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“You Won’t See Me” – in search of an epistemology of collaborative songwriting

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Abstract

Collaborative songwriting is an effective music industry creative working model, and a significant number of hits have been written by teams[1]. However, little is known about the operational specifics of the creative processes undertaken by successful songwriters, and academic research into songwriting creativity is constrained by a number of methodological challenges. This paper aims to analyse and compare the observation methodologies available to researchers, and to evaluate the reliability of the available evidence bases. Analysis of a finished creative work such as an audio recording may tell us little about the way it was created, so the search for usable evidence should perhaps start with the songwriters themselves. John Sloboda[2] identifies four methods by which we may gain understanding of a composer’s creative process - examination of manuscript; ‘general and retrospective’ interviews with composers; ‘live’ observation of composers; and observation of improvisatory performance. The first and last of these are discounted, respectively, because of the lack of iterative music notation generated by most songwriters, and also due to the non-real-time nature of songwriting, particularly in a technology rich environment such as a studio. This leaves interviews or real-time observation, but these two methods’ integrities, and even their status as primary sources, may be questionable. Interview subjects, for a variety of personal or economic reasons, may not be incentivised to provide reliable information to researchers about the reality of their creative processes. Real-time observation of a collaborative songwriting session partly solves this problem, but generates massive amounts of qualitative data, which must be reduced, necessarily destructively, to a manageable size before it can be a meaningful and usable research evidence base.

When these data have been evaluated and analysed, the researcher is left with an overarching philosophical question, common to much creativity research, and addressed by Csikszentmihalyi[3] and Boden[4] – does a case study only become meaningful after the work is proven to be societally ‘successful’? The paper will discuss approaches to this problem and possible strategies for triangulating evidence bases, toward an informed understanding of the collaborative songwriting process.

[1] T. F Pettijohn II and S. F Ahmed, “Songwriting Loafing or Creative Collaboration?: A Comparison of Individual and Team Written Billboard Hits in the USA,” *Journal of Articles in Support of the Null Hypothesis* 7, no. 1 (2010): 2.

[2] John Sloboda, *The Musical Mind : the Cognitive Psychology of Music* (Oxford [Oxfordshire] ;New

York: Clarendon Press ;;Oxford University Press, 1985).

[3] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Society, Culture, and Person: a Systems View of Creativity," in *The Nature of Creativity : Contemporary Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Robert Sternberg (Cambridge ;;New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 325–339.

[4] Sloboda, *The Musical Mind : the Cognitive Psychology of Music*.