were playing.

I developed both the research question motivating this paper and the main findings inductively. These fieldwork visits and interviews were initially conducted for another analytical purpose: to analyze gender inequalities in folk and metal. During data analysis, patterns in the typical career trajectories of folk and metal musicians emerged inductively. I noticed that independent metal musicians' careers tended to polarize around their mid-30s. Most stopped playing. A lucky few achieved an unusual amount of success for a metal band; they embarked on multiple international and European tours, were signed to well-established metal labels like Nuclear Blast<sup>5</sup>, and some secured sponsorship deals. In contrast small-time folk musicians range from their 20s to retirement age and even older, with a far greater age range in the scene.

After identifying these strikingly different career trajectories—polarization between blowing up and giving up in metal, and sustainable independent careers in folk—I focused my analysis on organizational factors that could explain these different career outcomes. I coded interview transcripts and field notes for explicit discussions of why musicians might quit, mentions of work-life balance, and descriptions of the day-to-day work of writing and performing music. I then abstracted up from the data to understand the organizational pressures and supports involved in producing folk and metal music. Qualitative coding, in conjunction with empirical literature on grassroots music scenes, allowed me to connect divergent outcomes in the folk and metal scenes to their organization, including shared expectations about *stylistic conventions* and different kinds of *music-making spaces*.

Both folk and metal are grassroots music scenes, where most musicians operate on a small-time level; for example, they generally produce music on a part-time basis, without the

involvement of corporate record labels or professional support staff. As previously mentioned, musicians in the metal scene tend to be in their mid-30s or younger. Many metal fans and musicians are employed in working-class or lower-middle-class jobs, such as construction or skilled trades, or are still completing school and establishing their careers. Folk musicians range from their early 20s to retirement age. Fans are generally 40 or older, and working in or retired from middle-class occupations such as public service careers, teaching, or information technology. In both scenes, most participants are white. Based on my fieldwork observations, I would estimate that fewer than 15% of fans and musicians in both genres are visible minorities. Additionally, the folk scene contains near-equal proportions of men and women, while women make up approximately one-quarter to one-third of heavy metal fans and less than 5% of heavy metal musicians.

The folk and metal communities are ideal sites for understanding how local music scenes create opportunity spaces for individual music careers. As grassroots music scenes, both folk and metal share many organizational similarities—for example, a lack of corporate record labels, and the need for musicians to self-manage most aspects of their careers. Yet, as I argue, they create sharply different opportunities for independent musicianship. Comparing two similar scenes with such dissimilar outcomes highlights the organizational differences that underlie sustainable small-time careers in folk, and unsustainable small-time careers in metal.

### *Findings*

Both the Toronto folk and metal scenes center on small-time, semi-professional musicians who engage in music as “serious leisure” (Stebbins). Despite earning little money at music (sometimes, not even enough to offset their expenses), Toronto folk and metal musicians are passionately devoted to music, and treat their music careers an opportunity for personal

development rather than a recreational activity. For these artists, music is more akin to training for a marathon than watching TV, for example. **Musicians in both scenes stress that are motivated by love, not money.** And indeed, independent musicians in folk and metal (like any genre) passionately love what they do. Yet, as I observed, music careers that are motivated purely by passion are more sustainable the folk scene than in metal. In this section, I first outline typical career trajectories of folk and metal musicians. I then highlight two organizational differences that shape these career trajectories: different *stylistic conventions*, and differently organized *music-making spaces*.

### ***Careers in Heavy Metal***

Heavy metal is firmly rooted in youth culture, both symbolically and in terms of the demographic composition of participants. Heavy metal music and culture draw on imagery associated with youth and vitality (Weinstein). And, most heavy metal fans are white men in their teens to late 20s.

Toronto heavy metal bands also have a clear life course. Emerging amateur bands with no following in the local scene (i.e. whose typical audience is a few of their friends) are commonly composed of musicians in their late teens to early 20s. Small-time local bands that can consistently draw larger crowds, including audiences from outside their personal networks, tend to center on musicians in their mid-20s to early 30s. These small-time metal bands typically work day jobs and use their vacation time to tour regionally, to nearby cities. Musicians in the most professionalized metal bands, who consistently tour nationally or internationally and earn all or most of their income from music, can be anywhere from their mid-20s to early 40s. Few musicians deviate from this typical career trajectory. **By their mid to late 20s, metal musicians who are not yet established in the local, small-time circuit tend to quit performing publicly. By**

their 40s, metal musicians who have not yet broken into the national or international touring circuit tend to end their music careers.

