

**Everyone Is Musical: a contemporary ethnography of  
'third-wave' ukulele musicking, online and offline**

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to deepen understanding of ukulele players' activity during the instrument's 'third wave' of popularity, beginning around the new millennium. This activity is especially rich at the grassroots level, but limitations exist in its prior scholarship, which is largely restricted to North America, and to groups with relatively stable memberships, which do not target particular demographics, and which meet predominantly in offline, synchronous, spatial contexts. This thesis's primary focus is English ukulele social worlds, which are highly active and comparatively under-examined. Equally important, however, is the third wave's intimate relationship with the internet, inevitably complicating its geographical focus. Influenced by earlier scholars at the intersection of ethnomusicology and popular music studies, such as Finnegan, Shank, and Cohen, the thesis's methodology combines multi-sited participant-observation with semi-structured interviews and an open-ended questionnaire. Its analysis, adopting Stebbins's 'social worlds' and Finnegan's more dynamic 'pathways' as structuring principles, takes particular interest in self-identity, both in terms of players' broader social identities, and their self-identification as musicians. Where Shank applies a psychoanalytically-informed framework to participant identity, this thesis is informed by humanistic psychological models, suggesting participation in the ukulele's social worlds is enabled through practices cultivating non-judgment, non-directivity, and what Carl Rogers calls 'unconditional positive regard', which may replace conventional metrics of musical valuation. This thesis proposes that the ukulele's third-wave social worlds and pathways are marked by flexibility, allowing participants to pursue individual musical 'desire lines' (extending Finnegan's 'pathways' metaphor), in contexts which are neither uncomplicatedly collective nor solitary, mirroring the convergence between online and offline which characterises contemporary life. This, in turn, enables participants to bring their real and ideal musical selves into closer congruence, and may appeal particularly to players previously excluded from musical practice and performance.



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## Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i> .....	3
<i>Acknowledgments</i> .....	5
<i>Index of tables</i> .....	11
<i>Index of figures</i> .....	13
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	15
<b>2. Review of prior literature</b> .....	21
<b>Time, place and practices: scholarship of the ukulele, and its epistemic gaps</b> .....	21
From national pride to cultural tourism: the ukulele in historical texts.....	23
Practices, experiences: ethnographies of the third ukulele wave .....	27
<b>Musicking in small, non-professional, and fringe social worlds</b> .....	35
The general within the particular: small musical worlds in scholarship .....	36
Why study musicking at the micro-level? .....	43
<b>Research questions and claims to knowledge</b> .....	45
<b>3. Theoretical framework</b> .....	49
<b>Musicking: music as practice, and ideal relationships</b> .....	49
<b>The person-centred lens: unconditional positive regard, the actualising tendency, and congruence in musicking</b> .....	51
<b>Worlds, pathways, and desire lines</b> .....	57
<b>Modelling musical identities and selves</b> .....	62
<b>Musicking, lived experience, and the self: orienting the research</b> .....	66
<b>4. Methodology</b> .....	67
<b>Participant-observation</b> .....	70
<b>Online ethnography</b> .....	73
<b>Semi-structured interviews</b> .....	77

Anonymous questionnaire.....	82
<b>5. <i>Everyone is musical: open events, improvisational strategies and the musical self in ukulele jams</i>.....</b>	<b>87</b>
Case study: the wall of strumming, instrument loans, chord charts.....	92
Case study: song selection, participation style, and ‘rooms at the party’ .....	98
<b>Improvisational affordances and the casual/serious hybrid leisure world .....</b>	<b>102</b>
The wall of strumming.....	103
Songbooks and chord sheets.....	104
Repertoire selection .....	105
Resources for new attendees.....	106
<b>Being musical: desire lines and unconditional positive regard in the ukulele jam .....</b>	<b>110</b>
Demusicalisation and the perception of flexibility .....	117
<b>6. <i>Flexibility and belonging: ‘closed’ events and demographic-specialised ukulele social worlds</i> .....</b>	<b>119</b>
Case study: an explicitly closed LGBTQ+ women’s group .....	123
Case study: an implicitly closed queer ukulele event .....	129
Case study: an explicitly closed group for retired people .....	134
Case study: a ukulele festival attended by retired players .....	140
Desire lines, marginalisation, the ‘we’ and the ‘I’.....	145
<b>7. <i>Hoping for an in-between: the ukulele YouTuber, participation, holicipation, and platformisation</i>.....</b>	<b>149</b>
No one will hear this, but: YouTube as a site of participation/holicipation .....	157
Giving back the rainbow? YouTube as a site of participation/platformisation.....	165
Expressing the inexpressible, differentiating the perceptual field .....	173
The YouTube convention and restoration of collapsed contexts .....	181
<b>8. <i>Life on the interstices: ukulele musicking in the age of COVID-19</i>.....</b>	<b>185</b>



From wall of strumming to ‘wall of mess’: background and context .....	188
Benefits and wellbeing .....	195
Problems and challenges .....	201
Intimacy and independence .....	207
In the same room: past, future, and felt meaning.....	214
<b>9. ‘A despicable toy guitar for idiots’: discourses of devaluation.....</b>	<b>219</b>
Twee, gender, and childishness .....	223
‘A) sad and B) terrible’: the ukulele in advertising.....	232
The power of ‘playing badly’ .....	240
Recycling devaluation, empowering powerlessness.....	250
<b>10. ‘Every single person in the room’: whiteness and the limits of inclusion.....</b>	<b>255</b>
Case study. Zara and Jo: musicking in the absence of unconditional positive regard	260
Case study. Consuming the other, confirming the Other: reinscribing colonial history .....	266
Case study. James: exnomination and fragility.....	275
Discourses of whiteness.....	282
<b>11. Discussion: the (un)hidden musicians, and taking the ukulele seriously.....</b>	<b>287</b>
Mapping the particularities of social worlds, pathways, and desire lines .....	289
Person-centred values in third-wave ukulele musicking .....	295
Hybridities, tensions, and conflicts: opposing forces and blurred boundaries .....	302
Final remarks: breadth, depth, and (path)ways forward .....	307
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	<b>311</b>
<i>Appendix A. Field sites visited</i> .....	<b>349</b>
<i>Appendix B. Interviewees</i> .....	<b>353</b>

*Appendix C. Interview questions..... 357*

*Appendix D. Interview consent form..... 359*

*Appendix E: Survey questions..... 361*

*Appendix F. Survey description..... 363*

## Index of tables

<b>Table 1:</b> Sample of popular ukulele YouTube performers .....	154
<b>Table 2:</b> Example list of brands using the ukulele in their advertisements. ....	236
<b>Table 3:</b> The ten most popular words extracted from survey responses and transcribed interviews, using MaxQDA .....	256
<b>Table 4:</b> Rogers' six conditions (1957), and how they might manifest when transposed to the everyday musicking space of the ukulele social world .....	298



## Index of figures

<b>Figure 1:</b> Visualisation of worlds, events and pathways. Winston, Emma (2021).....	91
<b>Figure 2:</b> E major (left) and E7 (right): chord charts and finger positions. Winston, Emma (2021) .....	97
<b>Figure 3:</b> Case studies in chapter by type (explicitly closed versus implicitly closed). Winston, Emma (2021) .....	120
<b>Figure 4:</b> Visualisation of participant pathways. Winston, Emma (2021) .....	122
<b>Figure 5:</b> Visualisation of offline-first and online-first worlds and participant pathways. Winston, Emma (2021) .....	152
<b>Figure 6:</b> Visualisation of participant pathways to the Strummers. Winston, Emma (2021) .....	194



## 1. Introduction

A woman stumbles into a bar, gingerly picks up a musical instrument for the first time, and begins, to her own amazement, to sound out chords. A drag queen belts out parody songs to riotous applause. A hundred voices ring out in unison in the basement of a pub, in raucous celebration of nothing more than playing and singing beside each other. A teenage girl, viewed by millions through a screen, strums soulfully, inspiring others to do the same. A rural village group performs pre-war popular songs to a room of care home residents experiencing dementia, powerfully evoking memory. A neat grid of players stay up all night on a video call, playing silently but in unison, leading songs one by one, miles apart, and as if in the same room.

What these individuals have in common is that they all play the ukulele in 21st-century England. The ukulele has experienced a surge in popularity since the turn of the new millennium: in 2011, the Telegraph reported that a survey for the then-annual Music Instrument Retail conference in London found that, for 42% of 180 music shops surveyed, the ukulele showed the fastest sales growth of any instrument during the preceding year (Wallop 2011), while the National Association of Music Merchants' 2015 Global Report showed the instrument steadily increasing in retail value since 2009, from thirty million dollars to almost seventy million dollars (Morton and Lamond 2015, 12). During this period, the instrument also became increasingly visible in audiovisual media, serving as a plot point in a 2010 episode of cult teenage drama *Skins* (Campbell 2010), acting as the lead instrument in long-running sitcom *New Girl's* theme song (*Hey Girl* 2011), taking on a brief but important cameo in Disney's 2009 film *The Princess And The Frog* (Clements and Musker 2009), becoming an audiovisual motif in the critically acclaimed Cartoon Network series *Steven Universe* (Brown 2017), and, perhaps more controversially, accompanying numerous advertisements for products ranging from dating websites to instant rice (Jacobson 2015).

The instrument's media proliferation was paralleled by a rise in ukulele clubs, groups of individuals meeting to play their instruments together, sing and socialise. While the total number of these groups is difficult to accurately ascertain, since they are almost without exception community-run, and many are very small in size, the ukulele resource websites Got a Ukulele and Ukulele Hunt maintain databases which attempt to act as a central listing of them; Got a Ukulele counts 284 such clubs in Britain (Maz 2017), while Ukulele Hunt counts 457 between Britain, the contiguous United States of America, and Australia (A. Wood 2010a, 2010b). Alongside these groups, numerous independent ukulele-playing musicians began to post content to the video platform YouTube, giving the instrument a significant presence in the online sphere. As of 2017, a query for the search term 'ukulele cover' on YouTube, for instance, yielded more than eight million results.<sup>1</sup> The ukulele, then, appears to have experienced a 21st-century resurgence in popularity, and to have acquired cultural importance both at the level of mainstream media and, particularly, at the grass-roots level.

This is really the instrument's third wave of popularity. The first took place in the last years of the nineteenth century, when the instrument gained enormous popularity in Hawaii after being introduced by Portuguese settlers; by the early 1900s, it had been introduced to the contiguous United States, where its popularity peaked in the 1920s. Its 'second coming', as Tranquada and King put it, took place during the early 1950s, when it was popularised in America by TV host Arthur Godfrey's televised ukulele lessons (Tranquada and King 2012, 142). Its popularity waned again in the 1960s, although it experienced some use by artists like Ian Whitcomb and Tiny Tim outside Hawaii, and resurged alongside a revival of traditional music in Hawaii in the 1970s, further popularised by artists such as Israel Kamakawiwo'ole in the 1990s (Tranquada and King 2012, 155–58). Around the turn of the millennium, a new ukulele

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<sup>1</sup> As of 2021, YouTube no longer provides a count of videos returned for a given search term; however, ukulele covers continue to be actively posted to the platform.



boom began in Britain, the contiguous USA, and Japan. Despite this, and despite this third wave being perceptible for well over a decade at the time of writing, it has received relatively little attention in academia. A few scholars have given the third wave varying, but mostly minimal, amounts of space in historically-focused texts on the instrument (see Beloff 2003; Tranquada and King 2012; Shelemay 2015; Yano 2015), and a few case studies of third wave ukulele social worlds have emerged from the field of education studies, which are explored in more detail in my literature review (see Giebelhausen and Kruse 2018; Kruse 2013; Thibeault and Evoy 2011). But these studies are, I suggest, limited in their attention to time, place, and practices. Almost invariably, their primary focus is on the instrument's use in North America, despite the fact that Britain plays host to a large number of ukulele sessions, clubs and festivals, and they only rarely consider the online context in any depth. Additionally, few studies considering musicking across multiple groups have been published, one focusing on group leaders rather than members (Giebelhausen and Kruse 2018), and one whose analysis centres the instrument's role in Christian missionary work in Hawaii, and may not be applicable in a more secular context (Higashi 2011). Both also consider only one *type* of ukulele group, with a relatively stable membership, not catering to any particular demographic, and gathering mainly in spatial, offline contexts. While Ku examines groups with less stable membership and across a broader range of locales, her work remains restricted to general-interest, offline-first groups, and her focus is on songbook construction, not broader musicking experience (Ku 2018).

The picture of the ukulele's third wave in scholarship, then, is incomplete; much of how the numerous events centring it actually function remains unexplored. Yet to its enthusiasts, the ukulele is vitally important. The groundwork for this thesis was laid in 2009 by a project conducted during my Masters degree, which used survey and interview data to explore the ukulele's representation. Intriguing patterns emerged in my limited data suggesting the ukulele represented many players' first experience of

music-making which felt truly accessible; this often seemed to profoundly impact upon their sense of self, but there was little space to explore this in my Masters research. Enthusiasts within ukulele groups and clubs seemed passionate about the instrument, but to outsiders its significance was taken for granted, even hidden. This thesis, then, aims to explore the ukulele's third wave in 21st-century England, uncovering these hidden qualities. Its primary goals are to document the social structures and workings characterising the instrument's resurgence, and to reflect upon participants' experiences of music-making with the instrument. In doing so, it also considers what about the ukulele specifically might have led to its resurgence at this point in history.

This thesis views music as first and foremost constituted by activity, which I refer to, after Small, as 'musicking' (Small 1998). I adopt Finnegan's models of 'social worlds' and 'pathways' as structuring principles for my analysis, elaborated upon in chapter 3 (Finnegan 1989, 305–6). Broadly, a 'world' refers to an individual group, or a conglomeration of multiple groups with close, overlapping social connections between them. A 'pathway' refers to the dynamic route taken by a participant within a world, or between worlds, which is hewn out by normative musicking and social practices that endure beyond the immediate group of individuals present. I propose that the ukulele's pathways are frequently characterised by what I call 'desire lines', individual musicking routes led by personal desire which diverge from the main enduring pathway, and suggest that many of the normative practices of the third wave are constructed to enable pursuit of these desire lines. As a result, conventional modes of aesthetic valuation are often suspended and replaced with a quality of universal acceptance, which I interpret through a lens informed by person-centred and humanistic psychotherapeutic theory, in particular the concept of 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers 2012, 151). This is made possible through practices enabling a convergence of collective and solitary musicking, which persists in some form on every pathway described in this thesis. This, I suggest, might reflect, and be produced

by, the contemporary experience of a similar everyday convergence between togetherness and aloneness, resulting from the increasing infiltration of the internet into everyday life.

My methodology for this project is primarily a multi-sited ethnography, combining participant-observation with semi-structured interviews, and a survey of 505 respondents to gain a broader background view. Chapters 2-4 explore the literature surrounding my field of study, my theoretical framework, and my methodology, and are followed by six main chapters (chapters 5-11). Chapters 5 and 6 consider ukulele musicking pathways which route mainly through offline spaces: chapter 5 includes an ethnography of three ukulele 'jam nights' open to the public, while chapter 6 examines the experiences of participants at ukulele events catering, explicitly or implicitly, towards particular social demographics. The following two chapters explore pathways depending more upon the digital: chapter 7 explores ukulele playing on YouTube and the tensions therein, while chapter 8 narrates the experiences of a collective of players on Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapters 9 and 10 consider 'outsiders', asking who is *not* present on these pathways: chapter 9 represents an early exploration of the resonances of whiteness in the third wave, while chapter 10 examines the qualities of a backlash against the instrument emerging alongside its popularity. The final chapter discusses my findings, and considers directions for further research.

I believe the ukulele's cultural significance in the 21st century has been substantially underestimated within academia, perhaps in part due to its widespread reputation as lacking in seriousness, which chapter 9 suggests may simultaneously support its popularity among at least some enthusiasts. My personal investment in this project stems from more than a decade as a casual (and rather mediocre) ukulele player, making brief visitations to the pathway of YouTube cover songs in my late teens, and to occasional jam nights in my early twenties. As an undergraduate student of traditional musicology, and later as a keyboard player in several small indie and

folk bands, the pathways I usually traversed were concerned with works, with tracks, with producing something which could be shown to others. My forays on to the ukulele's pathways felt remarkable for their non-judgmental acceptance, in which even the idea of 'playing well' was almost irrelevant. During my Masters degree, I befriended the staff of a dedicated ukulele shop, who told me both about the instrument's explosion in popularity and the unique experiences of its clientele. I realised that my impression of the instrument's pathways as remarkable was not imagined; on investigating further, I realised how limited the scholarship devoted to the third wave was. My own musical background is very different from that of many of my participants. I have experienced relatively little friction in fitting myself into each musical pathway I have chosen to traverse, and have never questioned my identity as a musician. My investment in the ukulele is partly on behalf of those whose relationship with music, and with musicking, is more difficult than my own; although, like any pathway, world, community or scene, it is not perfectly inclusive, it nonetheless represents a route through the joy of a musical life taken by many who might otherwise never experience one at all.

## **2. Review of prior literature**

This literature chapter is divided into two sections exploring the primary themes and concerns of existing texts. The first reviews the literature on the topic of the ukulele specifically, and the second considers the existing scholarship on music-making in small, non-professional and fringe social worlds and other community formations more broadly. Through this exploration, I aim to demonstrate the limitations in the existing body of related work, highlighting what is drawn from it in my own study, and considering how this thesis might contribute originally both to knowledge about the ukulele's third wave of popularity, and about music-making in non-professional contexts.

### **Time, place and practices: scholarship of the ukulele, and its epistemic gaps**

The literature concerning the ukulele itself is relatively limited in scope, particularly with regards to its third wave. Although some research on the topic does exist, much of it published in the last few years, there are clear epistemic gaps in the ukulele's academic representation in terms of place, time, and practices. Both historical and ethnographic literature on the instrument is focused almost exclusively on its use in North America, both within and outside of Hawaii. Historically-focused literature considering the ukulele is disproportionately concentrated upon its first, and, to a lesser extent, second waves of popularity, in the early and mid-twentieth centuries respectively. Some ethnographic literature does explore ukulele musicking during the third wave in more depth, but does so from a relatively narrow viewpoint. Almost all scholarship on the instrument's third wave focuses on only one case study per article, and emphasises ukulele groups which are not aimed at any particular demographic, with a list of known members who attend regularly, and who meet and music together in spatial, offline contexts. Only one study, by Giebelhausen and Kruse, compares four ukulele groups, but all four nevertheless conform to the stable-

membership, general-interest, offline-first model described above (Giebelhausen and Kruse 2018).

This thesis indicates that much third-wave ukulele musicking does not conform to this model. It takes England, which is home to a great variety of ukulele activity but is largely absent from existing scholarship, as its primary geographic focal point, but also examines ukulele activity which is more difficult to pin down to a particular locale, facilitated by the growth of the internet and social media. It also considers *types* of ukulele social worlds and pathways which are not represented by the case studies in the existing literature, deliberately distributing its field research across a variety of musicking social worlds. These range from general-interest, stable-membership groups like those described in prior scholarship, to jam nights which are open to the general public (including those without an instrument of their own), to groups catering to a specific social demographic or identity, to the activity surrounding the instrument on YouTube, to online clubs which meet using videoconferencing software. Although it should not be assumed to offer anything like a complete picture of ukulele pathways and social worlds, it nevertheless presents a far broader consideration of ukulele activity than has previously been documented. Marcus suggests single-sited ethnography does not take into account contemporary increases in global interconnectedness, and advocates multi-sited ethnographic methods as ways of researching which are more integrated with the world system (Marcus 1995). If culture, as Geertz suggests, is ‘an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols’ (Geertz 2017, 89), then examining a wider range of worlds and pathways facilitated seeking emergent patterns between the meaning-making practices of seemingly socially unconnected worlds, and considering whether there might, indeed, be a shared culture of ukulele enthusiasts, whatever specific pathways they might have chosen to traverse.

This multi-sited approach ultimately led to the model of ‘desire lines’ discussed in my introduction, which manifest through a range of improvisational strategies and

which I believe to be particularly characteristic of ukulele musicking during the third wave of the instrument's popularity. These desire lines express a flexibility which I argue is a defining feature of the ukulele's third-wave normative practices, and which is at its heart 'person-centred' (a term further elaborated on in chapter 3), enabling a shift away from skill-based metrics of musical valuation, and facilitating unconditional acceptance between its musicking participants. Although these desire lines are more readily created and traversed in some social worlds than others, they are persistently present in some form, and express the negotiation of a range of increasingly blurred boundaries; between the online and offline, between musicking together and musicking alone, and between participatory practices and the interests of corporate culture. My study's broader viewpoint also enabled me to begin considering who might be absent from the ukulele's third-wave pathways, exploring the instrument's devaluation by outsiders to its social worlds, as well as the values of whiteness which might underlie the ethnic homogeneity of English ukulele social worlds, both topics scarcely touched on in prior literature. This chapter both examines the scholarship preceding my own study, and situates it in relation to it.

*From national pride to cultural tourism: the ukulele in historical texts*

Much of the existing literature on the ukulele itself concerns its earlier history, particularly its first wave of popularity in Hawaii in the late 19th century, and later in the contiguous USA in the early 20th century. It is worth acknowledging that the ukulele was not, as some believe (see Nagyszalanczy 2015), originally developed by Hawaiian indigenous people; although inseparable from Hawaii, it nonetheless exists, as Stokes notes of the Neapolitan mandolin, within a framework of hybridity and mobility (Stokes 2017, 27). In the early 19th century, Calvinist missionaries had arrived on the island (Kashay 2007; Meller 1958), paving the way for white American settlers involved in the sugar trade (Cushing 1985; MacLennan 2014). The ukulele was created by Portuguese woodworkers who had settled in Hawaii to work the sugarcane fields in the latter part of the 19th century, and was a hybrid of two Portuguese instruments:

the form factor of a *machête*, a small instrument with four strings, tuned like the top four strings of a five-string *rajão* (King and Tranquada 2003, 5–10). Hawaii's last king, David Kalakaua, developed an affection for the instrument, and, with the rest of the royal family, made deliberate efforts to promote it, effectively giving it, in Tranquada and King's words, a 'new identity as a native instrument' (Tranquada and King 2012, 47), and using it in particular for a new style of songs, called *hula kui*, which were often written to evoke national pride (Tranquada and King 2012, 63). After the monarchy's deposition, the instrument was catapulted to popularity in the contiguous USA by its introduction to the Hawaiian pavilion at the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, where it was used to accompany the *hula* in a daily show (Tranquada and King 2012, 19). Following a decade of robust popularity, the instrument began declining in use by the 1930s (Tranquada and King 2012, 135).

Several early texts discuss the ukulele during this period from either an organological or an ethnomusicological perspective (see, for example, Kanahele 1986; Roberts 1926; Cabral 1946; Elbert and Knowlton 1957). Beloff offers a later account of the instrument's history which is particularly useful for its exploration of individuals and groups instrumental in popularising the ukulele, and for its visual elements, which include photographs of numerous ukuleles and archival material such as advertisements and the covers of popular early songbooks (Beloff 2003). By far the most comprehensive history of the instrument, however, is a more recent text by Tranquada and King (2012), which follows and expands upon an earlier journal article by the same authors (King and Tranquada 2003). Tranquada and King's accounts of the instrument's history are particularly valuable because, firstly, they correct and clarify many of the ambiguities recorded in these earlier texts. Secondly, they draw on both contemporary and historical sources to give a more synoptic overview of the instrument's story. Thirdly, their book pays close attention to the political resonances of the instrument's early popularity; they position its adoption in Hawaii as emblematic of the 'revival and politicisation of Hawaiian culture', during a period in



which Native Hawaiians were keen to assert their resistance to annexation by the USA (Tranquada and King 2012, 52), and trace its mainland popularity to the overthrow of the island's monarchy, and the morphing of Hawaiian music from a source of national pride to 'a powerful form of marketing' to mainlanders (Tranquada and King 2012, 72), a perspective largely absent from earlier texts.

Although my own study is chiefly concerned with the third wave, Tranquada and King's account has nonetheless been particularly influential to chapter 10 of this thesis, which considers manifestations of whiteness, and the resonances of colonialism in present-day English ukulele social worlds. It is also one of only two historical texts I have been able to source on the ukulele mentioning Britain at all, in the context of the banjo ukuleles which became the predominant form of the instrument in England during its first and second wave, but which seemed uncommon in the social worlds I encountered in my own study, despite being billed as 'the successor to the Hawaiian ukulele' when first introduced (Tranquada and King 2012, 110). The banjo ukulele receives only the briefest mention without further analysis in Tranquada and King, and the ukulele's position in Britain, or indeed Europe, is otherwise mentioned only in passing by Beloff, although he does provide profiles on George Formby and Ian Whitcomb, both British players experiencing much of their popularity during the second wave (Beloff 2003, 67, 72–73). Nevertheless, a clear geographical gap appears to exist, in which only the instrument's significance on the North American continent is generally explored in depth.

Tranquada and King also go beyond the instrument's earliest years to consider its mid-century second wave, spurred on by sales of ukuleles constructed from modern plastics, and the popularity of television presenter Arthur Godfrey, who featured lessons on the instrument on his show during the spring of 1950 (Tranquada and King 2012, 145–46). Beloff, too, considers the role of Godfrey and of the ukulele's presence in TV shows set in Hawaii, as well as providing profiles of some of the most significant ukulele players during its second wave, including George Formby and

Tiny Tim (Beloff 2003, 67–70). A chapter by Szego also offers an interesting perspective on the ukulele’s role in school music pedagogy in Canada during its second wave, and provided valuable information in particular on the instrument’s construction as feminine to chapter 9 of this thesis, which explores the ukulele’s devaluation, including in terms of its gendered representation (Szego 2015). There is, however, a dearth of published historical work regarding the ukulele’s third wave, commencing in the early 21st century. Shelemay briefly acknowledges that ukulele culture is ‘a living tradition’ (Shelemay 2015, 327), but does not go into descriptive detail regarding what this looks like in practice. Beloff offers two pages of evidence for a third wave of popularity both within and outside Hawaii, including the popularity of ukulele festivals in Hawaii, as well as increased sales of the instrument and a growing collector market internationally, but does not attempt to interpret this growth in depth (Beloff 2003, 46–47).

Again, Tranquada and King offer the most comprehensive account of this of the historical texts available, and dedicate part of their book’s final chapter to the third wave. This is particularly helpful in that it represents a rapid tour through some key features of the early years of the third wave — the rise of viral ukulele videos on YouTube, the growth of ukulele clubs, the devaluation of the instrument by outsiders, and its presence in mainstream media all receive brief mentions (Tranquada and King 2012, 158–66) — but the depth of exploration is minimal, the description of the role of the internet is outdated, and no detail is given of how the social worlds of the ukulele players discussed actually operate in practice. This is not a particular criticism of the text itself, which primarily takes past events as its focus, uncovered mainly by engaging with archival material; at the time of its publication, the events of the third wave described in the book were still very much in the midst of unfolding. Nevertheless, the account serves to establish interest in a third wave which is never fully explored. This thesis aims to expand and describe in detail some of the musicking activity which is only briefly discussed in Shelemay’s and Tranquada and King’s texts,

and does so with a focus on interpreting player experience and felt meaning, as well as paying particular attention to England, whose historical relationship with the ukulele is only minimally discussed in the related literature.

Yano delves more deeply than other historians into the ukulele's third-wave representation, adopting Japan as her focus (Yano 2015). Her account is particularly valuable because it examines the instrument's contemporary use in the country in terms of its whole history, particularly in terms of colonial images of Hawaii. Yano is the only author of a primarily historical text on the ukulele to address this dynamics directly in her work, and does so in a manner which is helpfully nuanced. Her article is also noteworthy for its close consideration of the instrument in a geographical area outside of the North American continent. A particularly close thematic resonance between her work and my own is flexibility and what she dubs 'in-betweenness', which resembles my own findings regarding desire lines and improvisational strategies in third-wave ukulele musicking (Yano 2015, 319–20). Her analysis of this flexibility, at a superficial level, is similar to my own; like my participants, she cites ease of playing, cost, portability, sonic affect, and sociality as its constituent parts (Yano 2015, 320). She does not, however, describe in any detail how the ukulele is actually used by players in the real world, and her definition of this flexibility consequently remains rather vague. Where my work builds on hers is in my own focus upon, as Finnegan puts it, 'what people actually *do* on the ground' (Finnegan 1989, 7). This consideration of real-world practice was ultimately what revealed some of the most interesting nuances of ukulele pathways in my own study, in particular the desire lines I have already mentioned, and the unconditional positive regard and subsequent actualising they facilitate, which presents a model for how the flexibility Yano names actually plays out in practice.

#### *Practices, experiences: ethnographies of the third ukulele wave*

There are also several journal articles regarding the instrument during its third wave which are more ethnographic in nature, and are thus more methodologically

comparable to my own study. Szego's study of the ukulele in Canadian pedagogy during the second wave combines ethnographic and archival data, and may thus be viewed as a bridge between the two categories of literature discussed in this section. The more 'purely' ethnographic literature discussed here all adopts the third wave of the early 21st century as its setting, and thus serves to fill in some of the late detail left unexplored by the texts discussed in the previous section. These ethnographic texts, too, are both useful and limited in their own ways, doing early methodological and thematic groundwork which served as an invaluable starting point for my own research, but are again limited to stable membership, general-interest, spatial, North American groups, and additionally tend to be rather narrow in scope. Ku's unpublished Masters thesis could be viewed as a possible exception, using survey and observational data gathered from groups internationally, including some British groups, but her focus is specifically on the construction of song sheets by group leaders, rather than on the broader experience of musicking as in the other sources discussed here (see Ku 2018). Thibeault and Evoy's account is an autoethnography of a peer-taught class at the University of Illinois (Thibeault and Evoy 2011), in which students built their own ukuleles and then learned to play them. It touches, at least briefly, on a few of the core ideas explored more deeply in my own thesis, in particular musical participation by inexperienced players, and the ukulele's growth in popularity on YouTube. However, it does not look beyond the experience of its authors in their own group, and does not intend to; it is, primarily, intended as a teaching model for secondary or university music education, but is interesting in part simply because it represents one of the earliest ethnographic accounts of musicking with the ukulele during its third wave.

Kruse presents another single-site ethnography, this time of a ukulele club in Dallas, based on participant observation and interviews with six club members, which may be viewed as one of the more direct predecessors of this thesis (Kruse 2013). Kruse's participant-observation is most directly comparable to chapters 5 and 6 of this

thesis, which explore the structure and mechanics of face-to-face, general-interest ukulele jams and groups through data gathered by participant observation and interviews. Each of my own chapters, however, explores multiple case studies in detail, and also refers to other data gathered at similar sites not presented as case studies in the chapters themselves, to attempt to gain a broader overview. My own chapters also explore social worlds whose form differs somewhat from the stable membership and regular attendance of Kruse's ukulele club; chapter 5 considers ukulele jams which are open to anyone, sometimes including those passing by the venue who are simply curious, while chapter 6 considers groups catering, either explicitly or implicitly, to players in specific social demographics. Nevertheless, Kruse's study has much in common with mine; his participants, like mine, tend to emphasise the subjective feeling and emotional experience of playing the ukulele, a common topic of discussion in my own interviews.

Even though the group described in Kruse's research practises in spatial, or what I refer to as 'offline-first', contexts,<sup>2</sup> he does directly engage with the role of the internet, describing it as offering a secondary means of building relationships within the group (Kruse 2013, 163–64). My findings suggest the relationship of online and the offline on ukulele pathways to be broadly rather more complex and enmeshed than this, and I ultimately propose that some of the ukulele's offline-first practices actually mirror aspects of the increasing convergence between online and offline. This may be partly a function of the fact that, at the time of Kruse's study, social media was less ubiquitous, growing in parallel with the instrument's popularity but not yet as deeply

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<sup>2</sup> This terminology is explained more fully in the opening of chapter 7, but acts as a shorthand distinguishing between groups, clubs and jams meeting mainly in the same room (offline-first), and those whose primary pathways move through the online space, either via social media or videoconferencing platforms like Zoom (online-first). To refer simply to 'online' or 'offline' social worlds and pathways would be both disingenuous and inaccurate, since virtually all participants' pathways move through both online and offline spheres to some degree even if mainly situated in one or the other, and most offline-first events and social worlds make use of the internet in some form, as Kruse's own study suggests.

intertwined or reflective of it. Perhaps the most significant limitation of Kruse's study is that, much like Thibeault and Evoy's, it focuses on a single ukulele social world, and does not attempt to compare practices between multiple worlds, or to consider the pathways taken by participants beyond the immediate group described in the case study. Kruse is evidently aware of this, suggesting that other ukulele clubs should be examined to construct a 'more holistic representation' of the practices of ukulele players (Kruse 2013, 165). Ultimately, Kruse's article lays particularly valuable groundwork, theoretically and methodologically, for this thesis; my work builds upon his, to seek more broadly applicable patterns in ukulele pathways which might go some way towards explaining its contemporary popularity.

Giebelhausen and Kruse, like me, aim explicitly to build on Kruse's work (Giebelhausen and Kruse 2018).<sup>3</sup> Their study is perhaps methodologically closer to my own thesis than any other existing published work due to its multiple case study approach, examining four ukulele groups, in a direct response to Kruse's exhortation for more holistic representation. As scholars of music education, Giebelhausen and Kruse have a particular interest in pedagogy, which, in turn, leads to a focus on leadership. Although they, like Kruse and myself, use participant-observation to gather data in ukulele clubs, their interview data is collected exclusively from group leaders, rather than group members; in their recommendations for further research, they suggest that similar studies be performed focusing on group members. Although some of my own participants did lead groups, they were also all participants in ukulele musicking themselves, and in addition, the role of the organiser of a ukulele event in my own study tended to differ significantly depending upon the group's practices; in the most open events, described in chapter 5, event organisers could not really be accurately described as taking a 'leadership' role in the pedagogical sense at

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting here for clarity's sake that, despite both working in the field of music education and in the relatively sparse area of the third ukulele wave, Nathan and Adam J. Kruse are different researchers based at different institutions; to my knowledge, their studies in this field are unrelated except by topic, although Giebelhausen and Kruse do acknowledge the earlier Kruse paper directly.

all. Giebelhausen and Kruse's model, therefore, is mainly applicable within the particular form of social world which makes up their field of study: general-interest, spatial/offline-first clubs with a leader taking a teaching role. This is, again, not a criticism of their project; the multiple case study approach builds in a useful and focused manner on Kruse's single case study, but it does mean that their study still really takes place within a single form of ukulele pathway; this thesis aims not just to look at multiple social worlds, but multiple pathways players might take throughout their musicking journeys, both to document a broader range of practices, and to consider the connections and patterns emergent between worlds.

Giebelhausen and Kruse also particularly recommend further interrogation of demographic and identity in ukulele groups. Their field of study extends to general-interest ukulele groups, but does not include ukulele social worlds and events catering (either explicitly or implicitly) to players occupying particular identity demographics (marginal or otherwise). I consider this a pathway of its own, albeit one which runs in close parallel to the ones described by the other studies discussed here; chapter 6 examines four identity-specific social worlds, suggesting that the pathways taken by their players particularly emphasise belonging as a prerequisite to flexibility.<sup>4</sup> Although I had already conducted this phase of research by the time Giebelhausen and Kruse's article was published, I agree with their conclusions that demographic and identity are important areas of study which are all but absent from the existing literature on the ukulele, and this thesis aims to begin correcting this omission. Giebelhausen and Kruse also draw attention to a predominance of white participants in the groups their study focuses on, and recommend that further research addresses this issue more directly than the scope of their article permitted (Giebelhausen and Kruse 2018, 363). This was a phenomenon I, too, observed independently in my

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<sup>4</sup> Although my fieldwork included time spent in two non-identity-specific, stable-membership groups, these groups are not presented as close case studies because this group type is already well-represented in scholarship; they nonetheless retain the flexibility seen across the social worlds described in this study.

research, and chapter 10 of this thesis endeavours to begin to address it directly, although discussing it with participants proved challenging. What I did uncover revealed some of the potential limits of the inclusiveness encouraged by the practices of ukulele social worlds, and this might be a very fruitful topic for future research.

A 2011 doctoral thesis by Higashi, examining the ukulele's role in Christian ministry in Hawaii, and a 2019 article by Reese, a phenomenological case study of members' experiences in a ukulele group, share a concern with Turner's concept of 'communitas', a liminal and subjective state of togetherness in which participants experience one another as equals regardless of their ordinary social roles, frequently achieved through rites of passage in which participants jointly experience a liminal state (Higashi 2011, 11–12; see Turner 1970, 93–111). This has obvious resonances with my own application of Small's theory of musicking to the ukulele's third-wave practices, and to my suggestion that the 'ideal relationships' explored through ukulele musicking allow for unconditional positive regard between participants; in this respect, my work builds on these authors, and in particular responds to Reese's suggestion that different formats and practices across a wider range of group formats should be examined to establish the effect of these practices on communitas.

While I agree communitas is a useful framing for the experience of at least some participants, it might also imply a more binary and less fluid phenomenon than I experienced on the ukulele pathways explored in this thesis. Higashi considers communitas specifically in group public performances after a course of formally learning the instrument, while Reese explores it in the context of participatory group sessions which do not take place in front of a public audience. Both authors view these as bounded liminal spaces in which communitas can occur; Reese views communitas as emergent during the session itself, and Higashi 'at the point of reassimilation from liminality' (Higashi 2011, 53). While I am essentially in agreement with their basic stances, I also view them as a little too restrictive. In my own study, musicking (even in an apparently thoroughly collective context) was not always



experienced through the lens of unambiguous togetherness, but seemed to perpetually and variably negotiate convergent and blurred states of togetherness and solitude which were not confined to the defined space of the offline-first jam, rehearsal, or concert, and which could be explored freely via participants' individual desire lines. This, I will ultimately propose, reflects the convergence of these states of togetherness and solitude in everyday life following the penetration of the internet into contemporary ways of being.

Rogers' person-centred models of personality development, expanded upon in chapter 3, ultimately proved to be useful to this thesis in part because of their nuanced consideration of the relationship between the collective and the individual. The unconditional acceptance, or 'positive regard' Rogers describes, which seemed to characterise many of the ukulele's social worlds in my own study, is inherently a relational phenomenon; the growth it facilitates, however, manifests differently for each individual, and is driven increasingly by their internal desires rather than by external collective expectation (Rogers 2012, 151). Reese identifies Csikszentmihalyi's model of flow as one of the phenomenological elements of *communitas* (Reese 2019, 210), and while some participants in my own study did describe musicking in terms resembling flow, this was not by any means universal, possibly in part because some participants were too early in their musicking journey to have acquired the level of technical skill Csikszentmihalyi describes as a prerequisite flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2008, 72), and because some participants still experienced anxiety when musicking, which can disrupt flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2008, 75). Nonetheless, these participants still frequently described a sense of connection, and showed signs of musically actualising despite their anxiety; a longer-term increase in confidence in their musicking was one commonly-reported example of this.

Reese describes any identity transformation experienced by individuals in her study as temporary and transient, but I am not convinced this is necessarily the case either for my own participants or for hers; increased comfort and reduced anxiety

around playing, in and of itself, suggests a more persistent alteration of musical identity, although as Rogers' models of the 'actualising tendency' suggests, this is more a continuous process than a static goal (Rogers 1995a, 193); a state of growth is enabled and can persist, but the growth itself is never fully complete. Reese focuses on more fantastical forms of musical identity, such as participants 'feeling like rock stars' (Reese 2019, 219), but her participants' descriptions of their increasing proficiency suggest, in my view, that more enduring (albeit more mundane) forms of musical actualising, including thinking of oneself as 'a musician', may be present here too (see Reese 2019, 215). She also describes a significant range of skill and engagement mirroring my own findings, and attributes this to the masking effect of what she refers to as a 'dense blanket of sound' (Reese 2019, 214), or 'sonic wall' (Reese 2019, 221) and what I refer to in this thesis as the 'wall of strumming', in which the playing of the collective masks that of the individual, performing, in Turino's words, a 'cloaking function' (Turino 2009b, 100).

While Reese attributes the 'sonic wall' effect to the play-along videos used by the group her study describes, I found it seemed to be present in every social world in which participants played in groups in the same room, simply due to playing acoustically similar instruments which were relatively individually quiet when unamplified; in online-first social worlds, the cloaking function was achieved through alternative practices. I posit that this encourages pursuit of individual desire lines, enabled by a sense of safety and unconditional positive regard which was itself facilitated by this collective cloaking, whereas Reese (like Turino) views it as the individual becoming subsumed into the collective. Nevertheless, some of her own participants' quotations suggest that individual exploration within the safety of the wall of strumming may have been just as present in her own study; as well as the unity she focuses upon, they also describe differentiated experiences of experimenting (Reese 2019, 214), and of freely dropping out and listening at will (Reese 2019, 215). My own study provides what I think is a more expansive model for these phenomena

alongside the sense of togetherness these studies describe, as well as indicating more ways they might be enabled across different forms of musicking social world.

