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London Musicians and Social Change Today

Throughout my life, I have always had an interest in music. I have been listening to music for as long as I can remember. I used to listen to alternative and classic rock bands with my brother; my first concert was Green Day when I was six. As I grew up, my taste in music expanded to include pop, R&B, soul, rap, and musical theatre. My eclectic music taste compelled me to appreciate all music genres and now I consistently listen to all of them. The first instrument I learned to play was the piano at age four. Since then, I have also learned to play the viola and classically trained my voice. Although I loved listening to music and played multiple instruments, what cemented my interest in the study of music was tap dance. I started tap dancing when I was three years old, and by age seven I started choreographing pieces of my dances. The rhythms of tap dance enchanted me; the way that tap dance merges and layers its own rhythms with those already existing within the music fascinated me. I used my musical knowledge to focus on rhythms and incorporate intricate ones into my choreography.

When I discovered I would be traveling to London to complete my humanities, I contemplated how I should study music. One of my ideas was to incorporate local London musicians with my experiential learning. However, once I realized what the experiential learning was meant to be, I realized that finding musicians and speaking with them could become its own project. Once I determined to complete this as one of my ISPs, I faced the challenge of finding musicians to speak to. I started researching London musicians in D term to be prepared. After

searching “local London musicians” on the internet, I found a music advertising website, Gumtree. From scouring Gumtree, I found the band Thunder on the Left and its frontwoman Carla Tully. I looked at the band’s website and liked how they incorporate political statements into their philosophy as a band. I also researched venues and their upcoming shows to find musicians. From this, I found Selin & The Band, Cameron Donald, and Kai Henderson. I specifically chose these four musicians because they each represent a different genre: alternative/punk, pop/R&B, rap, and rock. Once I found the musicians I would be interviewing, I needed to decide on the questions I would be asking them. Initially, I knew I wanted the question to be very open ended, so the artists had room to interpret them and I could easily change them depending on the pace of the interview. After thinking through these ideas, I wrote five questions that I asked each of the interviewees.

What do you do outside of music?

Who is your biggest musical influence and why?

What inspires your music the most? Your life, the life of others, society, or something else?

What issues in culture/society do you think are the most touched upon in music now? Do you think that should change?

If there was only one issue that you could fight for with music, what would it be?

These questions allowed the musicians to also focus on society and its influences on their music and the music industry. While I hoped to focus my project on societal influences in London, the responses I received from the musicians allowed me to expand beyond this one type of influence.

The interviews of the four artists taught me the overlap of influences and viewpoints in different genres of the music industry. The four artists compare in how they started in music, their musical influences, and their musical inspiration. They also have many similar thoughts on how society is a part of the music industry today. To both the musicians and me, the music industry includes musicians, record labels, publishing companies, and distributors. While

anybody can become a musician, they are not truly apart of the music industry until they develop a decent sized following and the public recognizes them.

One of the main similarities between the four musicians is how they became interested in music. All four started to have music become a part of their lives at a young age. Carla Tully started studying classical music at nine years old. Selin's father played music for her while she was still in the womb. Kai Henderson's older brother forced him to take guitar lessons when Kai was eight. Cameron Donald's father introduced him to rap while he was also only a child. From these experiences, each individual has grown as a musician. For example, Tully drifted from playing classical music to writing alternative music of her own. Each of the other artists is now a songwriter as well. While they all started out young, the musicians continue to pursue music because of their love for it. Music is a competitive industry, however, music is the "only thing that really made sense" and what they "have the most fun doing" (Tully 2018; Henderson 2018).

There are many commonalities between the musical influences of these musicians. Tully, Selin, and Henderson all take influences from the rock genre. Selin takes influence from classic rock artists such as Michael Jackson and Pink Floyd. Tully and Henderson utilize the music stylings of more alternative bands like Nirvana and the Foo Fighters, respectively. What makes this similarity so interesting is that after the death of Nirvana's founder, Kurt Cobain, Dave Grohl (Nirvana's drummer) created the Foo Fighters. Both Cobain and Grohl created music differently than other musicians in their time. They focused on the stylistic and structural aspects of music instead of solely focusing on their talent. Between their lyrics and in-depth scores, the bands became icons that Tully and Henderson look up to. Henderson especially appreciated how Grohl utilizes each of the instruments while creating melodies – the music focused on more than just the lead singer and guitarist. Each of the female artists interviewed take some influence from