Ian, a metal guitarist, had a fairly typical music career. He started learning guitar in his early teens, joined his first band at 19, and played with 4 bands over the next 9 years. Reflecting on his experience in metal bands, he says,

When I was young and impressionable, yes, um, I thought I could do anything, and I thought, I'll become a metal musician. To hell with the audience research and all that, I'm going to do this. Little did I realize the actual bigger picture didn't support my grandiose vision.

Initially, Ian intended to build a full-time music career on the national or international touring circuit. Like many metal musicians, he was unsuccessful; his most successful band toured regionally (i.e. in Southern Ontario and parts of Quebec and the Maritimes), but no farther, and never earned enough money to offset their expenses. Although he still loves metal, Ian stopped performing publicly around the age of 28 to focus on building a career outside of music. He occasionally writes and records original music that he posts online, programming the instrumental parts (e.g. drums) that he cannot play himself; but, Ian no longer works with other musicians or plays live. He has largely disengaged from physical spaces in the local metal scene, but still participates with other scene members virtually, on social media. This experience is common to many metal musicians; rather than building long-term semi-professional careers, they eventually stop performing in the local metal scene.

Because playing heavy metal requires musicians to build and maintain a high degree of technical skill and to commit to regular rehearsals with a band, heavy metal music careers are difficult to combine with other major life commitments such as schooling, family, and paid work. This underlies the decisions that many musicians make, to stop performing. In addition to individual metal musicians leaving the scene, local metal bands often break up when members

are in their mid to late 30s; for example, Toronto metal band Eclipse Eternal announced their last show in 2014 (when many members were in their early 30s) in the following announcement posted on social media:

Almost fifteen years ago I pulled from the void a child. I named it Eclipse Eternal. Today I dig its grave. The years have not been kind yet we expected no less. It is not an easy thing to be in an active band for this long a time...through these long, arduous years, more than twenty individuals came and went. Yet, battered and bruised, Eclipse just kept growing, and with each new addition it became stronger, more powerful, more whole....But time has taken its toll and the fire that once consumed all has become coals and ashes. It is time to lay down our banner.

Notice the sense of struggle in this announcement. These musicians do not claim a lack of creative inspiration or desire to pursue other projects. There is no sense that this band has simply reached its natural conclusion, as some creative endeavours do. These musicians clearly attribute the end of this band to struggle through “arduous years” that left them “bruised and battered.”

**The high demands of a heavy metal music career, even a semi-professional one, are enough to make such a career unsustainable over the long term.**

These career trajectories resemble those outlined in The Metal Archives, an online encyclopedia of metal bands. This encyclopedia is extensive (i.e. it includes amateur, small-time, and professional bands), user-generated and heavily moderated to ensure accuracy, similar to Wikipedia<sup>6</sup>. With the exception of bands that are successful in a global music industry (e.g. Cannibal Corpse, Amon Amarth, Obituary, Jungle Rot), most bands described on this site are active for approximately 5 years. Because many musicians play in multiple bands, a typical heavy metal career spans roughly 10-15 active years. These 10-15 years typically last from the time a musician is in his late teens to his late 20s or early 30s.

The kinds of metal musicians who are systematically absent from the Toronto scene—stable small-timers in their 40s and older—reveal broader, underlying patterns and clarify typical

career trajectories for metal musicians. These absent cases suggest systematic barriers to sustainable small-time careers as metal musicians. Instead, most metal musicians either continue on the path toward professionalization or cease performing publicly. In other words, metal musicians' careers closely follow the "stepping stone" model of amateurism. There are a few exceptions; some remarkably persistent small-time metal bands continue playing for decades for little or no money—for example, Anvil, whose career was documented in the film *Anvil! The Story of Anvil*. Yet, bands like Anvil are the exception rather than the rule. Most small-time metal bands either progressively advance in their careers or step off the career ladder. Metal bands are certainly motivated by a love of metal music; but, passion is often not enough to sustain musicians' ability to write and perform music over the long term.

### ***Careers in Folk Music***

The Toronto folk scene is organized around long-term independent music careers. It is common to see small-time folk musicians from their early 20s through retirement age at open stages, improvisational jam sessions, and festival workshops. And, while metal musicians either move up or quit playing, small-time folk musicians can remain active in the local touring circuit indefinitely.