### **Musicking in small, non-professional, and fringe social worlds**

Beyond the ukulele itself, this thesis situates itself within wider literature emerging from popular/vernacular music studies and adjacent fields, concerning musicking in small, non-professional, and fringe community formations. Much of this literature is ethnographically-oriented. Cohen's useful exploration of ethnographic methods in popular music studies suggests that they may be rather under-utilised in the field (Cohen 1993, 136), but today, although it remains a methodological minority in popular music studies journals, ethnographic work is no longer as rare as thirty years previously. Although this review is necessarily non-exhaustive, it nevertheless presents the ethnographic texts most influential to this thesis, and contextualises the findings discussed thereafter. It first briefly explores existing studies of musicking in small, amateur or semi-professional grassroots contexts bearing structural, thematic, stylistic or methodological resonances with my own project, and then moves on to consider justifications given in the literature for studying musicking in more fringe contexts, which might be written off as insignificant within wider culture. I ultimately conclude that such contexts are worthy of scrutiny firstly because analysis of even the smallest communities contributes to overall understanding of everyday life and musicking, but secondly because they can offer insights into not just musical practice, but human experience, outside of the immediate social worlds being studied. With reference to Finnegan (1989), whose research inspired multiple aspects of this thesis, I propose that the very existence of ukulele pathways thus renders them worthy of study.

Ethnographic literature was particularly influential to this thesis because it seemed methodologically well-suited to my object of study. As Cohen puts it, ethnography allows the general to be studied within the particular (Cohen 1993, 133),

and for broader concepts to be examined through individual experiences and interactions. I suggest this renders ethnographic approaches particularly useful in considering smaller, more hidden musical worlds which may be more likely to be written off as lacking meaning or seriousness in wider culture; engaging with them directly, as I do in this thesis, and as the authors discussed in this section do with their chosen fields of study, allows their material practices to speak, and for what they say to be taken seriously. In turn, ethnographic methods also proved well-suited to the humanistic psychological stance which would ultimately become a large part of the broader theoretical framework of this study. The humanistic view (which I believe is also expressed in many of the normative practices of the ukulele's social worlds) of the individual as directing their own development and lived experiences, which can only be facilitated, not controlled, by others (Rogers 2012, 370), can only be met by methods taking individuals' directly reported experience of as their source of data.

*The general within the particular: small musical worlds in scholarship*

It is first worth briefly exploring the 'world' and 'pathway' as units of study in and of themselves. A range of literature examining vernacular cultural formations exists, which makes use of a variety of terminology and models, most commonly that of the subculture or scene (see, for example, Kruse 1993; Straw 1991; Clawson 1999; Thornton 2013; Walsh 1993; Barron 2013; Bennett and Rogers 2016). Either of these models could, I think, have been applied here, but neither felt like a perfect fit. After Redhead's (1990) observation of the perceived breakdown of earlier subcultural boundaries in dance music, Bennett critiques the earlier 'subculture' terminology as excessively fixed, imposing 'rigid lines of division' over experiences which are often much more fleeting (Bennett 1999). This seemed a particularly inappropriate way to conceptualise of the often highly changeable and varied routes taken through musicking by ukulele enthusiasts. In addition, 'subculture' has historically been used primarily in reference to youth cultural formations (see, for example, Hesmondhalgh 2005, 21–22, who suggests the link between popular music and youth is no longer so

clear); my own study indicated something much more expansive, at times certainly stratified by demographic, but inclusive of participants well beyond retirement age, as Hesmondhalgh suggests.

Scenes tend to be conceptualised as more structurally fluid than subcultures (see, for example, Straw 1991). Yet Hesmondhalgh expresses concern that the term 'scene' is excessively polysemic; that it can denote a truly expansive, globally scattered collective, or (often) can simply be used to imply a collective social formation within a single geographic locale (Hesmondhalgh 2005, 29). If subculture is not expansive enough, scene, he suggests, is too vaguely defined to coherently communicate social formations. Stebbins's conceptualisation of the social world, which I encountered first through his work on barbershop singers (Stebbins 1996, 2018), ultimately aided in balancing the general with the specific. Stebbins conceives of the social world as a constellation of actors forming around a particular shared interest or activity, citing Unruh's definition which views the social world as 'diffuse and amorphous', and is generally larger than a 'group' or an 'organisation' (Unruh 1980; Stebbins 2018). Both Unruh and Stebbins note that involvement in a social world is voluntary, and Stebbins adds that a social world is usually held together by some form of communication, often asynchronous (Stebbins 2018, 3–6). This was broadly accurate to what I was observing, but still did not quite capture the movement *between* overlapping social constellations I witnessed many participants making. In addition, Stebbins claims that involvement in a social world can only take place when the activity it has formed around falls under the category of 'serious leisure', which, as I discuss in chapter 5, proved problematic to apply to the ukulele players involved in this project.

In her extraordinary book *The Hidden Musicians*, Finnegan's model of pathways, referring to the dynamic journeys players take between instances of musicking, both within and between social worlds, resolved many of these issues. There is slippage between Finnegan's use of 'world' and 'pathway', and she sometimes uses the terms almost interchangeably; this is also the case in this project. When I refer to a social

world, I aim to refer to the sum total of ukulele enthusiasts in a particular constellation of individuals who are socially connected to each other. This means a social world might encompass multiple ukulele groups or events taking place in a locale, with overlaps in membership between all of them, or might include some events which are further afield, but are organised by individuals known to the attendees of a cluster of local groups. Some events, like festivals, bring together multiple social worlds into one larger one. A 'pathway' refers to a set of mutually agreed practices often shared between worlds; participants may explore a particular pathway between worlds, or within a single one. This also leaves space for participants from outside the social world to enter it, even if temporarily, meaning that serious leisure need not be a prerequisite for presence in a social world. My own model of 'desire lines' describes the particular individual flexibility of available pathways participants can choose to adopt, branching off from the enduring network trodden by prior participants without disconnecting from it.

The literature on musicking social formations most closely informing this thesis is largely ethnographic in nature. Cohen presents an excellent early example of ethnographic work in vernacular music, examining the paths of non-professional musicians in Liverpool's rock music scenes through close case studies of two bands (Cohen 1991). Tracing the journeys of these bands through contexts ranging from live gigs to the pursuit of record label contracts, she describes their processes of songwriting, performance, and organisation in depth. Although she contextualises these bands within the broader rock scene, in Liverpool and beyond, the depth of Cohen's observation contrasts a little with Finnegan's, which takes a more synoptic overview of the musical life of Milton Keynes, looking at ten different musical worlds which each contains multiple groups. My project falls, in its breadth and depth, somewhere between Cohen's and Finnegan's, but I found the level of descriptive detail in Cohen's study especially compelling, and this particularly influenced how I chose to convey the case studies described in this thesis.

In documenting musicking which is comparatively hidden from those who are not practitioners themselves, a researcher is met with the challenge of verbally conveying to a reader what the musicking experience — inherently multi-sensory, embodied, and largely non-verbal — is actually like. While the voices of Cohen's participants remain present in quotations throughout her book, its chapter on gigs is especially replete with Geertzian 'thick description' (see Geertz 2008), not only richly detailed to vividly evoke her sensory experience, but actively interpreting that experience to consider what might be signified by the musicking practices described. I pursue a similar route in my descriptions of individual musical worlds; while the voices of practitioners are included wherever possible, this is balanced with thick description of what Finnegan, after Abrahams, refers to as 'rituals' (Finnegan 1989, 335). These are the heightened participatory events around which groups and social worlds coalesce, such as jam nights, festivals, and rehearsals, which form the backbone of many participants' pathways.

Cohen warns against ethnography in the absence of theory; ethnographic description of experience purely for its own sake, she suggests, is 'meaningless' (Cohen 1993, 132). For Cohen, ethnography provides an orientation to research, allowing the researcher to move outwards from the particular to the general. Her own later work takes a more expansive view of Liverpoolian music temporally and spatially, examining a wider range of musicking practices within the city, applying close-range thick description and direct ethnographic experience, then moving outwards to consider these locally-situated practices in terms of their historical and social dimensions (Cohen 2007). The city is a central 'character' in Cohen's latter book, as Milton Keynes is in Finnegan's book. Although my own study attempts to map some of the pathways of, particularly, English players, partly to highlight the range and depth of ukulele musicking taking place here which has previously been ignored in scholarship, the instrument and its players are my primary focus, above any broader aspects of English or British culture. There is therefore perhaps a less clear

sense of place in this work than in Cohen's or Finnegan's. Locality is also complicated by the internet in my own study; particularly in chapters 7 and 8, it connects players from much further afield to pathways which might initially have been carved out by English players, but are now thoroughly international.

In balancing close-range ethnography with broader theoretical considerations, Shank served as an important example (Shank 1994). Shank's focus is mainly on progressive country and rock in Austin, Texas, and his narrative is richly descriptive, at times almost cinematic. His empirical observations and direct reports of experience are coupled with exploration of a theoretical framework delving into ideas borrowed ambitiously from poststructuralist thought and psychoanalysis. Like me, Shank is concerned with how real-world musicking practices produce and are produced by identity, and his account of the scene expertly moves outwards from ethnography to the generation of theory. Like Shank, in this thesis I consider ideas adopted from the field of psychology in the context of musicking and identity, although my interpretation owes more to Rogerian humanistic theories of the 'actualising tendency' than to Shank's Lacanian ideas of the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

For my part, ethnography was the starting point, and Rogers' ideas began to take shape as my framework only after encountering his concept of unconditional positive regard, further discussed in chapter 3 (see Standal 1954, 11; Rogers 1995b, 282), and realising it named the phenomena I was observing in the field. Stokes cautions against viewing theory as 'something we do after fieldwork' (Stokes 2010, 339), but my experience was more that the two unfolded alongside one another; in my own project, ethnographic description allowed me to 'show my working' on my own pathway towards this broader theoretical framework, to readers who have not themselves journeyed on similar pathways. Although ukulele musicking has grown significantly in popularity and influence during its third wave, it nonetheless remains a relatively undocumented leisure activity. I have tried, here, like Cohen and Shank, to balance the general with the particular in bringing its practices and structures to light.



Perhaps the text most similar to this project in broad structure is by Stebbins, and explores the activities of barbershop singers (Stebbins 1996). While Cohen and Shank's focus is on musicking straddling a fine line between amateur and professional activity, Stebbins, as I do, takes as his focus a single, niche activity, practised exclusively by amateurs, with few to no true professional counterparts; the barbershop singing he describes is intrinsically a leisure activity. While professional ukulele players do exist in Britain (one is discussed at length in chapter 7, and another in chapter 10), professional roles for players to aspire to are scarce on most of the pathways I describe. Stebbins's focus, then, is trained upon the varying levels of seriousness with which people participate in leisure activities; while the broad structure of his study is similar to mine, his findings differ. He divides leisure participation into two subtypes: hobbyist (in which the activity is pursued without participants modelling themselves on professional counterparts) and amateur-professional (in which participation is modelled on the engagement of professionals in a similar activity), and argues that barbershop singing is always a hobbyist activity, but one whose participants can be divided into two levels of seriousness: highly committed devotees, and moderately committed participants. He also names another category, the dabbler, who treats the leisure activity as a casual pastime, and who tends not to be welcome in 'serious-minded' barbershop chapters (Stebbins 1996, 45–55). Experimentally applying these categories to third-wave English ukulele players proved almost nonsensical; the seriousness of players' engagement was sometimes so mercurial that a player might move between Stebbins's categories even within a single session, or (often) appear to an observer to be a devotee, but claim to be a dabbler. The ukulele's musicking practices are such that unconditional positive regard between players, regardless of variable levels of engagement, remains constant.

I have already discussed Kruse's (2013) exploration of the hybrid, partially-online model of communication adopted by the group he describes. Kruse's article, however, prioritises the offline aspects of his case study, and the role of the internet is

considered only briefly, almost as an afterthought. There is, however, a substantial body of other literature on community and vernacular musicking practices mediated by the digital (see, among others, Allington, Dueck, and Jordanous 2015; Born and Haworth 2017; Elliott 2004; Lysloff, C. Gay, and Ross 2013; Molyneux et al. 2020; Waldron 2013a, 2013b). O’Leary’s content analysis of YouTube channels offers more specific detail on the nature of the ukulele’s representation on the platform, and was a useful starting point for chapter 7 of this thesis, but this, too, is incomplete, focusing on channels centring around ukulele pedagogy, rather than those emphasising original and cover performances (O’Leary 2020). O’Leary does not adopt an ethnographic approach, meaning his findings are less richly experientially detailed than the other studies explored here. Perhaps the closest studies to chapters 7 and 8 of this thesis, which examine online-first ukulele worlds on YouTube and Zoom respectively, are Waldron’s articles on a convergent online and offline community coalescing around the banjo, with a central message board, ‘Banjo Hangout’ (Waldron 2013b, 2013a). Waldron’s studies serve as a useful touchstone for my own work, in that they position the *convergence* of online and offline communities as integral to participants’ experience of learning: ‘music learning in one context,’ Waldron suggests, ‘continually reinforced and complemented learning in the other, resulting in a deeper and richer experience than learning restricted solely to one context’ (Waldron 2013a, 98–99).

This sense of offline and online as inextricably intertwined was particularly apparent at the YouTube convention described in chapter 7, but was further deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic, and chapter 8’s Zoom ukulele group. Although physically isolated learners in Waldron’s study express a sense of missing out on close personal relationships in offline meetups (Waldron 2013a, 99), by contrast, the relationships formed on Zoom through musicking were harder to qualitatively distinguish from those formed in offline contexts, further blurring the two spheres. The practices of Waldron’s participants also seem less fluid than those described in

this thesis, conforming more uniformly towards serious leisure; despite its structural similarities to some of the social worlds and pathways I describe in this thesis, then, the Banjo Hangout community seems not to display the characteristic flexibility and blurred boundaries of third-wave ukulele pathways; in this way, their relationship to the internet itself seems to mirror their leisure practices. This thesis proposes that the flexibility which characterises third-wave ukulele pathways produces a musicking experience that is at once both participatory and, in a term borrowed from Killick (2006), holicipatory — that is to say, both collective and solitary — mirroring the blurring of boundaries between the collective and the solitary produced by the increasing penetration of the internet into everyday life.

#### *Why study musicking at the micro-level?*

I have already mentioned the influence of Ruth Finnegan's work on this research, in terms of its conceptual terminology of worlds, pathways, and my own interpretation thereof, desire lines. However, it is also worth highlighting that Finnegan's underlying intent in *The Hidden Musicians*, like mine in this thesis, was firstly to uncover the systematic and coherent structures underlying musical practices which could easily be written off as haphazard and unstructured to an outside observer, and secondly, in one small way, to deepen understanding of wider culture. Finnegan notes that it is impossible to understand 'the overall interaction of the many pathways which make up British society' without knowledge of 'local music activities at the grass roots' (Finnegan 1989, 33); understanding of the particular is viewed as a prerequisite for knowledge of the general.

This movement outwards from the microcosm to the broader theoretical macrocosm is echoed by Reddington (2004, 2012), who examines in detail what she terms a 'micro-subculture' or 'subculturette'; this refers to a small, locally-situated subculture (or, in my own terms, social world) whose participants might otherwise be erased from canonical discourse, but whose practices and experiences may shed light on broader cultural dynamics; in Reddington's case, the early Brighton punk scene is

used to illuminate the treatment of women in both punk at large and the wider music industry. Kruse likewise suggests that examining local musicking at close range is necessary in understanding the role of situated music practices in the construction of identity, but notes that this also tends to play a role in a sense of connection to, but also distinction from, other, distributed communities engaging in similar situated practices (Kruse 1993, 38). The local is not merely local; it exists in relation to other localities. Grenier and Guilbault similarly advocate both micro and macro analyses in popular music studies, extending from local practices to global and political social dynamics, and emphasising their mutual interdependency (Grenier and Guilbault 1990, 393).

Kruse critiques Finnegan for an exclusive focus upon the locality of Milton Keynes, without taking into consideration how the practitioners she discusses differentiate themselves from those in other geographical areas (Kruse 1993, 38). However, I view Finnegan's treatment of the musical worlds and pathways she explores as connecting their practices to wider culture in an even more expansive and ambitious form than this; rather, she moves outwards from examining hidden local practices to consider what they might tell us about wider societal dynamics, and even about what it means to be human. In her final chapter, she calls attention to grassroots musicians as upholding a system of social roles which are just as integral to cultural understanding as those created by industrial labour. She also entertains the idea of music as a dimension of human experience as unique and significant as language, and of the pathways explored in her work as comparable to those afforded by organised religion (Finnegan 1989, 340).

DeNora takes a similarly ambitious approach, using ethnographic studies of music in locally-situated contexts ranging from aerobics classes to house parties, to position musicking as central to structuring everyday human experience, and as a tool for shaping self-concept and identity, as well as regulating bodily processes (DeNora 2011). Viewed through this lens, which understands grassroots, everyday musicking

as expressive not only of wider musical practices but of broader dimensions of human experience, to ignore and fail to document the pathways which have developed around the ukulele during its third wave seems nonsensical; by Finnegan's and DeNora's criteria, the very existence of these pathways, let alone their recent rise in popularity, justify their serious consideration. Their relative neglect in scholarly research, and the wider cultural tendency to devalue the ukulele which I describe in more detail in chapter 9, render this task all the more vital; in taking for granted that they are unworthy of closer scrutiny, a small but significant facet of contemporary society, and, indeed, of what it means to be human, is left unexamined.

### **Research questions and claims to knowledge**

This is, inevitably, not an exhaustive tour of the literature which contributed to the research process for this project, and throughout the rest of this thesis, I will refer to other literature which is not necessarily derived directly from the study of grassroots musicking, but relates more specifically to the themes and issues explored in each chapter. It should by now, however, be evident that my intent in conducting this study is to fill a clear epistemic gap. While literature on the ukulele is not completely absent, it is incomplete and not comprehensive. All of the texts discussed in this section considering the ukulele itself provided useful material on which my own research builds, but all are limited in terms of place, time, and practices. There is also remarkably little literature concerning itself with the ukulele's popularity outside of North America, despite numerous potential pathways and a wider range of social worlds available to English players, as suggested by sources like Wood's database of ukulele clubs (A. Wood 2010b).

Historically-oriented texts regarding the instrument also tend to be comparatively light on detail about its third wave, if they consider it at all, while ethnographically-oriented texts document some of what is actually taking place amongst ukulele practitioners during the third wave, but are restricted either to a

single group or, in the cases of Higashi, and Giebelhausen and Kruse, multiple groups which are similar in form (not catering to a particular player standpoint, offline-first, and with a relatively fixed membership) leaving alternative pathways players might take unexamined. Despite suggestions by Kruse, and Tranquada and King, that the internet might be playing a significant role in the ukulele's third wave, there is also surprisingly little focus on online-first worlds, with the exception of O'Leary's content analysis, which is evidence of the instrument's popularity on the platform, but is incomplete and lacks experiential detail.

I also suggest that an epistemic gap exists regarding what about the ukulele *specifically*, and its attendant social worlds and pathways, might have prompted the third wave of the late 1990s and early 2000s; Yano, in my view, comes closest in her assertions about the instrument's characteristic flexibility, but in attributing this to the ukulele itself, her analysis does not extend to how this flexibility manifests in musicking practice — that is, what players actually do with the instrument in the real world — and is therefore necessarily incomplete. On the other hand, Reese describes a range of practices which resemble those encountered in my own findings, but does not identify the flexibility I propose those practices contribute to, nor the lasting change which can result from this. The wider literature from popular music studies, anthropology, ethnomusicology and music education regarding small musicking communities, in my opinion, strongly justifies endeavouring to fill in these gaps. As Cohen suggests, close-range ethnographic study is particularly valuable when more general issues and theories can be studied *within* the very particular, locally-situated practices of the sort I have described in this section; and as Finnegan suggests, wider-ranging issues may be illuminated by, and, in turn, justify the cultural importance of those local practices.

The central questions asked by this research are, in essence, then: why the ukulele; and why now? To begin establishing an answer, the rest of this thesis aims to examine a broader range of third-wave ukulele social worlds and pathways than have

previously been discussed in the literature, and to consider how they actually operate in terms of real-world musicking practice, as well as taking place in a region in which a great deal of ukulele musicking takes place, but which is almost completely neglected in earlier studies of the instrument. In doing so, I uncover, in particular, how desire lines are manifested within musicking to enact ideal relationships with both the self and with others, and how the processes used to manifest those desire lines are shared and repeated across ukulele pathways which might seem quite superficially different. I ultimately propose that these processes might offer the key to understanding the ukulele's third wave, in that the musicking practices they afford mirror the experience of a contemporary life increasingly marked by convergence, and a corresponding blurring of the boundary between online and offline, between public and private, and between connectedness and isolation. To further explore this, I use a theoretical framework incorporating thought derived from ethnomusicology, anthropology, and psychotherapeutic theory, and a multi-modal methodology falling loosely within an ethnographic and qualitative approach. This framework is discussed in the next chapter.





### **3. Theoretical framework**

As Cohen notes, theoretical models 'are not simply imposed on field situations and data: rather, they provide an orientation to the research which can be developed by the researcher over the course of analysing data' (Cohen 1993, 132–33). She describes a 'bottom-up' process in which the researcher moves from the particular to the general, and describes the local and the global as 'dynamically interrelated and inseparable' (Cohen 1993, 133), a resonant description when considering a field I would ultimately find to be characterised by blurred geographical, sonic, and social boundaries. Finnegan describes her own work as based first and foremost on local ethnography before moving towards broader questions (Finnegan 1989, 9), and, in practise, my research followed a similar trajectory. I adopted an inductive stance, using a modified grounded theory approach (see Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Charmaz, 2006) to analyse ethnographic data as it was collected, and only then beginning to generate hypotheses to further refine my questions and theories; the details of this are further discussed in my methodology section, but it is worth noting that the conceptual frames described here are considered from an interpretivist perspective, as structuring principles or lenses for understanding the experiential ethnographic data collected via the methods discussed in chapter 4.

#### **Musicking: music as practice, and ideal relationships**

Throughout this thesis, music is conceived of in terms of practices, rather than, as Blacking puts it, 'a thing in itself' (Blacking 1974, x). Particular combinations of these practices are normalised within particular forms of social world and ritual, and while these may (for instance in the case of YouTube's ukulele performers, described in chapter 7) result in a recording which can reasonably be described as a musical work, this is not my primary concern so much as the practices producing it; it is perhaps worth explicitly stating that in the case of the pathways described in this

thesis, the production of a commodity was the exception rather than the rule. Music was treated by the players I observed, participated alongside, and interviewed as a process first and foremost, and as an object second, if at all. Small's *Musicking* (Small 1998), in transforming 'music' into a verb and presenting it in its present participle form, emphasises its status as an act rather than as an object; something that is done, rather than an abstract concept that something is done *to*. Small's theoretical framing of musicking, as well as its primary purposes and functions, underpins this work throughout.

While Blacking suggests that music is primarily expressive of experience (Blacking 1974, 104), Small goes beyond this, theorising that musicking functions as a ritual act, heightening experience to allow its participants to explore, affirm, and celebrate 'ideal relationships' in metaphorical form (Small 1998, 96); this, he suggests, supports real-world social cohesion and stability. This process is not only engaged in by performers; it includes audiences, listeners and bystanders, and the relationships explored are not only those between individuals, but between sounds themselves. In turn, musicians and audiences also form relationships to these sound relationships, giving rise to a set of second-order and third-order relationships which are mediated by their first-order sound relationships (Small 1998, 199). Small notes that these more complex relationships are difficult to clearly articulate or grasp through verbal explanation, but that they are 'effortlessly' captured by the act of musicking itself. Modelling these relationships, he suggests, allows them to be experienced as if they really existed; it enables participants firstly to try out new ways of relating to one another, to themselves, and to the external world, without committing permanently to them, and secondly to claim and affirm values of which they are more certain. Thirdly, it acts as a mode of celebrating; in empowering participants to explore and affirm their values, Small suggests musicking 'leaves them with a feeling of being more completely themselves, more in tune with the world and with their fellows' (Small 1998, 184).

This thesis therefore assumes that the practices framing a given musicking ritual have meaning, and are not arbitrarily chosen. It considers how ukulele players describe relating to one another, to themselves, and to the musicking process, and examines aspects of their practices to understand how they might support the ideal relationships players engage in through their musicking. It ultimately concludes that the ukulele's third-wave pathways are frequently characterised by encouraging participants to engage in musicking practices which straddle a blurred boundary between the collective and the solitary, and that this enables both individual experimentation through the pursuit of desire lines, and unconditional positive regard between participants, a concept borrowed from humanistic psychotherapy and explored in the next section of this chapter. This unconditional positive regard creates a sense of safety encouraging both further experimentation, and a sense of interpersonal warmth within the social world. I also speculatively suggest later in the thesis that the blurring of the collective and the solitary acts as a means of exploring a similar, broader convergence of togetherness and aloneness which resulting from the increasing penetration of the internet into everyday life. Since the ukulele's third-wave resurgence took place in concurrence with the rise of social media, and its popularity is closely intertwined with the emergence of YouTube, in particular, I posit that its musicking practices may represent a means of exploring ideal relationships under the conditions of digital convergence.

### **The person-centred lens: unconditional positive regard, the actualising tendency, and congruence in musicking**

Throughout this thesis, I propose that one of the characteristics of the ukulele's third-wave social worlds is that skill and technique are largely set aside as metrics for evaluating the playing (or other participation) of others musicking in the same space. This enables the pursuit of desire lines, or experimental pathways driven by curiosity; the normative practices of many of the social worlds described in this thesis seemed

to be designed, whether consciously or not, to liberate participants to experiment with playing in new ways (and sometimes with not playing at all) without disrupting the pursuits of those musicking alongside them. The actual mechanics of how this is achieved are discussed throughout the thesis, particularly in chapters 5 and 6, but it should be noted that the result seemed to be that participants expressed an almost relentless warmth and acceptance towards those musicking in the space alongside them, both in the immediate, experiential context of participant-observation, and in interviews taking place away from the musicking ritual itself, suggesting an enduring shift in perception. Whether their compatriots were talented, or whether their playing was virtuosic, or closely supported the strumming of the group, was rarely raised; it simply did not seem to be viewed as relevant, and participants instead seemed focused upon social connections and the in-the-moment experience of musicking.

I identified this warmth as a defining feature of third-wave ukulele social worlds well before I was aware of the existence of any constructs to name or explain it, and was at first unsure how to make sense of it. On the one hand, it seemed utterly selfless and collectivist, based on complete acceptance of the other, however 'good' or 'bad' their playing, and whether or not they actively socialised or engaged by, for example, making song requests. On the other hand, it seemed individualistic, with each participant focused on their own playing, accepting that all present had different agendas for musicking; the improvisatory practices of their social worlds meant they could pursue these agendas collectively, without disturbing each others' individual desire lines. I found language for it on encountering the theories of Carl Rogers, a founding father of humanistic psychotherapy, while my research was ongoing, through my attempts to better support students I was teaching as an associate lecturer, and endeavouring to train myself in the very basics of active listening (see Rogers and Farson 1957). I began, out of curiosity, what I thought would be a cursory investigation of the origin of these techniques, and found myself reviewing Rogers' work. I was stopped in my tracks by his description, after Standal, of 'unconditional

positive regard', which seemed to perfectly capture the quality of warm acceptance of others' musicking I had witnessed throughout my journeys on the ukulele's third-wave pathways:

It is an atmosphere which simply demonstrates 'I care'; not 'I care for you if you behave thus and so.' Standal (see Standal 1954, 11) has termed this attitude 'unconditional positive regard,' since it has no conditions of worth attached to it...It involves an acceptance of and a caring for the client as a separate person, with permission for him to have his own feelings and experiences, and to find his own meanings in them. (Rogers 1995b, 283–84)

In everyday life, positive regard — a sense of love and acceptance from others — is often conditional. In psychological literature, truly unconditional positive regard seems to be conceived of almost exclusively in a psychotherapeutic context, but Sanford describes it as a 'way of being' which *can* exist in non-therapeutic relationships, including in casual exchanges, albeit on a spectrum of intensity and requiring variable effort (Sanford 1984). Much, too, has been written about the 'psychotherapeutic frame', a term coined by Milner for the set of boundaries, conventions and rules which surround and lend safety to the therapeutic space (Milner 1952), enabling psychotherapeutic phenomena to emerge (see, for example Cherry and Gold 1989; Gray 2013; Langs 2019; Luca 2004; Warburton 2014). The therapeutic frame is less used in person-centred contexts than in psychoanalytically-informed ones, but Gray suggests that it can be usefully applied across modalities (Gray 2013, 3–4). There are clear parallels between the therapeutic frame and the musicking space; Finnegan notes that musical performances are defined, in part, by being set apart and 'framed' (her word) as separate from everyday life (Finnegan 1989, 151), as well as by sets of agreed-upon conventions and boundaries. If this framing is partly what enables the exploration of ideal relationships Small's theory of musicking describes, it seems reasonable to assume that this may include phenomena such as unconditional positive regard, which might be less available in everyday life. It is the

framing, the normative modes of engagement, of the events described in this thesis which seem to enable effortless unconditional positive regard on the part of participants.

For Rogers, unconditional positive regard is one ingredient in an environment which promotes growth. He views humans as driven by a natural and innate 'actualising tendency...involving not only the maintenance but also the enhancement of the organism' (Rogers 1995a, 123); exposed to a 'growth-promoting environment', an individual will move in the direction of personal fulfilment, or what Maslow refers to as self-actualisation (Maslow 1954). This is both a relational and an individual process; truly unconditional positive regard, which is fully and not partially accepting, allows the individual to become released from earlier 'conditions of worth' (external expectations which may have been presented as conditions for positive regard, and which have been introjected on to the self) they may have been subjected to, and pursue fulfilment driven by individual desire. This also means the environment should ideally be non-directive, so that the client can lead that pursuit (Rogers 2012, 40).

Removing obstructions from the actualising tendency leads to increased positive *self*-regard, increased openness to present-moment experience, and 'differentiation of the perceptual field' (Rogers 2012, 142), so that what may have been perceived in terms of broad, black-and-white abstractions becomes more variable and based on the complexity of primary experience; the individual becomes more 'aware of this existential moment as *it is*' (Rogers 1995b, 353). For example, an individual who had previously been told they lacked musical ability, and had become afraid to music with others, might begin to realise that making a mistake does not — indeed, cannot, due to the affordances of the ritual — lead to judgment or expulsion from the social world, does not mar the musicking experience, and does not mean they are 'unmusical', or should not music. This shift was commonly reported by a subgroup of participants discussed in chapter 5, and I argue throughout this thesis that the normative practices

of many third-wave ukulele social worlds are set up to enable a non-directive environment in which unconditional positive regard can be effortlessly extended to enable increased musical actualising and differentiation.

Unconditional positive regard is, however, only one of the six conditions Rogers stipulates as necessary and sufficient to enable the actualising tendency:

- Psychological contact between client and counsellor
- The client is incongruent
- The counsellor is congruent
- The client receives empathy from the counsellor
- The counsellor shows unconditional positive regard towards the client
- The client perceives acceptance and unconditional positive regard (Rogers 1957, 95–96)

I was initially unsure if these conditions could emerge in a non-clinical musicking space. It is worth noting that although the social worlds described here were nominally led by individuals who were usually experienced in the instrument, most interactions took place between peers in a group context, and leaders were generally treated as equals within the group; one divergence from this model, then, is that there was therefore no clear parallel to the figures of the counsellor and client on the pathways described in this thesis. I would ultimately find the presence of all six conditions *could* be clearly detected (discussed in chapter 11), but that they extended fluidly and multidirectionally between individuals.

Congruence, suggests Rogers, is a state in which both behaviour and perceived self (or how the individual views themselves and their behaviour in the real world) closely align with ideal self (an imagined concept of the self viewed as desirable), and may require adjustments towards a more realistic image of the perceived self, a more achievable image of the ideal self, or both (Rogers 2012, 465–70). Participants seemed to experience varying levels of congruence regarding their musical self-concept, but often implied or stated increasing congruence the more time they spent traversing the

musicking pathway; they might begin their musicking journey in the incongruent role, but later progress to a more congruent one and become more able to support newer attendees. Although the musicking frame is not a perfect mirror of the therapeutic frame, then, clear parallels are present.

I am unaware of any other studies applying Rogers' model of personality to musicking not already framed as therapeutic. Sackett suggests a similar gap exists in literary analysis (Sackett 1995). 'One test of a psychological theory,' he suggests, 'is its ability to fertilise thought in other disciplines' (Sackett 1995, 141), and notes that although Freudian psychoanalytic theory has been widely applied to literature, other psychological schools of thought remain rather neglected in cross-disciplinary work, providing examples of how humanistic ideas might illuminate the analysis of a range of literary works. Since Rogers' methods hinge on the conscious, directly reported thoughts and experiences of clients, I suggest they might be very appropriately used to interpret ethnographic data. Shank's application of poststructuralist psychoanalytic thought to his ethnography of the Austin rock 'n' roll scene might be viewed as parallel to my endeavours here; however, where his Lacanian-informed analysis rests on interpreting the unconscious motives behind participants' actions, my Rogerian-informed one relies on interpreting the conscious experiences they verbally report.

Additionally, while the lens of *communitas* used by Higashi and Reese implies a transient and reversible shift in self-concept, humanistic theory accounts for these in-the-moment experiential shifts and traversals of desire lines, while also leaving room for more lasting change. While the actualising tendency may be enabled by transient experiences occurring in a time-limited frame (be that a musicking frame or a therapeutic one), this can gradually lead to greater shifts in an individual's relationship with themselves and with their external environment (Rogers 1995b, 204). The shift some participants seemed to experience in their musical self-concept, as well as the longer-term relationships that were sometimes built within the spaces described in this thesis, suggests that *communitas* may not tell the full story, and that Rogers'



humanistic theories of growth and change may aid in filling in some of the gaps in considering what kind of ideal relationships are explored, affirmed and celebrated through the normative practices of ukulele musicking.

### **Worlds, pathways, and desire lines**

Worlds, pathways, and desire lines are central structuring principles in this project's conceptual framework, and although I have briefly unpacked them in chapter 2, it is worth further clarifying their use and distinctions. The pathways concept, derived from Finnegan's *The Hidden Musicians*, is deployed in this study as the main organisational term for the various overlapping routes players take between locally-situated ukulele rituals, as well as within and between given social worlds; in my case, this includes rituals taking place online. Finnegan's aims resemble my own; her research intends to uncover and display the importance and vitality of hidden and taken-for-granted musical practices in a particular time and place, and does so by examining the social structures of individual sites of activity, proving them to be 'not just haphazard or formless', but held together by 'an invisible but organised system' (Finnegan 1989, 4). Finnegan and I also encountered similar problems in finding vocabulary to accurately describe our observations. 'Worlds', 'groups' and 'communities', Finnegan suggests, while useful for describing individual units like bands or social clubs, do not capture the wider relationships they share through 'established symbolic and habitual practices' (Finnegan 1989, 305). Terms such as 'networks', meanwhile, draw attention to these broader connections, but do not properly describe the 'abiding structure over and above the links of particular individuals' within musicking which, for instance, allows a tradition or practice to continue in a locale even if one set of links or groups is dissolved (Finnegan 1989, 305). These relational practices are all shared by the players described in this thesis, and I, too, found myself unsure of how best to refer to them early in my research.

Finnegan coins the term 'pathways' to describe the movements players make between and within individual musical 'worlds', referring to

a series of known and regular routes which people chose – or were led into – and which they both kept open and extended through their actions. These 'pathways' more or less coincided with the varying musical 'worlds'... but avoid the misleading overtones of concreteness, stability, boundedness and comprehensiveness associated with the term 'world'. (Finnegan 1989, 305–6)

In practice, I found that participants' pathways often route through multiple types of event and social world, and social worlds themselves cannot necessarily be broken down to single events and groups. A player, particularly in London where ukulele events were abundant prior to the coronavirus pandemic, might spend time interacting with other players or just practising along to ukulele tutorial content on YouTube (one social world) before going to an open jam night in a pub (another social world), then the next day attending a rehearsal at a small group with a fairly stable membership (another social world), and at the weekend attending a large ukulele festival (another social world). Each of these social worlds overlaps with others: an open jam night might be attended by students of two unrelated ukulele classes which are each their own social world, as well as having its own regulars; the subscriber base of a large ukulele YouTube channel brings together numerous internationally-located social worlds into one; similarly, a large festival might be a conglomeration of parts of multiple social worlds located around the country. A social world can be locally-situated and fairly stably populated, but this is not always so, and a small, stable social world can be combined with others at events like festivals to create a new social world. Pathways therefore describe a dynamic journey between worlds.

The distinction made between 'pathways' and 'worlds' in *The Hidden Musicians* is actually hazier than I have indicated here; on occasion, Finnegan seems to use the terms almost interchangeably, acknowledging that musical worlds within her field of Milton Keynes are also bound up with broader institutions manifested further afield,

and that the 'worlds' term is limited in its ability to capture this complexity. Most frequently, and in my opinion most usefully, however, Finnegan uses the 'world' concept to describe individual bands or groups, or conglomerations thereof, and the 'pathway' concept to describe connections between worlds, and, crucially, participants' movements within and between those worlds; pathways, like musicking, are inherently participatory and person-centred. There is, consequently, also some slippage in my deployment of the two terms in this thesis, but generally when I refer to a 'world', I do so in reference to a particular overlapping constellation of social connections, often a single club/group or multiple closely affiliated ones. When I refer to a 'pathway', I do so in reference to the routes of participation and practice enthusiasts may take between worlds, but also sometimes within one particular world.

Despite the expansiveness of Finnegan's ideas, mid-way into my own project I found I felt the need to extend them further, which gave rise to the novel concept of 'desire lines'. Although the pathways terminology is chosen, in part, to describe the 'relative and non-bounded nature' of musical practices, 'in one sense locally based, in another extending more widely across the country' (Finnegan 1989, 304), this thesis also observes a tendency towards extreme flexibility which I ultimately argue is a defining feature of the third wave, and which pathways are not quite expansive enough to describe. Finnegan's pathways are:

established, already-trodden and, for the most part, abiding routes which many people had taken and were taking in company with others. To be sure, none were permanent in the sense of being changeless, nor could they survive without people treading and constantly re-forming them; new paths *were* hewn out, some to become established, others to fade or be only faintly followed, others again to be extended and developed through new routings... But for any given individuals the established pathways were in a sense already there, as a route at least to begin

on: they were part of the existing cultural forms rather than something that needed to be calculated afresh each time. (Finnegan 1989, 307)

But many participants in my own project adopted a more mercurial approach than Finnegan's, shifting and changing in their level of commitment, style of playing, decision to sing or not to sing, to be heard or not to be heard, not only when choosing groups or events to move between, but often actually within the duration of a single session. While one player might be motivated to consistently tread out the habitual musical pathways to which they were accustomed, sitting beside them in the same session might be a new player motivated by trying on new musicking identities, regardless of technical prowess. Perhaps the most remarkable quality of ukulele pathways is that these ways of being seemed perfectly compatible with one another, with each player taking a wholly individual journey even as they played alongside others; the sound-relationships afforded both by the morphology of the ukulele and by the established practices and structures of musicking within ukulele pathways afforded this compatibility, and allowed participants to extend unconditional positive regard to one another, rather than judging others' playing by externally-imposed standards.

Using the pathways metaphor, players therefore seemed able to 'walk' alongside one another, diverge from the main path to take a 'route' of their choosing either parallel to or completely away from the main pathway, then return to it without destabilising the journeys of others. I refer to this phenomenon as the 'desire line', in a deliberate expansion of Finnegan's terminology. This is really a semantically imperfect naming: in wayfinding, the desire line is an informal path created by repeated foot traffic erosion, which then becomes a newly abiding pathway, whereas the phenomenon I describe takes place at the individual level, and so does not usually create an established pathway for others to follow, although they may do so if they wish. Despite this, I retain the term chiefly because it captures how players allowed their participation to be led, above all else, by desire, but also never seemed to erode

the established routes which already existed; instead, it was a defining structural feature of ukulele pathways in and of itself.<sup>5</sup>

Cohen, like Finnegan, explores culture as a dynamic rather than a static process, noting a desire to conceive of local cultures in her work on Liverpoolian music as ‘connected’ rather than ‘fixed’, which allows her to ‘highlight fleeting, transient and plural connections between music and city’ (Cohen 2007, 36). She refers to a range of theorists who have considered local cultures in terms of their mobility rather than settlement, some of which might also have been usefully applied here: Gilroy’s metaphor of the Black Atlantic uses ‘ships in motion’ to position Black culture as a hybrid always between locales, transcending the fixed borders and binaries of the nation-state (Gilroy 1993, 4); Appadurai views cultural ‘flows’ and ‘scapes’ as defining features of globalisation in an increasingly interconnected age (Appadurai 1990, 296); Connell and Gibson describe music’s relationship to place as attached to certain locales, but position those locales as ‘the outcome of more fluid, multidirectional spatial flows’ (Connell and Gibson 2003, 46). All of these texts describe phenomena familiar to this thesis, but I have chosen to adopt Finnegan’s terminology because the ‘pathway’ implies something an individual may actively choose to strike out upon; the journey may be difficult and others may advise against it or scoff, or it may be a simple and scenic route, but, rather than an unstoppable external force, it is something that is ultimately individually chosen by the practitioner themselves. The pathway, and perhaps to an even greater extent the desire line, relies on agency and the willingness to forge on and make the journey oneself, whether or not one chooses to follow or lead other travellers along the way.