other strong female artists. The most pivotal album for Tully was *Jagged Little Pill* by Alanis Morissette, due to its women's rights nature. Before Morissette, society wanted women to oppress their anger – it was an emotion only men should show. *Jagged Little Pill* allowed Morissette and the album's female listeners to express their anger. The most influential female artists for Selin include Amy Winehouse, Christina Aguilera, and Celine Dion. Each of these artists had powerhouse hits, such as Aguilera's "Beautiful," a self-love anthem for its listeners. The final commonality between the artists' musical influence is the one between Tully and Donald – hip-hop and rap. Tully has recently started incorporating more hip-hop into her songwriting, receiving inspiration from artist Kendrick Lamar. Donald focuses more on rap, with his main inspiration being Eminem. Eminem even inspired him to become a rapper. There is a strong commonality between these musicians and the artists and genres that influence them.

The musicians have similar opinions on how the music industry tackles societal issues. Tully and Selin both recognize Childish Gambino (also known as Donald Glover) for his viral song "This Is America." The song combined with its music video has a very powerful effect – it criticizes how society handles the issues at hand. To open the music video, Glover executes a man of color in a pose very similar to the one that used to be on Jim Crow posters in the southern United States to show that racism still exists (Rao 2018). He also demonstrates how the entertainment industry casts a shadow over important issues such as police brutality and gun violence. Tully and Selin appreciate Glover's effort but believe more needs to be done. While Tully and Selin only see some political issues influencing the music industry, Henderson and Donald notice how other musicians call attention to the mental health issue at hand. Henderson feels that rock music discusses some mental health issues, possibly because they feel a responsibility to after incidents like the suicide of Chester Bennington, the lead singer of rock

band Linkin Park, in the summer of 2017. While Henderson recognizes the rock genre's efforts, Donald recognizes those of the hip-hop genre. Both XXXTENTACION and Logic have released music that brings awareness to depression and suicide. XXXTENTACION with "SAD!" and Logic with "1-800-273-8255." The title of Logic's track is the number for the National Suicide Prevention Hotline. Not only did Logic call attention to suicide with his lyrics ("I don't wanna [sic] be alive"), but he gave those that need it an option for help (Logic 2017). Each of the musicians interviewed noticed how there is some recognition of societal issues in the music industry, but not nearly enough.

Many believe that for musicians to "make it" in the music industry they need to have signed a record deal, specifically with a major record label such as Sony Music Entertainment, Universal Music Group, or Warner Music Group. There are many benefits to signing with these major record labels. Major record labels have had the time to develop as a company and make important connections within the music industry (Music and Creativity 2014). Major record labels also have more money to spend on producing and distributing an artist's music than smaller labels. However, there are also drawbacks to having a record deal with a major record label. One of the largest disadvantages is a musician's creative freedom. Especially with new artists, major labels would rather sell a "safe" album – one they believe will sell. As new musicians, these artists do not have the liberty to entirely choose the album they record.

While in the past, it was imperative for musicians to sign a record deal to become successful, it is not as necessary to do so now. With technology advancing and ability for artists to spread their work via the internet, labels do not entirely control the music industry anymore (Mitchell). There are some successful musicians who do not belong to a major record label. One of the most well-known musicians in this position is Macklemore, along with his partner Ryan

Lewis. The duo produces their music themselves and has won many awards for their work, including Grammy Awards, Billboard Music Awards, and others. Macklemore has released tracks that major record labels might consider controversial like “Same Love” and “Wing\$.” “Same Love” fights for gay rights and how society views homosexuals whereas “Wing\$” shows the consequences of a highly capitalistic and consumerist society. Both songs were a part of Macklemore and Ryan Lewis’s first album released together, *The Heist*, in 2012. Macklemore and Ryan Lewis were able to incorporate songs like these because they produced their own music and do not have a contract limiting their creative freedom. Macklemore and Ryan Lewis show how it is possible for artists to be successful independently.