Nikki's career trajectory illustrates the flexibility of folk music careers. Nikki started playing folk music as a teenager. She played casually at open mics and jam sessions for years and presently, in her late 30s, plays with a weekly "jam band". She also has a full-time career outside of music; she is completing a PhD. Notably, Nikki is able to balance her folk music career with her academic career and travelling internationally to collect data because she can invest more or less energy in her folk music career depending on how much time she has available. Some weeks or months, Nikki focuses on her academic work; at other times, she puts

more energy into folk music.

Folk musicians can also engage in the folk scene at different levels of commitment during different times in their careers. Elliot played fairly regularly as a local folk musician in the 1980s before marrying and starting a family. He remained active in the folk scene as a fan, but largely withdrew from public performances and played only occasionally with friends, in jam sessions in private homes. Now that his children are grown, he works as a supply teacher and performs locally with a band approximately once per week.

This was a common career trajectory among folk musicians, particularly women: they built a small-time music career, then fully or partially withdrew from public performances to pursue work or family commitments but continued to play casually by attending jam sessions and song circles. Many of these musicians re-entered the local folk performance circuit years later. Notably, small-time folk musicians generally do not make enough money to sustain themselves at any point during this career trajectory.

Of course, some folk musicians wish to professionalize, and some of these musicians abandon their music careers when they do not succeed. But, sustainable small-time careers are available to folk musicians who want them, while they are not a serious possibility in metal.

**Amateur folk musicians' career trajectories suggest the possibility of *sustainable semi-professionalism*.** Small-time folk musicians often shift back and forth between different modes of engagement (e.g. performing in local venues and folk clubs, jamming with friends in private homes, attending workshops and song circles) over decades, without ever fully exiting the folk scene. Folk musicians who want to professionalize can certainly try to build full-time, paid music careers. But, people who wish to participate in the folk music scene on a regular, ongoing basis as without trying to professionalize can do so.

## *Stylistic Conventions*

The stylistic and compositional elements of folk and metal music shape the career paths that are available to musicians. Folk music is participatory, improvisational, and suited to either group or solo performance (Cohen, *Folk Music*). Although many folk musicians write their own music, many also play covers of folk standards rather than composing original music. In contrast, metal is technically complex, highly choreographed, and always played in groups (Walser; Weinstein). Composition is also incredibly important to heavy metal musicians, who play covers (i.e. non-original music) much more rarely than folk musicians. **These stylistic elements of heavy metal create immense structural demands on metal musicians; playing heavy metal, even at the semi-professional level, means maintaining a high level of technical skill, writing original music, and practicing regularly with a band. Heavy metal is an ongoing commitment, which can easily become unsustainable. In contrast, folk music makes lighter technical demands on small-time musicians. Folk musicians need not make intense investments in skill development, music composition, or band rehearsal, and can more easily take time off from performing. These less demanding music careers are often more sustainable than intense music careers in metal.**

Heavy metal requires “virtuosity” (Walser 67-78). Metal is composed of complex instrumental parts that weave together a melody and countermelody. This demands a high level of musicianship. Matthew, a musician in his late 20s, says,

In metal, you’re kind of expected to show your technical prowess on your instrument, as opposed to, you know making something commercially viable for someone to listen to. I find more metal is music for musicians. People that actually play music and appreciate the hard work that it would take to play that particular thing.

In some genres, musicians deliberately create music simple enough that anyone can play along; this is a core part of punk’s DIY ethos (Leblanc), and a belief organizing many folk music

genres (Cohen, *Folk Music* 2-3). But, as Matthew observes, audiences expect heavy metal musicians to display exceptional instrumental skill. Indeed, heavy metal with simpler composition—for example, subgenres like nu metal that rely heavily on simple, chugging power chords—risks criticism, as Paul shows:

[Nu metal] is sort of more poppy stuff where it's just like not very interesting drums and it's all power chords...just this whole bunch of garbage bands...Because that sort of stuff appeals to the wide masses and of course it needs some, some like real metalheads into it. But it's just the fly-by-nighter people who like it.

We can see similar expectations of skilled musicianship in Kristen's experience of playing in a band with a less-skilled musician:

Our other guitar player was kind of, a metal fan but maybe less of a musician. So things were kind of getting hard. You know, we had to sit down with him and say, like ok, we're going to learn triplets today, and we're going to learn scales today, and like...educate him. And I think he realized, 'this is not what I want to do right now.' So he left.

Notably, when confronted with a musician with subpar skills, the only options that Kristen considered were improving her bandmate's skill or replacing him. She did not seriously consider simplifying the band's music so that it was within his capabilities.