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<sup>5</sup> This is in keeping with how physical pathways are used in traversing urban spaces; in ‘Walking In The City’, de Certeau suggests a ‘poetic geography’ is formed through walking which cannot be captured by more literal and formalised maps of a space (M. de Certeau 2011). De Certeau views walking as ‘a space of enunciation’, in which walkers go beyond the imagined limitations a pathway’s determinants might have set for it.

## **Modelling musical identities and selves**

Throughout this thesis I reference forms of identity and the self, in particular 'musical identity' and the 'musical self'. These are expansive and contested terms, and my argument rests upon certain limiting definitions of them. MacDonald et al describe each individual's 'self-system' as composed of a series of 'self-images', which may be situational or restricted to a particular domain, for example feeling like a skilled musician, or indeed a musician at all (Macdonald, Hargreaves, and Miell 2002, 7–8). These self-images are integrated within an overall 'self-identity'. 'Self-esteem' refers to the evaluation of one's self-images and self-identity, or 'how worthy we think, and feel we are' (Macdonald, Hargreaves, and Miell 2002, 8). Components of self-image develop during childhood through a process of self-monitoring and comparing one's behaviour to others, which is then compared against self-image, and what Rogers calls the ideal self, a desired and future-oriented self-concept. This process of comparison can cause an 'external locus of evaluation' to become introjected, so that external expectations become the primary means by which one evaluates oneself (Rogers 1995b, 119).

These expectations may be real or perceived, and subtle or overt; some participants' ideal musical self seemed based upon values introjected solely through self-comparison, but others had undergone a process Small refers to as 'demusicalisation' (Small 1998, 212), in which they had been told outright that they were 'not musical', usually in childhood. For some, who described a strongly-felt ideal musical self incongruent with their musical self-image after the demusicalising event, this was outright distressing. MacDonald et al suggest the distress produced by incongruence is often experienced as lowered self-esteem (Macdonald, Hargreaves, and Miell 2002, 8), and increased self-judgment, but it is also worth noting that some participants in my own study spoke in terms indicating lowered musical self-esteem (in terms of 'not feeling like a musician', or being 'bad at music') but did not seem distressed by it, and at times seemed to allow their musicking to be motivated and

liberated by it. These self-images may have been introjected partially from discourses levelled at the ukulele itself by detractors, and chapter 9 discusses this in more detail.

Rogers suggests that acceptance and non-judgment can help an individual to shift self-evaluation away from an external locus and towards an internal one (Rogers 1995b, 53–54). This thesis suggests the normative practices of the ukulele's social worlds implicitly declare that all participants' musicking is valuable. This value is asserted unconditionally, regardless of participants' technical skill, musical self-images, or self-esteem, freeing them to move into a state of actualising and bring their perceived and ideal musical selves into congruence. This may enrich other areas of life, even when actualising is restricted to music; Creech et al suggest that developing a realistic musical possible self — a future-oriented self-concept resembling Rogers' concept of the ideal self — can positively impact on subjective wellbeing later in life (Creech et al. 2014). They note the importance of experimentation with 'provisional selves' in generating musical possible selves, through actively pursuing and practising new skills (Creech et al. 2014, 43). If, as Rogers suggests, the growth-promoting potential of therapy lies in the relationship formed, and if, as Small proposes, musicking is about enacting ideal relationships, it seems reasonable that active involvement in musicking might facilitate the actualising process.

Such views of the self exist in a challenging relationship with postmodern ideas of social constructivism. For Rogers, there is a real and essential self which the human organism seeks to actualise, conflicting with the multiplicitous and malleable identities proposed by constructivism. O'Hara advocates for what she calls 'weak-form constructivism' in psychological study, in which consciousness is acknowledged to be formed from constructions, but these constructions are viewed as 'surface clues' to deeper and more universal experiences (O'Hara 1995, 296). This thesis takes an approach partially informed by radical empiricism, in which experience is viewed as the sole constituent of knowledge. This operates in parallel with Rogers' goal to empathically occupy his clients' lifeworlds, and with ethnographic practice which

views lived experience as its object of study; if the self is experienced by a participant as a coherent and continuous identity, I treat it as such, interpreting reports collected through ethnographic study through the lens of my own lived experience. The external evaluative locus informing both much of the ukulele's devaluation by outsiders, and participants' experiences of demusicalisation, is understood as an *experienced* form of socially constructed ideals.

MacDonald et al delineate two broad forms of musical identity, which they refer to as identities in music (or IIM) and music in identities (or MII) (Macdonald, Hargreaves, and Miell 2002, 11–14). IIM refers to self-concepts developed in relation to culturally defined roles in music; am I a musician? Do I consider myself musically skilled? How do I think of myself in relation to the normative roles and practices of a given field of musicking? Self-esteem with regards to IIM can alter musical practice; Reynolds notes that developing a poor self-concept of one's musical ability in childhood makes future engagement in musicking less likely (Reynolds 1993, 21), which was consistent with the experiences of the demusicalised subgroup of participants in this project. What was more surprising was that this subgroup seemed at times to view the ukulele's pathways as an exception to their non-musical self-concept, facilitating a return to musicking which they themselves had assumed would never occur, and restoring some semblance of an IIM, often after extended periods of disengagement from musicking. Reese refers to participants in her own study temporarily trying on the role of 'real musician' while playing, but suggests that this tended to be lost outside the moment of *communitas* in musicking. Although I similarly found that some participants were reluctant to describe themselves as musicians, they also spoke freely and enthusiastically about their musicking practices, and the development in their confidence over time. I suggest that although the term 'musician' itself remained bound up with an external evaluative locus for some participants, they nonetheless experienced real, lasting, and profound shifts in their internal evaluation of their IIMs.



MII refers to the use of music for developing and negotiating what Turner refers to as 'social identity' (Turner et al. 1987), such as gender, sexuality, age, class and race. It is considered mainly in chapter 6 of this thesis, which examines four ukulele social worlds centring, either explicitly or implicitly, particular forms of social identity which are subject to marginalisation. These social worlds are found to particularly emphasise belonging as a prerequisite to actualising in their musicking practices, allowing participants to forge desire lines from a particularly stable base created within the social world; in this respect, IIM fed into MII, and vice versa. Chapter 10, conversely, considers MII in terms of negative space, attempting to interpret the underrepresentation of ukulele players of colour from the third-wave social worlds in which I had conducted fieldwork. This required an interrogation of Rogers' view of unconditional positive regard as divorced from systemic power, as well as with how the values of whiteness might present themselves on the ukulele's third-wave pathways.

I endeavour to achieve this from a perspective informed by intersectional theory (Crenshaw 1989), which proposes that social identities intersect at the individual level of lived experience, and, in turn, express intersecting systems of power and marginalisation at a broader societal level (Bowleg 2008). Although gender and race were initially Crenshaw's primary concerns, contemporary intersectional analyses extend her ideas to take into account other axes of privilege and marginalisation, viewing all identity as a matrix of overlaps and conflicts; Cho et al describe intersectional interpretation 'more as a nodal point than a closed system – a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities' (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 788). The intersection of gender and sexuality is particularly crucial to one of the social worlds discussed in chapter 6, and although my analysis in chapter 10 hinges primarily on whiteness, the gendered aspects of Hawaii's representation in colonialist marketing is also a crucial consideration. Although I indicate that the

ukulele's pathways play a vital role in the development of many participants' IIMs, their relationship to MII was perhaps more fraught, indicating a possible playing-out of deeper-rooted dynamics of dominance and marginalisation that became increasingly apparent to me over the course of the project, but may have been beyond participants' conscious awareness.

### **Musicking, lived experience, and the self: orienting the research**

The theoretical framework for this project is presented here as a lens for focusing, directing, and more deeply understanding the ethnographic data, and my interpretation of it, presented in the main chapters 5-11 of this thesis. It serves to orient the research, and to more clearly define terms ('music', 'identity', 'world') which are rather polysemic in their broader use. It positions music first and foremost not as an object, but as an activity engaged in by individuals. It holds that this activity is meaningful in its capacity for exploring, affirming and celebrating participants' real and ideal relationships with one another, with themselves, and with the wider world, as well as with the act of music-making itself. It views lived experience, of the researcher as well as of the participant, as the primary (at times, the only) source of knowledge, and adheres to the humanistic perspective that individuals are naturally drawn towards fulfilment and actualising when in an environment that does not obstruct this process. It also considers identity to be multipartite and composed of numerous self-concepts, including musical self-concepts, which are nevertheless often experienced as part of a coherent and continuous self, and which can affect overall self-image and self-esteem, as well as existing within a complex and intersectional network of broader power structures.

## 4. Methodology

Balancing breadth and depth in research for this project was a particular challenge. I frequently felt pulled between close-range, detailed knowledge, and broader background context; especially when my research began, the only available scholarship on the third wave was made up of single-sited case studies, meaning I felt responsible for providing context. Yet I also knew the specifics of my research might differ from prior studies; I knew, for instance, that a good deal of ukulele activity was taking place on YouTube and in social worlds which differed structurally from those described in earlier literature. My research methodology therefore involved a mixture of qualitative and ethnographic methods, employed pragmatically and modified where necessary, to fill gaps wherever they were most apparent. My approach was informed by naturalistic enquiry (Beuving and Vries 2014; Lincoln and Guba 1985), in which knowledge is developed primarily to offer insight into lived experience in a local context, and, rather than broad statistical generalisability, seeks for research to meet special criteria of trustworthiness based on credibility (sufficient understanding to produce a 'true' representation, acknowledging no singular objective reality), transferability (sufficient detail for findings to be applicable to other contexts, often through thick description), dependability (showing the findings could be repeated) and confirmability (showing the findings are shaped by participants and not solely the researcher) (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 289–327). One method for increasing credibility is 'triangulation', in which data is collected through multiple modalities (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 305), an approach I have adopted here; this chapter describes the range of methods used.

I adopted a multiple case study, or multi-sited ethnographic approach (see Baxter and Jack 2008, 548; Marcus 1995; Yin 2013, 46–53). Prior single-sited case studies seemed sufficiently limited that I wanted to offer insight into meanings shared between different types of ukulele social world, and possible connections to what

Marcus calls the 'world system' (Marcus 1995, 96), beyond what a single-sited case study could offer; this also represented a form of triangulation which might increase the research's credibility. Additionally, the multi-sited ethnography also seemed to offer an experience of the ukulele's worlds and pathways more closely emulating participants' experiences; since ukulele musicking is a part-time activity for most enthusiasts, and certainly for nearly all of those playing at a grassroots level, most engagement was through events scheduled on fixed days of the week or month, or less frequent events like festivals. For those in locales with just one accessible event, this might mean only musicking alongside others on that day, but for those in London, where I was located for most of the research process, it was common for participants' pathways to route through multiple events on consecutive days of the week, since most local events were weekly and took place on different days.

During some periods of research, I was therefore immersed in multiple field sites simultaneously, but where appropriate I would make briefer visits into social worlds which were more closed, or which gathered less regularly. For the participants in chapter 8's Zoom group, due partly to the pandemic drastically increasing attendees' leisure time, it was not uncommon to attend events in the same social world every night of the week. My engagement with this world increased over a few months, from 2-3 nights a week to daily, meaning despite the unusual circumstances, my fieldwork within this group was more traditionally 'immersive' than in any other field site discussed in this thesis. This was, again, simply a product of attempting to engage with social worlds in a similar manner to participants. Appendix A lists field sites attended and their timelines.

Finnegan describes her own methodology as 'mixed and perhaps rather haphazard...participating much more directly and deeply in some worlds and activities than others but trying to gain some appreciation of them all' (Finnegan 1989, 342-43), which she attributes to conducting fieldwork in an urban setting in which countless events and activities were available. Living in London led to a similar level

of choice, although I did not remain exclusively within the city, expressly to get a sense of what pathways participants might take elsewhere. Two popular informational websites list ten and eighteen ukulele groups meeting in London, respectively (Mohandes 2017; Maz 2017), but they are not consistent with one another; although some events I visited were publicly listed, two did not appear on any list I was able to locate, but were recommended by individuals. There are likely more ukulele social worlds in the city than I even became aware of during this study, and which are not accounted for by online resources.

I had entered the field as an occasional ukulele player, with a few contacts more embedded in the instrument's social worlds, who I had largely met through musicking not centring around the ukulele itself. These contacts were my starting point for selecting initial field sites; since the person-centred angle of my research holds that the participant, rather than the researcher, is the expert on their own lived experience (the primary source of knowledge according to my empiricist epistemology), I wanted to trust those already traversing the ukulele's third-wave pathways to recommend initial fieldwork sites, and only then to inductively select further sites based on my findings in the field. This also meant my own pathways were closely aligned with how any other participant might locate social worlds, by word of mouth and personal recommendation; Pratt suggests that ethnographic writing foregrounding personal narrative in this way 'mediates a contradiction within the discipline between personal and scientific authority' (Pratt 2020, 32), negotiating the 'impossible' task of bridging objectivity and subjectivity. Consequently, however, like Finnegan, my engagement within different worlds and with different events also varied in time and scope, and was dictated by comfort levels of participants; some preferred to have me observe only a single event, while open events such as jams welcomed me for months at a time. This, too, mirrored participants' engagement; the desire lines inherent particularly in offline-first ukulele pathways normalised periods of more and less intense involvement in different social worlds. The resulting research

aims to balance close detail with enough wider context about the ukulele's third-wave pathways to make tentative inferences about the wider meanings and themes present. The specific methods used to achieve this are described in this chapter.

### **Participant-observation**

Participant-observation was a mainstay of the study; since the social worlds discussed mostly centred musicking without an audience, from which no recording or other 'work' was produced, musicking itself was the only means by which I felt I could reasonably understand how participants' pathways actually functioned in practice, and get a sense of the subtleties of the frame — the conventions and norms — of their social worlds. I visited 23 field sites (see Appendix A) during the course of the project (though the depth of my involvement varied significantly between them). Gold's typology of participant-observation identifies four possible roles for the researcher in participant-observation: complete observer, observer as participant, participant as observer, and complete participant (Gold 1958), and, to begin with, I had imagined myself adopting a role somewhere between participant as observer and complete participant. In practice, this proved rather more difficult to apply to the ukulele's pathways than I had envisioned. Because participants' desire lines were so variable, particularly in the most open events like those described in chapter 5, in one sense anything at all that was done during the ritual was complete participation, whether playing a ukulele, flitting around the room to talk to others, or simply sitting back and listening (or observing). This also meant that non-participation, or complete observation, was itself participation. Desire lines also meant that periods of more and less intense involvement, and moving between multiple social worlds, were viewed as completely normal. I would frequently bump into the same participants at different events, meaning my multiple case study approach, in and of itself, arguably resulted in more complete participation on the macro-level of broader pathways between social worlds.

In more closed worlds and events, I took a similarly flexible and pragmatic approach. I would generally initiate contact with a group or event's organisers explaining my research interests, and asking firstly if they would be willing for me to visit, and secondly how they would be most comfortable with me participating, requesting that they asked attendees if they were unsure. In all cases that I received a response, organisers either expressed no preference, or said they would prefer me to participate. If they had no preference, I would attend with a very small soprano ukulele with me in a backpack so I could choose whether to participate depending upon my intuitive impression of the group; I ultimately used it at all but one of the events I took it to. The length and regularity of my involvement was also variable; I visited some worlds only once or twice, but I remained regularly involved with others for several months. There are clear disadvantages to shorter periods of time spent in a social world; Brymer describes participants revealing a secret to him after two years spent in the field with them (Brymer 1991, 181), suggesting that rapport can significantly affect data collection. It was certainly true that the social world within which I formed the closest relationships, described in chapter 8, also provided the richest emotional data in participant-observation. When I was unable to remain in a social world for extended periods, I would aim to recruit from that world for interviews, so that where I could not deepen my own lived experiences and relationships more emphasis was placed on the directly reported experiences of others. I aimed to respond to the flexible pathways I encountered with similar methodological flexibility.

Field notes were almost always written up in detail immediately after each session when I arrived home, occasionally the next day if it was very late at night, since most sessions took place in the evening. I took occasional and brief 'jot notes' in my phone's native notetaking application on any details which seemed particularly salient during sessions (see Bernard and Gravlee 2014, 276–77; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 21–22), which were transferred to my main field notes after the session. I

did not make audio recordings during participant-observation, both because acquiring consent from all participants at larger events would have been impossible, and because acoustic blurring was so common at many ukulele events that any recording would anyway have been of very limited use.

I regret that I did not adopt a more boldly autoethnographic approach to my field notes during participant-observation, and, consequently, the eventual writing up of this thesis. Although epistemologically I found myself intuitively pulled back, over and over, to radical empiricist approaches such as Jackson's (1989), I found myself afraid of centring my own narrative voice too much, thinking of DeWalt and DeWalt's assertion that it is difficult for the autoethnographer to capture sufficient detail (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010, 168). While I felt drawn to the epistemological standpoints of the autoethnographic works I was reading (see, for example, Garner 2018; Harrison 2012; Patti 2009; Zebracki 2016), I found that they were frequently difficult to contextualise within a wider canon of literature. Knowing that I wanted to balance breadth with depth, given the gaps in the existing scholarship of the third wave, I felt reluctant to pursue a radically autoethnographic style, choosing, instead, to 'remove myself' from immersion in the field after attending each event (Bernard 2006, 344), and positioning my experiences within a broader interpretive perspective, while still attempting to retain reflexivity, as Hamilton describes a balancing act between her roles as an actor as well as an observer (Hamilton 1998, 33).

When my fieldwork in offline-first spaces was almost complete, I read Ellis's extraordinary novel *The Ethnographic I* (Ellis 2003), and my perspective was permanently altered, perhaps too late. Ellis presents both a vividly emotional and personally revealing autoethnographic account, while also situating her narrative within a rigorous and thorough historical exploration of both autoethnography and ethnography itself as a discipline, using personal experience to illustrate and link together the theory and experiences of others, at times combining or fictionalising dialogue to do so most effectively. Were I to repeat or extend this project, I would



adopt a more radically autoethnographic methodology, emulating Ellis's, but to do so ethically would, I think, require a rethink of what was explained to participants, particularly interviewees, ahead of obtaining consent. In the event, my descriptions of specific case studies are presented as autoethnographically as I could reasonably manage, and are written in the first person and present tense to try to capture both as much of my own sensory and emotional experience as I and my field notes were able to recall, blended with the emotions produced metacognitively, in the moment of trying to remember while writing. Beyond these case studies, I adopt a more conventional interpretive approach, written in the third person and past tense. Chapter 7, on YouTube, may be the most 'experimental' in this regard; although browsing the website was a rather disembodied act, the often highly emotional inner experience of that act was, at times, best expressed as autoethnographic thick description.

### **Online ethnography**

Lane suggests that to accurately portray contemporary life it may be increasingly necessary to view online and offline identities as intertwined, and digital ethnography should therefore be viewed as continuous with spatial fieldwork (Lane 2018, 186–87). Chapters 7 and 8 of this thesis concern, respectively, the ukulele's popularity on the online video platform YouTube, and ukulele activity using the videoconferencing software Zoom during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. The latter was simpler to approach methodologically; the Zoom events were time-limited rituals in a bounded virtual space, in which every attendee's presence was known in some form even if their camera and microphone were off. As such, my approach did not radically differ from offline-first ukulele jams; I participated actively, writing up field notes from memory after each session was complete, and rarely taking jot notes on my phone if something particularly remarkable happened during the session. I have already mentioned that the schedule for this phase of research was actually

more conventionally immersive than any other social world I had participated in, and that this mirrored participants' involvement; just as they found that a pastime of previously variable intensity had become a constant in the absence of other available social activities, so I found that I, too, was spending more hours in the same social world than ever before. Disclosure of my status as a researcher was also, in some ways, simpler than in a spatial, offline-first event; the community used a Facebook group to communicate between sessions, where I was able to create a post explaining my research, which also proved helpful for interviewee recruitment. Despite the strange circumstances leading to chapter 8's addition to my thesis, I was ultimately surprised at how straightforward adapting my earlier methods were to the virtual space.

Chapter 7, on YouTube, was a little more complex, theoretically and methodologically. The network of pathways routing through YouTube also includes spatial events in the form of conventions, and as such my fieldwork for this chapter also included more traditional participant-observation at a British YouTube convention; although my own findings suggested that viewing similar events as data sources for social media research might yield valuable perspectives, there is a dearth of prior research on YouTube conventions specifically. I was also surprised by how little ethnographic work centred around YouTube more generally. One notable exception to this was Bishop's work on vlogging, gender and algorithms (Bishop 2018a, 2018b, 2019), which was invaluable in establishing what ethnography on YouTube specifically might look like. Bishop describes her ethnography, after Postill and Pink (2012), as a 'messy web' (Bishop 2019, 2594), comprising semi-structured interviews, and observing content creators through the content they posted across multiple social networks, as well as analysing YouTube's promotional materials.

Bishop's ethnography includes data derived both from directly interacting with the content creators in her study, and from observing their video output, unknown to them. She analyses and thematically codes this data simultaneously, acknowledging the fragility of boundaries between the 'online' and the 'offline', which she refers to in

quotation marks to denote their conceptual contingency. I took a similar approach, incorporating field notes taken while browsing YouTube itself into my dataset alongside my field notes taken in spatial contexts. Throughout this thesis, I also refer to ukulele pathways as 'online-first' or 'offline-first'; an online-first pathway is defined as one in which participants' interactions are mainly digitally mediated, but who may intermittently meet in the offline space, and an offline-first pathway is one in which interactions largely take place in the same physical space, but may be complemented by forms of online interaction. Bishop and I therefore agree that online and offline are constantly intertwined, and cannot be fully separated; Postill and Pink similarly propose the work of the social media ethnographer is always inherently mobile, moving between social networks and offline spaces fluidly (Postill and Pink 2012, 130). I ultimately conclude that third-wave ukulele pathways themselves share and reflect these qualities of mobility, and may even represent an attempt to negotiate them.

Hine's (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*, although a little dated by the technologies it discusses (including newsgroups and internet relay chat), was helpful in thinking through the ethics of citing virtual sources; as a result of what Marwick and boyd refer to as 'context collapse' (Marwick and boyd 2011), the line between public and private is perhaps more difficult to navigate for sources which are permanently archived, often searchable, and technically public, but to which the author did not necessarily consent to being placed under close academic scrutiny. Hine suggests pseudonymising newsgroup participants so that their posts cannot be easily traced back to an enduring online identity, but notes that in contexts which can be text-searched, even verbatim quotations can pose a problem (Hine 2000, 24). In the present day, the great majority of online sources can be easily text-searched, so verbatim quotations from comments sections or forums almost inevitably leave their authors at risk of identification. Ultimately, while I felt comfortable exploring video content uploaded to YouTube specifically for the purposes of being seen by, and entertaining

or educating, a potential audience, I felt particularly uneasy about reproducing comments in my thesis without consent. Chapter 7 therefore tends to summarise comments, rather than quoting them; the most notable exception is the recurrent motif ‘no one will see this, but...’, which was used by numerous commenters and does not identify any particular author.

The inclusion of online-first participant-observation does complicate this study’s interest in *English* third-wave ukulele pathways. Offline-first pathways were relatively easily defined as English; they took place within locally-bounded, physical spaces in various places in the United Kingdom, and, particularly in the case of recurring events such as jams, were attended largely or exclusively by players living locally. YouTube, conversely, is a global platform on which it may not always be readily obvious where creators and audience members are based, and the Zoom ukulele club had several regular attendees based outside the United Kingdom. Miller suggests, however, that social media use is always inherently local (Miller 2016, 1), since it is constituted of content posted by individuals with locally-situated everyday lives, and proposes that social media is best considered an elaboration of the telephone, as a locally-rooted but networked technology deeply integrated into ordinary life (Miller 2016, 2).

In this respect, chapters 7 and 8 are also thoroughly British in context; chapter 7 centres the fandom surrounding an English ukulele YouTuber, along with offline-first research conducted at a British convention. Chapter 8’s Zoom ukulele club was initiated by the regulars of a large jam night in London, discussed in chapter 5. Although the event’s regular attendees ultimately grew far beyond this social world, it retained a consistent core of members who had met in the London space. With the exception of one weekly bilingual jam hosted by an overseas member, repertoire was also made up primarily of books originally put together for offline-first jams in the UK or Ireland, and thus tended to reflect the cultural and musical knowledge of those locally-situated jams. As Miller notes, social media’s boundaries are permeable, but

this does not mean that all sense of locality is lost. It is, however, often easier to invite others located further afield into the spaces enclosed by those permeable boundaries, who might not otherwise be able to music within it.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

I also conducted a total of 24 interviews with 26 participants (see Appendix B); two interviews took place with pairs of participants at their request. Two interviewees were ukulele event organisers, and the rest were players; their ages spanned from mid-twenties to mid-seventies, and most had begun playing the instrument within the last five years, although both event organisers and three players had been playing for more than a decade. I began participant-observation three months prior to beginning to recruit interviewees, partly to expand my pool of contacts for recruitment, but ultimately interviews and fieldwork ran alongside one another throughout the course of the project prior to writing up. Here, too, I took a flexible and pragmatic approach. I aimed to strike a balance between focused interviews, which were directed in part by emergent themes picked up in my earlier participant-observation, and open interviews, used to generate emergent themes in the absence of prior assumptions (see Payne and Payne, 2004). Although I entered each interview with a list of questions (presented in Appendix C), I endeavoured to hold these lightly; if a participant steered the conversation in an alternative direction, I was also prepared to abandon these questions and pursue their line of enquiry instead, asking questions to encourage detail in their responses. Conversely, when an interviewee seemed uncertain about where to direct the conversation, the interview questions were returned to, and adhered to more strictly.

The questions covered the participant's life course in relation to the instrument (which was usually further probed to consider the life course in musicking more generally), the subjective felt meaning and experience of the participant's pathways, the ukulele, and the act of musicking itself, as well as musical identity. I adopted some

techniques from narrative interviewing methods (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000), stimulating an impromptu narrative from the participant with an initial question: in my own interviews, this question was 'can you tell me about your own journey with the ukulele?', which was used to gain an overview of the participant's musicking life course. After Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal, Hopf then suggests that the narrative interview can be steered firstly towards a particular life phase discussed in the narrative, secondly towards a situation mentioned in the narrative, and thirdly towards a particular theme or argument (Hopf 2004, 206). In practice, I used the first and second steering techniques both in interviews which veered away from the semi-structured format, and those which conformed to it, when I found myself with further questions which had not yet been answered. The third technique was used only when a participant had gestured towards the presence of a clear theme, either new or already known, but had not expanded on it.

In practice, interviews tended to build upon and further detail knowledge already gathered from participant-observation with regards to structures, practices, and experiences within musicking rituals themselves, but did also generate some new knowledge and themes about participants' experiences across the whole life course of musicking. I was already aware of the themes of flexibility and belonging on the ukulele's pathways from experiencing those pathways myself, but interviews elaborated on how participants actually acted upon that flexibility, and experienced a sense of belonging. I was also aware from participant-observation that the ukulele was perceived as particularly accessible, but interviews filled in the details of participants' perceptions of cost, portability, and initial learning curve as some of the constituent parts of that accessibility; the wall of strumming, conversely, was identified by participants mainly in conversations had while actually in the musicking space itself. Conversely, the theme of demusicalisation emerged initially from interviews.

Participants were recruited mainly through word of mouth, both within fieldwork sites and by personal contacts passing my details on to other interested

parties. Initially, I had planned for all interviews to take place face to face; Aquilino suggests that telephone interviewing leads to reduced nonverbal communication between a researcher and participant (Aquilino 1994), and Rubin and Rubin similarly argue that face-to-face interviews are preferable (Rubin and Rubin 2011). Yet this unilateral decision on my part did not sit well with me, particularly given the frequency with which participants (particularly those with a history of demusicalisation) I attempted to recruit in the very earliest phases of interviewing referred to me as an 'expert', and in a few cases expressed an interest in my project, but declined to be interviewed saying they felt they did not have sufficient expertise to be of help to me. I wanted to encourage a sense of agency amongst participants from the outset, and to emphasise that I had approached them because I considered them experts on their own lived experiences, regardless of their technical expertise, to enable them to steer the interview where appropriate. Sturges and Hanrahan suggest that the lack of visual cues in telephone interviews does not necessarily affect the depth of responses (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004, 112), but also, importantly, note that their respondents universally preferred being able to select a medium for interview, feeling it afforded them more control over their often busy schedules (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004, 113). In addition, Fenig and Levav suggest lowered participant anxiety when talking about sensitive subjects in telephone interviews (Fenig et al. 1993). Although I was not handling particularly sensitive topics in my own interviews, the sense of being 'underqualified' did seem to produce anxiety for some participants, and I was keen to reduce this. Encouraging interviewees to select a comfortable format seemed a pragmatic way both to increase their sense of control and reduce their anxiety, as well as reaffirming them as the experts to whom I had turned for their knowledge.

Before the pandemic, the options I offered for interviewing were face-to-face, telephone, videoconferencing, email, and secure instant messenger. Most participants elected to speak face-to-face, with only two choosing the telephone, two choosing

email, and one choosing videoconferencing. For face-to-face interviews, I also let participants select the venue for meeting; the majority chose pubs, which is perhaps not surprising given most of the ukulele groups described in this thesis met in pubs. During the pandemic, I offered all options except face-to-face, but in practice all interviews in this period took place over Zoom. Again, this was perhaps a function of familiarity, since this subset of participants was recruited from a few groups which also held their ukulele jams on Zoom. I also let participants dictate the length of interviews, which ranged from 15 minutes to three hours. Although at this early stage of research I had not yet settled upon Rogers' ideas as the core of my theoretical framework, it is perhaps worth noting that Rogers himself suggested that allowing clients some say in the length and frequency of therapy sessions, conventionally strictly fixed, might be fruitful in a truly person-centred approach (Francis 2009).

Before each interview, I forwarded a request for consent either as a precomposed form (see Appendix D) or a series of less formally-worded questions and notes containing equivalent content by email or messenger to participants, detailing how their data would be used and for how long it would be kept, and asking if they wished to be referred to by their real name or a pseudonym. Although some signed this consent form, others gave either a recorded or written verbal response, and as long as this was clearly affirmative I viewed it as permission to proceed. All participants expressed indifference regarding their anonymity. However, Reich notes that the contemporary internet complicates informed consent with regards to identity; identifying information not deliberately shared can now often be found online with relatively little effort when only an individual's name is known (Reich 2015). Consequently — particularly in light of chapter 10, which I was unsure how participants would respond to being associated with, including those who had had no involvement with the topic of the chapter in question — I chose to pseudonymise all individuals and groups involved, except in the case of public figures. Group names have been chosen to preserve a similar subjective tone to their original names. Emailed



interviews were saved to a secure cloud server as text files. Video interviews were recorded with participant consent using Zoom's recording function, saved to the same server, then transcribed either by hand or with a 'first pass' of audio transcription software Descript, then hand-edited; these transcripts were saved to the cloud, and the original recordings deleted. The audio for face-to-face interviews was recorded, with consent, in WAV format to my phone using the audio recording app AudioShare, then treated in the same way as the aforementioned video interviews. A few shorter, less formal interviews, labelled as 'brief interviews' in the text, were additionally conducted at participant observation sites; here, I used paper consent forms, and attempted to record in quieter areas. However, they often did not yield usable recordings; in these cases I have summarised rather than quoted them, and used them chiefly to identify broader emergent themes.

I forwarded my first three interviewees a copy of their interview transcripts to ensure that they were happy with the content, but all three immediately indicated that they were happy to proceed regardless. Given the length of the transcripts might have been off-putting following a casual and conversational interview, I realised it might be more sensible to instead give participants the right to withdraw individual statements during the interview itself, and implemented an 'off the record' policy which was stated at the start of the interview; if a participant said something that they then felt might be reckless or incriminating, they could immediately signal to me that they would prefer the comment to be kept off the record, and I would censor it from the final transcript with no further questions asked. This was not a method derived from any earlier studies, but since I did not feel comfortable knowing interviewees had no way of rescinding statements from an interview, this seemed a pragmatic solution. Hammersley notes the right to withdraw is considered central to ethical research, but that this can be complex in an ethnographic study (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, 226–27). In an environment I had deliberately constructed to be friendly and conversational, I knew it was possible that impulsive comments might

be made; it seemed preferable that a participant should be able to retract a singular statement than to withdraw from the study completely. In practice, the off the record policy was used only twice, both in case of comments clearly made in jest which the participant felt might be misconstrued if printed, and I do not feel my findings would have differed had they remained on the record.

### **Anonymous questionnaire**

From the outset, I was acutely aware that even a multiple case study would still offer only a very partial view of the ukulele's overall landscape in its third wave. With little pre-existing data to lean on, I hoped that a survey would help situate my more detailed, close-range research against a broader ground, so that even though the study would still not be entirely generalisable, it might provide more transferability as a grounding for future research than if I had elected to focus on case studies only. Cohen notes that questionnaires rely on discourse that is disconnected from day-to-day activity, and are therefore not truly ethnographic in the anthropological sense (Cohen 1993, 127). DeWalt and DeWalt, however, view questionnaires as a form of interview, albeit one in which the balance of control is shifted towards the researcher and away from the participant (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010, 150). Although I had been keen to offer participants as much control as possible, I felt that survey data might at the very least help to complement and contextualise the deeper research I was conducting via participant-observation and interviews.

A secondary motivation emerged from an observation I had made while speaking about my research to both friends and strangers, who would occasionally respond by reflexively, and at times vehemently, devaluing the instrument. I was also aware of a backlash that had emerged in conjunction with the ukulele's most recent surge in popularity, which was readily expressed on social media in particular. I was intrigued by this, and was keen to interview participants who were *not* enthusiastic about the ukulele to learn more about what lay behind it. In practice, recruiting these

participants was challenging. I found that due to the very nature of my research I was often automatically assumed to be motivated by apologism for the instrument, and struggled to obtain consent for interview from those with strong negative feelings towards it. The willingness to express these feelings some social media users showed, however, made me suspect that an anonymous questionnaire might attract some more openly critical responses. This anonymity was, of course, a risk; Garcia et al suggest that true anonymity online can leave responses especially open to untruth, because non-verbal cues cannot be used to filter out false data (Garcia et al. 2009, 53). Nissenbaum points out that such untruths can be easily extended to demographic details like gender and ethnicity which might be automatically assumed in face-to-face ethnography; such data, she notes, is left up to trust (Nissenbaum 2001, 114). Tourangeau notes, however, that despite the difficulties anonymity can present, it can sometimes nonetheless reveal data which cannot otherwise be uncovered (Tourangeau 2018, 424–25). While I was prepared for the survey to generate unusable responses, I felt that it was worth attempting, even if I could not include the data alongside that derived from interviews and participant-observation.

Thinking of DeWalt and DeWalt's classification of surveys as a form of interviewing, I elected to make the questionnaire partially open-ended in nature, eliciting a mixture of continuous prose and single word responses (see Appendix E). These were collected via private online survey software hosted by SurveyMonkey, preceded by a custom splash page on my professional website, explaining the purpose of the survey, the study, and laying out the terms of consent (see Appendix F). This page was located at a custom, pronounceable address so that it could be more easily shared. The first, and only compulsory, question, was simply 'How do you feel about the ukulele?', and could be answered with anything between a single word and a full paragraph. Subsequent questions asked respondents for up to three words they associated with the instrument, asked whether they played themselves, and asked them to recount any significant experiences of playing or otherwise encountering the

instrument. The questionnaire included optional fields for location (since respondents were recruited online, I wanted to ensure that I could choose to filter in or out responses from outside Britain), demographic information on age range, gender and ethnicity (which were added in light of the intersectional concerns already discussed). All of these questions were presented as open-ended, write-in fields, with the exception of whether a respondent played the ukulele and whether they had been involved in a group (a boolean yes/no response) and their age range (a dropdown selector from which the respondent could select an age from the ranges 17 or younger, 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65-74, and 75 or older).

I was well aware that this left space for potential abuse of the questionnaire given its anonymity; with this in mind, the only identifying information collected was an IP address, which was stored for 13 months in the SurveyMonkey backend and was not visible to me, but made it more difficult for respondents to send multiple false responses, and meant I could block any respondent clearly abusing the questionnaire. I also manually checked all responses on receipt; any gender or ethnicity data containing small variations was sorted by hand into categories (so that, for example, 'man' and 'male' were combined in the final data). If any single question was answered in a manner unambiguously suggesting bad faith, I made a note of the answer, but then removed the entire response from the dataset to filter out deliberately provocative answers. This was necessary for fewer than ten responses. In cases of ambiguous intent, I tagged the answer so that I could examine the dataset both with and without it. Choosing to record the content of ambiguous responses actually yielded some useful data in and of itself; I noticed that although the demographic fields were usually filled out in earnest but occasionally ignored, a few respondents answered the optional ethnicity question ambiguously (usually by stating their ethnicity as 'human', but in one case entering 'why ask?' despite having answered the other demographic questions). This early discovery sensitised me to the issues discussed in chapter 10.

The questionnaire received 505 valid responses from respondents recruited by word of mouth and advertisements on Facebook and Twitter. These were imported into MaxQDA and analysed using a modified grounded theory approach. I adopted open coding to look for broad topics, before proceeding to axial coding to narrow down themes to potentially pursue in my participant-observation and interviews. I did use a mixed-methods approach to analyse some of the data, plotting word and code frequency both across all the results and against disclosed demographic information, mainly to check for any particularly surprising trends between demographic, sentiment and codes. However, in practise the written prose content of the responses were most informative. I ultimately also ran the same qualitative analyses on my interview data, and found the themes coded to be broadly consistent between them. However, while all my interviews were broadly positive in sentiment, questionnaire responses were much more mixed. While 64% of responses were coded as positive in sentiment, 17% were coded as ambivalent, and 15% as negative. The distribution of these responses is not in and of itself necessarily representative of any broader pattern, but it does indicate the range of views and sentiments provided by the survey. Some negative responses provided a vivid picture of the quality of the backlash against the ukulele, which strongly informed my analysis in chapter 9. Responses were variable in length, but some were extremely rich in detail and could be treated similarly to interviews; two of these are considered in chapter 10, which covers a topic which otherwise proved challenging to elicit discussion of in interviews.

The core approach of this project is an ethnographic one, centring participant-observation and experiential interviews, and focused around multiple case studies; the questionnaire was always intended to augment and direct those case studies and to provide context, rather than to be viewed as authoritative or to stand on its own. Although I believe it may increase the likelihood of transferability, it is subject to bias and does not mean my findings are broadly generalisable. Nonetheless, I am no longer as certain as I was when I began this project that an online survey *is* truly disconnected

from the everyday. One of the overarching themes of this thesis is the increasing convergence of the online and offline in everyday life, and of a corresponding blurring between togetherness and aloneness. Although the level of control a survey offers a participant, and the absence of non-verbal cues from the data, are less than I consider ideal, many people's musicking *does* take place from the same location as the survey was filled out, particularly in light of the pandemic. The asynchronous nature of the survey also shares features with YouTube's musicking social worlds, described in chapter 7. Although inevitably aspects of data are lost which are present in synchronous forms of interviewing, I believe the questionnaire nonetheless did capture a fragment of the everyday lives of its participants, and was therefore ethnographically valuable and enriching.

## 5. Everyone is musical: open events, improvisational strategies and the musical self in ukulele jams

This chapter introduces the concept of the ukulele jam night, one form of musicking event attended by many third-wave English ukulele players. A ukulele jam (as opposed to the groups with more stable membership presented in the earlier literature) is an event anyone can turn up and play at alongside others, without needing to book or otherwise obtain permission to do so. It differs from an open mic night in that players do not tend to perform solo; usually, a songbook is available, from which songs will be selected one by one and played in unison by everyone present. In this respect it resembles a folk or jazz jam, but generally all players at a ukulele jam will play ukuleles.<sup>6</sup> Despite being less discussed in prior literature on the instrument, open ukulele jams appeared to be an especially popular model for British ukulele events when I began research for this project in 2015; more than half the groups listed in Wood's (2010b) directory adopted an approach in which anyone could turn up and play.<sup>7</sup> Most British cities and large towns, as well as some smaller communities, still hosted at least one regular ukulele jam immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic. Although 202 of my own survey's respondents said they had played the ukulele in some kind of group context, most did not specify the form this took. Of those who did, 22 stated they did so within a jam/strum-along or a similarly

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<sup>6</sup> The exception is a few jams which include a bassist and occasionally a percussionist to help players keep time. Bassists at ukulele jams often play a 'U-bass' or ukulele bass, an electroacoustic short-scale bass with a sound box resembling an oversized ukulele, and synthetic gut strings, with a sound somewhere between a bass guitar and an upright bass. U-basses are uncommon, but not rare in English ukulele worlds.