The musicians interviewed have similar ideas about including societal issues in their own music. Tully incorporates the issues she sees in society in Thunder on The Left’s latest album, *National Insecurity*. The title of the album informs readers that the music will stimulate their minds without even having to listen to a single track. The title track has only 13 different words in the entire song, but it sends an important message on technology. The song opens with the phrase “brush your teeth it’s time for bed, are you living are you dead” repeating four times. Right away, a listener wonders what exactly the song is about. The only two other words in the song are “clones” and “drones” which are repeated in order throughout the middle of the track. While the song is simplistic, it clearly shows how technology has the capability of killing human life in the band’s opinion. “National Insecurity” is just one example of how Tully incorporates societal issues into her music. The other artists interviewed have not released any music with societal influences. However, once speaking about societal issues, both Selin and Henderson mentioned incorporating them in their future music. Selin mentioned how one of her not yet released songs focuses on the topic of greed, since to her, “everything stems from greed” (Gecit

2018). Henderson believes that he will include a few songs on mental health and other issues in his next album. After our conversation, he felt inspired to start taking a stance on the issues he feels strongly about with the help of his music. All three of these musicians believe in using music to call attention to issues in society.

Before talking with these artists, I had some knowledge of life as a musician. My oldest brother was a part of four different bands throughout high school, and I went to many of his performances. However, I never knew the thoughts that local musicians have about the music industry. The music industry overall does not do enough in terms of drawing attention to issues in society. Many musicians do not have the ability to release music that receives influence from society due to strict record labels that limit their creative freedom. However, since independently writing, producing, and releasing music is becoming easier, more artists will be able to take a stance on their beliefs through their music. Although it is happening slowly, I am glad for this development. Music is very influential and can be used for change.

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Notes

1. Thunder on The Left's frontwoman and songwriter Carla Tully spends her entire life in the music world. Starting at age nine, she trained to play classical guitar and soon learned how she was more interested in playing her own songs rather than the compositions of others. Since then, she has continued to gravitate towards music and songwriting as it was a mode of expression. To her, it was "the only thing that really made sense." Besides being the lead singer of Thunder On The Left, Tully manages a film composer as well as produces music. She also utilizes her law degree from university to work for a nonprofit organization on musicians' rights. Apart from working in the music industry, Tully is a writer. She has written a poetry book, similar to Milk and Honey by Rupi Kaur, but a darker style of poetry.
2. Selin has been involved with music since she was an infant. Her father wanted to pursue music when he was young, but his father would not allow him. This led Selin's father to make music a large part of her life and ensure that she grew up in music. Selin's father realized she was talented when she started to sing along with him as a child. She continued to be actively involved in music and she wrote her first song on the guitar when she was just six years old. The turning point in her life that made her want to pursue a career in music was the 2008 X Factor finale. Alexandra Burke won the show that season and to celebrate, performed the classic "Hallelujah." After watching this performance, Selin became obsessed with the song and music itself. Today, Selin is a student at university and hopes to have a job in music once she graduates, possibly even teaching music to children.
3. Kai Henderson owes his musical talents to his older brother. His brother, a drummer, at the age of 13 requested that Kai learn to play the guitar, so he could have someone to "jam" with. Henderson was eight at the time and did, at his brother's request, learn to play the guitar. By his mid-teens, Henderson also started songwriting. Like how those who are good at sports usually continue to play longer than those who are not as talented, part of what created Henderson's interest in music was that he was talented. It is also "one of the few things [he] had the most fun doing." Henderson goes back and forth between performing/writing his own music and other types of work. His other work is always involved in the arts and entertainment industry. He has acted in a Buddy Holly tribute show, worked for a theater and film company, and set up musical festivals such as All Points East Festival and British Summertime Festival.
4. Cameron Donald is a rapper from Johannesburg, South Africa who relocated to London. Donald fell in love with rap music when his father first introduced him to Eminem. The two of them would listen to Eminem among other artists in car rides. He believed Eminem and his music to be "bigger than life" which is what inspired him to become a rapper. To him, many rappers are "superheros [sic] who gain their powers through sheer passion and practise [sic]," which is the level that Donald would like to achieve.

Appendix One – Thunder on The Left (Carla Tully) Interview

What made you want to be a musician?

“It’s weird really” “this should be such a basic question but it’s not”

- Classically trained guitar player at 9 years old
- Would play other composers’ work but always wanted to play something that was her own
- Gravitated towards it because she was really good at it and it was a mode of expression
- “the only thing that really made sense”

What do you do outside of music?

“I work in music”

- Manages a film composer
- Producer
- NGO (music rights), studied law at university
- Writer – published one book, is working on another; like “Milk & Honey” but darker (poetry, some short one-liners, etc.)

Who is your biggest musical influence and why?