In addition to its complexity, heavy metal is always played in groups. Heavy metal requires at least three instrumentalists (a guitarist, a bassist, and a drummer) and a vocalist (Weinstein). Most bands add further instrumentation, usually a second guitarist or a keyboardist. Accordingly, metal bands typically contain 4 to 6 members. Solo artists are quite rare in heavy metal. And, solo artists may compose their music alone, but they cannot perform it alone; they must hire other musicians to play on their albums and during live performances.

Heavy metal is also highly choreographed and rehearsed. Improvisational music exists in other scenes; jazz and blues music have clear structures within which musicians improvise during live performances, and well-established conventions governing this improvisation

(Becker, *The Etiquette of Improvisation*). But, heavy metal is never improvised during a performance. Metal musicians practice their own parts individually, rehearse how those parts will fit together, and then perform the music as rehearsed.

In summary, heavy metal performance is analogous to ballet, or perhaps a symphony orchestra. It requires a group of highly skilled artists who practice independently to develop and maintain their skills, create an original composition that contains multiple complex parts, and then rehearse collectively to join their individual parts into a coherent whole. These artists arrange all the elements of a particular performance in advance (i.e. how all the parts for each song will be played, and in what order the songs will be performed), rehearse that performance, and then deliver it as closely as possible to what was rehearsed.

**These stylistic conventions create demanding music careers.** Developing instrumental proficiency, finding comparably skilled bandmates, and rehearsing together regularly requires immense effort. Because metal musicians' ability to play depends on other band members being present and having practiced their parts, all band members experience pressure to commit to a regular rehearsal schedule. When a band member quits (a regular occurrence) the entire band is disrupted and often ceases performing while they locate and train a suitable replacement. This is very different from other music scenes, where lineup changes are more manageable. For example, as long as jazz or blues musicians are familiar with a standard repertoire and the basic rules for improvising, they can perform together with little or no rehearsal (Becker, *The Etiquette of Improvisation*). That is not possible with metal musicians; replacing a member takes significant time and rehearsal. Because participation in a heavy metal band is such a significant commitment, metal musicians can be quite choosy when selecting new members. Dwayne, a metal musician in a fairly successful band, explains that new members

have to be on the same page musically. They have to have the same kind of goals...and like, I, honestly, I just want somebody in my band that can play the shit, and that we can have a beer with after too, you know? Uh, we were in that boat a few months ago when our one guitar player left. We were like, oh fuck, you know? We gotta do the album, so we need a new guitar player. And it actually only took a month and a half to get a new guy.

Dwayne was initially unable to find a suitable replacement through his personal networks, so posted a “guitarist wanted” listing on the band’s social media channels. He then found a suitable guitarist within “only” 6 weeks. This is quite fortunate, as some bands go for months with an incomplete lineup, during which time they cannot perform publicly. Dwayne’s comments also point to the commitment required to play metal:

Most of the time it’s just like, this person’s great, and they fit, but there’s a catch. I have to work 7 days a week. Oh, no, I can’t go on tour. Or, [pause] I don’t have a guitar rig. Or, just so many different factors come into it. It’s pretty good luck that we were able to find somebody with all, everything we were looking for.

Metal musicians not only look for musical talent in their bandmates; they look for commitment, because one member who cannot rehearse regularly, or who cannot commit to a tour, or who does not have adequate gear, hampers the ability of the entire band to perform.

These demanding stylistic and performance conventions position heavy metal as an all-or-nothing genre. Musicians either make the large commitment required to perform regularly with a band—individual practice, plus weekly rehearsal, plus songwriting and performing—or they cease public performance and perhaps play in private as a hobby as Ian does. There are few or no options for musicians who want to perform heavy metal on a casual level. The commitment required to build even a small-time metal career becomes harder to maintain as musicians age and take on work and family responsibilities. A professional musician might view this large commitment as worthwhile, but many Toronto metal musicians effectively pay to play; they spend more on instruments, upkeep, gas to gigs, and rental fees for rehearsal spaces than they

will ever earn for performing. As Phillip says, “[playing in a metal band] takes up a large portion of my income...I guess it’s a very expensive hobby at this point.” By their mid-30s, most local metal musicians find that the commitments of time and money required for a small-time career are simply no longer sustainable.