<sup>7</sup> This number should be treated cautiously. Many groups in Wood's database now have defunct websites, and in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, more still are on hiatus. Wood's resource also does not perfectly match Got A Ukulele's similar database, suggesting there may be more groups not on either list. Additionally, an apparent surge in smaller, stable-membership groups affiliated with the University of the Third Age, further discussed in chapter 6, may now have overtaken the number of jams open to the public. Despite these caveats, the number and distribution of jams in Wood's database should give some indication of the significance of this model.

open social world, while 46 referred to groups with more stable memberships. Although this should not be treated as a representative sample, it does give some indication of the popularity of more open jams alongside more closed clubs or groups, and further justifies their exploration.

Beyond the basic cultural significance of jams, however, I have dedicated this chapter to this form of ukulele world and its pathways, because, firstly, it is particularly revealing of the ‘desire lines’ discussed in the introduction to this thesis, which I believe are a defining quality of third-wave ukulele worlds and pathways more generally, and which foreground individual choice and flexibility of engagement even in the context of collective musicking; flexibility was the core emergent category in both participant-observation and interviews concerning every form of ukulele world throughout this study, but its presence was particularly obvious in both my own and other attendees’ experiences of jams. Using data drawn from interviews, longer-term participant observation in three weekly London-based jams, which are presented as thickly descriptive case studies, against a background of shorter-term participant observation in other jams and events which varied in openness (see Appendix A), this chapter explores the practices through which these desire lines manifest, arguing that ukulele jams are constructed on a foundation of improvisational strategies.

I use the term ‘improvisational’ here expansively. There is precedence in literature for the use of the word ‘jam’ in describing musicking events with a similar ‘turn up and play’ approach to those described in this chapter (see Cameron 1954; Nelson 2011; Berliner 2009, 36–63; DeVaux 1997, 202–35; Pinheiro 2011), but these texts are mainly concerned with improvised jazz music. Those who extend the term to other musical styles (see Giddings 2019; Pedro 2013) still seem to treat melodic and harmonic improvisation, specifically, as a necessary component of a jam session. Although this form of improvisation is certainly one possibility afforded to players by the strategies described in this chapter, I propose musicking in ukulele jams also



involves improvisational strategies, from the processes used to select repertoire, to spontaneous movement within and between events, to in-the-moment, individual decisions on when and how to play and sing. These forms of improvisation may not traditionally be considered aspects of musical performance, but within Small's conceptual framework of musicking, they are as crucial to musical participation as harmonic and melodic improvisation.

I also explore the experiences of a subset of players to whom ukulele jams held a particular importance, and who, I believe, reveal something crucial about what those improvisational strategies, and pathways foregrounding desire and personal preference, actually facilitate in practice. These players (who I refer to, after Small, as 'demusicalised') had previous negative experiences of being told they were 'not musical', usually in childhood (one survey respondent also described starting a ukulele group for schoolchildren 'who had been told they were not musical'). Demusicalised players had tended to cease all musical participation thereafter, picking up the ukulele later in life. Ukulele jams were often their sole positive experience of musicking with others, and frequently enacted profound shifts in their musical self-image. Following in Shank's footsteps, I consider their experiences through the lens of psychological theory. Where Shank's analysis rests on poststructuralist psychoanalysis, however, mine draws from Rogers' models of the actualising tendency, and of congruence between real and ideal self. I conclude the foregrounding of desire lines through improvisational strategies enables the ukulele jam to act as a site in which musical valuation processes are readjusted. This allows previously demusicalised players to experience what Rogers calls 'unconditional positive regard', a sense of acceptance without conditions, within a space for musicking, and in turn enables them to move towards musically actualising.

The thickly descriptive case studies presented in this chapter describe some of my experiences within two ukulele social worlds. One of these worlds, however — the Strum-Along — encompasses two separate and simultaneous ukulele jam events.

The biggest of these, which I refer to in this chapter as jam A, took place in a large pub in central London. Simultaneously, a second ‘satellite’ jam under the same name, which I refer to as jam B, took place in a much smaller pub a few miles away, which, although well-attended, was generally much less busy. I treat them as part of the same social world, partly because their regular attendees overlapped so heavily, with some players preferring jam A or jam B, but others moving freely between them, but also because their practices and strategies were all but identical; players, including myself, experienced them as offshoots of the same social and musical world. A third event using the the Strum-Along name, jam C, ran simultaneously with jams A and B in a pub in zone 3 of London. Jam C is not one of my primary case studies for this chapter, chiefly because although it was technically open to the public, it was attended mainly by a stable group of regulars, and consequently adopted some distinct practices which I did not observe in other open events, including rehearsing for, and performing, formalised gigs. Although regulars at jams A and B often knew each other and sometimes moved between the two jams, they generally did not attend jam C. As such, I consider jam C adjacent to, but not necessarily within, the the Strum-Along social world described in this chapter.

I raise this partly for clarity, but also because it illustrates the difference between musicking *events* and musicking *worlds*. Figure 1 shows a simplistic visualisation of the relationship between the two worlds described in this chapter, as well as between the events that took place within those worlds, as well as a few of the varied pathways an individual player might take within and between these events and worlds:

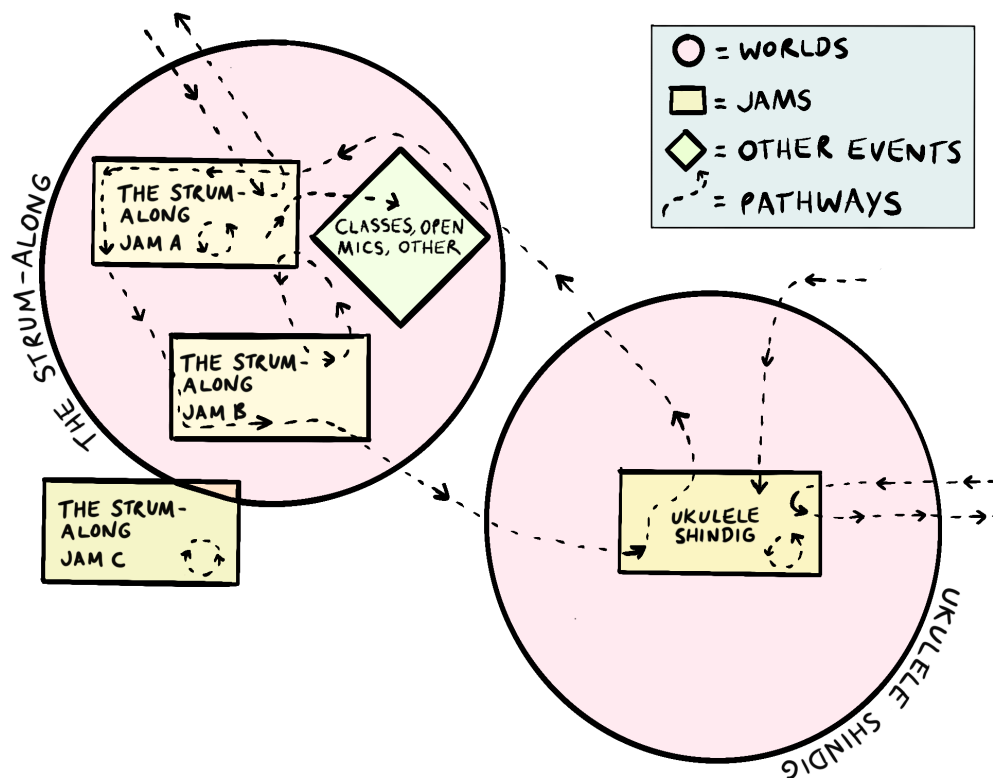


Figure 1: Visualisation of worlds, events and pathways

The jams described here were bound together by consistent values and practices, deploying improvisational strategies and foregrounding desire lines to foster an environment for musicking in which unconditional positive regard was centred, and one effect of this was to encourage flexibility of movement *between* jams when desired. Although most regulars spent time mainly in one social world, some occasionally visited others, or consistently attended events in multiple worlds. Newcomers might attend multiple jams before settling on one, or might try out a few and never return. This was part of the natural life of a jam, and all forms of participation, and indeed non-participation, seemed to be encouraged; these norms enabled a wide range of musicking approaches to flourish during the jam, whatever pathways attendees chose to traverse within it.

### **Case study: the wall of strumming, instrument loans, chord charts**

It is a Monday night in East London, and I have just arrived at the Ukulele Shindig. I arrive at 7PM sharp, the listed start time for the event, but as I enter the bar, I realise I have been too eager. There are few signs of an imminent ukulele jam, but around one half of the room, someone has arranged a ring of tables marked with hastily-scrawled placards, reading 'RESERVED – UKULELE SHINDIG'. The venue is busy, but the only visible ukulele case is mine; the other patrons are mostly young men spilling out of the offices littering the surrounding streets for after-work drinks and a game of table football, finance employees in chinos and jackets, and startup founders in jeans and t-shirts. I realise I am here before even the Shindig's organisers, so I order a drink, and sit at a table in the corner, wondering if it will be obvious when they arrive. Around 7:30PM, Mark, the organiser, and two helpers, Philip and Helen, burst through the door with stacks of boxes loaded onto three hand trolleys. They begin to unpack ready for the jam: a full box of spiral-bound and laminated songbooks which are distributed across the tables, a cajon drum deposited in the centre of the space, and three large boxes of colourful ukuleles bearing no visible brand. Assuming jam attendees would bring their own ukuleles, I'm surprised by this, and make a mental note to enquire further when the opportunity arises.

More and more people begin to trickle into the bar; most, but not all of them, have ukuleles of their own slung over their shoulders. They settle into groups around the reserved tables, which I spend the evening flitting between, striving to ensure I introduce myself and disclose my research interest to as many people as possible between songs. Without exception, they are warm and excited to talk with me. At 7:45PM, Philip finally seats himself at the cajon, and Mark and Helen stand nearby at a table in the centre of the space. For the rest of the night, they alternately choose songs from the book and solicit requests shouted out by those of us at the tables. Rapidly calling out the page number of the chosen song as loudly as possible, they begin vamping the first few chords. When they're satisfied enough of the room has caught

up, they count in a bar or two, and the rest of us strum and sing along while Philip keeps time. We can barely hear him, however; the volume of our singing is high from the outset, and the more confident players in the room tend to strum with some force in response. This particular jam is unamplified, but by 9PM there are around fifty of us, and we're playing loudly enough that the tech workers on the other side of the room have to shout to hold conversations with their colleagues. I wonder if we might drive them to leave the bar frustrated, but over the months I attend the jam, each week I notice at least a few of them come over to listen, and often, they sing along when we play something they know. Occasionally, one of them even sits down to play with us.

This latter phenomenon was particular to the Shindig, as the only jam I visited whose musicking space was shared with non-players. Enthusiastic and correspondingly loud en masse strumming, however, was a universal characteristic not only of jams, but of every ukulele social world I spent time in, and possessed an important function of its own. The barrier to entry for unguided events like jams is low, and it is perhaps not surprising that I found that participants displayed an invariably broad range of confidence and skill. In addition, the sound box of a soprano ukulele is small, and its nylon strings afford it a quieter volume than an acoustic guitar (see Woods 2015 for a comparison with other stringed instruments). A room full of players strumming in even approximate unison, however, creates a kind of sonic critical mass, which is audibly full, but in which the fine detail of even nearby individuals' playing is almost impossible to pick out. I came to refer to this effect as the 'wall of strumming', a reference to Phil Spector's 'wall of sound' production technique, which relies on doubling parts across multiple instruments to create a textural depth in which, as Zak (2001) puts it, sounds '...lose their individual identities and become inaudible as distinct characters, yet their presence is felt in the overall sound and affective sense of the texture... "felt rather than perceived"' (Zak 2001, 86). Lasson (2011) observes a similar effect in a smaller ukulele class: 'The sound the group makes,' she notices, 'is determined by the best people in the room, not the worst'

(Lasson 2011). The wall of strumming means that if most players are in unison at any given time, their playing adds to the overall sonic texture. Any mistakes or aberrations tend simply to be drowned out.

This seemed to embolden new players in particular. From time to time, perhaps once every few weeks, people would be drawn into the bar, and into participation, with no prior preparation or expectation; these players tended to be completely new to the instrument, and the wall of strumming meant that they could play along even if struggling. At around 9:30PM during my first visit to the Shindig, I witness this phenomenon for the first time. A group of three women are seemingly drawn into the venue by the sound of strumming. One gingerly approaches the nearest table as a song ends, and asks the players sitting there what's going on. She and her friends were on their way home, she says, heard us playing, and thought it was 'lovely'. Mark beckons her friends over, and offers all three of them loaned ukuleles out of the boxes. They sit with us for the rest of the night and do their best to join in, poring over the songbook and trying to make out the chord diagrams printed there. No formal guidance is available at this, or indeed any of the jams I attended, but the players sitting nearby the women show them the basics of fretting and strumming. They cannot keep up with the playing of the rest of the group, but they don't seem to mind, laughing and singing along anyway. At one point, one of the women leans across to the adjacent table and says, 'I hope you can't hear how awful I sound!'. 'We can't hear anything, love!' laughs a man, and the count-in begins again. The wall of strumming means the songs continue at pace, even if not everyone can keep up with them.

Sometimes, these 'off the street' players would later purchase their own instrument and return as regulars. Two regulars at the Shindig, Simon and Maya, had initially attended the night specifically to try out the instrument, and had gone on to purchase their own ukuleles and attend the jam consistently. For them, the flexible and relaxed approach of the Shindig was a gateway to longer-term participation. Both, however, had attended because they were already interested in potentially picking up

the instrument, rather than stumbling across the jam spontaneously as a passer-by. While, for some, a first visit to the Shindig was a stop on the pathway to more regular musicking, some players would attend once, hire a ukulele to participate, and would subsequently never return. This, too, was fully accepted as a possible outcome. I never saw the three women from my first week again, and there seemed to be no expectation they would return. All that seemed to matter was that players enjoyed themselves in the moment, and knew they were welcome if they did choose to return. Laura, the organiser of the Strum-Along (discussed in the next section of this chapter), also ran a formally-taught ukulele course, 'Strum With Us', so that brand-new players in a similar position could learn the instrument in a structured class if they preferred. Comparatively, there was no formal learning pipeline directly associated with the Shindig. Some newcomers ultimately crossed over to the Strum-Along world, attending Strum With Us or an alternative class. Others chose to learn casually, and self-taught either online or simply by attending the jams themselves. One of the core aims of the Shindig seemed to be to allow wanderers on to the pathway, but once they were there, there was no concerted effort to keep them there. They were either free to continue on it, or to depart at their leisure.

Each week at the Shindig, one longer break is scheduled around 9PM, so we can socialise and go to the bar. It is during this break, in my first week, that I finally get the chance to approach Mark, Philip and Helen; shyly, I introduce myself and my project, and ask about the boxes of loan ukuleles. More common than those who spontaneously step into the bar and decide there and then to join the jam, says Helen, are those who deliberately come to the Shindig to play a ukulele for the first time, either as a group leisure activity for, for example, a hen night or birthday party, or because they are keen to try out the instrument, but are not yet willing to buy their own. The point of the loaned instruments, Mark says, is for anyone who is 'curious, but not ready to commit yet' to come along and join in regardless of whether they have a ukulele of their own. 'They only cost about £20,' he says, 'so it's not really that

much of a commitment anyway.’ At that moment, I wonder if he has contradicted himself, but will come to understand his statement later on in my research process. The jam asks for a deposit to cover the cost of a borrowed ukulele, says Philip, ‘because, you know, a uke gets nicked, a uke gets beer spilt on it, all of that.’ He taps a battered ring-bound folder on the table. ‘We keep track of them in here, keep the money in a float, give it back at the end of the night. But I think we probably take it less than half the time, maybe if it’s big groups that are real rowdy or drunk. There is a system, but mostly we trust they’ll come back in one piece.’ I mention this exchange because it is characteristic of the kind of ‘organised chaos’ that seemed to characterise all the ukulele jams I attended, but was particularly close to the surface at the Shindig.

It seemed fairly common at ukulele events open to the public, particularly jams and festivals, for a few players to bring spare instruments for newcomers or plus-ones. These were only sometimes actually used. Some players would only come to their first jam when they had purchased their own instrument, and many of the new players I spoke to had bought their first ukulele specifically to use at jams, but others would attend with the intention of ‘just listening’, and could be coaxed into playing with the offer of a loaned instrument. The Shindig, comparatively, had a pre-planned system for larger-scale instrument lending, and its publicity included this as a selling point. Perhaps because of this, I met more completely new players, who had never played a ukulele at all, at the Shindig than at any of the other events I visited in the field. The Shindig often felt chaotic in mood, but intentionally leveraged its more organised system for instrument distribution to give the newest demographic of players more freedom. Even that system, though, was ultimately applied flexibly, and according to intuition.

Having resolved my curiosity about the boxes of instruments, my attention turns to the Shindig’s songbook. It contains almost a hundred songs in various genres, from classic rock to chart pop to Disney musical soundtracks, and each is chosen and arranged with accessibility in mind. Most of the songs in the book use only three or



four chords, and are transposed to a key in which they can be played without requiring barre chords or more challenging hand shapes, although there are a few rare exceptions to this. One of these is 'Country Roads', which we play as our final song before we leave the bar each week, belting it out until our voices are hoarse. The chord chart for 'Country Roads' contains an E chord. This was widely agreed to be the most difficult-to-play major chord, requiring an almost claw-like hand shape to partially barre a fret that less advanced players — including myself — found challenging to recreate at speed. Printed beside the E chord in the chord chart for 'Country Roads', however, is an E7 chord, with a far more beginner-friendly hand position that requires only three fingers (see figure 2). The choice to play the easier or more difficult chord is again left to us to decide as individuals. The wall of sound means if a proportion of us choose to add the seventh degree of the scale by selecting the simpler E7 chord, sonically, everything still hangs together. Like so many aspects of ukulele jams, it seems designed to keep our imperfect and variable playing just close enough to work.

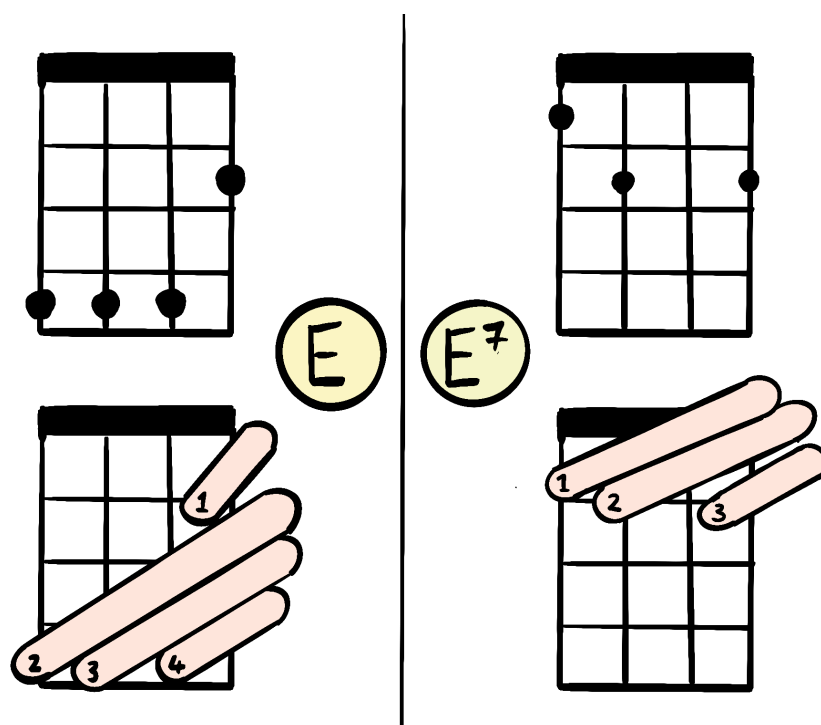


Figure 2: E major (left) and E7 (right): chord charts and finger positions. Numbers denote fingers, where 1 is the index finger, 2 is the middle finger, and so on. Note that E major requires a much greater stretch.

### **Case study: song selection, participation style, and ‘rooms at the party’**

A little later, I am in the basement of a large West End pub to attend the Strum-Along jam, and wide-eyed in awe. Although by now I have played at several jams with between ten and fifty attendees, and in a few groups with around fifteen to twenty others, this one is on a different scale entirely. Not only has an entire floor of the spacious pub been reserved solely for the jam, but its capacity has been met within fifteen minutes of its doors opening. The space is full to bursting; already, some players are standing, others perched on the edge of the stage at the front of the room. I make a beeline for the only empty seat I can identify, at a central table, beside a woman in her 40s who introduces herself as Rebecca. She tells me she has driven from Sussex to attend. ‘It’s so exciting to be here,’ she says. ‘Everyone’s been so welcoming.’ I ask her if she’s visited before, and Rebecca laughs. ‘I only bought a ukulele a few days ago!’ she says. ‘I’ve been watching videos on YouTube. I want to take lessons, but I want to play with people *now*, too. It’s mad, isn’t it? But we had dinner upstairs just now, and everyone was so kind. I can’t wait. I just want to play.’ She asks if she can test out my ukulele, a soprano with a spruce wood top to give it a bright tone; it is a ‘travel’ model with an unusual appearance, and has a slim, shallow body only about half the depth of a standard ukulele. I had originally selected it simply because I found it more comfortable to hold, but the attention it receives from players is sometimes an excellent icebreaker in the field. I hand it over to Rebecca, and she strums, sounding out a few chords clearly and only a little falteringly. I suspect she will keep up with our playing without much trouble.

The Strum-Along adopts two alternating systems for song selection, one more anarchic, one more organised. We’re told at the beginning of the night that we are encouraged to shout out requests. It is first-come, first-served, Laura tells us, but in such a large room, ‘you’ll need to be loud, or we won’t hear you.’ Requests are also taken via Twitter; we can message or reply to the official account for the event with our suggestions. At the front of the room is a huge projector connected to Laura’s iPad,

displaying the chords for the current song. This makes it possible for players standing or squeezed into a corner of the crowded space to participate, and is visible even at the back of the room. The requests sent to the Twitter account pop up in real-time at the top of the screen, meaning they often receive a live response from the room. Early in the night, a tweet suggesting Taylor Swift's 'Shake It Off' is met with a cheer, and is immediately moved to the top of the queue. Shyer, less confident, and often newer attendees make the most use of the Twitter request function, allowing them to choose songs without drawing attention to themselves, but since the room is large those seated further away from Laura make heavy use of it too. Everything about the night seems to be structured around flexibility in how we participate; the pace is more relaxed than at the Shindig, and there is more time to chat and get drinks between songs. Although I don't notice anyone wandering in off the street as they do at the Shindig, there is more mixing between groups, people often socialise during songs as well as between them, and I notice more people seem to know each other despite the number of attendees.

The Shindig's songbook had impressed me with the size of its repertoire, but the Strum-Along songbook is larger and more ambitious still, containing nearly 300 songs; where the Shindig's songbook was lent in paper form, here we are encouraged to download the songbook on a mobile device, although many simply use the projector. Although a single definitive version of the songbook is available online, new songs are also tested out throughout the year in various supplementary songbooks. They are then either made a permanent fixture in the next definitive edition, or discarded if found too difficult or dull. It is clear Laura knows the content of the songbooks well; when a request is called out, she immediately knows if the song features in the 'main', 'interim', 'second interim' or 'new' songbook. When I interview her later, she reveals how much time and effort she has devoted to putting the collections together. 'The original book took years to put together,' she tells me. 'Each redraft takes less time, but still, a long time. Hundreds of hours.' As in the case of the

Shindig's instrument lending system, it was obvious that the Strum-Along's repertoire selection was only possible due to a great deal of commitment and labour. With a system in place, however, a relaxed approach to repertoire selection was possible.

This flexibility extends to other aspects of participation. From the outset of my first visit, I notice considerable variety in how other players participate. Most are focused on strumming, a few others picking out what seems to be the melodies of the songs; I can't hear them across the crowded room, but they are often bent over their own instrument, listening closely. Sometimes, a few players will sit back and listen, sometimes chatting with others, sometimes enjoying the pure sensation of singing into the wall of strumming. Still others do not sing at all. When I ask these players about their preferred participation style, a few say it allows them to focus on honing their playing, but most, who have often picked up the instrument as adults, mention self-consciousness. Nora, a regular at a jam just outside London, and a shy new player in her 40s, concisely sums up her feelings about singing as 'too vulnerable.' A sense that singing is optional seems to let Nora play instrumentally without self-consciousness. 'I thought I'd never be able to do it at all,' she tells me. 'I thought I'd just be rubbish and it would be awful. But I can do it, now, as long I don't sing.' Bruce, a man in his 50s with a wicked sense of humour, who turns up almost weekly at jam A, takes a more irreverent stance, joking that 'they can't expect both from me, one is bad enough.' By the time I reach the writing-up phase of my project, he has changed his stance, releasing a home-recorded EP online, on which he both plays and sings. For Bruce, this is a welcome and exciting progression in his confidence, but it is not one expected of players; for Nora, simply adding the sound of her ukulele to the wall of strumming is enough, and this, too, is valued by the players surrounding us.

I have already mentioned that two other events using the Strum-Along name took place each week, simultaneously with the large jam. One of these, jam C, had more in common with a fixed-membership group than a jam, whose practices closely resembled similar social worlds in Kruse and Giebelhausen and Kruse's studies;

although it had been set up by former attendees of jam A, pathways generally did not cross between the two, and I came to view it largely as its own social world. The other, jam B, was almost a miniature version of the larger jam A, took place in the basement of a smaller central London pub, and was generally attended by about twenty people. Initially, I alternate weeks between the Strum-Along jams, and find that some regulars swap between jam A and jam B, choosing one or the other during a given week depending on travel time, or whether the more crowded night holds an appeal after a tiring day at work. Others prefer one of the two, although they may sometimes visit the other simply to ring the changes, or to socialise with another player they have not seen in some time. One exception is Richard, who frequently plays bass at London-based jams, including jam A, but often departs in the middle of the evening to spend time at jam B too:

The smaller one was the first one, where it all started. They're both fun, it's all fun, but you get the veterans there. I just try and squeeze in as much uke as I can, each week, get the best of both worlds. There's a real community feel at both of them, really, but sometimes you're in the mood for one or the other. (Richard, brief interview)

Jam B feels wilder to me despite its smaller size. Players are more inclined to shout out song requests with fewer people present, and although plenty of newcomers attend both jams (some regularly, others only once), there are more experienced and confident players at the smaller jam. Although the live Twitter requests are intended for players at the larger jam, those at the smaller one often keep an eye on the song requests there too and use them in their own session, allowing a kind of networking between both jams. More and more, I adopt Richard's strategy, beginning my night at one jam, and arriving late at the other, so as not to miss out on either. The two jams really do feel like parts of the same social world, as if I am literally treading a pathway across the city between them; the same repertoire is used, similar methods are used to select it, and the same familiar faces regularly attend both jams. There is overlap, too,

between the worlds of the Shindig and the Strum-Along, but each has its own distinct set of practices, regulars, and repertoire. Comparatively, the two Strum-Along jams feel, to me, more like going between rooms at a party; dancing and singing with friends in a larger, busier living room, then slipping into the kitchen or garden where the mood is more intimate, but still far from sedate.

### **Improvisational affordances and the casual/serious hybrid leisure world**

Although each ukulele jam displays its own distinct ritual practices, what characterises jams *as jams* is, first and foremost, flexibility. What the practises I observed at ukulele jam events had in common were their foregrounding of individual choice, within a distinctly collective context. In practice, this was accomplished through musicking conventions which were improvisational along several axes. My use of the term ‘improvisational’ here does not necessarily refer to jam attendees actually inventing new melodic or harmonic sequences, although this was certainly one possibility left open by these conventions. Rather, like Becker views all aspects of the art world, from distribution to criticism, as contributing to a work of art (Becker 2008), and how Small considers composing, listening, and dancing no less forms of musicking than performing a musical work (Small 1998, 8), here I treat improvisation as extending to a variety of aspects of musicking not necessarily traditionally deemed musical.

Turino defines musical improvisation as instances in which:

*I surprise myself* with purposeful alterations, extensions, or flights away from...habitual formulas. For me, improvisation sometimes occurs like a spontaneous spark, and at other times I think an idea before playing it. (Turino 2009a, 105)

The alterations and extensions Turino actually identifies as improvisation are largely confined to melody, harmony and rhythm, but his emphasis on departures from established formulae, I think, appropriately describes both his definition of

improvisation and my own more expansive one in this chapter. This section lays out some of the affordances put in place to encourage improvisation in ukulele jams, considers players' responses to them in practice, and explores their implications for ukulele social worlds, and their attendant pathways.

### *The wall of strumming*

The wall of strumming, resulting from a group playing an individually relatively quiet instrument in approximate unison, was a near-universal feature within all the worlds described in this thesis. However, its effects were particularly noticeable in jam-style events open to the public, which on average had more players strumming together than in fixed-membership groups. This was identified in some form by interviewees traversing various pathways, but it was most commonly mentioned in reference to jams. The wall of strumming encouraged improvisation by making it difficult for participants to hear any individual's playing above their own, but responses to it fell into two categories. Firstly, newer and less confident players described hearing themselves just well enough to be able to learn and enjoy playing with the group, without feeling exposed. 'Your own mistakes getting lost in the crowd,' said Lindsay, an interviewee in her 50s who had only taken up the instrument a few months before joining a group, 'is what makes it enjoyable for me. I don't have to feel bad about being bad.' Secondly, more experienced players could use the sonic space the wall of strumming created to experiment with more complex alternative chord voicings, strumming patterns, and melodic 'solos' without disturbing the rest of the group.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, neither response compromised the other, and no consistency was required throughout a given session. Even the most experienced players did not always play complex solos or harmonies, with many preferring more relaxed engagement. Individuals' approaches often differed between songs played at

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<sup>8</sup> This behaviour was not discussed verbally by players as frequently as the wall of strumming, but I observed it widely during participant observation.

the same jam, depending on skill level, preferred playing style, and feelings about the repertoire. At some jams, a microphone allowed leaders to be lightly amplified, in which case players could volunteer to lead and be lifted temporarily above the wall of strumming if they chose, although in practice only a few took this opportunity.

### *Songbooks and chord sheets*

At all jams, songs were transcribed in keys which were relatively easy to play on the ukulele, placing chord names either within or above the lyrics, and often placing chord fingering charts somewhere on the page, corroborating Ku's findings (Ku 2018, 32-33) Most jams had their own songbook compiled by organisers or the player community. Either efforts were made to simplify the chord sheets in the book to make them easier to play, or alternative, simplified chord voicings were printed alongside their more complex counterparts, with the wall of strumming affording more leeway for missing notes, extended harmonies, or changed octaves. These simplified chord sheets often reduced the number of chord changes, leaving additional space in the arrangement for more confident players to experiment with adding their own solos, melodic decorations, and extended or passing chords without requiring beginners to keep up.

The Strum-Along songbook contained the largest collection of songs I encountered in any single jam, and is used as a source of repertoire in many other jams. When I interviewed Laura, she noted that she had heard the book was used by 'lots of jams, especially outside London'. The songbook itself therefore acted as a pathway networking the Strum-Along with other social worlds. The Strum-Along's publicity materials explicitly permit the book's reuse, and its latest edition is freely available online. However, its webpage requests the name of the jam be printed on any materials reproduced from it, ensuring players are aware of its source. McCann refers to the process of repertoire sharing within folk music as a 'gift cycle' (McCann 2001, 93), which is echoed by the Strum-Along's approach to sharing their songbook. Although, McCann suggests, a tune shared at a session may be considered a



commodity, and (as is the case for every song in the Strum-Along songbook) may even reproduce an existing copyrighted work, the process of musicking decommodifies it, transforming it into a gift entailing 'the risk of self, the tunes, the songs, the chat, the shared experience, the history of personal endeavour' without limitation or protection (McCann 2001, 93). In ensuring the name of the jam in which the songbook originated was known to those reusing its contents, but otherwise distributing it freely, Laura passed on two gifts: firstly, an opportunity to try out a huge body of new repertoire, for which the labour of transcribing was already complete; and secondly, the knowledge of the Strum-Along's existence. Players outside the city who heard of the jam would sometimes travel to London expressly to attend it, and as such, freely sharing the songbook with credit also offered the chance to physically traverse a pathway to a new musicking world.

#### *Repertoire selection*

Choosing repertoire by encouraging attendees to shout out song titles was a common strategy at the ukulele jams I attended. Players often described choosing a song impulsively, perhaps one they had heard mentioned earlier in the night, or simply whatever caught their eye while flicking through the songbook. Others, however, would turn up at the beginning of the night already hoping to play specific repertoire, and would repeatedly shout out their preferred songs until the leader paid attention. The Strum-Along's additional use of Twitter for song suggestions made this easier still for players who struggled to be heard or were shy. Players keen to play particular songs could also tweet at the jam's official account before even arriving at the venue to ensure their request would not be lost in a flurry of messages, or could make a request while at the jam using their phone or tablet. Occasionally, even those not present at the venue would make song requests on Twitter: 'Play 'Eye of the Tiger' for me!'; 'Can't make it tonight, but I hope someone picks 'Sunny Afternoon''. These requests would often be honoured, so that it was possible to participate in musicking even without being present in the physical space.

The songbook itself was compiled not only by Laura, but by a committee who volunteered repertoire for future editions, and, where possible, helped to transcribe and typeset that repertoire. This helped diversify the book's material, since it was selected on the basis of a wider variety of musical taste than a lone individual could offer, but it also meant the flexible repertoire selection process extended even to what songs appeared in the book in the first place. Anyone could volunteer for the songbook committee; although, in practice, many of those who did were competent enough players and music theorists to work out the chords for a song from scratch, some players simply typeset chord sheets from other sources they were already using for solo practise.

#### *Resources for new attendees*

By definition, a jam is open to anyone; if someone has never attended or played an instrument before, they are still welcome to participate. At the Strum-Along, Laura kept a close eye on new faces where possible. If a player seemed to be struggling to an extent that impaired their enjoyment, she would invite them to her own beginner classes. Otherwise, she described taking a very light-touch approach at jams:

I don't go around telling people how to hold their ukulele. If they want that, they can come to classes. But I find a lot of it's intuitive. That's the way I came to it, and there's a lot to be said for doing things informally. (Laura, interview)

Another common approach was for optional beginner sessions, which were smaller and more closely supervised, to be held immediately before the jam itself, so that players who wanted to could receive feedback and instruction before being 'set free' to play with others. However, many players on jam pathways, including those who had attended jams for years, were entirely self-taught, and there was a range of approaches to everything from plectrum and strap use (Maz (2012, 2014) suggests both of these are considered non-traditional, but both are in wide use regardless) to how the instrument was held. Several advanced players told me the correct way to

hold a ukulele was with one's thumb placed at the back of the fretboard, but admitted not doing so themselves.<sup>9</sup>

Even if a would-be player does not own a ukulele, this need not prevent them joining the jam. At most jams, a solution to this was reached by organisers, attendees, or both, bringing along a few spare instruments for anyone who needed one; this would often be done in response to new potential players contacting an organiser and expressing an interest in attending despite not owning an instrument, but regulars would sometimes bring a spare ukulele 'just in case', even if it was never used. The Shindig, with its system for instrument hire, built upon this further. In publicising that the jam has instruments available for hire, the Shindig actively normalises and encourages participation from would-be players who do not yet own an instrument. Some of these players may intend to purchase their own ukulele when they have decided whether or not to continue playing in the longer term, but others have no intention of doing so and simply want to enjoy musicking there and then. Both of these approaches were accepted equally.

Stebbins describes social worlds based around non-professional activities, pursued for enjoyment and/or fulfilment, as 'leisure social worlds' (Stebbins 1976, 1992, 2001). Stebbins's conceptual framework of the Serious Leisure Perspective, or SLP, holds that leisure can be divided into two categories, casual and serious. Casual leisure, which prioritises enjoyment first and foremost, tends not to be considered part of a participant's everyday life, is often an occasional or irregular pursuit, and only rarely, suggests Stebbins, begets leisure social worlds at all. Serious leisure, by contrast, tends to be comparatively committed, prioritises fulfilment rather than hedonic enjoyment, and often contributes to a sense of identity as a participant in the

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<sup>9</sup> It is perhaps worth noting Jake Shimabukuro, a virtuoso ukulele player and composer launched to international fame by one of YouTube's earliest viral videos (see Caldwell 2013), finds this thumb position uncomfortable. Preferring to wrap his thumb around the neck of the instrument, a position also adopted by many players in my own study, he encourages players to find alternatives that feel 'relaxed' and 'comfortable' (see Shimabukuro 2020).

activity it centres (Stebbins 2018, 21). Stebbins's definitions for both of these terms accurately describe different forms of participation in the ukulele jam; while many treated it as serious leisure, for some it seemed completely hedonic, and a truly occasional activity, sometimes even a one-off. However, Stebbins seems to consider the 'core activities' of leisure social worlds as either casual or serious in and of themselves, with serious activities being more complex and requiring more commitment to participate than casual ones (Stebbins 2018, 4), and he appears to view virtually all organised group musicking as a form of serious leisure, though he acknowledges some participants are casual 'dabblers' in music who will become part of a social world only if they progress to becoming more seriously involved (Stebbins 2013).

Despite the diversity of social worlds Stebbins successfully applies the SLP to, it does not capture the complexity of ukulele jam leisure dynamics. While, as in Finnegan's study, the social worlds of ukulele jam participants were shaped by commitment and dedication, much of that commitment went into facilitating the improvisational affordances described here, which encouraged participation anywhere on the scale from casual to serious; players could 'try out' varying levels of seriousness in their approach. Repertoire took intense labour to transcribe, but was then shared freely. Song selection could be carefully premeditated, impulsively chosen, or left entirely to others. Players could attend weekly, or wander into the jam from the street, join for an hour, and never return. Some players would participate more seriously over time; others would not. Many players' participation varied within a single session, actively playing for part of the night, but then catching up with a friend at the bar while most of the room continued to play. Stebbins suggests even the most casual dabbler 'must have an instrument to experiment with' (Stebbins 2013, 148), but the practice of loaning instruments removed even this barrier to entry; players need not necessarily commit at all to participate. Although many used the jams to improve, and some experienced players would test out more complex solos

and harmonies, this was not required. Even the occasional individual wandering into the Shindig from the bar area, who would pick up a ukulele and jokingly strum it without fretting any chords, was welcomed by the group. The wall of strumming meant they posed no real distraction to more serious players.<sup>10</sup>

Turino suggests that participatory music practices often constrain advanced players to make inexperienced ones more comfortable, and posits that 'subtle and intensive' improvisation on the part of the advanced player can remedy this (Turino 2009a, 116). The ukulele jam is saturated with improvisational affordances that extend beyond individuals, to the network of pathways that run between and within ukulele social worlds; it is constructed so that neither party is constrained. Players taking this opportunity to experiment and try out various musicking practices traverse a type of pathway I refer to as the 'desire line'. Finnegan's 'invisible but organised system' of pathways certainly felt present at the ukulele jams I attended, in a systematic and often innovative set of practices aimed at creating possible routes through and between ukulele social worlds. Those routes, however, were flexible, optional, and often departed from and moved between at will. Highly experienced, serious players might take one pathway with a more casual player imitating them, who would depart and then return again, perhaps even within one session. Those joining simply out of curiosity might observe other players' routes from the sidelines, without ever setting foot on another pathway themselves. Ukulele jams supported this network of converging and diverging pathways by prioritising individual enjoyment, inclusive

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<sup>10</sup> For clarity, it is worth noting here that Stebbins's use of the 'social world' terminology differs a little from my own, and from Finnegan's, in its granularity. Stebbins appears to define the social world as comprising *everyone* pursuing a particular leisure activity with connections to a collective, and might consider all the players and events described in this chapter to belong to the same world, although he notes members can only ever be 'partly involved in the full range of its activities.' (Stebbins 2018, 5) Comparatively, I have used Finnegan's more atomised definition, in which social worlds are immediately connected groups of individuals, which may be networked to other, qualitatively similar worlds by pathways which run through and between them. If anything, this makes the variable seriousness of the ukulele jam all the more remarkable, as Stebbins appears to view entire activities, rather than only subgroups of their participants, as conforming to either the 'casual' or 'serious' type, whereas even within a single ukulele group seriousness varied greatly.

of differing preferences. This is why I consider the term 'desire line' appropriate to describe more mercurial pathways, like Richard's travel between multiple sessions in a single night. At ukulele jams, following the pathway most desirable to a player was a higher priority than taking an already well-hewn route.

### **Being musical: desire lines and unconditional positive regard in the ukulele jam**

These desire lines can be viewed, through Small's lens of musicking, as a means to construct particular types of ideal relationships, which are qualitatively unlike other readily available musical leisure activities for some players. Small unpacks at length the interpersonal, societal, and even cosmic relationships 'explored, affirmed and celebrated' by different kinds of musical participation, but mentions only once that the relationships explored may, 'perhaps', be with ourselves (Small 2011, 201). For Small, the relationship with the self seems perhaps a secondary concern, but for one subset of players I interviewed, the most radical reorganisation of ideals seemed to take place in the realm of musical identity, how they thought about their own musicking, and how they consequently gave or denied themselves permission to music. These players described a negative experience of musicking earlier in life which usually resulted in complete cessation of musical participation. Picking up the ukulele particularly playing in jams, had made it feel possible for these players to step back on to a musicking pathway, and was often their first positive experience of musicking. Attending jams often seemed to serve almost a therapeutic function for these players, and this realisation, in turn, revealed new lenses through which to view the improvisational affordances discussed in this chapter.