- Alanis Morrissette *Jagged Little Pill* – for what it stood for, how she expressed her anger which normally is frowned upon when women do it (women should suppress their anger, only men can show it); it was a “pivotal album” for her
- Nirvana – Kurt Cobain not only for his guitar playing skills but for his energy and his lyrics
- Rage Against the Machine
- Kendrick Lamar: conscious rap, doesn’t put women down all the time
- Led Zeppelin
- Genres: hip-hop, rock, grunge
 - Problem with rap/hip-hop is that it often is homophobic and misogynistic
- All people with something to say, they’re more “provocative”

What inspired your music the most? Your life, life of others, society, or something else?

- Exact first response: “Things that piss me off or frustrate me” which includes the following:
 - “We need to get away from the conditioning the government does to keep us in line”
 - “need to see through societal bulls***”
 - “inequality and injustice”
 - Need to pay attention to things like the national health service, homelessness (“increased 125% in the past 10 years”), police instead of “trivial stuff”
 - How do you make sense of why you’re here and how you are living (living life, etc.)
 - Sometimes religion

- Technology: AI, robotics
 - “Where is the place for humans when this becomes advanced enough?”
 - “What will the government do?”
 - “Hyper-dependence on technology”
 - “it f***ing terrifies me” as well as interests her

What issues in culture or society do you think are most touched upon in music today, if at all?

- “Not much is touched upon at all, music is mostly about love”
 - “Someone needs to f*** it up” especially with female rights
 - Capitalism has failed people: the gap between the 1% and the 99% is getting larger and larger; it is so disproportionate

If there was only one issue you could fight for, what would it be?

- Digital rights and privacy because it is “completely out of control”
 - “needs to be regulated by independent judiciaries”
 - Can’t be Silicon Valley companies i.e. Apple, Intel, SanDisk,
 - US and Brexit elections were tampered with
 - Threats to democracy
- Gay rights are already covered by so many different organizations
- Snooper’s Charter (Draft Communications Data Bill): 12-month browser history store in a government database
 - “Anyone could hack it and change information”; should be regulated to criminals
- “none of it is f***ing paranoia”
- “People are just absorbed into their screens”
 - Health implications – should be somewhat regulated
- “The government is oppressing people and can’t be trusted if technology gets to the point where there are no jobs for people”
- People are “enslaved to the system”

Appendix Two – Selin & The Band (Selin Gecit) Interview

What made you want to be a musician?

- Her father had wanted to go into music, but his father wouldn’t let him, so he always played music to her; grew up in music
 - Had her sing with him – that’s when he realized she was good
- Wrote her first song on the guitar when she was 6
- Alexandra Burke – Halleluiah (X Factor finale winner 2008)
 - After watching the performance, became obsessed with it and music

What do you do outside of music?

- Student: wants to get a job in music, perhaps teach kids

- With the band: organizes/manages (they don't have a manager) and does PR

Who is your biggest musical influence and why?

- Because of her dad: Pink Floyd, MJ, classic rock
- Jazz Classics
- Amy Winehouse and Christina Aguilera
- Celine Dion
- Changed over time

What inspired your music the most? Your life, life of others, society, or something else?

- “Anything in the moment that makes me think and has a story to tell...I think it's like that for most musicians”
- What goes on in her mind/relationship
- Real life situations
- “Mr. Crazy” – about the thoughts going on in her mind while dating a guy that she loved, “he was pretty crazy”, but she still loved him anyway

What issues in culture or society do you think are most touched upon in music today, if at all?

- Politics is touched on, but not much (“This Is America” by Childish Gambino)
- “Environmental isn't touched upon at all really – maybe indie”
- “we need more reality”

If there was only one issue you could fight for, what would it be?

- “everything stems from greed”:
 - Natural habitat being killed (environmental, not only just other animals us too)
 - “people to this day don't understand what the f*** is gonna [sic] happen”

Appendix Three – Kai Henderson Interview

What made you want to be a musician?

- His brother was a drummer – when his brother was 13, Kai was 8 and he forced Kai to play the guitar, so he'd have someone to jam with. His brother got him into music.
- Turned out he was good and that led to an interest
- Started songwriting at 15 or 16 and grew from there
- “one of the few things I have the most fun doing”
- He goes back and forth between performing and writing his own music and other things

What do you do outside of music?