Stylistic conventions in folk music contrast sharply with stylistic conventions in heavy metal. The label “folk music” can broadly refer to multiple genres of vernacular and often regionally based music, including bluegrass, American folk revival, English folk ballads, East Coast fiddling, and more (Cohen, *Folk Music*). Yet, these genres have key stylistic commonalities. In particular, music is often structured around simple chords played in recognizable patterns that facilitate “jamming” or unrehearsed collective playing (Cohen, *Folk Music*). Additionally, most folk genres are based around some degree of improvisation. Learning a folk song means learning a general framework (i.e. lyrics and a chord progression), rather than a specific instrumental arrangement (i.e. a picking or strumming pattern on the guitar). After learning the chord progression for a folk song, folk musicians elaborate within that framework, arranging their own instrumental parts or even improvising a picking or strumming pattern during live performance. Accordingly, folk songs are played in many different ways by many different musicians. There is no definitive version of a traditional folk song like “Can the Circle be Unbroken”; there are only versions by particular musicians.

This basic framework for folk music—a chord progression, within which individual musicians develop their own instrumental arrangements—means that folk music can be played at multiple skill levels. Some folk musicians are well known for their technical instrumental skill, and create complex instrumental arrangements. Yet, other folk musicians perform the same songs with simpler instrumentation. Deb, for example, performs regularly on the small-time,

local folk club circuit, where she plays primarily for “passing the hat” (i.e. tips) or a small cover charge collected at the door. In some scenes, a music career involving regular performance might require an advanced level of instrumental skill; but, Deb describes herself as only a moderately skilled guitarist. She even jokes about this publicly:

Deb strums a few opening notes on her guitar, and then starts to play a few chords, singing a light melody of “oohs” over top of it. This only lasts a few seconds before she stops playing and says into the microphone that “this is a trick that another friend taught me—if you’re not that good a guitar player, just sing “oohs” or “la la las” over top of the instrumental parts, and nobody will notice.” (fields notes, 25 July 2012)

In other music scenes, musicians might be embarrassed to present themselves as lacking skill on their instrument; but, simple instrumentation is perfectly acceptable in the folk scene. Some folk musicians also deliberately play a style known as “porch music.” John, a small-time folk musician in his late 30s, explains that porch music is “music that anyone can learn three chords and play on their porch” (*field notes, January 5<sup>th</sup> 2011*). **Porch music is not stigmatized; it simply denotes music that is well-suited for collective playing, because it uses (or can be played with) simple instrumentation.**

Because the same folk song can be played with multiple instrumental arrangements, folk musicians can easily play in varying group formations. The same folk song can be played by a solo artist with only an acoustic guitar and voice, a duo, or a large multi-instrumental group. It can be played with pre-arranged and rehearsed instrumental parts, or spontaneously in a “jam session” where everyone follows the same chord structure and improvises the instrumentation. During these jam sessions, musicians play together without prearranging or rehearsing any particular songs. This occurred, for example, during a folk festival when a time slot on one stage was advertised as an open jam session where musicians or festival attendees were invited to participate. Four musicians brought their instruments and joined in:

The musicians take turns calling the song, i.e. choosing and leading the song, although at a couple of points between songs, there is a prolonged pause where people think (often out loud) about what to play next. During these pauses, all the instrumentalists ‘noodle’ a little bit, i.e. they play a short riff or melody that doesn’t really go anywhere (*field notes, Feb. 16<sup>th</sup> 2013*)

“Calling” a song means choosing a song that everyone will play together. Often, this is a folk standard. If the song is unfamiliar, the musician who calls the song will name a basic chord progression to allow others to follow along. In this example, it was clear that nothing was pre-arranged or rehearsed—notice, for example, the long pauses as the musicians participating in the jam figured out what to do next. However, these musicians were still able to competently play music for almost a full hour.

Because folk music is designed for spontaneous rather than highly rehearsed playing, individual musicians are easily interchangeable. Many folk musicians have a “residency” or weekly standing gig at the same location. When a regular musician is absent from this performance, the band will ask another musician to substitute. Aiden, a guitarist in the local Toronto folk scene, explains:

The drummer that I use, he’s my number one call. But he’s also 12 other people’s number one call, if not more. Right? So I mean, I have to expect that there are going to be many gigs where he’s going to say, yeah, I can’t do yours, I’m busy, sorry. Cool, ok, well I’ll go to one of my other 8 drummers...I can play with any bass player, any drummer that are in my world, and are at a certain level. And I can do a gig with no practicing, and no nothing.

These flexible, spontaneous playing arrangements are facilitated by the stylistic conventions of folk music. Metal musicians are not easily interchangeable; it takes weeks or months for a new musician to learn the music required to play with a new band. But, folk musicians can substitute for others easily. If heavy metal is like ballet, folk music is like square dancing. Anyone who is familiar with the basic framework—a standard repertoire and mutually understood rules for improvisation—can participate with minimal preparation. Folk musicians

are thus similar to jazz or dance hall musicians, whose skill in improvisation means that they can easily play with new members without rehearsal (Becker, *The Etiquette of Improvisation*).