Most of this subset of players described either being told, often in a school orchestra, choir, or music lesson, that they lacked the talent to perform music at all, or they had been permitted to participate but experienced belittlement when doing so, usually by an authority figure like a teacher or parent. Several were told they were 'tone-deaf' or 'had a tin ear', others recounted being labelled as 'unmusical' or told

they would 'never be musical', and some were outright instructed to be silent; Hayley, in her late 20s when I interviewed her, recalled being told at the age of eight that she should 'mouth along rather than singing' in her school choir. These experiences were sometimes recounted with deep anger, and were usually accompanied by a sense of embarrassment, and perhaps anxiety that I would judge them too, leaving me with a sense that the experience had been painful. This group had virtually all ceased performing completely after the wounding experience, and had taken up the ukulele years later in adulthood. This was often a difficult decision, and all the more so when deciding whether to play around other people. Some participants expressed fears of distracting or disturbing more experienced players, while others described a sense of being an impostor in the space.<sup>11</sup>

These fears were usually markedly relieved by actually playing alongside others, aided by realising that a workable standard could be reached on the instrument with little experience, and that the wall of strumming made it nearly impossible for others in the space to identify flaws in any given individual's playing. Crossing that initial hurdle of picking up the instrument for the first time, however, was extremely difficult for some players, and it often took a long time for them to attend their first jam, or purchase an instrument to do so. Most of them described choosing the ukulele either because they felt 'drawn to it' without knowing why, or because certain qualities of the instrument and its worlds minimised the 'friction' of taking the first step. The single most common theme coded in my initial data analysis was the instrument's perceived beginner-friendliness, which was most commonly attributed to being 'easy to play', a cheaper alternative to other instruments, especially the guitar, and being physically small and easy to hold and store. Given the length of time and degree of deliberation it took some of these players to even begin exploring the instrument,

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<sup>11</sup> Given that the experience of these players was often characterised by shame, which MacDonald and Morley (2001) have suggested is strongly associated with non-disclosure, it is worth noting there were very likely other participants present in the study with similar histories who chose not to reveal them.

Mark's initially confusing comment ('it's not really much of a commitment anyway') at the Shindig, during our first conversation about the hire system and the cost of the ukulele suddenly made more sense. While the purchase of a £20 ukulele represented a relatively small commitment, especially for the Shindig organisers themselves, the ability to hire or borrow one temporarily lowered the friction of that initial step still further for those with a history of musical rejection.

The experiences shared by these players mirrored what Small dubs a 'process of demusicalisation', which he suggests is commonly perpetuated within school-level music education, and which depends on the following syllogism:

1. Our music (which may be classical music, marching band music, show band music, choral music, or big band jazz but rarely improvised or self-composed music, which is difficult to control) is the only real music.
2. You do not like or are not proficient in or are not interested in our music.
3. Therefore, you are not musical. (Small 1998, 212)

'Being musical', as Small puts it, was a central topic of my interview with Laura, organiser and founder of the Strum-Along. Before organising jams and classes for adults, Laura had taught the ukulele in schools, and recalled witnessing a process of demusicalisation akin to the one Small describes first-hand:

I remember one class with a boy, who admittedly wasn't the best singer. He was slightly off-key, and he was the loudest in the class, and was bringing everybody else with him. And so the class teacher was going to tell him not to sing, and I had to jump in and say, no, no! You can't do that. It'll destroy his self-confidence, and if you do, he'll never — he'll always say 'I'm not musical'. And I know that because I was almost there myself when I was younger. So what I used to do was come and sit by him, and I'd make sure *I* was the loudest in the class, and he'd tune in with me, and by the end he was great. It's just positive reinforcement. (Laura, interview)



All demusicalised players described a past belief that they were 'not musical', as Laura recalled both experiencing herself and defending her own students from. A characteristic experience reported by demusicalised participants, however, was *wanting* to music and to be musical, meaning desire and self-image were mismatched, which was often described as acutely painful. Demusicalised participants often described playing with others as bringing desire and self-image into closer alignment, which was often experienced as a sudden moment of reconciliation, but then tended to persist and develop players' confidence over time. Hayley described her first experience of playing with others as a 'turning point' in her musical self-image:

I was shocked. Like, I can finally play and sing. I found for the first time in my life it was easy to play music, and I had just so desperately wanted to play music my whole life. I used to, like, pretend to my friends sometimes that I was in my brother's band. I wanted to play music *so much* I would actually lie about it (laughs). Sometimes they'd be practising somewhere and I'd just, like, start singing, and I was just like, 'oh my God, this is what it could be like.' And then suddenly with the uke, I was playing it straight away, and I could do it myself, and I could do it with other people, which was the turning point, really. (Hayley, interview)

Hayley's ideal musical self, which had previously been so simultaneously desirable and unreachable she had felt compelled to deceive others into believing in it, had been brought into alignment with her real self by musicking with others. Maria, similarly, experienced her first jam as a corrective to beliefs she had held about her own musicality since childhood:

I just, you know. I didn't think, I thought it was something for other people, because everyone always said I couldn't. Not for me. But I was there, and I was doing it, and it was like, okay. This is it, this is real. You can do this after all. (Maria, interview)

In his ethnography of the Austin progressive country scene, Shank proposes that self-image is developed through interaction between the Lacanian forces of the Imaginary (a misrecognition of 'an image of ability and wholeness', which becomes the ideal self, desired and pursued) and the Symbolic (the 'condensed totality of the expressed and enacted desires of others', which are also themselves misrecognitions). Because the ego can only ever momentarily reconcile with the Imaginary within a symbolically constituted culture, pursuit of what is essentially impossible creates a 'productive anxiety' which motivates consistent, active participation among Shank's informants in the scene. While aspects of this model resonated, primarily the tension between internal desire and the views of others, its outcome did not seem to align with the highly variable and often inconsistent degrees of participation afforded by the improvisational strategies I witnessed within ukulele jams, nor did it account for demusicalised participants' experiences of longer-lasting resolutions of conflict in their musical self-images. Despite their lesser use in interdisciplinary contexts, Rogers' humanistic models of personality offered a more comprehensive explanation, and a useful lens to view the ukulele jam.

For Rogers, like Lacan, the human organism in its natural state is constantly seeking, but for Rogers the pursuit — via the actualising tendency — is not impossible. Increased movement towards actualisation results in increased congruence between the ideal and real self (Rogers 2012, 465–70), which may involve adjustments towards both a more realistic image of the perceived self and a more achievable image of the ideal self. One aspect which can shape the sense of self is 'positive regard', a sense of acceptance and love from others; if positive regard is shown to be conditional, particularly in childhood, these perceived 'conditions of worth' can be introjected on to the self, and can become difficult to tell apart from one's own desires, so that the individual judges themselves according to an 'external locus of evaluation' (Rogers 1995b, 119). I suggest that Small's syllogism had indeed become introjected in demusicalised players; the ideal musical self was reshaped into one who could ably

participate in 'real music'. On being told this was unachievable — 'therefore, you are not musical' — a further condition was introjected: '...and therefore, you should not music'. The best demusicalised participants could do, according to their external locus of evaluation, was not to participate at all, to stay quiet, exactly as Hayley and Maria were told to outright.

Key to the humanistic viewpoint, however, and in contrast to the Lacanian model, is the optimistic trust that every organism possesses the actualising tendency, and that exposed to a 'growth-promoting environment', they will tend towards it, and will in turn move towards an increasingly internal locus of evaluation (Rogers 1995b, 119–20). One way this is achieved is through unconditional positive regard from the therapist, a quality which I propose is precisely what the improvisational strategies framing the ukulele jam facilitate, albeit in a real-world musicking situation. Unconditional positive regard of the *musical* other is, I suggest, precisely what Small displays in his own work: to Small, 'all musicking is serious musicking...and if all musicking is serious musicking, then no way of musicking is intrinsically better than any other' (Small 1998, 213). Echoing this, Laura repeatedly stated during our interview that 'everyone is musical'. When I enquired further, she responded:

Being better is just about finding it easier and more natural and more fun. It's actually, I swear, it's just down to practise, deliberate practise. There's all different things you can do to make it easier, make a game of it, try a different rhythm, hold it differently, but in the end it's just doing it in whatever way inspires you. There isn't 'better' and 'worse', except how it feels to *you*. (Laura, interview)

I hear, in Laura's statement, a view that every individual is the expert on their own growth, itself a cornerstone of Rogerian humanistic theory. She seemed to prioritise personal enjoyment and fulfilment above any conventional evaluation of skill. I suggest the improvisational strategies discussed throughout this chapter put these priorities into practice. The wall of strumming, flexible selection of repertoire, and scope for experimentation in style of playing and singing allowed players at any

skill level to participate in musicking regardless of the seriousness of their engagement. Mistakes and failed experiments did not disturb others, and while regular attendees might be missed *socially* if they chose to go elsewhere on a particular night, because no individual player was more integral to musicking than any other, any level of commitment to a jam was acceptable. While this degree of freedom could be achieved by playing alone at home, playing in a social context facilitated receiving unconditional positive regard, proof that others accepted one's playing, regardless of whether it met the standards of the 'real music' of Small's syllogism. This was essential to previously demusicalised players, allowing them to readjust their ideal musical self towards a more realistic and inclusive one, and to begin perceiving themselves as able to music with others in the here and now.

This trajectory was not always uncomplicated, and for some demusicalised participants, as well as many who did not report a history of demusicalisation, playing the ukulele remained somewhat bound up with introjected ideals of musicianship, which usually involved positioning the ukulele as somehow in opposition to 'real music'; however, this viewpoint was often increasingly disconnected from conditions of worth, so that although musical self-identity might seem unchanged, musical self-esteem appeared to be unaffected, a phenomenon further discussed in chapter 9. Every player traversing the pathways of ukulele jams after a self-reported history of demusicalisation described greater fulfilment and confidence in their own musical capability, and for some, it proved to be a gateway to other forms of musicking. Hayley's 'turning point' described bringing her perceived and ideal musical selves into congruence; this precipitated a dramatic change in her musical life, in which she found herself able to write songs prolifically and eventually to perform them to others as a soloist, something she described as a 'lifelong dream'. Not all demusicalised players experienced such a dramatic shift in their musical practice, but all described greater fulfilment and contentment after beginning to music with others.

## **Demusicalisation and the perception of flexibility**

Demusicalised players tended to describe their experiences of the ukulele jam as being particularly meaningful; this is perhaps unsurprising given that, for many of them, it represented their first positive experience of musicking, and enacted an especially profound shift in how they viewed themselves. The vast majority of jam attendees I interviewed, however, as well as those who contributed survey data, described increased wellbeing in some form due to playing the instrument, especially in a group context. This phenomenon was not exclusive to those who participated in jams, rather than in other forms of ukulele musicking, but jam attendees were particularly likely to describe the positive effects of playing the instrument in terms of its capacity for social connection. It is, of course, possible that many more participants in the study had demusicalising experiences, but did not disclose them, either due to failing to recognise or recall them, or to consciously choosing not to share them. Small suggests the 'real music' syllogism underlies much of school music pedagogy (Small 1998, 212), and if so, these experiences are likely common, although they may not always have the profoundly negative effect on self-image some demusicalised participants described. Rogers also notes a need for positive regard is 'universal in human beings' (Rogers 1959, 224), and not limited to those struggling with self-image. As such, social worlds in which unconditional positive regard characterises the ideal relationships explored by musicking might enable the actualising tendency, even in those without demusicalising experiences. This study might therefore indicate potential for the application of Rogerian thought to other social worlds in an ethnomusicological or popular music studies context. Despite a clear resonance with participants' descriptions of congruence and acceptance in musicking spaces, and in contrast to theories drawn from psychoanalytic modalities, it is seemingly virtually absent from studies conducted outside of a therapeutic context.

I do not believe that some ineffable quality entirely unique to the ukulele facilitates desire lines and the unusual flexibility of ukulele jams. The instrument's

portability and low cost were commonly cited by participants as central to its appeal, and seemed to lower the perceived barrier to entry significantly for some. Laura and a few other participants described the instrument as ‘particularly easy to learn, but not necessarily to master’, which was often attributed to its morphology: ‘four strings, four fingers’. There was clearly a draw for some players in being able to play with others soon after picking up the instrument, even if it took much longer to become more proficient. Certainly, too, the instrument’s relatively low volume allowed the wall of strumming technique to be effective when players performed in unison. These qualities, however, are not solely the provenance of the ukulele; I am not aware of other jams in which participants are expected to play a single instrument in unison, and future research might well explore whether the dynamics I identify here are also present within other musicking worlds. Perhaps more important than any empirical measurement of flexibility, in practice, was, participants’ *perception* of the ukulele as flexible, enabling them to free themselves from an external locus of evaluation for long enough to allow themselves entry into the musicking ritual and explore their relationships with others, and with themselves.

## 6. Flexibility and belonging: 'closed' events and demographic-specialised ukulele social worlds

Given that ukulele jam nights are defined by their openness and by welcoming attendees without prerequisites, it is perhaps not especially surprising that flexibility is cultivated within their normative ritual practices. As well as the jam night, a range of other ukulele worlds and pathways exist which are less open in their structural affordances, although the extent to which this is true is variable. This chapter takes four field sites in different forms as its main case studies, as follows:

1. A fixed-membership group for queer-identified women
2. A ukulele 'speakeasy' night borrowing practices both from jams and from conventional gigs
3. A rural University of the Third Age group for retired players
4. A festival in a small coastal town in the south of England

These worlds yielded particularly interesting data because, in some respects, their agenda is very different from the jams discussed in the previous chapter; they all act, in some form, as enclaves for attendees belonging to particular social demographics. They are therefore, to variable degrees, 'closed' rather than 'open'; worlds 1 and 2 cater especially to an in-group of LGBTQ+-identified players, and worlds 3 and 4 to enthusiasts of retirement age or older. How this manifests in practice, and the *degree* of openness or closedness present, varies substantially between individual worlds, and, as per figure 3, I further divide these case studies into subtypes I refer to as 'explicitly closed' (worlds 1 and 3) and 'implicitly closed' worlds (worlds 2 and 4). Explicitly closed worlds declare themselves outright to cater to a particular group, whether that is simply a stable lineup, or a particular social demographic, so that certain prerequisites for joining exist; implicitly closed worlds do not verbally specify this, shaping their membership through their practices and internal culture alone, which in practice meant that the implicitly closed case studies

presented in this chapter also hosted attendees who were supportive of but not within the demographic in-group themselves, whereas the explicitly closed worlds were more homogeneous and stable in membership. All the explicitly closed worlds I encountered during my research centred around groups with relatively stable lineups; this model is perhaps easier to control the membership practices of than a jam or a festival. The implicitly closed worlds discussed here are also examples of worlds with more complex structures, and may blend aspects of jams, gigs, and workshops.

	LGBTQ+	OLDER/RETIRED
EXPLICIT	WORLD 1 (BAND)	WORLD 3 (USA GROUP)
IMPLICIT	WORLD 2 (SPEAKEASY)	WORLD 4 (FESTIVAL)

Figure 3: Case studies in chapter by type (explicitly closed versus implicitly closed).

Despite this, like the jams described in my previous chapter, these worlds persist in centring desire lines and improvisational strategies. Flexibility remained a primary emergent theme amongst interviewees who were members of or visitors to these worlds, just as amongst attendees of open jams. However, the theme of a sense of belonging also emerged. Belonging is frequently described in terms which seem opposed to flexibility or improvisation. It is defined by Hagerty et al as ‘the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment’ (Hagerty et al. 1992, 173), and by



Pfaff-Czarnecka as 'a position in social structure, experienced through identification, embeddedness, connectedness and attachments' (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2013, 13). For jam attendees, embeddedness and attachment were more often secondary concerns; while some participants mentioned the value of a place to go in which they could reliably play with others, being a welcomed but not integral visitor to the world of the jam was often perceived as liberating, particularly to more anxious demusicalised participants.

By contrast, participants in more closed worlds were more likely to mention the value of feeling like a smaller part of a wider collective, reliable access to a group of collaborators with shared ideals and values, and, particularly in the two LGBTQ-centric worlds discussed here, the importance of finding others 'like me' to play with. What regular attendees of more open jams did seem to experience equally alongside attendees of more closed, demographically-tailored events was a form of belonging Pfaff-Czarnecka defines after Hage (2002) as 'the combined result of trust, feeling safe, community, and the sense of possibility' (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2013, 13), fostered by the unconditional positive regard cultivated equally in the ritual practises of both forms of social world. Members of these more closed worlds, particularly when they also occupied a marginalised social standpoint, seemed to emphasise a sense of belonging qualitatively grounded in embeddedness and attachment, in addition to the sense of trust and possibility players described more universally.

Per MacDonald et al's model, while players participating mainly in more open social worlds often appeared more focused on their IIM, those in closed worlds, especially ones centring a particular marginalised positionality, seemed to find exploring and developing MII a helpful precondition for moving on to considering their IIM. Several scholars suggest that experiences of discrimination and prejudice based on social demographic can negatively affect sense of belonging and increase distress (see Cabrera and Nora 1994; Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy 2021; Sólveigar-Guðmundsdóttir 2018); it is perhaps for this reason that players with lived experience of marginalisation might gravitate towards this more stable sense of belonging, even

as they described the ukulele itself, and the norms of the spaces in which they played it, as flexible.

Maslow posits that self-actualisation, or what Rogers calls the actualising tendency, will only be enabled when needs for 'belongingness', a subjective sense of identification with a group, have already been met (Maslow 1943, 380; 1998, 39–40). The participant pathways described in this chapter, in particular, reflect this view. Many had been led by their own desire lines to these social worlds, which were musicking spaces in which they could be assured of experiencing belonging in terms of their *social* identities, as a precondition for negotiating their *musical* identities. Musical actualising may, therefore, have closely intertwined with self-actualisation in other areas for these players; a social world in which the whole self was unconditionally positively regarded formed a stable base from which to explore new ways of musicking, and thus new identities in music (see figure 4). For these participants, flexibility and belonging existed in a truly symbiotic relationship, and they were able to access desire lines in musicking not despite, but because of, the membership practices of their social worlds.

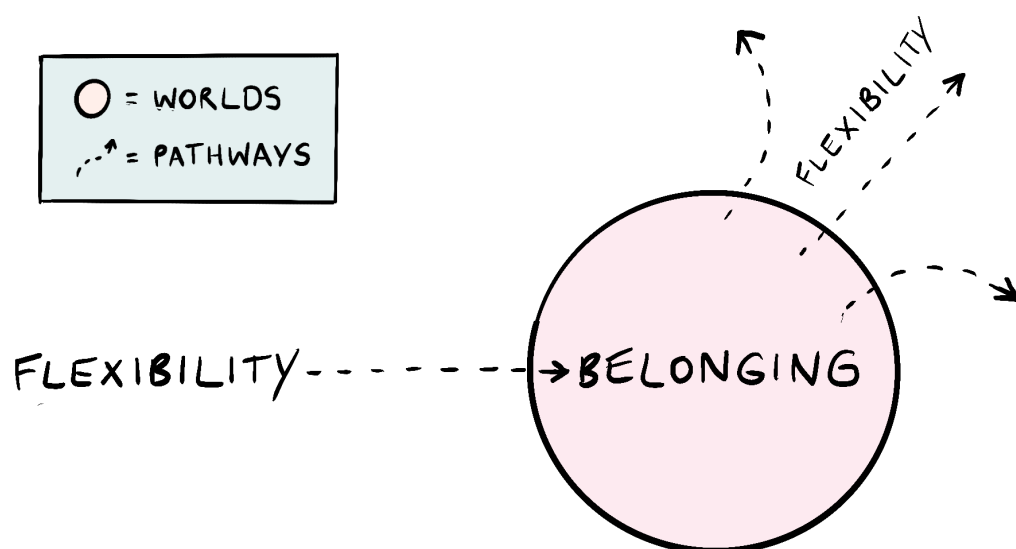


Figure 4: Visualisation of participant pathways. Flexibility leads to belonging and self-actualisation, a stable base for further flexibility and specifically musically actualising.

I acknowledge that ‘open’ and ‘closed’ are rather imperfect and blunt terminology.<sup>12</sup> While the defining feature of jams is that they are open to anyone, the degree to which closed worlds are, in fact, closed is more variable. Explicitly closed worlds include stable-lineup groups and bands without a demographic focus (like those discussed by Kruse and by Kruse and Giebelhausen), as well as stable-lineup groups for specific social demographics. I have chosen to focus on the latter here because they are untouched in the literature in comparison to general-interest, stable-lineup ukulele social worlds, and because, despite their even tighter restrictions further intensifying their additional emphasis on belonging, their improvisational strategies and centring of desire lines as a means for moving towards musically actualising remain absolutely unhindered, and arguably strengthened. I feel that they therefore illustrate particularly clearly that desire lines and a focus on flexibility are a characteristic feature of ukulele pathways more generally regardless of social world structure, rather than a side-effect produced by particularly relaxed norms within individual ukulele social worlds.

### **Case study: an explicitly closed LGBTQ+ women’s group**

From the moment I learn about Queer As Uke, a Sussex-based ukulele band composed of queer-identified women, my curiosity is piqued. By this stage of my research, I have interviewed members of three all-female ukulele groups, and am aware of a few social worlds for women and/or LGBTQ+ players both in Britain and internationally, but Queer As Uke is one of the most active. I first attend the group’s concert on a snowy evening in 2016. Pushing the door open, I make my way down the steps to the — literally — underground venue. The size of the space is somewhere

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Less open’ is really a more descriptive term for the worlds described in this chapter than ‘closed’, since none are completely shut to possible new members, and the implicitly closed worlds are technically open to the general public. However, since my central aim here is to compare these worlds to fully open ones in order to illustrate that desire lines are present regardless of attendance practices, in the interests of readability I have used the more blunt terminology.

between the two Strum-Along 'satellite' jams, but the layout is rather different; the stage is fully lit and amplified, but more than half the room is filled with rows of seats, a few of us crammed into a small standing area by the bar. I am one of only a few audience members attending alone; the crowd, largely but not exclusively women, are mostly talking and laughing in groups, decked out in Christmas jumpers and reindeer antler headbands. The group file onto the stage in matching Hawaiian shirts and tinsel lei to form a semicircle, and begin playing Girls Aloud's 'Sound of the Underground'. Even with nine players, the wall of strumming is a bright wash of sound across the stage. Unlike players at jams, every member of Queer As Uke sings, though some more confidently than others; one or two of the women lead each song at a microphone in the centre of the semicircle of players, but some join in with the melody line during choruses or add a second or third harmony part. One of the women, Steph, is a particularly advanced player, who fills in solos and riffs sparingly while the others strum; at these moments, she can be heard above the wall of sound, but is carefully responsive to the musicking of the others.

The group alternates songs with appearances by other performers. All are women, and all include some content themed around LGBTQ+, and particularly lesbian life, including a comedian who performs a stand-up set about the gay dating scene, a burlesque act, and a duo who perform extracts of a historical musical about two lesbian revue performers. The compere introducing each act is a 'bio drag queen'; where a male-identified performer traditionally performs drag in the exaggerated role of a woman, the 'bio queen' refers to a *female*-identified performer who self-consciously performs a camp hyper-femininity (J. Taylor 2007). In a beehive wig and gold dress, she sets a raucous tone, outrageously flirts with performers and audience members of all gender presentations, and makes innuendo-laden jokes throughout. Between each guest act, Queer As Uke perform another song. Some are straightforward, multi-part covers, but others have altered lyrics. First is a deadpan version of Right Said Fred's 'I'm Too Sexy' changed to include lesbian sartorial

stereotypes: too sexy for my Crocs, too sexy for my Docs, too sexy for my fleece; a cover of 'My Heart Is In Havana' with location names changed to transform the story into one about an ex-girlfriend living locally; a version of 'Big Spender' with only a few words changed to make it a tale of seduction between two women. We sing as loudly as possible, cheering when we don't know the words. At one point, Steph teaches the audience a round, and we sing sections of Lady Gaga's 'Born this Way', NWA's 'Express Yourself', and Madonna's 'Vogue' together haphazardly as the players strum onstage until we dissolve into laughter.

After the show, I approach member Lola and Alex, the drag queen, who are chatting in a corner of the bar. I introduce myself, congratulating them on their performances; I've had a wonderful time, and want to thank them. They seem thrilled to hear about my project, and to my surprise, although it is around 11pm, offer to take me to a quieter local bar so that I can speak with them there and then. I accept, and we trudge through the chilly streets to a tiny, cosy pub, a traditional English inn but for its walls plastered with feminist posters. We take our seats, and begin to talk. I'm curious about the group's history. 'I think it started in about 2011,' says Lola. A local lesbian singer-songwriter, she tells me, had organised a regular pub jam, which developed beyond its original form:

I think what started it was, it was a jam in a pub on a Sunday afternoon. I think she just got hold of a ukulele and started playing it, and then she invited people to join her for a regular jam. And it was open to anybody, but because she was a regular fixture at the women's performance tent at Pride, and because you'd get the same crew going to see her year after year, it tended to be, you know, lesbians. Or, well, not exclusively lesbians, there were some men as well, but mostly gay, I'd say, or LGBT, as it was then. And then the jams faded a bit, and we started to do gigs, and it gradually became a bit more of a closed group. But then it kind of opened up a bit, but it is still women, it's still the LGBTQ ukulele band. But now we're the LGBTQIA ukulele *harmony* band, so we've added that string to our bow as well. (Lola, interview)

When I interview her alone, I notice when Lola talks about musicking, her train of thought often flows seamlessly into discussion of gender and her lesbian identity. She tells me that she sometimes plays music outside the band, and that there, too, she prefers to play with women:

Anything I've played at, I've always wanted it to be with women, because I identify with women much more...I've been to jams with guys, and they just...in my experience, they go 'Oh, I know best,' and 'Why don't you do it like this?' And with women, the vibe is just different. It's very collaborative. I think women collaborate a bit better, maybe. So we aren't just open to anybody. (Lola, interview)

Lola's statement reminds me of Clawson's study of women bass players, which finds a subset of participants attribute their instrument preference to an idea that women are essentially better-equipped to play it, perhaps due to their anatomy or being somehow 'closer to the earth' (Clawson 1999, 206). Clawson is concerned this may detract from analysis of power relations, but acknowledges the resistant potential of asserting superiority within the very framework conventionally positioning women as lesser musicians. Musicking with women, for Lola, meant trusting that power relationships were equal, and asserting her own agency alongside others. Limiting the group's membership means it has a fairly stable lineup, Lola tells me, and she describes a sense that a particular standard of musicking is expected of the group by their audience. 'Because we've now got a following,' she says, 'they expect certain things from us. One of the things we've added over the years, as we've got more competent is, we've added a lot more harmonies; our singing is quite important, now,' resulting in the group's reputation as 'the LGBTQIA ukulele harmony band'.

I assume initially that all this positions Queer As Uke firmly within Stebbins' category of the 'serious leisure world' (Stebbins 1976), in which the flexibility and desire lines I have identified in ukulele jams are not present. A particular characteristic of serious leisure worlds, Stebbins suggests, is tension between inclusiveness and

quality. As Lola continues to open up, however, she states outright that desire drives the role any individual member takes within the band:

Some of us want to do the music as a technical thing. Some of us want to be *performers*, you know. Some of the band really like to sing, others don't like it so much and they'd rather hang back, so we're all constantly finding our place, really. We play to our strengths and weaknesses, I suppose, in whatever ways we all want to. We all started off doing the simple (mimes) strum strum, you know, and some of us had never played. Some of us played guitar. But for some, you know, it was zero to 95 over the years. Some of us have had lessons, some of us have concentrated more on other things. We all rise to the challenge, but we do it in different ways, and I think we've all got better. Being so collaborative, you know, as a group, helps with that. But we're also all people with different lives. (Lola, interview)

Although Queer As Uke is structured differently from an open jam, then, the essential qualities of unconditional positive regard, and accepting the value of each individual member participating however they felt able to, remained, and Lola's trust in women as essentially collaborative in musicking appeared to facilitate this acceptance. She also viewed the ukulele as particularly adaptable and accessible, creating a space in which different forms of engagement with the instrument could take place:

I struggled to play the guitar for years, I stopped and started. I just find it really hard. But the uke, it's only got four strings, and it's little. Well, actually, there's a lot more you can do with it than you think, but at the time when I started, I thought, oh, I'll just learn a few chords, and I'll be fine...and, you know, some of our band don't know what the notes are and they're not really that interested, they just want to know where to put their fingers. The musician in me wants to know what I'm playing, what chord is that, and how is it made up, and I can do that, and they can do that. (Lola, interview)

Most of the group's live bookings take place at LGBTQ+-specific events, with the others being mainly ukulele festivals. Lola notes one central annual event in their calendar is a concert on World AIDS Day, in a local LGBTQ+-inclusive church. The other performers, she tells me, are always choirs. The group is always booked for the latter half of the concert, 'as light relief.' I am immediately curious how the light-hearted repertoire I have heard that evening translates to such a comparatively sombre event. 'It serves a dual purpose, there, though, I think,' Lola says, pensively. 'It's having fun, but also feeling like we're part of a wider community.' A strong history of LGBTQ+ choirs, often referred to as gay choruses, dates back to the 1970s (see Latimer 2008; Hilliard 2008; Taylor and Herring 2012; Hayes 2008; Brett and Wood 2002; Shallenberger 1994; Ahlquist 2006), and Hilliard (2008) finds that, as well as citing reasons for membership relating to personal musical identity, such as simply wanting to sing in a chorus, choristers frequently cite a connection to the gay community as a key motivation (Hilliard 2008, 350). I ask Lola if she has sung in a choir, and she winces.

My partner and I sang in a choir for a year, a couple of years ago, and...I found it incredibly stressful. There's nothing to follow, it's so exposed. You have to learn so many parts, you can't just do what you want. The ukes aren't so stressful. I mean, you might be stressed because you...play a bum note or something, but at least you know where you're going. (Lola, interview)

Despite already considering herself a musician, the perceived availability of desire lines within her ukulele social world increased Lola's ability to access both musicking itself and a connection to the wider LGBTQ+ world than a choir had offered. Having space to explore her identity through music, in turn, facilitated experiencing music through her identity. Although the underlying structure of the group was relatively closed compared to the jams I had attended, the characteristic flexibility I had observed in more open worlds was still present, and members of the



group could still pursue desire lines, networking them both with other ukulele worlds, and with the wider LGBTQ+ community.

### **Case study: an implicitly closed queer ukulele event**

The Ukulele Speakeasy first draws me in because of the charismatic reputation of its organiser, Lux. After losing count of the number of players I have met who, at some point in our engagement, have told me, 'Oh, you *must* meet Lux,' I decide to investigate her Speakeasy, which runs monthly at a tiny pub in the heart of central London. The event is not ticketed or otherwise gated, but I notice the intimate atmosphere immediately; people seem to be entering in groups of friends, chattering away comfortably. I am again the only person attending alone, and the venue is so small every table in the pub is already taken, so I seat myself at the bar, quietly observing. I notice, too, that while none of the other ukulele events I have attended have displayed any particular norms of dress, here most attendees seem either to be meticulously turned out in sharp business suits, or obviously costumed in zoot suits, pinstriped fedora hats and comically oversized ties; I later learn that each Speakeasy event has a theme, and that tonight's theme is 'business'. Perhaps two thirds of attendees have a ukulele with them; it seems that while some plan to participate, others are happy to spectate.

Lux bounds on to the stage, a character larger than life and the picture of kitsch, retro glamour in a sequined tuxedo, a 1920s bob, and immaculate red lipstick. With a wink, she tells us the Speakeasy combines group singalongs with individually-billed performers, and ends with an open mic night, which anyone present can sign up for during the evening. Three slightly battered ukuleles sit on a table beside Lux; casting her eyes over the room, she asks if any newcomers would like to borrow one to strum along. The room falls silent; I wonder if there really is nobody here new to the instrument, or if the offer is simply too nerve-wracking. After a moment, Lux leans into her microphone, and says 'Don't worry. I promise we'll all sing so loudly nobody

can hear you. There will never be a better opportunity to try out an instrument.’ Gingerly, some newcomers volunteer to take a ukulele, the promise of being swallowed up by a wall of sound perhaps offering enough safety to accept. This exchange ultimately seems to take place at every Speakeasy event I attend; invariably, it takes a few minutes, and the promise of being unheard, for the lending ukuleles to be handed out. When newcomers are particularly reluctant, Lux jokes the show cannot possibly start until all three are in the hands of new players. Though delivered with a grin and a lighthearted tone, I never once witnessed the show starting without all the loan ukuleles being distributed; Lux would persist until all were accepted. While other jams tended to take a light-touch approach, letting players make their own way on to the pathway, Lux’s bombastic stage persona offered a way to nudge players over the initial hurdle of musicking with a little more force. Once initially encouraged on to the pathway, they were once again left to explore the instrument without scrutiny.

Since my first night in attendance at the Speakeasy is business-themed, the night really commences with a singalong led by Lux to Madonna’s *Material Girl*. Teaching the simplified chord sequence as rapidly as possible to the audience, she also encourages anyone who wants to join her at the microphone for ad-hoc backing vocals. Those who do seem to be veteran attendees, dressed in suits and film-noir-style hats, singing harmonies and performing charismatically to the crowd. The backing vocalists are so confident that I assume they must be Lux’s band members, planted in the audience for theatrics, but when I try to confirm this later in the evening with one of them, she is surprised. ‘You thought we were a band? I’m flattered!’ she chuckles. ‘No, we didn’t plan it, we’ve just all been here ages.’ The contrast between the three timid newcomers, coaxed into taking a loan ukulele, and the women clustered around the microphone belting out the chorus of ‘*Material Girl*’ without a trace of self-consciousness, is profound. Higgins suggests long-term participation in community music can lead to significantly increased self-esteem, and more confident self-identification as a musician, in turn decreasing shyness (Higgins 2012, 76–77,

p. 165); from my seat at the bar, I wonder how musicking at the Speakeasy might shape the identity in music of those newcomers, and whether they, too, might one day stand behind the microphone.

At first, I am unaware of the Speakeasy's more subversive undertones. Where Queer As Uke's connection to lesbian culture is close to the surface, the Speakeasy's centring of queerness amongst its norms of practice are more subtle, although both use humour as one means of expressing it. The first performance after the opening singalong is a version of the comic song 'Business Time' from series *Flight of the Conchords*, a parody song from the perspective of a man seducing his partner, combining a smooth R&B musical style, including vocals styled after Barry White, with lyrics Braae characterises by their 'romance, mundanity, and ineptitude':

Wednesday night is the night because they have to visit her mother on Tuesday, after-work social sport has been cancelled, and 'there's nothing good on TV'; foreplay consists of brushing their teeth and clumsily getting undressed; and, after all of this activity, everything is over quickly, but it is all right because 'two minutes in heaven is better than one minute in heaven.' (Braae 2019, 350)

Zemke notes that *Flight of the Conchords'* songs 'intuitively exaggerate and critique the hypermasculinity, heteronormativity, and sincerity found in the gender performances of contemporary popular music' (Zemke 2017, 129), and in 'Business Time' Braae identifies the musical and lyrical juxtaposition as skewering tropes of hegemonic masculinity through self-deprecation (Braae 2019, 350–51). The Speakeasy performance of the song acknowledges and deepens this subversiveness. Lux invites a woman introduced as Ginny up to the stage to take lead vocals; speaking to Ginny later, I learn that she had had no idea she would be asked to sing, and that her performance is entirely unrehearsed. Despite this, as we begin to strum, she assumes a swaggering posture, gazes theatrically over her glasses, and delivers the first line of the song in her deepest voice: 'Girl, tonight we're gonna make love. You know how I know? Because it's Wednesday'. At times, she forgets to strum along with the rest of

us, instead aggressively grasping the microphone and almost growling into it, using humour to subvert gendered expectations of power. Gender-swapped songs, with pronouns left unchanged, are a particular feature of the Speakeasy, and I am frequently surprised at the power women, in particular, evoke in their performances of comic songs.

14 participants across the study mentioned viewing the ukulele as an intrinsically humorous or 'comedy instrument', and parody songs were used occasionally in almost all the ukulele worlds I visited. However, I notice at the Speakeasy that humour is sometimes deployed to explore and communicate lived experiences of marginalisation. Lupin, a softly-spoken performer who reveals they have been playing the instrument for only six weeks, performs a song exploring the challenges of securing employment as a non-binary gendered, disabled person with mental health difficulties. It is clear the experiences described are real and painful, but Lupin teaches us a jolly three-chord chorus, which serves the dual purpose of juxtaposing the serious content of the song with almost absurdly humorous music, and allows those of us who feel comfortable doing so to music alongside them. Another woman, Lila, performs an original blues song about navigating the UK immigration system. She peppers her song with sarcastic jokes, but here they serve to make her tone still more vicious; humour becomes a means of communicating her anger at the absurdity of her situation. The room is silent by the time she finishes singing, and afterwards, several members of the audience embrace her.

Meeting Lux later, I remark that the atmosphere of the Speakeasy seems particularly supportive of diverse lived experience. 'Well, you found the queer ukulele night,' she smiles. 'Don't worry, though, we still let the normals take part if they want.' When she bids us goodbye at the end of the evening, she thanks us for 'queering the ukulele' with her. Although I notice some performers do use the Speakeasy explicitly to push at the boundaries of sexuality and gender, others use it to highlight other categories of difference. For some, like Lupin, who exist at an

experiential intersection of multiple marginal identities, these categories are inseparable. As a reclaimed homophobic insult (see Hall 2002, 53), the term 'queer', including in its academic usage within queer theory, usually refers to consideration of sexual and gendered difference. However, some scholars explore a more open-ended use of the term, referring to difference and the denaturalisation of normativity, often in the context of power and the production of identity, in a broader sense (see Jagose 1997, 98–99; Sullivan 2003, 43; Sedgwick 1994, 9). Lux's use of 'queering' as a verb recalled Sullivan, whose concern is with displaying how queering is *done*; to queer, according to Sullivan, is to 'make strange' the heteronormative institutional norms, and she suggests queer theory may be best viewed as an interdisciplinary mode of deconstruction which can be applied outside of sexual and gender-based categories of difference (Sullivan 2003, vi).

When I speak to Ginny, the performer of 'Business Time', she is thoughtful and softly spoken, far from her swaggering stage persona. Despite the rising cost of living gradually pushing her further out of the city, she says she still lives here in large part because of the Speakeasy. 'This is where all my friends are,' she says.

I've never felt so welcome anywhere as I do here, I just never really fitted anywhere, but I think I do here, and I think it's because of the people. Anyone can come, but not anyone *does* come. It brings in, well, outcasts and misfits, mostly, I think. We're all a bit odd and awkward, and we all care about each other. That's who it's for, really. (Ginny, brief interview)

Ginny's assertion that 'anyone can come, but not anyone *does* come' is a succinct summary of what I am trying to communicate when I refer to 'implicitly closed' groups, with attendance based not on enforced restrictions or gating, but affinities. Like the other worlds described so far in this thesis, the Speakeasy encouraged flexible participation, a low barrier to entry, and adoption of unconditional positive regard for one another as a way of being. In the Speakeasy's case, however, this was mobilised to facilitate participation of those not just excluded from music, but with broader lived

experience of difference. Sometimes this took the form of systemic marginalisation, but for some, like Ginny, it emerged from a more nebulous, relational sense of difference. Queering her performance of gender and sexuality in a safe and supportive context seemed, for Ginny, to represent a queering of broader norms, in which she was able to 'really fit', naturally actualising when the expectations of others were removed from her path (Rogers 1995a, 121–22). For some of the Ukulele Speakeasy's attendees, the ukulele's flexibility granted access to a space in which both identity in music and music in identity could be explored through musicking with others, offering the experience of belonging to those who might be excluded from it in other areas of life.

### **Case study: an explicitly closed group for retired people**

Older players also create their own enclaves, both explicit and implicit. The University of the Third Age (or 'U3A'), a UK-wide organisation providing education and workshops for adults older than retirement age, maintains a 'subject advice' page for the instrument noting the availability of local U3A ukulele groups 'all over the country' (Cockburn 2021). U3A groups and workshops are explicitly closed and are demographic-specific; by their own statutes, they are 'open to anyone who's no longer in full-time work' ("U3A" 2021). To conduct a comprehensive overview of these groups was unfortunately beyond the scope of this project, but it is worth noting that the largest age group represented amongst my background survey respondents was those over 55, most of whom reported being U3A members. While my survey is not necessarily a representative sample of the general population of ukulele players, given that it was conducted solely online and leaned heavily on social media as a means of recruitment, I had expected it to underrepresent older respondents (Hertzog and Light 2004, for example, suggests response rates to online surveys might be less consistent amongst older adults), so the outcome of such a substantial presence of retirement-age participants and U3A members might be significant. Although this

section explores only one U3A social world, a deeper exploration of this particular pathway is perhaps one of the clearest directions for further research in this area.