- He works
 - Always related the arts/entertainment
 - Worked for a theater and film company

- Acting – toured with a Buddy Holly Tribute show
- Music Festivals: All Points East Festival, British Summertime Festival

Who is your biggest musical influence and why?

- “When you find an artist you like, you binge on them”
- Jimi Hendrix – “stereotypical for a guitar player” “there's not many words to describe why”
- Metallica – knowing them and their music and picking it apart
 - How things like guitar solos relate to the rest of the song, well structured
- Dave Grohl (Foo-Fighters) – music is not only based on the guitar; there are rhythm and bass incorporated into the melody and they are conscious of this idea
- Jimi Hendrix, Metallica, and the Foo Fighters are the “big 3”

What inspired your music the most? Your life, life of others, society, or something else?

- The album is mainly autobiographical – a story that actually happened or an idea that he had, and he wanted to express
- The love ballads are very “personal and raw”
- Mostly stuff that has happened
- Things that he wants to express but “isn’t appropriate for a dinner table conversation, so he puts it into music”

What issues in culture or society do you think are most touched upon in music today, if at all? Do you think that should change?

- Finds it “funny” that in the culture of #MeToo and all the issues in Hollywood, music (pop and R&B) is still so sexualized (Miley Cyrus) which is a “little hypocritical”
 - “Very crude and hyper-sexualized,” but “not necessarily a bad thing”
 - What they say in their music is less important now than what they say in the media
- In the US – hip-hop focuses a little on Black Lives Matter and police issues
- Rock: there is a resurgence of the apolitical, classic rock such as ACDC where the music is for a good time, not to say anything (Blackstone Cherry, Glorious)
 - There are some mental health issues being discussed, perhaps they “feel a responsibility” due to incidents such as Chester Bennington’s suicide
- The last time there was really an issue brought up in the UK by music was with the grunge movement (antiauthoritarian)
- “Punk was the last time there was something about politics” (Stormsy)
- “The UK doesn’t have as much to talk about compared to America”
- “The UK is older” “America is still figuring itself out”

If there was only one issue you could fight for using music, what would it be?

- At first, said mental health – due to his experience with it
 - Experience severe hypochondria and anxiety – in Scotland it is not as understood, was only told to change his diet
- After he thought about the question a little more, he mentioned that he is passionate about “calling people’s bulls***”
 - People are “so quick to stand behind a banner” and are “not thinking about their own views” – “they won’t get criticized for the banner’s views”
 - “people should feel like they’ve intelligently thought about something”
 - “There is a template of what the world should be” – people are “just putting the template on instead of understanding why and changing it from that”
 - People end up “butting heads”
 - Hasn’t written anything about it yet, “perhaps the next album”

Appendix Four – Cameron Donald Interview

Questions:

1. What made you want to be a musician?
2. What do you do outside of music?
3. Who is your biggest musical influence and why?
4. What inspired your music the most? Your life, life of others, society, or something else?
5. What issues in culture or society do you think are most touched upon in music today, if at all? Do you think that should change?
6. If there was only one issue you could fight for using music, what would it be?

Responses (via email):

“Hey!

1. I think the idea of being bigger than life initially inspired me to be a musician, which is perhaps why I really fell in love with rap music - Eminem’s music, specifically.

Rap is a genre populated by superheros [sic] who gain their powers through sheer passion and practise [sic]. No power is the same. I was never the best singer, but I always believed one day I could be the best rapper; the best lyricist and perhaps even the best songwriter, if I practise [sic] and put my heart into my craft.

2. Outside of music I spend my time playing video games and watching football. I also have an undying love for Game of Thrones.

3. Eminem is my biggest musical influence. He's the best; he is the bar. He is larger than life, yet he is vulnerable and pained. My dad introduced me to Eminem when I was probably too young to listen to "Smack That", but car journeys listening to Eminem were my first real experience with [sic] rap music.

4. I think that I was inspired to make music the most by the idea that it can change your life and tell your story like no other art form.

5. Hip Hop and it's [sic] sub-genres are starting to tackle the topic of mental health as rappers such as XXXTENTACION and Logic have recently released virally successful tracks that have touched a lot of hearts and raised awareness for issues such as suicide and depression.

6. I believe music should reference all sorts of opinions and topics, fighting to tackle every issue modern society breeds and houses. People relate to music in an indescribable way; it can change lives for the better when delivered sincerely."