The improvisational nature of folk music allows musicians to play on a low-stakes basis. Rather than committing to a weekly rehearsal, semi-professional folk musicians can play with different people, as frequently or infrequently as they like. Many folk musicians have regular jam sessions in private homes; but, the same musicians need not attend every session. Folk musicians often play on a drop-in basis, attending open stages, jam sessions, and workshops when they are available and, if necessary, taking weeks or even months away from folk music. Playing heavy metal inherently requires a fairly intense commitment from musicians, because the ability of each musician to play depends on his bandmates; but, semi-professional folk musicians can play at higher or lower levels of commitment, depending on their preferences, abilities, career expectations, and life circumstances. Because heavy metal demands ongoing, intense commitment, while folk music is playable at higher or lower levels of commitment, small-time careers in the folk scene are more sustainable than those in the metal scene.

### ***Music-Making Spaces***

The different stylistic conventions of folk and metal—complex, rehearsed arrangements versus multiple, flexible arrangements within a basic framework—support different types of music-making spaces. Accordingly, folk musicians have developed localized spaces and practices that are absent from the metal scene. The main types of music-making spaces in these two scenes are outlined in Table 2.

**TABLE 2: Types of music-making spaces in the Toronto folk and metal scenes**

	Folk	Metal
Private rehearsal spaces	Yes: private homes, garages, rented rehearsal spaces	Yes: private homes, garages, rented rehearsal spaces
Public music-making spaces, without ticketed performances	Yes: Open stages, jam sessions, song circles, workshops	No.
Public performance spaces	Yes: bars, clubs, dedicated concert venues, festival sites, suburban homes where house concerts are held	Yes: bars, clubs, dedicated concert venues, repurposed spaces (e.g. warehouses)

Heavy metal musicians generally produce music in two types of local music-making spaces: first, private rehearsal spaces such as basements, garages, and rented practice rooms; second, public spaces for scheduled, ticketed performances such as local bars, clubs, warehouses, and other concert venues. Heavy metal musicians rehearse in private spaces, and then play in public spaces for audiences who have paid to watch the performance.

Private rehearsal spaces and public performance spaces certainly exist in the folk scene as well. Folk musicians practice in private homes and rehearsal spaces, and then perform in local clubs and on folk festival stages for paying audiences. But, the folk scene also contains numerous low-stakes music-making spaces without paying audiences, where musicians are not expected to deliver a polished, professional performance. The key forms of low-stakes music-making spaces in the Toronto folk field are outlined in Table 3.

**TABLE 3: Low-stakes music-making spaces in the folk scene**

<i>Type of Space</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Organizational Support</i>
Open stage/ open mic	Performers sign in on a first come, first served basis. When their turn arrives, they perform for a short predetermined amount of time (usually 2 songs/10 minutes). The audience does not participate in the performance.	Regularly included in festival and conference programs. Many Toronto bars and venues also have weekly open stages.
Song circles, jam sessions	Participants sit together, some with instruments and some with voices only. They take turns choosing and leading a song that everyone sings and/or plays together. There is no stage and no distinction between audience and performer.	Regularly included in festival and conference programs. Often hosted by local bars and venues, or in private among groups of friends.
Skill-building workshops	An established artist leads a workshop on a specific instrument or style (e.g. Cape Breton style fiddling). Participants bring their instruments, play in front of each other, and receive feedback from the workshop leader and each other.	Regularly included in festival and conference programming; sometimes organized as a separate event before a concert at a local folk club.

In these low-stakes spaces, musicians generally focus on the process of making music, rather than the finished product. Jam sessions and song circles in particular are not performances; musicians in these spaces focus on the pleasurable, shared experience of making music together. Additionally, there is no audience in jam sessions and song circles. Everyone present becomes part of the music-making experience by playing along (or singing along, if they are not instrumentalists). These spaces are low-stakes because musicians can easily join in with minimal preparation. In these spaces, musicians need basic instrumental skill and some knowledge of folk music conventions, but not extensive rehearsal. These low-stakes spaces are also accessible to anyone seeking to participate in them. Any attendee at an industry conference or folk festival can play at scheduled open stages, participate in song circles, or attend skills workshops. Open stages and jam sessions at local bars are open to the general public, and thus have even lower barriers to entry.