My journey begins with a phone call with Pauline, the secretary of the rural U3A group I will be visiting. She is warm, friendly, and curious about my project, but mentions that the group has never hosted a visitor younger than retirement age before. I ask if she thinks they will be more comfortable if I participate alongside them, or if they would prefer me to sit back and quietly observe; she admits that she isn't sure. 'Can you be flexible?' she asks. I assure her I can. A few weeks later, I drive to the village hall in which the group meets each week. Pauline is there to greet me, waving enthusiastically, and ushers me into a side room to meet the others; I'm right on time, but many of the group have arrived early, and are seated in a circle around some folding tables pushed together. She introduces me, and asks them how they'd prefer me to be involved. 'Can she sing?' asks Tim, a man in his 70s with a boisterous grin. I say that I can, and he laughs. 'Well then!' he says. 'The more the merrier, don't you think?' The rest of the group nod and smile. It is then that Pauline surprises me with the news that the group will be playing a concert at a local elderly care home immediately after the practise session. 'In that case,' she asks, 'would you mind joining us? I don't know why I didn't ask you before. It's all a bit chaotic, really. You don't have to. Only some of us are playing there.' I tell her I'd love to, as the last few members trickle into the rehearsal room.

There are around 25 regular attendees of the U3A ukulele group, ranging in age from mid-50s to mid-80s. I make conversation with Colin, a tall, very quiet man in his 70s sitting beside me with two ukuleles on the table in front of him, an ordinary soprano, and a double-strung tenor with an almost mandolin-like sound. I ask him how often the group meet. 'Every other week, before,' he says. 'Weekly now.' 'We can't stay away!' laughs Tim from the other side of the table. Each member has a folder with them containing printed versions of the songs. Most use huge lever-arch files, and I remark that I haven't seen such large folders for song sheets anywhere else

during my research yet. Ruth, a woman in her early 80s sitting on my other side, tells me that they contain years worth of repertoire, and sometimes three or four versions of a given song; Robert, who is in charge of arrangements, likes to iterate on a chord sheet, 'until it's just right,' tweaking its key and strumming pattern until the whole group is comfortable. Although two members use iPads in place of folders, there is otherwise little reliance on electronics amongst the group, so players tend to keep all of Robert's arrangements in one place so that they can be compared, or returned to if the lineup, skill level, and vocal range of the group changes. Ruth shares her folder with me for the duration of the session, and expertly keeps track of the versions of songs we're rehearsing.

There is a huge range of ability across the group. Some players are almost completely new to the instrument; Ronald, a retired policeman in his late 80s, took up the ukulele six months ago, his first instrument. His intonation and rhythmic sense is remarkably consistent, and he tells me he's been practising every day, but is still working on being able to play and sing at the same time. 'I try to concentrate on the strumming, mostly.' By contrast, the group leader, Terence, proudly informs me he'd played upright, then electric bass for over 50 years before moving on to the ukulele. 'My first gig was when I was twelve,' he says. 'My wife sometimes says she doesn't know why I keep going for smaller and smaller instruments, but this one...it's just happy, isn't it? It just makes you smile.' We play through half an hour's worth of repertoire, repeating any parts that enough of us stumble over to disrupt the wall of strumming, and distributing some of the vocals between the men and women present. I had, by now, noticed that many of the same songs seemed to recur over and over in the repertoire of the ukulele worlds I had visited; the content of the Strum-Along songbook seemed to be the source of many of these recurrent songs, forming its own pathway between multiple worlds, but the U3A group was an exception, emphasising songs from older musical theatre such as 'Hello Dolly', and early 20th-century standards like 'Tonight You Belong To Me' and 'Ukulele Lady'. Two George Formby



songs, 'When I'm Cleaning Windows' and 'Leaning On A Lamppost', were also on the repertoire list. Although Formby's work was frequently mentioned by interviewees, it was often described as outmoded or contributing to the instrument's perception as lacking seriousness; the U3A group seem to value it more sincerely. Although several members describe participating in other ukulele social worlds, and are evidently connected to a wider network of pathways, their repertoire seems to have developed more independently, and does not network them directly to the Strum-Along.

The group's reliance on older repertoire also serves a practical function, as I discover after we finish our rehearsal. Those who choose not to join us for the concert remain in the room; they may play a little more, Pauline tells me, or may decide simply to sit and chat. The rest of us are directed to a care home a five-minute drive away, where we file in, guided by staff who greet us warmly and lead us to the residents' shared activity room. We stand in two imperfect semi-circles, sharing a few music stands, and wait to be introduced before we work our way through the repertoire list. The name 'University of the Third Age' refers to Laslett's typology of ageing, which positions the 'third age' as a period following retirement still marked by health, activity, and independence. This is often followed by the 'fourth age', marked by increasing dependency and declining health (Laslett 1987, 153–55). I am struck by the sense that our audience, though not far in age from some of the group's older members, have clearly reached a different stage of life; they are quiet, communicate little with each other, and many are half-asleep as we are introduced. As we play, an almost imperceptible flicker seems to pass through the room; the heavy eyelids of some of the residents are raised, and although they do not sing along like most other audiences I have encountered, they watch us intently. Some applaud us between songs, others quietly observe.

When I interview Tim later, I ask how he experiences the care home concerts, which Pauline has told me the group perform quite frequently. 'It's about memory,'

he tells me. 'It's social connection, and it's about remembering those social connections.' Something amazing happened at the end of the previous concert he had played, at a care home a few miles away, he tells me, and I ask him if he's willing to share more:

Obviously unfortunately a lot of people were tired. You saw that here too. They were falling asleep. On the left side I thought I recognised a lady, she had her head down, but I thought: she's very distinctive. I think I recognise her...so I spoke to one of the nurses and said 'is that lady's name Edie?', and she said 'it is,' and I realised, that's my mother's best friend. My mother died ten years ago, at 97. That's her best friend. She must be 104 now. I said, how is she mentally? She's fine, the nurse says. Go and talk to her. So I went over to her, and said, 'Hello, Edie...do you remember Helen? She was my mother.' She said, 'You must be Tim.' And she talked about us, and about my mother. And it made me feel connected to the past, to my mother in the past, but to Edie in the present, like these songs make me feel connected to the past, but to everyone else here in the present. (Tim, interview)

The past, present and future are recurring themes in Tim's interview. He has never played an instrument before, and as well as the connection to the past and present the ukulele offers, discusses at length how it gives him something to aim for in retirement: he does not consider himself a musician, but feels his progress in playing 'means maybe one day I could call myself a musician'. He recognises that some members possess a 'drive' to 'play things more complicated, and better', while others 'just want to play amongst (them)selves, to also bring enjoyment to other people', but here, too, he remains focused upon the future, and describes hearing his compatriots' progress as encouraging for his own musical development despite differing goals. It strikes me, too, that while his encounter with Edie has consciously connected him to the past, the group's decision to play frequent concerts in care homes connects them with the uncertainty of a possible future in the fourth age.

I ask Tim if he knows whether Edie had enjoyed the concert, and if he thinks musicking played a role in his encounter with her; it is hard for me to tell, I say, how the residents at the concert I played with experienced our musicking. His response is eloquent in its uncertainty:

The staff said she did. They said, please come back because it creates so much joy, we played songs they can sing along with. They don't always sing, though, you saw that, so I don't know. But it's to do with this connectivity thing, you know, socially. If we talk about ukulele bringing pleasure into people's lives...it's both ways. I don't know how she felt about it, but it creates a wonderful atmosphere for *me*. And I don't think it would have happened without that. (Tim, interview)

Rogers, after Gendlin, conceptualises of experience (or 'experiencings') as a perpetual flow, 'to which the individual can turn again and again as a referent in order to discover the meaning of those experiences' (Rogers 1995a, 141). He suggests the role of a therapist is to point to the 'felt meaning' experienced in the present moment to deepen and disinhibit it (Rogers 1995a, 141). Through fully experiencing this present meaning, events of the past and future can be more fully understood. Despite Tim's focus on the future, he adeptly returns to his own felt meaning in the present, returning to the subjective, in-the-moment sense of connection and 'atmosphere' created through musicking. This facilitated his own sense of connection and belonging with others, and persisted regardless of whether the mutuality of the connection he experienced was known. For Tim, the 'embeddedness, connectedness and attachment' Pfaff-Czarnecka describes as integral aspects of belonging were accessed, for him, through the felt meaning of his musicking in the present. Although they might have been fleeting, they remained in his memory, and led, in turn, to a 'sense of possibility' he could project into the future.

### **Case study: a ukulele festival attended by retired players**

I arrive at the arts centre on a Saturday morning in June. A concert venue and community centre, it is one of the largest buildings in the tiny coastal town in West Sussex, bright, airy, and with a clear view to the sea from its floor-to-ceiling glass windows. Despite its size, and my early arrival, a crowd spills out of the doors of the venue; a ukulele festival in such a sleepy seaside town is a noteworthy event, and players from all along the coast, as well as further afield, have travelled here wanting to be involved. The ukulele festival is an important event for many participants in third-wave ukulele social worlds. Ukulele Hunt lists 17 festivals in Britain in an international master list of over a hundred (A. Wood 2010b), but as with groups and jams, the actual number is difficult to ascertain; the case study described in this section, as a smaller festival outside a major city, was not listed at the time of writing.

Ukulele festivals range from single-day events to full weekends; for the duration, pre-booked ukulele acts play on one or more stages, a market often sells instruments and related paraphernalia, and smaller group workshops, often led by artists performing on the festival bill, are run, which must usually be booked by festivalgoers in advance. There is also often an opportunity for attendees to jam together en masse, and some festivals also play host to open mic stages where anyone can play; as such, the festival combines multiple pathways — gigs, private groups, and large jams — to a single meeting point between many ukulele social worlds, like a larger-scale version of the Ukulele Speakeasy's hybrid approach. The particular festival presented in this chapter was noteworthy for the demographic of its attendance; despite being open to the general public, the great majority of attendees and performers were 50 or over. Perhaps as a result, the attendees I spoke to often grounded their MII specifically in being an older beginner.

Here at the arts centre, performances take place across two rooms: a larger auditorium with a stage for bigger group performances, alternating with sets in a small foyer with a tiny PA, a bar, and a few tables. The smaller room is so full

throughout the day it is virtually impossible to move; chord sheets are handed out so that jams can take place between acts, but although I have brought my sopranino ukulele with me, there is barely space to retrieve it from my backpack, let alone to stand and play it. The auditorium, a staff member tells me, has a capacity of around 300, but not a single seat is available despite it being the largest purpose-built performance space in the area. 'It's too popular,' she tells me. 'We never expected this. It's a nice problem to have, I suppose.' In larger towns and cities, a single individual can often attend more than one ukulele event per week, and this is particularly true in London, where ukulele events take place on most nights of the week, and players can move freely between events, often being able to socialise with many of the same people due to the degree of overlap between worlds. Here, Rose, a festival attendee in her 60s, tells me:

There isn't so much. It feels quite momentous. We have one ukulele jam a month, at the pub down the road, second Tuesday each month. I always go to that one. That one was inspired by Uke With Us a few miles away, that one meets once a month as well, on a Sunday. That's all there is, really. This is so exciting! (Rose, brief interview)

More ukulele events, each with its attendant pathways and desire lines, take place in a single week in London than in a month in the West Sussex area. Jack, in his 70s, tells me that 'more and more people come to Uke With Us every month. 96, this time. That's a record.' I tell him I find this remarkable given the largest ukulele jam I have attended in London appears to have an attendance of around 150, and he laughs. 'You see? It means more. It means more.' Fischer suggests that subcultural groups are more likely to spring up in urban centres due to higher tolerance for unconventional activity, and that young people are more likely to be subcultural participants due to a lesser investment in traditionalism (Fischer 1982, 68–71), but Jack's statement seemed to fly in the face of this proposal; the ukulele scene appeared to be thriving in a less

populated locale with less frequent events.<sup>13</sup> This is actually consistent with Jang and Alba's data-driven tests of Fischer's work, which find that, adjusting for age and educational status, suburban areas are actually more likely than urban ones to exhibit non-traditionalism (Jang and Alba 1992, 602–4). A closer comparison of urban and rural ukulele musicking might be a fruitful avenue for further study, but my own study suggests highly active ukulele social worlds exist outside of urban centres, and similar patterns of flexibility (and, in more closed groups, belonging) seemed to emerge in my case studies irrespective of locale.

The older age of the demographic attending the festival includes the performers on the main stage; several University of the Third Age groups are among them. This may have resulted partly from the substantial presence of local players; Sussex has one of the largest retired populations in Britain. As in the case of the Ukulele Speakeasy, a particular quality of shared understanding seems to be present amongst attendees who choose to visit and remain at the festival. The most prominent emergent theme in this world is the instrument's potential for late starters in musicking, which many of the players I speak to seem particularly keen to talk about. In the bustling foyer, I meet Edith; she has recently turned 80, and tells me excitedly that she has been playing the instrument for the last five years since joining her local University of the Third Age:

It's my first instrument. It might not be my last, but, for now, I love this one. I always, always wanted to play something I could sing to. Never thought I could, but as soon as I picked it up, I realised I was wrong, and how lovely to be wrong. And, really, if you're lucky enough to be able to play such a lovely thing, why not

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<sup>13</sup> I use the word 'subcultures' here to mirror Fischer's verbiage. It seems clear to me that Fischer is describing a particular type of social world and that his model is relevant to this case study, but it may be the case that a degree of confirmation bias is present in which subcultures are viewed as always already youth-focused; much seminal early work in subcultural studies, for example Hebdige (1979), presumes subculture to be uniquely a phenomenon of youth, which is also a factor in my decision to consider groupings in terms of social worlds.

do it with other people? It's a collective. We enjoy it, and we make friends. (Edith, brief interview)

Many players I met at the festival described the ukulele as their first instrument; most had not taken it up until retirement, but had progressed quickly, often playing daily. Many described an earlier assumption that they would never participate in musicking, like the demusicalised players of chapter 5, but none described a demusicalising event outright; this may be a function of the fact that sufficient rapport could not be built at a single-day event to trust me with this more sensitive experiential data, but there may be other confounding factors in play; the historical perspective offered by Cox, for instance, notes an emphasis on singing and listening in school-level music education during the first half of the 20th century (Cox 1993, 352–53), so this may even be a function of reduced access to participatory instrumental musicking earlier in life. Nonetheless, their experiences had much in common with the demusicalised group; they, too, tended to be reluctant to identify themselves as musicians, but simultaneously described experiences of actualising in which an ideal musical self, which had often been present for a lifetime, was brought into congruence with the real self; often a particular turning point ('as soon as I picked it up') was identified for this. Like players who mainly attended open jams, there was an emphasis on flexibility as an implicit means of facilitating unconditional positive regard in musicking, but festival attendees also emphasised a sense of belonging and shared understanding, not just within their 'home' social worlds but at the festival itself.

You do get more time when you're retired. It can be a bit hard. It's the only thing I want to do sometimes. And I think when you get older that's so important. I think a lot of people here understand that, probably. (Jack, brief interview)

Small explicitly attributes musicking, as a 'ritual act', with power to facilitate social cohesion and stability (Small 1998, 96). The particular value to older adults of

forming social connections through musicking is highlighted by several scholars (see Ernst and Emmons 1992; Hallam et al. 2012; Hillman 2002; Lehmborg and Fung 2010). Ernst and Emmons' study of an ensemble of older adult beginners attributes a 'feeling of attachment' to the group as particularly important to wellbeing (Ernst and Emmons 1992, 32), and Gabriel and Bowling suggest that this might be especially crucial for older people, finding that socialising after retirement has a significant impact on quality of life (Gabriel and Bowling 2004). Dabback's study of the impact on identity afforded by older adults' involvement in a band suggests that retirement alters sense of place in the world. His participants describe an almost overnight loss of identity ('I used to be —') which seems almost to inversely mirror the distinct turning point of musical actualising some of my participants described (Dabback 2008, 58); musicking helps to produce an identity which exists in the present and future, which might compensate for a work-based identity which is necessarily consigned to the past after retirement.

Again, what seemed to be unique about my own participants' perceptions of the ukulele in developing a musical identity lay in its flexibility. The hybrid model of the festival, at which participants could try out activities ranging in structure and seriousness from jams to formal technical classes, was arguably particularly well-suited to the pursuit of desire lines. Dabback finds that his own participants tended to feel that musicking in later life gave them a willingness to identify *as a musician*; by contrast, most older players in my own study seemed reluctant to identify themselves as such, but nevertheless were highly active in musicking and described a process of musical actualising, regardless of whether they were willing to claim the identity of 'musician'. One possible explanation for this divergence is that only a minority of Dabback's participants were absolute beginners, with the majority reconstructing a musical identity they had developed earlier in life (Dabback 2008, 275), in contrast to players like Edith who were completely new to musicking. Additionally, all of these studies of older players appear to view technical skill development as a primary



motivation for collective musicking. Since third-wave ukulele social worlds often seem to sideline technical skill as a mode of musical valuation, replacing it with unconditional positive regard, the perception of the ukulele as particularly flexible might render it more accessible for players who are at an earlier stage of musically actualising than Dabback's participants. For these players, collective musicking can offer a stable sense of belonging as a base from which they can further explore their IIM.

### **Desire lines, marginalisation, the 'we' and the 'I'**

The importance of flexibility in third-wave ukulele worlds as an entry point into musicking, particularly for adults who have not previously played an instrument, or who have experienced demusicalisation, cannot be overstated. While I had initially wondered whether the flexible desire lines participants had traversed in open ukulele jams were simply a homologous feature of an event designed to be open to anyone, the same qualities existed in more closed social worlds and events. There seemed to be no perceptible tension presented by the combination of flexible participation and stable membership, or the foregrounding of particular identities. In worlds like the case studies described in this chapter, which catered either explicitly or implicitly to participants occupying particular social demographics, flexibility and desire lines seemed to offer a route into collective musicking supported by unconditional positive regard, which was accessible even to those with no pre-existing musical background or IIM. The additional theme of belonging, however, was characteristic particularly of these demographic-specific social worlds, and was further supported by unconditional positive regard of musicking, offering a safe base from which to experiment with flexible participation and traversal of desire lines. Rather than conflicting, then, belonging and flexibility seemed mutually constitutive of one another.

Both older people and LGBTQ+-identified people may be considered systemically marginalised groups. Experiences of marginalisation relating to broader social demographics were not a primary focus of my interviews; this might be a fruitful avenue for further research, since it was evident from my participation particularly in the world of the Ukulele Speakeasy that issues of marginalisation were explored quite directly through musicking, and the existing literature regarding older people's participation in music does suggest that musicking might modulate the effects of social exclusion; Marcinkiewicz positions the University of the Third Age more broadly as a means of countering the marginalisation faced by some older people (Marcinkiewicz 2011). Although ultimately beyond the scope of this project, consideration of the ukulele in terms of other axes of marginalisation faced by players also has potential for further study. In particular, some online sources seem to suggest the ukulele might hold particular value for some disabled players ("How Does Your Disability Affect Your Ukulele Playing?" 2016; "Jam Sessions for Disabled Ukers Around the World" 2016; "Ukes and Disabilities" 2016), and further exploration of this, particularly from a disability studies-informed theoretical framework, might deepen understanding of the instrument's role in musicking for participants who might find themselves excluded from other forms of musicking.

As Slobin proposes, music, as an expressive cultural form, 'is both what "we" do, and what "I" do, and the two things are so intertwined as to be inextricable' (Slobin 1993, 56). The experience of one's playing becoming lost in the wall of strumming leaves space for personal musical development and traversal of individual desire lines. But for the wall of strumming to function at all, there must be collective playing in the first place. For participants in more closed, demographic-specific social worlds, a sense of collective belonging and connection to the wider world (both of ukulele players and of those with shared experiences of other aspects of social identity) was an important component of developing a personal musical identity, and of bringing

the real and ideal selves into congruence. The self was not subsumed by the collective, but neither did it develop apart from it.

In many respects, the worlds discussed in this chapter are very similar to the jams discussed in chapter 5. Players tended to perceive the instrument similarly, emphasising its flexibility, and attributing this to a shallow learning curve, portability, affordability, and social norms in its worlds which suspended conventional aesthetics of valuation in favour of unconditional positive regard. Journeys towards musical actualising also tended to take similar forms regardless of the type of social world participants primarily musicked within. But there seemed to be an additional dimension of the importance of community that perhaps resulted from living life closer to the margins of wider society; for these players, individual flexibility enabled collective belonging, which in turn fulfilled their belongingness needs, enabling further flexibility, the traversal of desire lines, and facilitating actualising.



## **7. Hoping for an in-between: the ukulele YouTuber, participation, participation, and platformisation**

The social worlds so far discussed in this thesis fall into a category I refer to as ‘offline-first’, because they centre around what Bastos refers to as ‘spatial’ (as opposed to ‘virtual’) gatherings in situated physical places (Bastos 2021, 51). I prefer not to refer to these worlds as simply ‘offline’, because much of their communication still uses the internet: as well as more specific uses, like the Twitter request system maintained at the larger Strum-Along jam, ukulele festivals and jams are often publicised mainly in online spaces, some have their own Facebook groups for members to socialise between sessions, and resources such as the widely-used Strum-Along songbook are also distributed partly through digital channels. I therefore borrow the term offline-first, which appears to be little-used in the humanities, from the field of software development, where it refers to applications which run in a web browser, but retain their core functionality regardless of whether the user maintains a connection to the internet. Although a user may need to be online to access certain resources, its main operations take place locally so if connection quality is poor or absent, user experience is unaffected (see, for example, Feyerke 2013). Correspondingly, an attendee may initially learn about the existence of a ukulele world through an online source, and may need to use the internet to download a digital copy of a songbook, but the actual core activity of musicking in these worlds takes place in a spatial, offline context.

By contrast, this chapter considers the online-first world of YouTube, although it includes an offline, spatial YouTube gathering. Musicking amongst ukulele players on YouTube takes place through recording video, which is then uploaded and posted to the site. Although every social networking site I investigated capable of hosting audiovisual material contained some examples of ukulele musicking, YouTube was by far the most frequently mentioned by participants and appeared to be particularly active, and as such, it is my focus in this chapter. Mjøs identifies YouTube as one of

the earliest platforms (alongside the now-defunct MySpace) to be widely adopted by music practitioners (Mjos 2012, xiii); unlike Twitter, which can host videos of limited length but emphasises text, and Facebook, which emphasises social connection above content creation and consumption (Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian 2012, 105), YouTube centres audiovisual uploads of any length, and algorithmically recommends uploaded content to its entire network of users to solicit views.<sup>14</sup> Although designed originally for video content rather than audio, a study by Liikkanen and Salovaara finds music to be the most popular form of content on YouTube (Liikkanen and Salovaara 2015, 109). Musical content available on the platform is diverse, ranging from cover songs recorded on smartphones to professionally-produced music videos, but ukulele musicking, in multiple forms, has a significant presence and history there.

A few interviewees identified particular YouTube videos as important to the ukulele's third-wave rise to popularity. The most frequently mentioned, by four interviewees, was Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's 2010 cover of 'Somewhere Over The Rainbow', which stands at more than a billion views, and is the 206th most-viewed video on the entire platform ("YouTube: Most Viewed Videos of All Time (Playlist)" 2021); two interviewees also mentioned Jake Shimabukuro's virtuosic cover of 'While My Guitar Gently Weeps', uploaded in 2006 with 17 million views. These videos were not viewed as achievable goals for participants' own playing, but as evidence of the instrument's capabilities, and for two participants represented the moment they 'discovered' and found themselves drawn to the instrument. More commonly, participants in offline-first worlds described an initial phase of learning on YouTube from videos specifically designed as teaching resources, before commencing spatial participation:

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<sup>14</sup> A newer social platform worthy of further examination is TikTok, which is devoted to shorter videos that can be posted as responses to, or 'duets' alongside, content posted by another creator. TikTok appears to have an active userbase of ukulele players, but this was not the case until later in my research process, and as such remains a topic for future scholarship.

I taught myself, looked on YouTube and stuff like that before I decided, I'm going to book two lessons and see how it ends up. Didn't want to make a fool of myself, you know the rest. (Tim, interview)

I started with just looking up the chords on YouTube, watching people play, all that stuff, to see if I thought I'd be able to do it, and then I thought, I'd like to play with other people. (Rosa, interview)

Ukulele YouTube channels can be divided into two types: tutorial-centred, which I define as hosting content aimed at teaching the instrument to players at various levels, and performance-centred, to which the owner of the channel uploads covers and original songs. O'Leary provides a comprehensive content analysis of seven of the most popular ukulele tutorial-centred channels on YouTube, finding that interaction through the comments and voting sections of their videos suggests higher audience engagement than for the most popular channels on the platform overall. He also finds that these channels span a reasonably wide range of content and repertoire, noting that tutorials for specific songs tend to outperform other types of content, such as videos teaching strumming patterns decontextualised from repertoire, and that songs chosen tend to be by artists who are still musically active (O'Leary 2020, 182), which he views as possible evidence that, in contrast with participation in offline-first ukulele social worlds, 'younger ukulele enthusiasts may be more likely to choose YouTube as a means of engagement' (O'Leary 2020, 185–86).

I suggest in practice that, aside from possible demographic network effects (see Katz and Shapiro 1994, 94), one possible reason for this is that many offline-first ukulele social events, at least in England, take place in pubs, which are off-limits to would-be participants who are under 18. Interviewees of all ages in my own study, however, did mention using YouTube in some capacity. Most participants rarely mentioned performance-centred channels, and tended to use tutorial-centred channels often to learn or hone specific playing techniques not connected to particular

repertoire. However, three participants (all under 30) also mentioned performance-centred channels, two of whom described them as their primary involvement with the ukulele. These two participants were not involved in offline-first worlds at all; their social worlds stemmed first and foremost from YouTube, and conversely, many participants in offline-first worlds, including those who used tutorial-centred channels, were unaware either that performance-centred ukulele YouTubers existed or that social worlds had formed around them. While I do not think particularly meaningful quantitative content analysis can be done on my own dataset, since my interviewees are numerically far too few, and no questions about YouTube were asked in my larger survey, evidently at least some older adults do use YouTube as a learning resource, and overall the pathways of ukulele enthusiasts that involve YouTube are quite varied. A visualisation of some of these pathways can be seen in figure 5.

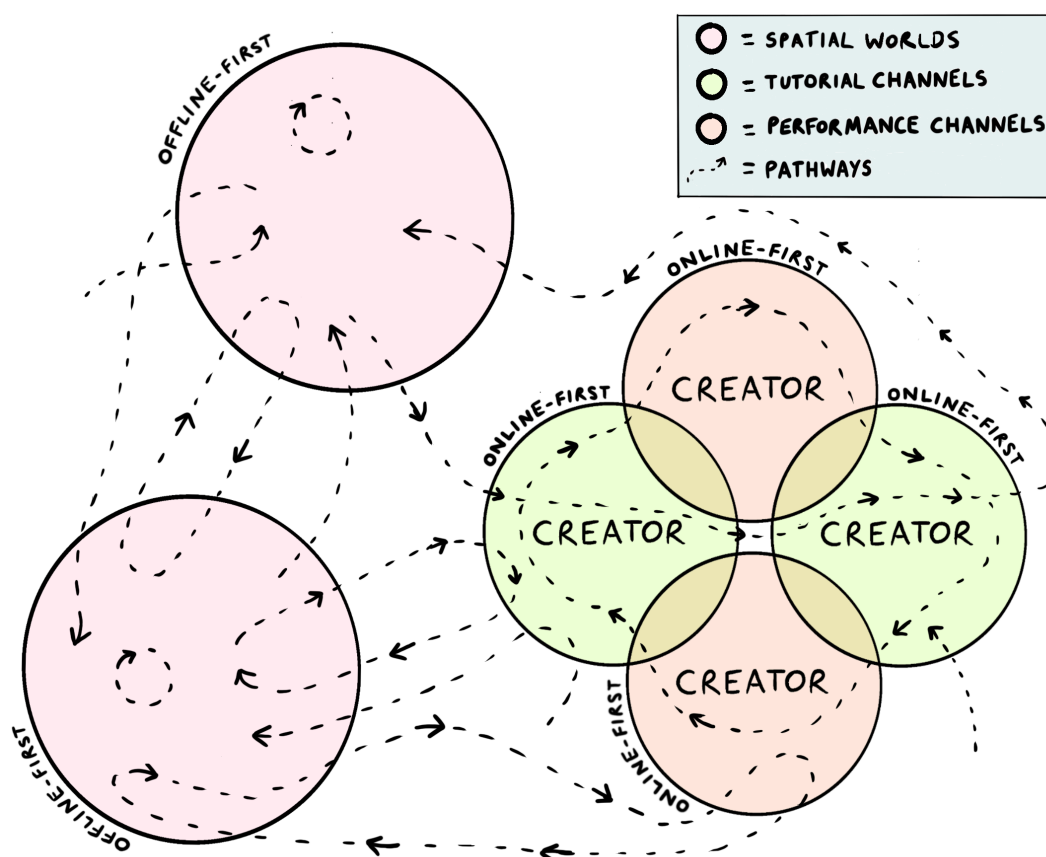


Figure 5: Visualisation of offline-first and online-first worlds and participant pathways, including both tutorial-centred and performance-centred YouTube channels.



Complicating this further, performance-centred ukulele YouTube channels are omitted almost entirely from O’Leary’s analysis,<sup>15</sup> and, to my knowledge, are also absent from existing academic literature either on the ukulele or on the YouTube platform more generally. They will therefore be my primary focus here. These channels are generally run by lone individuals, and performances are usually presented in an intimate, low-fidelity context. Shimabukuro’s aforementioned video falls into this category; its footage is grainy, shot outdoors in New York City’s Central Park, and was originally posted on the site ostensibly without the artist’s knowledge until it catapulted him to fame (Nakamura and Young 2013). Shimabukuro’s video is uncharacteristic of this genre, however, in terms of its virtuosity; far more common are vocal performances of songs with few chords and relatively simple plucking or strumming patterns. It is also unusual in that it was posted to the platform without his knowledge. By contrast, performance-centred ukulele creators usually post their own performances, which may be planned and scheduled, and sometimes involve taking audience requests. Most performance-centred ukulele creators on YouTube are very young adults or teenagers, most frequently girls or young women. While many receive few views, others do achieve a degree of virality: a sample of these is shown in Table 1. This chapter takes the mononymous Dodie, an English ukulele player and singer-songwriter with a performance-centred channel, as its main case study. Dodie was selected in part because her content and channel experienced particular success at the time of researching this chapter, but also because I considered her style and content to be reasonably representative of performance-centred channels at the time.

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<sup>15</sup> O’Leary notes that creator Elise Ecklund’s channel differs from the others considered in his paper because, as well as tutorials, her most popular content also includes some performances of original songs played on the ukulele. Ecklund may be usefully viewed as traversing a pathway between the world of educational content creators discussed in O’Leary’s study, and the more academically untouched world of performance-oriented content on the platform, the primary focus of this chapter.

Table 1: Sample of popular ukulele YouTube performers. 'Years active' refers to years spent performing ukulele-centred content; some creators listed have moved on to other forms of musicking or post performances alongside other content.

Name or pseudonym	Location	Subscriber count	Years active
Abbey Glover	UK	1.1M	2016 - present
Abby Lyons	USA	48.8K	2017 - present
Aruu Eugene	Malaysia	52.8K	2017 - present
Aryy	USA	1.14M	2008 - present
Carrie Hope Fletcher	UK	652.5K	2013 - present (intermittent)
Cavetown	UK	1.83M	2013 - present
Charlie McDonnell	UK	2.14M	2007 - 2016 (intermittent)
Chloe Moriondo	USA	3.13M	2014 - present
Danielle Ate The Sandwich	USA	48.5K	2007 - present
Dodie	UK	1.98M	2011 - present
Elise Ecklund	USA	1.96M	2016 - present
Emmanoodle	Canada	437K	2016 - present
Grace Vanderwaal	USA	3.48M	2015 - present
Jas Ratchford	UK	21.5K	2014 - present
Jon Cozart	USA	4.72M	2010 - 2020 (intermittent)
Julia Nunes	USA	227K	2007 - present
Karlie Goya	Hawaii	30.2K	2013 - present
Mxmtoon	USA	880K	2017 - present
Renee Dominique	Phillippines	1.46M	2013 - present
Sylvie	UK	11K	2016 - present

UkewithNix	USA	275K	2012 - present
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In my own study, only a few players, all younger than 30, mentioned dedicated fan communities for performance-centred channels. While they might look up tutorial content for particular playing techniques or songs they encountered, this was done only rarely. By contrast, their engagement with performance-centred creators was more consistent, involving direct social engagement with other fans in comments sections of videos or through other social media sites, such as Discord or Twitter. Tutorial-centred ukulele YouTube channels did not give rise to such clearly apparent social worlds per se, although they were mentioned as helpful resources by participants in other types of social world; these participants tended to be older, were usually involved in offline-first ukulele worlds, and were generally not aware of performance-centred channels when I mentioned them, although I did not consistently measure awareness of different types of channel by age. Performance-centred YouTube channels, however, did often seem to lead to the formation of social worlds. These were not always focused entirely on the consumption of the content produced by creators; some self-identified fans of ukulele YouTubers described becoming inspired to take up the instrument themselves, and covering, or in some cases writing, songs themselves.

Such creativity is not atypical in social worlds born on YouTube. Much of the early scholarship regarding the platform considers it, after Henry Jenkins, a rich site of ‘participatory culture’, in which the divide between producer and consumer is eroded, empowering users to generate content collectively; within a participatory culture, social connections are made, and individual contributions are felt to matter (Jenkins, Ito, and boyd 2015, 183). This chapter explores the relationship between YouTube, the ukulele, and participatory culture, but also identifies a tension between collective participation in musicking and what I refer to, after Andrew Killick, as holicipation, or solitary musicking (Killick 2006). YouTube’s inherently asynchronous

communication, this chapter suggests, leads ukulele musicking on the platform to occupy neither a wholly collective nor solitary status, becoming a fluid middle ground which at the time I assumed was not present within offline-first ukulele social worlds. I then explore a second tension, this time between participation and platformisation, or the increasing influence of digital platforms into everyday life. Jenkins positions participatory culture as at odds with mainstream, professionally-generated media. In recent years, however, an increasing emphasis on corporate media platforms has led to YouTube's recognition as a resource for marketing communication, which can be leveraged by brands for fiscal benefit. The result is an intertwinement of, and tension between, participation and platformisation, in which corporations leverage user-generated participatory content for their own ends, and at times use it to conceal its own appropriation.<sup>16</sup>

A visit to a YouTube convention in London, headlined by Dodie, indicated that YouTube's creators were actively negotiating these two tensions, and that ukulele YouTubers engaged in small tactical acts of resistance, which, despite an inability to dismantle the YouTube's sometimes restrictive structures, nevertheless enabled them to be interrogated through the medium of the platform itself. I was not fully aware of this before conducting participant-observation at a spatial YouTube convention, at which a discussion panel aiming to deconstruct the supposed divide between creator and viewer led me to investigate Dodie's and other ukulele YouTubers' uploaded content for more indirect critiques of the platform. It is noteworthy that my image of creators' relationships to these tensions was so incomplete prior to attending the convention, particularly since, to my knowledge, this is the first ethnographic exploration of a spatial YouTube gathering. The boundary appeared blurred not only between the individual and the collective, but also between the online and offline;

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<sup>16</sup> This development is mirrored, both on the platform and in media more widely, by the ukulele's use as a sonic marker of DIY, homegrown culture. This has led to its appropriation in corporate advertisements, further discussed in chapter 9 of this thesis.

ultimately, the latter was necessary to fully understand the former. This chapter aims to uncover an unstudied world of ukulele musicking on YouTube, which challenges prior considerations of participatory culture. It also suggests that further research into virtual spaces may be enriched by concurrent research into spatial ones, and that the two cannot be easily separated.

### **No one will hear this, but: YouTube as a site of participation/holicipation**

A young ukulele player stands in front of a white-laminated kitchen countertop crowded with potted plants. Her hair is messy and unbrushed, and she peers owlishly through a pair of large, round spectacles. She strums a Kala baritone ukulele in a syncopated rhythm, the sound of the strings echoing gently off the bare kitchen surfaces. ‘Someone’s going to get to know the better you, when I was supposed to,’ she sings in a soft voice, gazing directly into my eyes; ‘oh, why did it have to be you?’ she laments, scrunching up her face as if in pain. The camera smash-cuts to a close-up of the same player, in a softly-lit room, holding up a card reading ‘You’ in bold handwriting. I press pause, and notice for the first time that the reflection of a home video camera is dimly reflected in the lenses of her glasses (Dodie 2017a).

The ukulele player, known by the mononym Dodie, is a full-time singer-songwriter and YouTuber based in London. She is the owner of two YouTube channels: the first, under the handle ‘doddleodde’, has just under two million subscribers at the time of writing, and plays host to a series of cover songs and originals (Dodie 2021a). The second, with the username ‘doddlevloggle’ — referring to the vlog, a format Burgess and Green describe as ‘emblematic’ of the YouTube platform (Burgess et al. 2009, 53) — has a little over 900,000 subscribers and primarily features videos in which Dodie talks to the camera about various topics. The doddlevloggle channel, also includes some less polished covers and original songs. Dodie’s performances chiefly use a concert ukulele, which is featured on the cover of her 2017 memoir *Secrets For The Mad* (Dodie 2017d), but some of her songs are

accompanied by a baritone ukulele, and a few use an electric piano or acoustic guitar. Since February 2011, more than 160 videos have been uploaded to the main doddleoddle channel, and more than 350 to the secondary doddlevloggle channel. The larger number of videos on the latter channel is presumably due to a more casual approach to producing and editing its content: ‘doddleoddle is my portfolio content. This channel is more of a scrapbook/diary :)’ reads its description box (Dodie 2021b).

At the time of initially researching this chapter in 2017, the doddleoddle channel ranked in the top four thousand YouTube channels by view and subscriber count (see “Doddleoddle's YouTube Stats Summary Profile” 2017). Dodie self-released the EPs *Intertwined* in 2016, and *You* in 2017, respectively placing in the official UK albums chart at thirty-fifth and sixth position. Sony Music subsidiary The Orchard subsequently acted as distributor for her third EP, *Human*, in 2019, which reached fifth position in the charts, followed by the album *Build A Problem* in 2021, which charted at third position (“Dodie - Full Official Chart History” 2021). Dodie’s first two EPs received little press coverage, but the already substantial base of subscribers she had amassed since beginning her channel in 2011 appears to have driven sales and streams up sufficiently for her records to chart; her latter records received more mainstream recognition through airplay on BBC Radio 1 (*Radio 1’s Future Sounds with Clara Amfo, Hottest Record from Dodie* 2019), and coverage in *NME* (Smith 2018), raising her profile outside of YouTube’s social worlds, and in turn driving new viewers to her channel. It is worth noting that most ukulele YouTubers do not achieve this degree of success outside the platform, and Dodie notes in a video discussing *Intertwined’s* early chart performance that she feels having already established herself with a ‘ready-made audience’ on the platform at times makes it difficult to be taken seriously by labels (Dodie 2016c); the rapid growth of her fanbase, however, appears to have assisted her emergence into wider cultural awareness. Despite attaining unusual popularity amongst ukulele YouTubers, she shares many qualities with others in similar social worlds on the platform, expertly navigating, whether consciously or unconsciously,

the aesthetic trends popular amongst ukulele YouTubers and their viewers, and seems to view herself as connected with other players there; in one interview, she notes that an earlier ukulele content creator, Charlie McDonnell, inspired one of her first original songs (Pareles 2021).

Dodie's early career on YouTube, beginning in 2011, exemplifies a phenomenon identified by Henry Jenkins as participatory culture. Participatory culture emerges first and foremost, suggests Jenkins, from media convergence, in which content is circulated across multiple platforms and systems that compete and interact, courting consumers across various channels and locations (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins, Ito, and boyd 2015, 7). For musicians, the implications are potentially huge. Publishing and retailing records through more traditional channels is no longer enough to keep up with the new model of consumption. Social networking (which, including Dodie's interactions, takes place across multiple platforms) becomes a crucial part of promotion, but also allows artists and fans to communicate directly. This, suggests Jenkins, represents 'more than simply a technological shift' (Jenkins 2004, 34). Its outcome is participatory culture, a subsequent *cultural* convergence in which the lines between consumer and producer become blurred, and in which consumers, in Jenkins's words, can choose to 'take media in their own hands' (Jenkins 2006, 17). Jenkins defines a participatory culture as one

...with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). (Jenkins, Ito, and boyd 2015, 4)

Burgess and Green describe YouTube as a rich site of participatory culture; its services are oriented towards *creating and sharing* media in an everyday context

(Burgess et al. 2009). Dodie's earliest content, posted before the maturation of YouTube's algorithm and increasing emphasis on monetisation, is filmed on a lower-quality camera and consists mainly of simple songs inspired by her real life: a song about her best friend, written for her birthday; a duet with her seven-year-old sister in which the two express a wish to switch ages; 'The Ill Ukulele Song', in which, strumming a blue soprano instrument with imperfect tuning, she lists activities to pursue during illness, including 'attempt to write a witty song/with a cheap ukulele that's out of tune' (Dodie 2012). As I scroll forward through her content, I reach 'Social Dance' (Dodie 2014a), a simple fingerpicked waltz which, Dodie claims in her commentary, is inspired by the insecurity she observes among users on the social network Tumblr. Dodie's playing, songwriting and video production are less sophisticated than in her more recent content, but below each video I find a series of warm and enthusiastic comments dating back to its upload date; strong support, indeed, for creating.

Jenkins's emphasis on new media and convergence might, at first, imply that participatory culture is exclusively a digital phenomenon. Jenkins's own response is that aspects of participatory culture can be seen in folk art, but that in the age of digital culture, 'grassroots and amateur forms of expression gained much greater visibility' (Jenkins, Ito, and boyd 2015, 7). There are, however, obvious resonances between his definition of participatory culture and the offline-first groups described earlier in this thesis, in which the barrier to entry is strategically lowered to allow players at any skill level to participate, and in which the point is not necessarily to be skilled, but to be supported to play in a collective context. I am not the first to observe elements of participatory culture in offline-first ukulele worlds. In his video 'On YouTubers and Ukuleles', uploaded to the platform in 2014, YouTuber and student of new media Anthony D'Angelo posits participatory culture as the missing link between YouTube and the ukulele (D'Angelo 2014). D'Angelo discusses his own experiences of social connection and informal mentorship as a ukulele player on YouTube; he describes



playing the Doctor Who theme song on ukulele at a spatial YouTube gathering as a means of making friends with similar interests, and notes the value of the platform's comments section in simply reaching out socially to creators, as well as the availability of tutorials on the platform for both ukulele playing and video editing (he notes he has never had a formal lesson in either). For D'Angelo, the ukulele is an ideal adjunct to YouTube as a tool of participatory culture. It is cheap to begin as a creator, and has a shallow learning curve allowing the user to quickly play well enough to share that playing with others. Alongside its portability, these qualities were repeatedly identified as key to lowering the barrier to entry to musicking by players in the offline-first spaces I had already visited.

As I scroll through Dodie's videos, I find her most overt engagement with participatory culture, and blurring of the boundary between artist and audience, in the song 'Freckles and Constellations', which opens with a spoken explanation that 'this song was completely and entirely composed by my audience...literally, this is all you' (Dodie 2015b). Lyrics, melody, chords, visuals, and every other aspect of the work, aside from Dodie's own voice and ukulele track, she explains, were contributed by viewers, many of whom can be seen and heard singing and playing in clips shown during the video. The video itself is a sequence of clips of contributors shown one by one, interspersed with animation and illustration. The ukulele is by far the most frequently-sighted instrument throughout the 'Freckles and Constellations' video; in total, 18 viewers are shown playing it, perhaps partly to emulate Dodie herself, but perhaps also simply because of the instrument's popularity on the platform at the time. The contributors' cameras and microphones are of variable quality, and the resolution of some footage is so low that it is pixelated and hard to see, but it is present in the video regardless, valued for its own sake. Later, for a version of the song '6/10' on her first EP, Dodie will solicit recordings of the voices of her subscribers for use in her backing vocals (Dodie 2017b, 2017c). I think of Jenkins' assertion that believing one's contributions matter is instrumental to participatory culture, and remember

Rogers's description, after Buber, of 'confirming the other...accepting the whole potentiality of the other' (Rogers 1995b, 55). If, in a participatory culture, every contribution matters, perhaps this might, too, be understood as a form of unconditional positive regard.

As I watch 'Freckles and Constellations', it strikes me that although their clips flick past each other in sequence to contribute to the whole, almost every contributor is depicted alone, usually in a bedroom or other private space. Dodie's performances, too — aside from the occasional duet with another YouTuber, or her younger sister — are recorded alone, which is typical for ukulele content on the platform. Sometimes, she overdubs her own voice to create harmonies, and in a few videos she splices together footage of herself to allow her to 'duet' without others present. This is a significant difference between the participatory culture of YouTube's ukulele players, and the offline-first worlds of my earlier research. Although YouTube's users and creators can, and do, develop social connections and form social worlds, there is a strange sense of the solitary in where and how content on the platform is actually made, which I experience as a stark contrast to the packed bars and pubs of my offline-first participant-observation. Although YouTube supports live-streaming and live chat, these features were not introduced until 2019 and are still used only relatively rarely by ukulele YouTubers; communication via the comments section is asynchronous, and videos must be uploaded in full and processed prior to watching, so cannot be viewed in real-time. An audience might be imagined by a creator as they perform, but there is no direct sensory apprehension of the collective.

Andrew Killick argues that the practice of those who make music alone has historically been neglected within ethnomusicology. He names the act of solitary musicking 'holicipation', riffing off the etymology of 'participation', from the Latin for 'to take part'. If participation, suggests Killick, is to take (a) part in an experience, then to play alone, without audience or other players, is to 'take the whole':

When I make music alone, on the piano...instead of taking part, I take the whole, and (selfishly enough) I have it all to myself. The music is usually self-sufficient solo music...so I can play the whole of it by myself. The absence of an audience and of other players means that I can concentrate on the sounds I am making, hear them clearly and not have to worry about how they might sound to someone else. The playing may not be very distinguished, but it is mine and, if it pleases me, it serves its purpose. (Killick 2006, 274)

Killick proposes that holicipation is 'a form of experience that is, with its apparent lack of ulterior motives, potentially the most intensely and purely musical of all' (Killick 2006, 288). But what is curious about the practice of ukulele YouTubers like Dodie is that although their playing is holicipatory in its solitude, the lack of ulterior motive clearly does not quite apply. Although audience and other players remain absent, there must be an awareness that they are out there somewhere; uploading a recording of one's holicipation to YouTube to be viewed by an unknown audience renders that holicipation part of the participatory culture fostered by the platform. The asynchronicity of communication taking place means social connections can be fostered if a viewer chooses to reach out in the comments section, or the performance can simply be observed without making oneself known to the creator. Dodie's videos are neither wholly participatory nor wholly holicipatory; or they are both participatory and holicipatory.

The sense of solitude I identify within the collective becomes more acute, and more paradoxical, as I scroll forward in time on the doddleodde channel. 'Rainbow', posted in 2018 (and ultimately released on *Build A Problem* in 2021), is, for me, the most emotionally arresting of Dodie's songs. It is a sensitive exploration, fingerpicked on a baritone ukulele, of the lived experience of shame as an LGBTQ+ person (the artist identifies as bisexual); the intent is articulated in the video's description, but the song itself is expansive in its metaphor:

I was brought up in a line

But I seem to walk in circles  
It's getting hard to navigate  
When every map was never made for me (Dodie 2018b)

The video has over seven thousand comments, but more than a million views. Its comments section has almost a confessional tone; only a minority of comments address Dodie, or even other commenters, directly. Most are somewhere between a line and a paragraph describing the listener's personal investment in the song, and some are simply autobiographical, venting emotions; accounts of coming out to parents, of transphobic abuse, late autism diagnoses, falling in love for the first time. I quickly realise that, aside from the video's 'top comments', which appear at the top of the page when it loads, most of these stories have no responses at all; they are drowned out by the mass of others, and some acknowledge this in their text, opening 'I know no one will see this, but...' or 'I know this will get buried...'. I pick up the ukulele next to my desk, loop back to the start of the video, and, as I notice some commenters say they are doing themselves, try to pick along with it, a sort of invisible ensemble. It is almost as if the video's comments are vented into a void; the sheer volume of participation itself loops back to a holicipatory state. As the song ends again, I type 'dodie rainbow cover' into the site's search box, and am met with numerous cover versions, most played on the ukulele by young people alone in their rooms. Again, I scroll past the most popular versions, and click through cover after cover of 'Rainbow', each with a numerical view counter. 20 views; 12 views; 3 views. 0 comments. I realise that some of these versions might never have been played back before by anyone other than the creator themselves. The degree of public participation on the platform means that some musicking will always remain functionally solitary. Often, the playing is not, as Killick puts it, at all distinguished; but, for it to be uploaded, it must have served its purpose.

Something of the very fabric of YouTube's social worlds, then, renders the apparent binary of musicking together and musicking alone less clear. While I, and

thousands of others, might experience picking along, or simply listening to 'Rainbow' as traversing a pathway with Dodie, participating alongside her, we are also holicipating; she cannot apprehend us, nor we each other. In viewing an unwatched cover version, I too am 'confirming the other', but the other has no direct experience of the confirmation. Setting aside for a moment its algorithmic recommendations and content copyright detection, there is nothing revolutionary about YouTube's core functionality of hosting home video; for musicians it might be seen to fulfil a similar role to a home studio. The combination of a remarkably low barrier to entry and the presence of elements to facilitate social interaction, however, foster a participatory culture, but simultaneously a holicipatory one, a tension which — or so I assume at the time — is not present within offline-first ukulele social worlds.

### **Giving back the rainbow? YouTube as a site of participation/platformisation**

The participatory practices of ukulele YouTubers like Dodie are, however, in tension not only with holicipation, but also with 'platformisation', a term referring to the penetration of structures and processes fostered by digital platforms into everyday life (Poell, Nieborg, and Dijck 2019; Helmond 2015), which itself may be viewed as a type of convergence culture. The term 'platform' is applied to a range of online services, which Negus and Zhang describe as "digital architecture' that assimilates the circulation of information' (Zhang and Negus 2021, 6), but includes those with the capacity for social communication, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These social platforms can host social worlds within them, whose pathways often converge with other platforms. The most popular of these tend to be owned by large digital conglomerates (Mosco 2017; Negus 2019; Zhang and Negus 2021); YouTube was founded as a venture capital-funded startup, but after its first year of rapid growth and increasing running costs it was acquired by Google, and is now a subsidiary of Google parent company Alphabet after a restructure (Sorkin and Peters 2006). Following its acquisition, the YouTube platform has gradually increased its emphasis

on revenue collection through video advertising, paid subscriptions, and 'Content ID', which automates identification and monetisation of copyrighted material reused in videos (see Jackson 2011; King 2010; Soha and McDowell 2016). Some scholars have suggested that this increasing emphasis on monetisation is accompanied by a move away from user-generated content. Kim suggests that a process of 'institutionalisation' has taken place following Google's acquisition of the platform, in which user-generated content has been usurped by professional media content, and Wasko and Erickson argue that professional media is now more valuable on YouTube than user-generated content (Wasko and Erickson 2009, 383). I suggest Dodie and other ukulele YouTubers like her imply a more complex reality, in which participation and platformisation exist in a relationship of continual tension and interdependence.

Since content uploaded to the YouTube platform is free to view, revenue is collected primarily through targeted advertisements placed automatically before and after videos, and subscription fees which remove these advertisements. Through Dodie's uploads, however, I become aware of a more subtle, perhaps more insidious form of advertising, which highlights powerfully the tension between participation and platformisation on YouTube: the sponsored video, or 'brand integration', as YouTube's own learning resource for creators labels them. A brand integration is

a type of branded content where a creator finds a way to seamlessly feature a product or service in their videos. The idea is to do something with the product in the video that makes sense and aligns with your own channel's brand. (*YouTube Creator Academy* 2018)

Both Dodie's channels feature semi-regular brand deals, some of which clearly complicate Kim's assertions of institutionalisation on the YouTube platform. One of these, 'Tell Me A Story', for an online eyewear company, is a live recording of an original song for voice and ukulele (Dodie 2016a). Throughout the video, Dodie adopts the different personas described in the song's lyrics by donning hats and glasses placed on her by a friend who remains just out of shot, except during each

chorus, when he leans into the frame and sings along. The effect is informal to the point of feeling almost chaotic at times; the glasses are usually seated poorly on Dodie's face and threaten to slide off, and during the spoken outro in which she discusses the company's products, the two appear to mock traditional advertising, making clearly hyperbolic claims in an exaggerated tone, and delivering deliberately bad puns about the eyewear. In an 'outtakes' video of the song posted on Dodie's secondary channel, a pair of glasses is almost broken in one take (Dodie 2016b). This is not 'professionally-generated content' of the sort Kim describes. The style of the video is irreverent, messy, and sometimes unprofessional in tone, and that, it appears, is the point. The brand deal is valuable to the company paying for it because it offers access to a previously untapped audience. The video has more than a million views.

Trust, suggests Dasgupta, is a valuable economic commodity (Dasgupta 1988). A brand integration taking place in the same private space in which Dodie's audience is accustomed to watching her, in a style that feels familiar and intimate, maintains the trust and positive regard fostered between Dodie and her audience since her arrival on the platform. It also recalls the low barrier to entry of participatory culture on the YouTube platform; the homemade feel of the advertisement authenticates her, and in turn her sponsors, to her audience. 'Tell Me A Story' represents an example of a brand working with user-generated content, rather than trying to usurp it, and commodifying the sense of social connection between creators and viewers on the platform. The 'strong support for creating and sharing' Jenkins describes is not destroyed by the brand integration; the comments of 'Tell Me A Story' are as complimentary as ever, and several commenters describe the video as the best advertisement they have ever seen. By encouraging Dodie to present their advertisements in the style (informed by YouTube's participatory elements) which has become a part of her own 'personal brand' (see Chen 2013), *without* insisting on generating content on her behalf or attempting to control its professionalism, brands

who work with her can access an audience on the platform who might otherwise be unreachable.

As I explore Dodie's channel, I find that some brand integrations make for more comfortable viewing than others. Posted only five days after 'Rainbow', the song I had been struck by commenters' emotional, and often strangely holicipatory, responses to, is a performance titled 'Why the rainbow is ours'. Recalling 'Freckles and Constellations', the song's lyrics are pieced together from reworked messages sent by fans on Twitter about their experiences of identifying as LGBTQ+ (Dodie 2018c). This time, the video is sponsored by the sweet brand Skittles, who run a yearly campaign during Pride month during which the colours are removed from their product, to 'give the rainbow back' to the LGBTQ+ community. Dodie is alone, sitting against the same blue wall seen behind her in 'Rainbow', but while, in the preceding video, the camera is zoomed close to her face and ukulele, in 'Why the rainbow is ours', she is seated at the bottom of a zoomed-out frame. As she sings, quotations from the tweets on which each lyric is based appear on the blank wall above her. Each one is written out, apparently in her own hand, in a different colour of the rainbow. The comments below the video are similar to those below 'Rainbow', and are overwhelmingly positive in tone.

Although material benefit is derived from the campaign, since a portion of the company's, and Dodie's, profits are donated to a helpline charity whose number is clearly visible in the video, I nonetheless find myself feeling conflicted about the deployment of participatory culture, trust, and marginalised positionality in 'Why the rainbow is ours'. Bishop suggests that conveying affect, such as anxiety, can be a means for YouTubers to strategically negotiate authenticity, a form of 'visibility labour' (Abidin 2016), which can be deployed to generate views (Bishop 2018a). The video sits neatly within a wider context of LGBTQ+ content on Dodie's channel and on YouTube more widely, including amongst ukulele artists on the platform: see, for example, Abbey Glover's 'I Wish You Liked Girls' (Glover 2017); 'Make Out' by Julia



Nunes, whose video features real-life couples including the artist's own girlfriend (Nunes 2016b, 2016a); Mxmtoon's 'Stuck', an exploration of feeling trapped between identities (mxmtoon 2017); Dodie's own song 'She', which concerns falling in love with a girl (Dodie 2014b). The placement of the song in Dodie's uploads, coupled with its title, almost makes it feel like a deliberate foil to the aching sincerity of 'Rainbow', but I am well aware — and the video does not conceal — that it is motivated not only by the artist's desire to discuss her own identity, but also by a commission from a large brand, presumably keen to access an audience on the platform who might be jaded by mainstream advertising campaigns. This might be a particularly salient issue in advertising related to the LGBTQ+ community. The portrayal of LGBTQ+ people as comparatively affluent (whether accurately or otherwise; see Matthews and Besemer 2015) has previously led to targeting what is colloquially referred to as the 'pink pound' or 'pink dollar' as a potentially lucrative market segment (Branchik 2002; Eisend and Hermann 2019; Skover and Testy 2002, 230–33), and Abidin suggests that for some influencers 'coming out' may be a profitable strategy expressly because of the fiscal motivations of some corporations in 'performing care' towards the LGBTQ+ community (Abidin 2019, 626).

In recent years, targeting the pink pound has been met with some cynicism. Karen Tongson refers to 'rainbow capitalism' as the commodification of gay pride by corporations as 'purely symbolic' in the absence of substantive structural change (Tongson, quoted in Moniuszko 2021), Smialek notes the 'potential to do harm' in rainbow capitalism's presence in mainstream pop (Smialek 2021, 105), and Burns views 'the consumptive and sanctioned' outcomes of pro-LGBTQ+ capitalist processes as at odds with a queer politics of difference (Burns 2021, 127). This sense of unease extends beyond academia and journalism. Moniuszko reports increasing scepticism among users on social network Tiktok about the deployment of queer identity to generate revenue for corporations (Moniuszko 2021). By leveraging Dodie as a mouthpiece for the brand, and her audience's trust in her, Skittles almost appears to

attempt to sidestep this suspicion. The song fits neatly into Dodie's unsponsored content, and is authenticated both by her self-declared bisexual identity, and the emotional labour Bishop suggests is inevitably involved in visibility labour (Bishop 2018a), as well as by her history within YouTube's participatory social worlds; participation deployed to conceal, and benefit, platformisation.

Zhang and Negus suggest that platformisation results in a new category of musicianship, which they refer to as the 'platform musician'; the earlier categories of the recording artist and live performer), they propose, were shaped by the recording business and events industries, and the emergence of the platform musician indicates the increasing centrality of the online platform within the music industry (Zhang and Negus 2021). Dodie, I think, illustrates a particular nuance within the category of the platform musician. Platform musicianship, for some artists, results from a desire to extend their musicking already done elsewhere into an increasingly culturally influential sphere; indeed, Zhang and Negus describe an 'incentive project' by one Chinese conglomerate to encourage indie musicians on to their platform (Zhang and Negus 2021, 13).

For Dodie, and, in fact, most of the ukulele content creators named in Table 1, platform musicianship actually precedes these other categories. Dodie had amassed subscribers on the YouTube platform for almost a decade before moving into recorded releases or live public performance. In a podcast interview, her manager mentions that at the time he was hired, she had 100,000 subscribers, but had never released a record, and that 'no one knew anything about her outside of the YouTube community' (McCrae and Paluch 2019). In a vlog made as interest in her music outside the platform began to grow, she describes experiences of ambivalence when first approaching labels and publishers due to being viewed as a 'YouTube musician'; she also references friends and acquaintances who have either left the platform or drastically changed the tone of their content in order to be taken more seriously in other music industries (Dodie 2016c). Indeed, two of the ukulele YouTubers named in Table 1

(Aruu Eugene and Emmanoodle) seem to have no web presence outside the platform.<sup>17</sup> Being a ‘platform-first’ (or even ‘platform-only’) musician, then, as most ukulele YouTubers are, might be a double-edged sword of sorts in a way that being a ‘platform-inclusive’ musician is not; but it also allows performers to authenticate themselves and engender deeper trust with their audience, which can itself be a valuable commodity to brands outside the music industry itself.

The corporatisation of participatory culture is not new (see Deuze 2008). But there is a particular parallel between YouTube and the ukulele itself, in that both have earlier associations with participatory culture, and both are circularly appropriated not only so that those participatory associations are redeployed in service of large corporations, but also so that their own appropriation is concealed through the authentication achieved by that redeployment. The ukulele’s broader use in corporate advertisements is discussed in more detail in chapter 9 of this thesis, but it is worth noting that this too may be associated with YouTube. The particular style of ukulele music in these advertisements tends to be more homogeneous than that heard in original videos — including sponsored ones — by ukulele YouTubers; almost invariably upbeat, percussive strumming often coupled with glockenspiels, handclaps, and whistles. At around the same time as this style emerged in television advertising, it also began to appear en masse in royalty-free stock background music libraries, including YouTube’s own free-to-use Audio Library.<sup>18</sup> Royalty-free music is particularly useful on YouTube because, at least in theory, it is exempt from Content ID detection, allowing the creator to maintain creative control over the video’s content (Kaye and Gray 2021). It is difficult to determine whether the particular style of

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<sup>17</sup> Note, for clarity, that two content creators use the latter handle, one a Canadian ukulele musician, the other an Irish fashion blogger mainly active on Instagram with no apparent connection to ukulele social worlds.

<sup>18</sup> My research for this chapter included an interview with two co-founders of a small production library, who suggested, albeit tentatively, that this style of ukulele track became popular on YouTube first, and was only then appropriated by other forms of media, though I have not been able to confirm this conclusively.

'corporate ukulele music' (expanded upon in chapter 9) originates from YouTube or corporate media, but its popularity in royalty-free libraries means it is also frequently heard in YouTube videos not related to musicking, such as vlogs and beauty tutorials. My own observations suggest this might have become more frequent after 2014, when YouTube introduced a feature automatically warning creators about breaches of Content ID after uploading, but quantitative work to confirm this might be an intriguing avenue for further research.

One ukulele track featured in YouTube's Audio Library has now become so widely used that it is the subject of mockery. A search on the platform for the title 'royalty-free ukulele' elicits a series of videos juxtaposing the upbeat, handclap-laden track with violent footage from the video game Grand Theft Auto, and speeches by Stalin. Finding these videos, as I search the platform, is the first outright acknowledgement I see on YouTube itself of the clear tension between the ukulele's participatory associations, as D'Angelo recognises, and the advancing entwinement of participatory culture with platformisation and increasing corporate influence within YouTube. As I scroll through grids of video thumbnails, I consider the flexibility and desire lines which seem to characterise the offline-first worlds in which I have so recently conducted fieldwork. While YouTube's asynchronous models for content consumption and communication blur the boundaries between participation and holicipation, they also result, inevitably, in a kind of reification of the musicking process, which becomes commodifiable in a way the jam sessions I have attended are not. Small questions whether being able to play a symphonic work multiple times, through recording, 'do(es) not have a hand in the loss of narrative meaning' (Small 1998, 167) afforded by the active ritual of musicking, and, as I browse, it strikes me that this replayability is also what allows that musicking to be bought and sold by brands as a product in its own right.

Stebbins suggests serious leisure is differentiated from casual leisure partly by its existence within a 'system of functionally interdependent relationships' with

professionals and with a public (Stebbins 1977, 585); casual hobbyists are not part of this professional-amateur-public, or P-A-P triad. Offline-first spaces are constructed so that players can choose to be heard or not to be heard, to share or not to share, and, in worlds like the Ukulele Speakeasy, to participate with or without playing for an audience; they are truly hybrid spaces. While YouTube blurs the lines between participation and holicipation, and while musicians and commenters may not *know* whether they will be heard, they seem to have little control in reality of whether they are or not; uploading to YouTube inherently invites a public, so creators cannot fully opt out of the P-A-P triad, even if their experience is ultimately a holicipatory one. I find myself struggling to comprehend how desire lines can possibly be traversed in such a space; the tension of participation and platformisation seems to leave little space to choose. Positive regard by Rogers' definition, believing one's contributions matter by Jenkins's, certainly; but the intrinsic commodification of the ukulele in online-first spaces seems to imply that, unlike the offline-first spaces I have previously visited, positive regard can only ever be conditional. I consider Abidin's work on what she calls 'micro-celebrity', which she describes as 'the presentation of one's online self as a branded good, with the expectation that others are doing the same' (Abidin and Brown 2018, xiv). Although Burgess and Green describe creators' relationship with brands as 'co-creative' (Burgess and Green 2009, 90), while YouTube offers a choice in *how* a ukulele YouTuber brands themselves, in the culture of platformisation there seems to be little choice in whether or not one is branded at all.

### **Expressing the inexpressible, differentiating the perceptual field**

It is not until my research into YouTube moves into what is, to my knowledge, an almost ethnographically unexplored space that my own understanding becomes more nuanced. This is not a virtual social world, but — familiarly and unfamiliarly — a spatial one; Summer In The City 2017 (now re-branded as Social In The City), which describes itself as 'the UK's largest YouTube and online video festival' ("Summer in

the City” 2018).<sup>19</sup> YouTube conventions or festivals appear to be a nearly ethnographically-undescribed phenomenon; at the time of writing, I could locate only a few published academic works referring to Vidcon, the world’s biggest YouTube convention (Lange, 2019; Pierce 2020; Staley 2016), which in 2019 hosted 75,000 attendees (*VidCon US* 2021). Playlist Live, with an attendance of 13,000 (Tenbarge 2020), and Summer/Social In The City, which hosts 10,000 each year (Cook 2015), seem unexamined. I learn about Summer In The City watching Dodie’s videos, discovering that in 2015 she documented her experience of the festival (Dodie 2015a); when I learn that she has been selected to headline the festival’s main stage, my curiosity is immediately piqued. I wonder what a spatial gathering of a virtual social world might look like, and decide to book a pass to the event in the hope of conducting participant-observation there. I have little sense of what to expect.

Summer In The City, perhaps fittingly, began in 2009 as a small, independent three-day gathering organised by vlogger Tom Burns across multiple London parks (Burns 2014), but was acquired by events company MCM in 2015 (Clift 2016). By its third year, attendance had grown so substantially that it was moved to a dedicated location. Formalised programming and panels were introduced, as well as an open mic stage so that those not billed as artists could still participate. The event found itself over capacity, and from 2013 the convention was moved to Alexandra Palace, and a ticketing system implemented (O’Dell 2018). ‘Meet-and-greets’ were also introduced, allowing fans to wait in line to meet creators appearing at the event. Attendance continued to grow, and after its acquisition in 2015, meet-and-greets were allocated by ballots, and the event moved to the Excel Centre in London’s Docklands (Foxy

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<sup>19</sup> I have chosen not to pseudonymise Summer In The City as I have the other worlds and events in this thesis. This is partly because it was, at the time of conducting research, the only British YouTube convention of its scale, so would inevitably have been easily identifiable regardless, but also because its size means that an individual participant’s attendance is unlikely to constitute personally identifying information, whereas membership of a smaller social world might identify a participant if the name of the group or event is made public.

2015). Here, I step off the light railway on a warm morning in August, and head inside the vast building.

Visitors swarm in and out of the rooms of the centre. Most of them are teenagers or in their early 20s, and I'm struck by how many carry ukuleles. I later discover that while some intend to play in the open mic, others have brought their own instruments for Dodie to sign in their scheduled meet-and-greets with her. The Main Stage, the festival's largest space, is in Excel's North Event Hall, an 87,000 square metre room with a gigantic stage and sound system. Across the building, the identical South Event Hall is used for meet-and-greet queues. The central gathering area of the event is the Expo Hall, which hosts a market for merchandise and food and drink, three small stages covering genre-specific topics, promotional booths belonging to multi-channel networks and social media companies, three funfair rides, and an 'open mic dome', an inflatable space with its own small sound system where visitors can sign up to play a slot. I'm briefly reminded of a few of the jam sessions I've previously attended, as I realise the dome's backline includes an acoustic guitar and a ukulele, for players who have not brought their own instruments. Most daytime activity at the convention before music begins on the main stage in the evening takes place in the open mic dome, and in three rooms to the side of the Expo Hall, in which a series of panels are held.

The tension between participation and platformisation I've previously felt on the platform itself is, if anything, even clearer in the spatial environment, and at times I feel myself bodily pulled between the independent handcrafted and the glossy micro-celebrity. The Expo Hall's market sells an eclectic mix of slick, professionally-printed merchandise, mainly t-shirts and sweatshirts bearing the branding of larger creators, alongside handmade, one-of-a-kind items, miniature painted canvases and hand-sewn keychains made by smaller art YouTubers who are dotted around the space manning their own stalls, often alone for the duration of the festival. A roundtable discussion on wellbeing and confidence for newer creators in panel room A is

juxtaposed with a talk on monetisation in panel room B, literally competing for attention. From time to time, a creator steps out gingerly from one of the backstage rooms and is immediately surrounded by a crowd of fans. Some seem to be unable to spend time in shared spaces at all due to the sheer number desperate to meet them.

The open mic tent, for which I make a beeline as soon as I arrive, seems to be occupied almost exclusively by ukulele players, and occasional acoustic guitarists. It begins to feel like a metaphor in itself; almost a literal bubble tucked away in the corner of the Expo Hall, lined with blankets and cushions to provide a quieter space away from the buzzing main event. It seems to act as a space for largely younger people to test out musicking in front of an audience; many of them say it's the first time they've performed in front of anyone, and the atmosphere is supportive. The quality of performance is (understandably) variable, but again I recognise the unconditional positive regard I have by now seen in so many offline-first ukulele social worlds, and which I have so far struggled to locate consistently in online-first social worlds. I never see any of the musicians on the bill of the festival play there, although several rumours to the contrary are passed around during the weekend. The sense of the small within the big reminds me of the participatory cultures that seemingly thrive on the YouTube platform itself despite the palpable tension between them, at odds, yet interdependent. In this space for uncommodified, unreified musicking, I sense the traces of faint desire lines, but the absence of more popular content creators from the space makes me wonder if the conflict between participation and platformisation can be negotiated, or if it must be studiously ignored.

I spend much of the weekend watching panels, and gradually realise that navigating this tension is a topic of almost every panel, and that the creators present are constantly negotiating their own independence and creative communities alongside their dependence on the platform and desire for their channels to survive. I hear the same phrase — 'the creator-viewer divide' — used over and over by YouTubers of all genres and levels of popularity, often in the context of questions



around how to eliminate or 'deal with' it. Seated at the back of the room after a panel of musicians on YouTube who have repeatedly used the phrase, I take my phone out of my pocket and enter it into the search box of Google Scholar, my own Alphabet-owned centre of platformisation. Your search did not match any articles. I put my phone away and decide to attend a panel titled 'The creator-viewer relationship', which promises to address the topic directly. There, I discover that the 'creator-viewer divide' terminology is used among YouTubers to describe the active negotiation of participatory culture with platformisation. YouTube's producers are variably separable from its consumers, and the boundaries between the two categories seem to be experienced first-hand as mobile, but the panellists describe feeling buffeted between them by expectations reinforced, and perhaps even constructed, by the affordances of the platform itself. One panellist recalls the experience of meeting another for the first time years before, and describes mentally calculating the difference in their respective subscriber counts, to determine whether it was appropriate to introduce herself as a fan of his work. Today, she says, she looks back on that experience with the realisation that there is only fluid middle ground; there is no clear cut-off between creator and viewer. 'I think that's exactly right,' another panellist adds. 'The barrier isn't as solid as the numbers can make it seem.' All are aware, however, of the power imbalance between themselves and their viewers. They rely on their audience both monetarily and in terms of the positive regard they receive when sharing their experiences, but carry a sense of responsibility not to go too far or manipulate them.

What is particularly interesting about this discussion, and about much of what I hear expressed by creators during the weekend of Summer In The City, is not so much its content, although it strikes me that what I have encountered is a form of vernacular critical theory, which seems completely invisible to academic scholarship around YouTube. Its open expression, however, in full view of audience members and industry figures at a convention serving partly to promote YouTube itself, intrigues

me. It is not until later that I seek out traces of this criticality on the platform itself, and find what I am looking for in some of Dodie's musical uploads, negotiating these issues directly through the material she posts to YouTube. Her song 'Not What I Meant' seems to express the challenges of competition on the platform, skewering the subscriber number as status marker I had heard the panellist describe: 'You saw my number and my number wasn't good enough' (Dodie 2018a). Its chorus, too, recalls the seeking of a middle ground, and an intuitive sense of a fluid boundary in conflict with a more solid one externally forced, unwillingly, on the creator:

I'll do it if I have to  
Hoping for an in-between  
Not what I meant when I said that  
I wanted to be seen (Dodie 2018a)

In 'Burned Out' (Dodie 2017e), which Dodie states in a Sunday Times interview 'explores something I couldn't talk about without hurting anyone' (Dean 2019), she seems to express the same unease around the potential conditionality of the positive regard extended towards her as her sponsored videos had elicited in me:

But they love you  
Over and over, they love you  
Thousands and thousands of eyes just like mine  
Aching to find who they are  
Oh, they love you, oh, you can feel how they love you  
Coated and warm, but that's all they can do  
Words only get through if they're sharp (Dodie 2017e)

'I am burnt out,' states Dodie, in one interview. 'Also, I love it. Also, it's hard. And people are nice to me' (Dean 2019). I begin to realise another layer of negotiation is taking place. 'Burned Out' expresses what cannot be expressed (its bridge runs 'maybe I'll talk about it/I can just talk about it/I'll never talk about it'), a relationship

with the mutually exclusive. At first, I am reminded of Kristeva's abjection, the threat of the dissolution of meaning leading to a pre-linguistic, primitive state (Kristeva 1984, 15), but the result of the breakdown is *not* a return to the pre-verbal; rather, it is an expression of what is supposed to be inexpressible, of talking about the inability to talk; of successfully exploring what might cause harm, without causing harm. If 'differentiated perception of the field of experience' emerges from movement towards a more congruent and actualised self, leading to accepting the complexity of primary experience without value judgment or generalisation (Rogers 2012, 142), then, in 'Burned Out', Dodie seems to locate the longed-for in-between in 'Not What I Meant'. In doing so, she enables me, as a researcher, to differentiate my own experiential perception of YouTube a little.

Using social media platforms to directly critique the platform's own dynamics is a topic on which there appears to be little prior scholarship, but I find it not uncommon amongst ukulele YouTubers. Many such critiques are less straight-faced than 'Burned Out' and 'Not What I Meant', and are humorous in tone, such as Emma Blackery's expletive-laden 'My Thoughts On Google+' (Blackery 2013), which went viral after Google's short-lived social network, Google Plus, was integrated into YouTube's comments function in 2013 to the dismay of many creators, and Jon Cozart's 'YouTube Culture', which takes aim at exploitative sponsored content relying on visibility labour: 'I won't come out of the closet until I've got something to sell about it' (Cozart 2016). Willson suggests that platforms and their attendant algorithms are powerful entities (Willson 2017), which engage in what de Certeau calls 'strategies' to control and manipulate users and their data through delegating and managing everyday practices. This does not mean users lack agency entirely; de Certeau also describes 'tactics', which are used by those with less power in their interactions with powerful systems, and that the intersection of strategies and tactics ultimately shapes those everyday practices (M. D. Certeau 2011, 35–36). Willson suggests that users of large platforms engage in tactics when they operate those platforms (Willson 2017, 143), and

Van Der Nagel suggests that some of these tactics may be actively subversive. She describes in detail two processes taken to subvert unwanted connections imposed by platforms: *Voldemorting*, or refraining from mentioning key words or names so they cannot be searched, and *screenshotting*, sharing screenshots of articles rather than linking to them to avoid driving traffic to them (van der Nagel 2018, 87–90). These, she suggests, are ‘small acts of resistance’ (van der Nagel 2018, 89), which temporarily evade power structures, but cannot dismantle them.

These critiques of the YouTube platform on the platform itself are, in a sense, similarly small acts of resistance, in that they may function primarily as a means of differentiating the perceptual field enough to, as Mannell suggests, make staying on the platform possible and tolerable (Mannell 2017, 53). Andrejevic argues that exploitation takes place ‘when there is loss of control over one’s creative, productive activity—a loss that results in the re-appearance of one’s own activity in the form of an alien force turned back upon oneself’ (Andrejevic 2009, 94). This ‘alien force’ is recognisable, I think, in the content of ‘Burned Out’ and ‘Not What I Meant’; but by locating and critiquing it, it is, to a degree, controlled again. Although the tension between the participatory and the commercial is not fully resolved, it is differentiated. By virtue of the songs’ directness, however, they may also do a little more than simply evade power structures, as De Nagel suggests. Although they cannot dismantle them, they gesture towards and illuminate them more openly, using YouTube’s own tools to do so. The critiques performed by ukulele YouTubers on the platform itself are, however, a little less direct than those I heard discussed in panels at Summer In The City. They tend to lean on humour and poetry, and their function as resistant tactics becomes visible to me only after I witness the more transparently critical discussion of the creator-viewer divide at the convention. The asynchronous transmission of content in the holicipatory/participatory hybrid space still seems to limit creators’ ability to critique the practices of platformisation; to be noticed, to be shared, and to avoid disappearing into a holicipatory void, content must be algorithmically

promoted, and the strategies of the platform must be worked with, rather than against. In the spatial world of *Summer In the City*, communication could be more direct, for once addressed to an already captive audience known to a creator through direct sensory experience.

### **The YouTube convention and restoration of collapsed contexts**

During the final few hours of *Summer In The City*, I stand at the back of the Main Stage hall, surrounded by thousands of young people for Dodie's live set. I think for a moment about how many of them have channels of their own, and which of them might one day stand on the same stage. A band is with Dodie, but she is spotlit at the front of the stage, the centre of attention. The audience, rapt, mouth her words back to her, holding each other. Despite the feelings of ambivalence I have harboured for much of the weekend, I find myself deeply moved that a teenage girl teaching herself a simple, inexpensive instrument alone in her bedroom has led up to this moment. Dotted around the room are teenagers clad in giant Pride flags as capes; one fan has draped a rainbow flag over the centre of the crash barrier, where it is visible from every camera angle displayed on the jumbotron at each side of the stage. Dodie begins to play the introduction to a song, and says she's dedicating it to anyone in the audience who might feel unable to come out to their friends and family. 'Here, in this place,' she says, 'you are safe, and you are loved, and you are wanted.' Despite the palpable tension between participation and platformisation here, the sense of belonging that seemed so important to the marginalised players in the offline-first participatory cultures of the Ukulele Speakeasy and Queer As Uke suddenly makes its presence felt here too. I think back to 'Rainbow' and 'Why the rainbow is ours', both entwined in the strategies of the platform that hosts them, and the library of secrets that make up the comments on both, seemingly unaffected by the presence or absence of rainbow capitalist sponsorship. No one will see this, but. The tension

between holicipation and participation also seems to engender a coexistence of secrecy and belonging.

Marwick and boyd describe the phenomenon of 'context collapse' as an intrinsic feature of communication on online social media platforms (Marwick and boyd 2011). In offline contexts, they suggest, communication can be adapted to its known audience. In the online setting, the same strategies cannot be relied upon; context collapse brings together numerous potential audiences to any communicative act, who cannot be known or experienced in real time. The audience becomes an imagined one, and the imagined audience to whom a performance or lesson is addressed may differ from the one watching or musicking along in reality. The identity, even the presence, of another participant is known only if they choose to reveal themselves by commenting; although the view counter on a video may tick upwards, its source cannot be directly perceived. This phenomenon may lie at the heart of YouTube's blurring of participation and holicipation, in which numerous people might music together, invisibly travelling along the same pathway without being aware of one another's presence. Conventions like Summer In The City might serve as an opportunity to briefly restore that context, allowing creators and viewers to perceive at least a portion of their social world fully. Although they render viewers and creators more clearly visible to one another, however, they simultaneously render them less visible to algorithms, facilitating more direct critiques of platformisation in front of a visible audience in real-time without their words being concealed. Had I neglected to visit Summer In The City, I might have failed to identify the active critique and negotiation taking place on the platform. Another blurring was present here, between the spatial and the virtual; participants navigated a network of pathways extending both online and offline, alone and together simultaneously.

Abidin suggests that content creators can still foster genuine community and solidarity among their follower networks despite the commodification of LGBTQ+ influencers' identities (Abidin 2019, 629), and Baym notes that although the

relationships between content creators and their followers differ qualitatively from more familiar social relationships, and must be actively negotiated, the 'relational labour' involved in doing so can create genuine community and care (Baym 2018, 279). Standing at the back of the main hall, as silver confetti rains over the crowd, I scan the room, at the sobbing young people wrapped in pride flags, embracing and singing, gazing at the stage and trying to soak up every moment of the performance. Here, and in the collapsed contexts of the comments section, it is equally clear that some young people genuinely perceive the space as one in which they belong. The tension between participation and platformisation is not resolved, but while the positive regard I perceive in Dodie's social worlds might look to me to be clearly conditional and restricted by platformisation, it is not necessarily experienced as such by others. Nevertheless, I cannot help but feel the desire lines which seemed so instrumental to musically actualising in offline-first spaces are simply impossible in online-first platform musicking; they feel like unrelated worlds to me. It will not be until the COVID-19 pandemic a few years later, which brings with it new forms of online-first ukulele musicking, and new ukulele pathways based outside of public social media spaces, that the distinctive desire lines extending across all the ukulele worlds encountered during this project will become clear to me, and begin to form a coherent pattern. These new pathways are the focus of the next chapter.





## 8. Life on the interstices: ukulele musicking in the age of COVID-19

On the 4th of January, 2020, the World Health Organisation reported that a cluster of pneumonia cases had been detected in the Hubei province of China, which were linked, four days later, to the emergence of a novel coronavirus. On the 11th of March, following extensive international spread of the virus, COVID-19 was classified as a pandemic (“Timeline: WHO’s COVID-19 Response” 2020). On the 16th of March, the British government issued guidance advising against non-essential travel and close contact with others, and suggesting mass gatherings be avoided (*BBC News: UK* 2020a). On the 23rd of March, this guidance was formalised, and hospitality venues, including pubs, were forcibly shut down. The Prime Minister delivered a speech informing the British public that they ‘must stay at home’, permitting people to leave their abodes only for essential purposes. This commenced a period colloquially referred to as ‘lockdown’ (*BBC News: World* 2020).