**These intermediary, low-stakes music-making spaces facilitate sustainable small-time**

**music careers.** Even if they need to withdraw from the local performance circuit for a time, small-time folk musicians can stay active in the local scene by attending jam sessions or open stages as frequently or infrequently as they wish. These low-stakes spaces also provide an alternative career path for musicians who prefer not to perform for paying audiences, but who still wish to play music with others. Spaces like jam sessions and open stages, which are absent from the metal scene, provide an environment where folk musicians can interact with and learn from peers without experiencing pressure to professionalize.

Unlike the folk scene, the metal scene lacks intermediary spaces centered on casual playing rather than ticketed performances. Because heavy metal is played in groups of 4-6 people and requires the setup of significant equipment (e.g. electronic amplification equipment, distortion pedals), it is poorly suited for open stages, which are geared toward solo artists or duos with minimal technical requirements. Because heavy metal is not improvisational, it is also poorly suited to jam sessions or song circles. Accordingly, heavy metal musicians do not generally seek out these types of spaces, and these spaces are not embedded into the core institutions—the bars, clubs, and other concert venues—of the Toronto metal scene.

Overall, both the stylistic conventions of the folk scene and the availability of low-stakes music making spaces support small-time music careers at either higher or lower levels of commitment. This broader opportunity space supports small-time folk musicians in staying engaged in the folk scene over the long term, without pressure to either professionalize or cease playing. In contrast, the stylistic conventions of the heavy metal and the lack of low-stakes spaces support high-commitment music careers, and make low-commitment music careers less achievable. This puts pressure on heavy metal musicians to either professionalize and receive a clear payoff for their high commitment, or cease performing publicly. In short, the organization

of the metal scene supports burnout. Accordingly, few metal musicians continue to play beyond their 30s and the few who do have generally already achieved some degree of success.

### *Discussion*

Grassroots folk and metal musicians operate outside of commercial music industries, working without the support of corporate record labels, paid support personnel, or very much money. They claim to do this because they are motivated by passion, not financial gain; both folk and metal musicians make it clear that they do not play music for the money. Despite these similar attitudes toward independent music-making, folk musicians develop sustainable small-time careers far more frequently than heavy metal musicians. I have argued in this paper that the organization of the Toronto folk and metal scenes provide different levels of support for small-time music careers. The stylistic conventions of the metal scene center technical complexity and heavily rehearsed music, played in groups. Furthermore, the metal scene lacks low-stakes music-making spaces such as jam sessions, which would allow musicians to play collectively on a more casual basis. Together, these factors require high commitment from metal musicians, even at the small-time level, which heavy metal musicians often find unsustainable over the long term. In contrast, stylistic conventions of the folk scene facilitate improvisational playing that requires minimal rehearsal, and that is workable in multiple group formations. Folk musicians are less dependent on rehearsing and playing with the same musicians, and can therefore play music at varying levels of commitment according to their preferences and abilities. Furthermore, low-stakes music-making spaces in the folk scene such as jam sessions, open stages, and song circles provide an alternative to paid performances for folk musicians who do not desire paid performance opportunities. These factors systematically support long-term, small-time careers. These differently organized music scenes shed light on why small-time metal musicians tend to

stop playing around their mid-30s, while folk musicians can sustain small-time music careers into retirement.

Although I have discussed how the organization of local music scenes shapes possibilities for individual careers, the relationship between social structure and individual action is better viewed as reciprocal. **The local scene sets out the context within which individuals choose to continue or abandon their music careers.** Yet, these choices also reproduce social structures. In the metal scene, technically complex stylistic conventions and a lack of casual music-making spaces make small-time careers difficult to sustain over the long term; but, the fact that youth dominate the heavy metal scene likely entrenches conventions and practices that reproduce this youth dominance (e.g. the fact that metal shows are held in dingy bars and run late into the night, which may be unappealing to young, professional adults). Similarly, the abundance of older semi-professionals in the folk scene may contribute to reproducing the institutionalized spaces that facilitate long-term small-time careers. Open stages at local folk clubs and song circles in church basements happen because people—often, older small-timers with the necessary leisure time—organize them. My argument is not that stylistic conventions or particular music-making spaces *cause* particular types of music careers, but rather that they support and reinforce some career choices rather than others—career choices that may later reproduce those same stylistic conventions and working spaces.

### ***Conclusion***

This paper contributes to the sociology of music by linking the organization of local music scenes to the types of careers available to individual musicians. Although literature in the sociology of music provides rich, ethnographic description of scenes centered on different music genres (Aldredge; Cohen, *Rock Culture in Liverpool*; Finnegan; Grazian), we lack comparative

work that systematically traces out the consequences of organizational dissimilarities between scenes. The present paper begins to fill this gap by linking specific features of music scenes—shared expectations regarding stylistic conventions, and the organization of local music-making spaces—to patterns in the career trajectories of individual musicians.

I also advance the sociology of music by showing how organizational features of music scenes are linked to stylistic characteristics; that is, different modes of playing and composition. Work in the sociology of music tends to ignore the actual music being produced, and instead treats something else as its object of study, such as the lyrics, imagery, culture, or social networks surrounding the music (Roy and Dowd). But, my findings show that stylistic elements of the music itself—different modes of composing, rehearsing, and playing—are linked to different forms of social organization. The metal scene lacks intermediary, low-stakes music-making spaces because the compositional characteristics of the music are not amenable to such spaces; complex, carefully arranged music that requires extensive rehearsal does not lend itself to jamming, or casual, improvisational playing. In contrast, the folk scene has developed spaces such as song circles and jam sessions because these stylistic characteristics of the music facilitate these spaces. These different modes of playing, along with the different forms of social organization that they support, have very real consequences for the careers paths that are available to musicians. Small-time or semi-professional music careers are sustainable in folk over the long term, but unsustainable in heavy metal.

A promising direction for further research, would be to trace the organizational features of other local music scenes that make small-time music careers sustainable or unsustainable. Lee, for example, describes “Project Blowed,” a weekly open mic and workshop for rap and hip-hop artists in Los Angeles. This and other similar spaces might make small-time music careers in the

L.A. rap and hip-hop scene sustainable as rappers age. Indeed, Lee finds that the L.A. hip-hop scene contains a number of “OGs” or senior rappers who remain active in the scene and mentor younger rappers. While Lee notes that many younger rappers hope to professionalize and *avoid* becoming like these senior rappers, the presence of OGs suggests sustainable music careers for those musicians who are interested in participating in the scene on a small-time, long-term basis. Notably, Lee’s findings echo the themes I have developed here. Project Blowed is a casual, intermediary music-making space similar to the open stages, jam sessions, and song circles in the folk field. The stylistic conventions of rap music are also more similar to folk than to heavy metal; rap and hip-hop music range from the stylistically simple (i.e. with more repetitive lyrics, or with backing tracks with a simpler beat and mix) to the complex (i.e. with complicated flows or carefully arranged lyrics, and backing tracks that interweave extensive arrangement and instrumentation), allowing musicians of all skill levels to participate without demanding extensive commitment, as in the metal scene.

Future research should ask how this model extends to other local music scenes, such as punk, jazz, blues, and more—and perhaps even to artistic scenes not centered on music at all. Artistic scenes centered on painting, dance, or theatre might have different organizational properties that make small-time cultural production sustainable or unsustainable. Understanding these conditions can advance our knowledge about artistic and cultural production more generally.

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<sup>1</sup> I use all of these terms—local, small-time, semi-professional, and independent—interchangeably in this paper to designate musicians who are not full-time professionals, but are more than hobbyists who play in private spaces, exclusively for their own enjoyment.

<sup>2</sup> See Giddens (1984) on the mutually constitutive nature of social structure and individual action.

<sup>3</sup> See in particular Aldredge and Lee on open mics, and Sarah Cohen on the networks of clubs in a local music scene.

<sup>4</sup> Reported numbers do not add up to the total number of interviews because in both fields, some people occupied multiple roles; for example, some show promoters also host radio programs, and some musicians also help to organize festivals.

<sup>5</sup> A number of independent metal labels such as CDN or Sevard Records focus on small-time, independent bands. However, these labels provide minimal financial resources, and provide almost no services like graphic design, marketing, or show booking. While established metal labels might provide funding for an album's production phase, these independent metal labels sign only bands that have already completed their albums. These labels then pay to press the physical CDs and provide some of those CDs to the band to sell at shows, in exchange for the rights to distribute and profit from the remaining copies of the album. These record labels focus on small-time metal musicians, but do not generally provide them with enough support or resources to render small-time careers sustainable over the long term.

<sup>6</sup> The Metal Archives ([www.metal-archives.com](http://www.metal-archives.com)) has contributors from local metal scenes across the world, and accepts bands of all levels of amateurism to professionalism as long as there is public evidence of the existence of those bands (e.g. a presence on social media, a flyer for a local show, a digital or physical album).

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