At the beginning of the year, my plan had been to fully write up and polish the rest of my thesis, preparing to submit it for final examination. Like much of the rest of the world, these plans were thrown into disarray by the pandemic, but the ensuing period would also deepen my understanding of the ukulele’s social worlds to an extent I could not previously have anticipated. My research at Summer In The City, the YouTube convention discussed in chapter 7 — which, in a stroke of profound dramatic irony, took place in a venue later converted to the country’s largest COVID-19 field hospital (see *BBC News: UK* 2020b) — had demonstrated a convergence of online and offline, and a blurring of participation and holicipation, which I could not see a parallel to in the pathways taken by players in offline-first social worlds. Events like jams and festivals seemed utterly rooted in pubs, physical proximity, and collective participation. The wall of strumming effect discussed throughout this thesis only works, or so I assumed, in a mass gathering. I had presumed these worlds would struggle to weather the pandemic, but the events described in this chapter would

prove otherwise, revealing something crucial I had missed. The wall of strumming, I realised, was itself a marker of the inseparability of participation and holicipation in an age of convergence, allowing participants to play with others alone, to be both heard and unheard at once, allowing them to pursue desire lines of their choosing and producing unconditional positive regard. The pandemic, and the reconstruction of practices facilitating ukulele musicking on Zoom I describe here, would render apparent a blurring of boundaries which had been taking place all along.

This chapter is constructed mainly as a close case study of one particularly large and active ukulele social world (pseudonymised as the Strummers) which formed at the beginning of the first lockdown, and whose musicking took place via nightly Zoom calls. Although not solely an English or even British social world, since many of its regular attendees were based in other countries, the majority of its membership was British, as were its founders and most (although not all) of its hosts; as Miller puts it, social media use is always in some sense local (Miller 2016, 1), and the Strummers clearly emerged from a British context. This was not the only social world of its kind; I also visited two similar jams run by American hosts, interviewed the founder of an English one with a more closed membership, and found evidence of numerous others through a combination of word of mouth and listings on social media. I suspect, however, that, since it was set up at the very beginning of the lockdown, it may have been among the first; the hosts of all three of the aforementioned jams claimed to have been influenced by the Strummers, and it was (and remains) seemingly the most active, hosting jams every night of the week even after restrictions had lifted. This latter detail also meant that, despite its unconventional medium, my fieldwork for this chapter was in some ways the most traditionally immersive of any of the research I conducted over the course of this project, musicking for hours a day with many of the same players in a manner unavailable prior to the pandemic. I had not, at first, intended to include it in my thesis, attending the Strummers' events only because I, like most of its members, was intensely isolated in a period of global crisis, but realised

before long that my experiences with the group were drastically altering how I thought of the rest of my research. It was after this realisation that I began to recruit interviewees.

This chapter documents and explores the experiences of several active participants in the Strummers' jams, including myself. At times, it also considers how their practices might develop in the future, and simultaneously provides a lens through which to examine the past. It first documents the establishment of the Strummers' social world in the context of government restrictions, as well as describing the practices on which their musicking was based in mechanical terms. Following this, the chapter considers some of the benefits of online-first musicking the Strummers experienced, and the impact on participants' wellbeing, before moving on to explore some of the problems and challenges of musicking on Zoom. It then reconsiders some of the ritual practices of the offline-first ukulele social worlds discussed earlier in this thesis, in the context of a blurring between holicipation and participation within convergence culture, illuminated by comparison to the Strummers' online-first practices. It ultimately concludes that this blurring is present in all of the third-wave ukulele social worlds and pathways discussed in this thesis, and questions whether this might reflect an everyday life which, in the age of the internet, had already long been situated on the interstices of togetherness and solitude.

Perhaps more than any other in this thesis, this chapter is also an act of archival. The activities and rituals of social worlds like the Strummers are process-driven and uncommodifiable, in part because of their normative practices; sessions are not recorded, and, regardless, one of their core structural affordances lies in the muting of all but one player at a time. This is partly what allows the flourishing of desire lines and unconditional positive regard in the online-first ritual, but it also means no real archive remains of activity, or of the considerable work put into maintaining them. I also feared that the emergence of Zoom ukulele jams in an international public health crisis might make their erasure from history more likely still if I did not document

them. Kolata notes that the aftermath of the 1918 'Spanish flu' was marked by 'collective amnesia' (Kolata 2001, loc. 782), with the disease 'expunged from newspapers, magazines, textbooks, and society's collective memory' (Kolata 2001, loc. 773). Since (as chapter 9 will suggest) the ukulele's social worlds seem to be marked in part by their dismissibility, sitting within a wider context of 'hidden' musicking, 'ignored or taken for granted as "just there"' (Finnegan 1989, 325), I felt a particular duty to ensure the new forms of musicking I had encountered alongside the Strummers were not forgotten.

### **From wall of strumming to 'wall of mess': background and context**

It is March 2020, lockdown has just begun, and I, alone in my flat, presume the activities of offline-first ukulele social worlds will, at best, be placed on hold; indeed, it's difficult to imagine how they'll survive at all. All of the open jam nights I had previously attended, as well as some more closed gatherings, had taken place in pubs; although hospitality venues will be permitted, a few months later, to reopen over the summer, they will do so at severely reduced capacity, and, regardless, many will not survive the financial hit of the lockdown. More fundamental still is the introduction of social distancing, perhaps the most significant change to everyday life not only during, but long after, the initial lockdown. The term 'social distancing' had originally referred to a range of societal measures limiting community pathogen transmission, but since the appearance of COVID-19 it defines the maintenance of physical distance between individuals living in different households. The precise distance involved in social distancing varies according to regional policy, but at the time of the first lockdown in England, two metres is advised (Scherlis 2020; Bunn 2020). Reading this guidance for the first time, I recall the Strum-Along, which was often so busy that attendees would seat themselves on the floor or share chairs, and the coastal ukulele festival at which I had been crowded in so closely that I could not even retrieve my ukulele from my backpack. They seem incompatible, now, with everyday life.

Just as problematic is government guidance to avoid singing around others, which persists even during the period of lighter restrictions implemented during the summer of 2020, after emerging evidence of ‘super-spreading’ events involving choirs, and suggestions that singing might increase respiratory droplet transmission (“COVID-19: Suggested Principles of Safer Singing” 2020). Although lockdown easing measures will allow professional singers to perform during this time, the same is not permitted of amateur players. Although one interviewee later tells me her small, rural ukulele group are beginning to meet up in subgroups of six, a limit for household mixing introduced when lockdown measures are eased (*UK Home Office* 2020), she notes that they have been playing only instrumental music. I do not encounter any other participants in 2020 who even attempt this. The popularity of the ukulele amongst players of retirement age presents another problem; COVID-19 is far more likely to be dangerous to older people, so some participants are reluctant to gather even as measures begin to lift.

At the beginning of the lockdown, videoconferencing software, especially Zoom, had surged in popularity as a way to meet and socialise remotely.<sup>20</sup> Collective musicking, however, was not easily transposed to a virtual context, primarily due to audio latency, referring to the length of time taken for sound to travel from one location to another. Latency is perceptible at around a 15-metre distance, so is sometimes noticeable in offline musicking in large spaces, but, if consistent, can be compensated for; a conductor is one way to accomplish this (Dolister 2020). Online, the challenge is greater. Data is sent over the internet, divided into ‘packets’, via numerous intermediate points, or ‘routers’. Disruption in the network reroutes the packet, and, once all packets have reached the destination, they are reassembled. Delays can therefore be unpredictable, and differ for each user in the network; even

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Zoom’ is now often used as a synecdoche for videoconferencing software more generally (see, for example, Choudhury 2021). When I refer to Zoom in this chapter, I do so acknowledging that it is not the only software used for these purposes; it was, however, the one settled on in the particular social world described here.

two musicians trying to play together on Zoom will experience inconsistent latency which cannot be easily compensated for. A large group of players from different locations connecting to the same server will produce chaotic results which make mutually following auditory cues impossible (see Dolister 2020; Dannenberg 2021, 3–4; Gallagher 2020, 70–72; Onderdijk, Acar, and Van Dyck 2021, 2–3). This, clearly, presented a challenge to ukulele social worlds and pathways. If, as I have repeatedly asserted, the availability of desire lines and corresponding development of unconditional positive regard on ukulele pathways are afforded, in part, by allowing players' experimentations to become subsumed in the wall of strumming, the temporal and auditory atomisation Zoom necessitates at first appeared to render this impossible; the flexibility of the pathways and worlds described earlier in this thesis seemed utterly reliant upon occupying the same space. It was almost as if the defining qualities of these pathways were precisely what now rendered them unsafe.

After the Prime Minister's speech, Laura, the leader of the Strum-Along, decided to find a collective solution, and recruited a small group of regulars to trial a range of different software over the earliest days of the lockdown, which she coordinated in a private Facebook group. I was not personally present for these endeavours, but would piece them together from participant stories after the fact. The group (referred to hereafter as the Strummers) began by testing several of the most popular videoconferencing programs, discovering just how much of a problem latency would be when they tried to play together for the first time:

I remember I was on the very first one, where we were actually trying to all play together. We did try and play live, and I think in the first 10 minutes we just realised we couldn't do it. It just wasn't... it was just too off-putting for everyone. There was no way we could all be unmuted. It just sounds like a wall of mess, basically. So we realised somebody would have to lead it. (Bruce, interview)

The group also tried a specialist tool, JamKazam, which aims to prioritise audio data to minimise latency (Gallagher 2020, 74). For some players, but not others, this

seemed to make synchronous playing possible; it was reasonably reliable for participants with wired internet connections and computers with fast processors, but this was not the case for most of the group, and getting it working, reported one anonymous player on Facebook, was ‘an absolute nightmare’. Collectively, they agreed to return to Zoom, which by now was surging in popularity, and to experiment with adapting their methods to get back ‘the feel of playing together’, as Bruce put it. The process they settled upon worked as follows:

1. Each player joins a group Zoom call on their preferred device.
2. A version of the songbook is shared in PDF format which players are encouraged to download and keep open on a second device, or another window.
3. Song requests are made through Zoom’s chat function. When requesting a song, a player can offer to be the song leader, nominate another person to lead, or ask for volunteers. A predetermined moderator keeps track of requests in the chat, and works through them in order.
4. Before each song, all players mute their microphones except the song leader, but are encouraged to keep their video cameras on if they want to. If anyone does not or cannot mute themselves, the moderator unilaterally mutes them.
5. The leader plays unmuted, so can be heard by the other participants on the call, who play with them while muted themselves.
6. Between songs, players can unmute their microphones to interact.

Later, participants would experiment with what became known as ‘duetting’; two participants would alternate between verses and choruses, or would play a song (such as Nancy Sinatra’s ‘Summer Wine’) with lyrics implying two speakers, playing one character each, but never singing together. These systems might read as rather quotidian solutions to a complex problem, and, indeed, the simplicity was part of the point. But these descriptions do not fully capture the sense of ineffable, albeit sometimes fragile, immersion that regular participants in the calls over the next year describe to me in interviews. Being able to see other players and be seen themselves,

even when they cannot be heard, seems to be crucial to this; although they could choose to set Zoom to show only the leader's video in full-screen, in practice all interviewees said they used its 'gallery' view, displaying the other players on the call in a grid. Bruce tells me that gallery view makes the difference between feeling as though he's playing alone, and experiencing the jam as communal:

I've got a second screen I set up just for the songbook. I tried putting it on the same screen as Zoom and just having a little strip of people at the top, and it didn't work for me. I need to be able to look back and see everyone, like, as many people as I can, even if they're just reading their phone or something like that. I definitely need those people in front of me, even though I'm having to look somewhere else for music. I have to look back at the screen and have the...validation, almost, that there's people there, and I'm not just alone in my house. (Bruce, interview)

There is a fragility in the sense of the collective Bruce describes, but he is nonetheless able to affirm it by acknowledging other players on the call. Bruce *is* 'alone in his house'; but there are, too, 'people there'. To see them, even without hearing them, is to confirm the other, and in turn confirm the self, however precariously. Saffron, another early participant on the calls, tells me she, too, feels this sense of precarity between holicipation and participation. She emphasises this mainly at the points of transition, of entering and leaving the call, but also described a settling into the space during the session itself, becoming more securely immersed after a short time. This, however, can make the end of the calls feel jarring:

When you sign in, for the first minute or so — well, not even a minute or so — when you sign in and you actually come in part way through and someone's singing or something, it does feel as though you're joining something remote, but within a very short space of time, you're in there, and you're part of the group. But for the very first few seconds, it's like, I feel very remote, what's going on here? And then it feels very bizarre as well, when you finish, and you literally



click 'Leave Meeting' and everything's gone, and you're in your house and you're back to normal. (Saffron, interview)

Saffron and Bruce both describe a tension between the immersiveness of the collective connection afforded by the online sessions, and its delicacy; it is strongly felt, but the spell can be easily broken. There is, I think, a resonance here with the tension between holicipation and participation I had previously witnessed on YouTube, where the asynchronous nature of the platform had meant that moments of connection took place out of time. Although Zoom is intended for real-time communication, Caines suggests that it, too, is unbound from true synchronicity; latency affords 'glitches and slippages' in the flow of conversation which can lead to interruption and 'communicative friction' (Caines 2020, 2). The group had realised quickly that the experience would not be like that of the pub strum-along. Despite this, the immersiveness participants describe is not superficial. Moira, aged 72, who had never used Zoom prior to the pandemic, describes to me in poetic terms a physical sense of shifting into what Packer calls a 'third space' (Packer 2017), as she joins the calls:

Because I'm playing, and I can see people playing with me, the walls fall away from me when I'm on the calls...it's beautiful. (Moira, interview)

Once a system for the sessions was established, the group immediately began efforts to widen participation. The Facebook group which had first been used to coordinate a group to test software for the sessions was opened up to the public, and members of the Strum-Along were encouraged to share it with others, whether or not they had originally attended the jams in London. Figure 6 offers a visual approximation of pathways to the Strummers; although there was significant overlap with attendees of the Strum-Along, the unavailability of spatial jams meant that many participants entered from other social worlds, based both in Britain and elsewhere, as well as attending without prior connection to a ukulele social world.

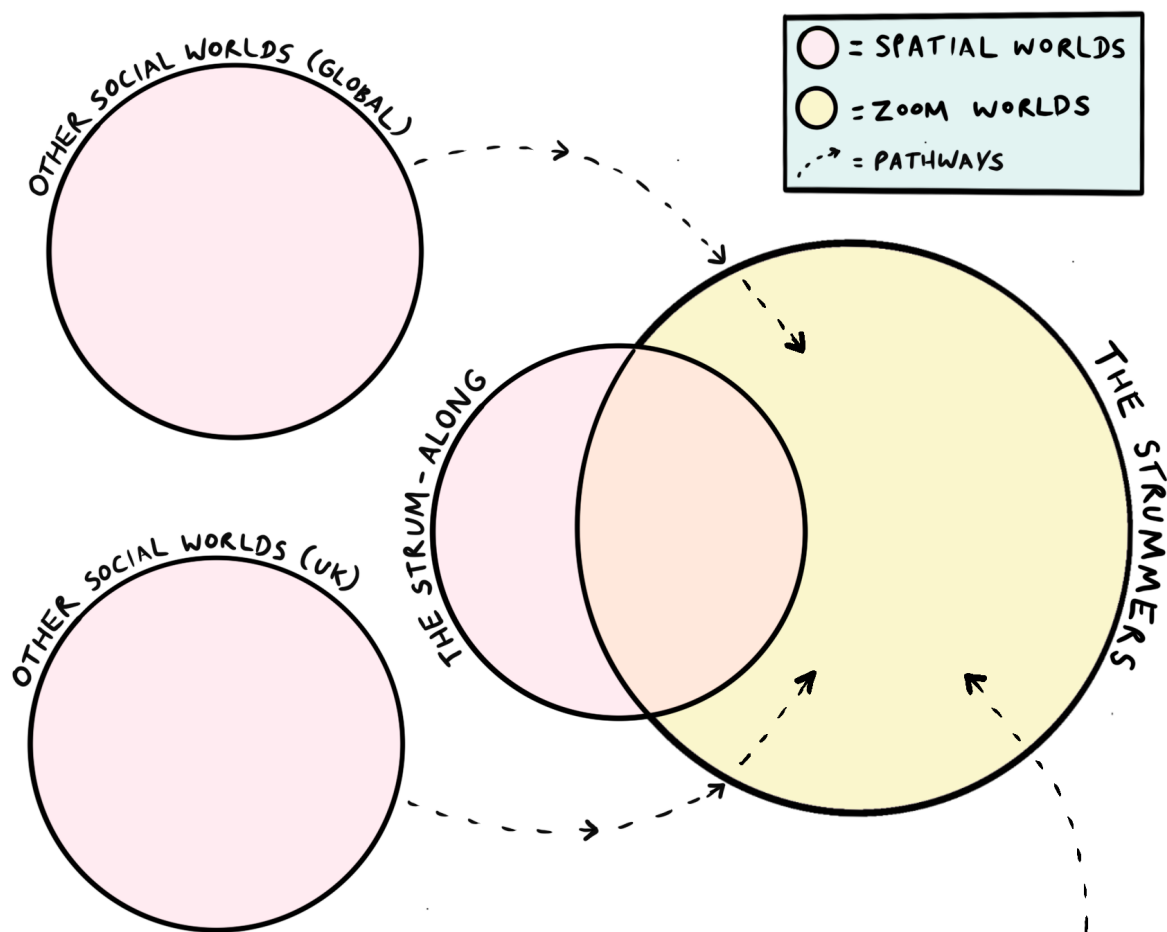


Figure 6: Visualisation of participant pathways to the Strummers

It is at this stage that I join the Strummers myself, although I am not present for their first public online jam, which is met with such enthusiasm that it rapidly reaches Zoom’s capacity limit of 100 participants; I am unable to get in. As the pandemic wears on, more and more regulars agree to host sessions of their own, until a Zoom jam hosted by a different individual, and often with its own unique songbook, is available to attend every night. Although the number of attendees will fall after the night’s initial wave of novelty in the spring of 2020, over the next year each jam will retain between 15 and 60 people on each call, depending on the night. Other ukulele social worlds start to follow a similar model to the Strum-Along, and Facebook’s algorithm begins to inform me of similar groups hosted from a multitude of timezones. The Strummers, however, seem to be the only group to music together seven days a week.

Like their offline-first counterparts, participation in the jam is flexible; some attendees come sporadically, others attend on the same night each week, and a small subgroup of players attend every night; for six months, I am among them. Some individuals lead at least one song every time they attend; others choose never to lead, or to do so only rarely. Most turn their cameras on, but some leave them off. For some participants, the affordances of synchronous online pathways prove surprisingly beneficial.

### **Benefits and wellbeing**

I realise quickly that perhaps the single most dramatic difference between the Zoom jams and their offline-first counterparts is the absence of the wall of strumming. The Zoom strum-alongs unavoidably require players to perform as a soloist if they want to lead a song, and even if they do not, and remain muted, they are still able to hear clearly the quality of their own playing, without the ‘cloaking function’ of numerous others. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some participants mentioned that this made them feel much more self-conscious than playing in offline-first spaces, and one was unwilling to participate in online jams at all because of it. But a surprising number of the Strummers identify aspects of the format which they find actually boost their confidence. Bruce is a fairly seasoned performer in a group context, but tells me he’s never played solo before; he suffers stage fright, he says, and had waited until he had been attending the Zoom jams for a few weeks before volunteering to lead a song. His eyes widen as he tells me that, beginning from the very first time he had acted as leader, his nervousness had dissipated:

I don’t know why, but when I ended up playing a song I didn’t get any of my normal stage fright. And now I don’t get stage fright at all any more. And when I mess up horribly on Zoom, it just doesn’t really matter. I don’t know what it’ll be like if I start playing in front of an audience again, like a ‘real life, I can see them, touch them, poke them’ audience. But I feel less stage fright, and I’m more up for doing things that I never would have done before. (Bruce, interview)

Bruce was unable to determine the precise quality of the online jams which felt less intimidating to him, and as he describes his experience to me I have a sense that he's afraid the effect will be undone when he's able to play in the same room as others again; it's a mystery to him, but one he's hopeful will last. Rosie, a newer player, is more conscious of exactly what it is that allows her to control her performance anxiety in the Zoom context:

Because you're not in the same room, it's a little less nerve wracking. You know, some nights there can be 50 people on. It's still a lot of people in front of you. But I try to concentrate on my song sheet and not look at all the people and pretend they're not there. And it's a little harder to do that if they're in the room with you!  
(Rosie, interview)

The fragility of the immersiveness Saffron and Bruce had described, in which the spell of collective connection could be broken by looking away from the screen or signing out of the call, is something, Rosie tells me, she feels she can exploit. Since, at all times, she is both playing alone in her room and participating in a large group of others, both holicipating and participating, the difference is experiential; in looking away from the screen she can temporarily return to experiencing the jam as holicipatory, managing her nervousness, before returning to the collective space by looking back at the screen towards the end of the song. Saffron suggests the value of this might be enhanced by the ability to participate from the familiar space of the home:

The difference between the Zoom meetings and in the pubs is that, because there's a person that's leading, I've found that people on Zoom are far more encouraging. There's no need to encourage in the pubs because you're all doing the same thing. But on the Zoom meetings, obviously at the end of each song, people unmute and they clap and they say, 'oh, fantastic!' And it doesn't matter if, well, we know there's varying degrees of ability, and that is what's absolutely marvellous, that people can feel so confident. For some people, they've never done it before and

they would never dream of doing it in public, physically in a hall or something, singing in front of all sorts of people. But because they're in their own houses, in their own familiar surroundings, they think, 'Oh, I'll give it a go!' And it's marvellous because they're really enjoying themselves, and to see them enjoying themselves, and the encouragement that everybody else gives them at the end, it's absolutely brilliant. And you just don't get that in a pub. (Saffron, interview)

Saffron acknowledges that the jams are, in some respects, less flexible when hosted on Zoom, and her rhetoric in this interview, looking back, is a little different from that of the participants and organisers I had met in offline-first social worlds, in which differences in playing ability were rarely even acknowledged; the frequent sidelining of skill I have described in the ukulele's third-wave social worlds is not a pretence or a conscious suspension of valuation, but the result of a playing environment in which other individual players can only rarely even be heard. This is not the case in the Zoom jam. Although beginner players can (and do) become valued members of the group without ever leading a song, if they want their musicking to be heard at all, it must be fully exposed; if being heard in the pub jam is a continuum, on Zoom it is a dichotomy. But Saffron experiences what I would identify as unconditional positive regard in spite of this: her eyes light up on my laptop screen as she recalls what it feels like 'to see them enjoying themselves'. Although she acknowledges the range of skill within the social world of the Strummers, it does not impede her experience of musicking; in fact, she seems to value it, despite the absence of the wall of strumming.

Much has been written during the pandemic on the topic of institutional surveillance of, particularly, employees and students while working remotely (see, for example, Blumenfeld, Anderson, and Hooper 2020; Okabe-Miyamoto et al. 2021; Spathis and Dey 2021). Zoom is, in some respects, built for such surveillance; it can automatically generate attendance reports for meetings, and, until April 2020, included an 'attention tracking' feature which could be used to monitor how many

times attendees clicked away from the Zoom window, although this was later removed after user complaints (see Spathis and Dey 2021). But it is, I think, important to note that there is nothing inherent about the medium of synchronous videoconferencing itself that produces surveillance of this sort. Removed from an institutional context, organised by a nucleus of individuals who had built a deep trust with one another, the Strummers illustrate that synchronous videoconferencing can also be leveraged to produce a *less-surveilled* experience for participants, becoming improvisatory practices in their own right.

Attendees frequently temporarily turn their cameras off, and lower the volume of their devices, to practice a song they have requested to play later, to try out new chord voicings, to flick through the songbook, or simply to wander away for a while because the songs being played do not appeal to them; while they are absent, the jam continues without them. An occasional custom develops in which a regular attendee who is tired or busy with another activity on a given night, but still wants the companionship of a Strummers session, will join the call but never turn their camera or microphone on, with ‘just listening’ added to their Zoom display name. The flexibility lost to the absence of the wall of strumming, of one’s playing being ‘lost in the crowd’, then, might be partially mitigated by the ability to control both seeing and hearing, and being seen and heard oneself, enabling the pursuit of individual desire lines in a collective context through other means.

The jams’ physical accessibility is another practical benefit, which is perhaps a little easier to foresee. Part of Moira’s enthusiasm for the online strum-alongs, she tells me, emerges from her prior inability to participate regularly in ukulele social worlds before the pandemic. Living in rural Northern Ireland, there were no events local to her, and she had been able to visit ukulele events only when travelling a few times a year, often to London. Perhaps for this reason, some of the most regular and long-standing attendees of the Strummers are not based in Britain. Several — including two interviewees for this chapter — are based in the USA. Two are based in Australia,

waking early to join us. One Canadian player participates daily during her lunch hour. One weekly host is German, and runs his night as a bilingual jam in which attendees are encouraged to learn songs not in their first language. Moira points out that she would be entirely unable to music alongside these participants at an offline-first jam, and notes that attending regularly, as well as meeting new people more generally, is far easier for her than before the pandemic:

I have a better social life online than I ever had before. It takes physical effort to go out when you're older, and you can get into a rut. And this is different, because we don't control who's coming on the stream at night, isn't it true? It could be anyone. And because our group — we've been so fortunate — are such nice people, why would you not want to be online? I look forward to every day. When I travelled to the groups, it was electric. It was *wonderful*. But for me online is much better. (Moira, interview)

Moira touches, here, on the effect of the Zoom jam on her own wellbeing. This was the single most-discussed topic with interviewees who were participants in the Strummers, every one of whom mentioned the mitigating effect of the jams on loneliness. Four recurrent themes were present in discussion of wellbeing specifically: first, the regularity of the sessions, which allowed players to build rapport, and meant that they knew there would always be an activity at the end of each day that they could 'drop in' to; second, the supportive attitude of the regular attendees in the group; third, the flexible nature of the jams, meaning that players could volunteer to lead when they felt sufficiently confident or could just play along at home without being heard; and fourth, the increased confidence in their musicking that players found themselves experiencing. Rosie weeps openly during the interview (telling me 'it's okay, they're happy tears') when describing her feelings of 'love and affection' for the group's members, none of whom she had met prior to the establishment of the Strummers. Tom, who hosts one weekly jam and attends most other nights of the

week, speaks to me frankly about the impact of the jams on his mental health, describing them as a strategy for survival:

I think that, basically, I would use the term 'lifesaver'. I mean, would I have been in severe depression, not wanting to get up and go to work in the morning by this point? I think I possibly would have been if it hadn't been for this. The fact they've been there every night, day in, day out... it's been a lifesaver. I've been able to not think about all the stresses and strains, not worry about what risks I might be taking if I go out later, not worry about the finances, you know. (Tom, interview)

By November 2020, the Office of National Statistics reported that 49 percent of British residents surveyed felt that the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively impacted their wellbeing. This seems to be particularly acute in relation to loneliness; in an analysis of results of a large-scale wellbeing study, Groarke et al describe loneliness as a 'significant public health issue' during the pandemic, with rates particularly high during the first wave of the pandemic amid the strictest lockdown, especially amongst younger people and those with pre-existing mental health problems (Groarke et al. 2020). They suggest that the single most impactful measure that might be taken to mitigate against lockdown-related mental health issues is increasing social support, but this is, of course, challenging to implement when households are limited in their ability to mix. The regularity of the Strummers' sessions facilitated the development of trust, and their flexibility the development of unconditional positive regard in musicking. These qualities seemed to reinforce one another: participants who mutually trusted each other felt more assured they were not being surveilled or judged, enabling more flexible engagement, and their positive regard of others enabled the development of trust. Although it was quite common for participants leading songs in sessions to mention improvements in their own musicking ability, this was rarely mentioned in interviews, with participants preferring to concentrate on the topic of wellbeing and self-confidence. The sense of the sidelining of skill in favour of unconditional positive regard I had noticed throughout my research was, to



my surprise, perhaps stronger in the Strummers than in any other social world I had encountered.

### **Problems and challenges**

While the jams organised by the Strummers offered, in many cases, profound benefits to their participants, they were far from a panacea. Tom, who had credited the Zoom sessions with his continued survival, had been active on ukulele pathways that were local to him before the pandemic, and continued to work as a busker even during the lockdown. When I speak to him in the summer of 2020 after restrictions have started to lift, he still feels too cautious to return to a pub and sit indoors with other players. He speaks wistfully, however, about hearing simultaneous musicking from players in the same room again; while the jams have meant a great deal to him, they clearly represent a second-best option.

I'm not going back there at the moment, you know. I think it's best for me not to. But I *want* to go back. There's a reason why you get people together, and you need to be able to hear each other directly. This is just the best we can do at the moment.  
(Tom, interview)

Five of the players I interviewed viewed the Zoom jams as a clear temporary stopgap of sorts; the rest were uncertain of what they would like the future of the Strummers to look like. One player, who had returned to offline musicking during periods of lighter restrictions, compares the online jams to 'a flat ukulele pub jam', but acknowledges that they are 'better than nothing'. Participants taking this view tended to be players who had had an active offline-first social world in their local area before the pandemic. Those, like Moira, who did not miss offline strum-alongs were more likely to have actually increased their playing since the lockdown began; there was less for them to miss.

Although the jams continue to be actively attended, the number of attendees has declined over time, and the initial spike in attendance which led me to be unable to

get into the first jam quickly dropped off, until a core of between 10 and 60 people on each call, depending on the night, remained. One possible reason for this decline is the phenomenon of 'Zoom fatigue', the experience of extended video calls as mentally taxing or draining. Throughout 2020 a plethora of articles have been published considering the causes of Zoom fatigue, and Lovink offers a meta-analysis of these. The blending of the personal and the professional, he suggests, is itself tiring; working and playing in the same location, as well as having to be aware that your personal surroundings can be seen in professional environments, is wearing (Lovink 2020). It also fosters a sense of needing to perform; seeing one's own image alongside others, Sacasas proposes, leads to additional expenditure of social and cognitive labour to adjust one's responses in real time (Sacasas 2020). Caines notes that videoconferencing can shift our awareness that we are being viewed, routinising this objectification of the self; this, too, can be alienating (Caines 2020).

Jenkins also suggests that convergence, when taken to its extreme, can be exhausting in and of itself. He describes the experience of watching a live-streamed virtual reality show, *Sequester*, on the Twitch.TV platform during the first lockdown, in which all communication between 'housemates' takes place in virtual 'rooms' via videoconferencing. Jenkins finds the juxtaposition of rooms alongside Twitch's chat system, and simultaneous social media commentary on the show's events, overwhelming:

All of this pushes against the limits of our capacities for attention (mine certainly) and against the constraints of contemporary technological infrastructure as images freeze or sputter. Too many viewers, too much going on. (Jenkins 2020)

It is perhaps not difficult to see how Jenkins's experience of convergence might lead to a sense of fatigue. He lists some of the forms of media he has observed or participated in during stay-at-home orders, from creative home movies to live streams to political tweets to final farewells conducted over video call, and notes their

convergence into a single physical space: 'It's all taking place in the same room.' The Strummers' mode of interaction was similarly busy, and similarly convergent; as many as fifty players could be viewed on a single page in gallery mode, the chatbox, open on the same screen,, was constantly busy with players making comments when someone was playing or the conversation between songs was too raucous to be heard via the microphone. Meanwhile, screenshots and in-jokes were posted to the Facebook page both during and between jams. Surprisingly, it was clear that at least some of the attendees of the jam calls found them *less* fatiguing than other forms of remote social interaction; I noticed that several regulars mentioned towards the end of 2020 that they had ceased all other Zoom-based social interaction other than the Strummers events. It is worth noting, however, that this was probably not universally true; the jams were a highly convergent, stimulating environment requiring attention to multiple streams of input, and some of the members who ultimately dropped out of them may well have done so as the result of fatigue. Some of these members may have ultimately returned to musicking solely in spatial environments.

A limitation of this chapter emerges from how difficult this is to confirm, due to the inherent selection bias in recruiting and participating online; absent players cannot speak. This is particularly the case for players who were unable or unwilling to join an online jam even in the early days of the pandemic. Some of these players, however, were present as absent friends mentioned by interviewees; three participants mentioned, in passing, friends or acquaintances who had not transferred their musicking online. Sally and Gina, respectively the secretary and leader of a small urban ukulele club with a membership skewing towards retirement age, discuss this phenomenon in more detail when I interview them. Sally alludes to a friend she says was active in spatial jams prior to the pandemic, but who she can't convince to join her on Zoom. He is, Sally says, convinced that if he does, he'll be scammed or hacked:

He won't have anything to do with the online world. He's completely disadvantaged himself, and he hardly sees people. And it's all because he's got

this fear that he's going to be scammed by the internet, and Zoom. And whatever you say won't convince him otherwise. (Sally, interview)

Gina has recently begun meeting up with other retired friends in public parks, some of whom are similarly reluctant to take part in online activities. She's concerned about them, she tells me, describing their intense loneliness and simultaneous reluctance to participate in online social activities:

Lately I've been thinking it might be good for people, because I know several people complaining about being lonely. I met a few people in the park the other day...and one woman described herself as so lonely she was thinking of hanging herself. I don't think she meant it, I think she was joking, but she was so desperately alone. And another lady who lives on her own said the same thing. And these two people just happened along in the park in case I was there, because they're so lonely. And I think Zoom groups have the possibility of helping lots of people, but they both said they just don't trust it. And there's one man that's been in contact with Sally months ago, and he's very intelligent and a good musician, but he wouldn't go to a Zoom meeting at all, because he was sure he'd be robbed, because it wasn't secure, which I suppose it wasn't at one stage. But he said he wouldn't have anything to do with it at all, because he didn't trust it. So that's fear, isn't it? Fear of the unknown, as it were. (Gina, interview)

Unlike Moira, for whom 'online is much better', Gina's friends, despite longing for social connection, viewed the online realm as alienating and frightening. These fears are grounded in real and legitimate concerns about privacy and surveillance. At the beginning of the pandemic, almost concurrent with its initial wave of popularity, Zoom experienced negative press attention prompted by multiple privacy concerns ranging from a lack of clarity about its encryption practices to an increase in 'Zoombombing', a practice marked by uninvited guests joining video calls insufficiently secured by the host user, in order to share offensive or discriminatory material (Elmer et al. 2021). The nature of Zoom's security issues, however, chiefly

concern its proper setup by a meeting host to prevent guests joining without invitation, and its suitability for hosting meetings featuring sensitive material (Young 2021). Gina's friend, convinced that he will 'be robbed' if he joins an online group, lacked the knowledge to determine this nuance, and therefore to keep himself reasonably safe in an online environment. This is not uncommon; as of 2019, nine percent of adults in the UK had either never used the internet, or had last used it more than three months ago. 22 percent lacked core digital skills such as communicating, problem solving, and remaining safe online, with older people particularly likely to be digitally excluded (*Citizens Online* 2020; "Essential Digital Skills Framework" 2018). The link Gina posits between loneliness and digital exclusion is also supported by policy research; Age UK find that digitally excluded people are more likely to feel isolated, and that this is particularly true for those who are less mobile ("Loneliness and Digital Inclusion" 2020).

Platformisation is another consideration in these concerns. At the surface level, the Zoom jams appeared to be less affected by the tension between participation and platformisation I had encountered on YouTube. As comparatively private, time-bound spaces for musicking, which, unlike YouTube, were not subject to context collapse, they were less susceptible to the overt market forces which seemed, at times, to strongly shape ukulele YouTube videos like Dodie's. However, Nguyen notes that reliance upon centralised media technologies for social interaction intensifies the dominance of corporate technology companies (Nguyen 2021). Véliz suggests that this may lead to increased commodification of personal data, which can be exploited by the organisations collecting it (Véliz 2021). Although Zoom claims that it does not share user data with third parties, Facebook, which was also used to organise the jams, has previously been involved in the misuse of its users' data (Isaak and Hanna 2018). An increasing reliance on platforms also raises the risk, and the likelihood, of such events. While Summer in the City had acted as a space relatively free of datafication, in which the influence of platformisation could be more openly criticised before a

known audience, the move into purely online spaces resulting from the pandemic might leave users, particularly those who are less technically knowledgeable, more open to exploitation.

Determining the possible scale of digitally excluded ukulele enthusiasts was, to my regret, beyond the scope of this study. I would suggest, though, that their absence from this chapter is in and of itself meaningful. Although Gina's friend's fearfulness is common, Moira's overwhelmingly positive experience of Zoom is also not unique. Age UK also note that building a positive experience by focusing on an individual's interests, rather than on the technology itself, is key to engaging older people digitally, so it is perhaps unsurprising that Moira's first foray into videoconferencing took place in the context of ukulele playing, one of her established interests. She remained, in other ways, digitally excluded, but contented; I ask her, when I interview her, if she has used her Facebook account, newly set up to participate in the jams, to contact other players outside the Zoom calls: 'No, of course not, Emma!' she laughs. 'I don't do Facebook and stuff, so I don't do that'. Yet Zoom and the strum-along sessions seemed a source of unadulterated joy to her, a way for her to play the ukulele around others whose presence she enjoyed.

More difficult to discern, without additional data, is what made Zoom possible for Moira, but not for others in her demographic. The absence of digitally excluded players might speak of a need to consider a wider range of users not just in hybrid and digital event planning, but at the level of software and user interface design. The benefits to wellbeing reported by the digitally included Strummers are substantial, and the potential benefits of casting a net more widely might extend not just throughout the pandemic, but far beyond it. Several experimental online communication platforms, such as VRChat and Gather Town, are now emerging as alternatives to conventional video calling, featuring elements of VR and gamification (Oloman 2021; Seal 2021). Whether these options might be tailored for digital inclusion

remains to be seen, and might benefit from further study, as would their potential role in musicking during and after the era of the pandemic.

However, I also suggest that, for users like Moira, one possible lesson to be learned from the Strummers' solution – widely-used videoconferencing software, creatively repurposed to sidestep latency – is that technological inclusion does not always require highly specialist solutions. Caines presents a range of approaches for 'playing with the Zoom gaze', experimenting with alternative modes of non-verbal interaction within the confines of the software, including physical and virtual emoji reactions, and use of participants' spatial and virtual backgrounds for communication (Caines 2021); many of the strategies she explores were intuitively used by the Strummers. Simultaneously, however, Caines calls to attention the inequities in synchronous videoconferencing as a medium, which might otherwise be missed by those present, asking whose voices, both literally and figuratively, are privileged by the software (Caines 2021). No clear universal solution exists to overcome these challenges, but becoming conscious of them is necessary to work constructively with them.

### **Intimacy and independence**

Despite the convergent, multi-channel, and highly stimulating nature of the Strummers' jams, participants actually rarely described experiencing them as overwhelming or alienating. In contrast, they often placed substantial emphasis on the capacity for virtual intimacy and emotional closeness at the jams, sometimes comparing the experience to environments like local pub nights, small gigs, or, more intimate still, playing music with a friend at home. Robert implied this sense of intimacy might actually be intensified in an online context, in which each player was experiencing the jam from their own home:

It's very intimate when you sit in your room with an instrument and your voice – super intimate. And it's very different from seeing someone either playing as part

of a group or playing on a stage. And this, it feels more like a friend showing me her songs. (Robert, interview)

Rosie agreed; recalling the final song of a 24-hour charity jam the group had organised during the summer of 2020, she remembered looking around the screen and realising how many players were in tears at what they had achieved, contrasting the experience with a crowd in a darkened pub:

I'm sitting there and I'm playing it, and the tears are streaming down my face! And I looked at Maria and she was crying, and I looked at Harriet and she was crying, and I thought: wow, there's so much emotion here! Because that's the type of thing that you normally get face to face in a little room, but to actually get it from being online was quite amazing, really. In a big pub crowd you don't see everybody's faces. You don't see everybody's reactions. Now we can't hear them, but if you've got it on gallery view, you can see everybody at the same time. You can look at everybody there. (Rosie, interview)

In contrast to Jenkins's experience of stimuli competing for attention, Robert and Rosie described a zoomed-in focus on the voices and faces of individuals, evoking a sense of closeness. Abrahams and Pinheiro recognise this intimacy, but respond to it rather differently, suggesting that it creates an awkwardness because to see faces so closely framed recalls 'the frame of interactions with our lovers in bed', or memories of being an infant looked down upon by parents. 'While video-conferencing,' they suggest, 'we are always connected to something very intimate, even in professional situations' (Abrahams et al. 2020).

The Strummers' members did not identify this awkwardness in either my interviews with them or my participant-observation alongside them. Intimacy was virtually always mentioned in contexts connoting a sense of unconditional positive regard and care. I experience this myself, unexpectedly, when I join one of the weekday evening jams during a particularly hectic and isolating week; I'm too exhausted to sing or chat, and would rather lie down and read, but I don't want to be



alone. I decide to try the strategy I've seen other regulars adopt, and add 'just listening' to my Zoom display name, so I can tune into the call and listen to others performing and chatting without being expected to do so myself. I say hello in the chat, letting the others know what I'm doing: 'Sorry I can't join you properly tonight, it's been an exhausting week, but I wanted to hear you all sing. Let me know if you'd rather I sign out'. I quickly receive a private message from a regular attendee, Florence: she says it's lovely to see me, and that she's here if I want to chat. She's happy, she tells me, that I'm here. Although my camera is off, a part of me feels seen nonetheless, not in the sense of Caines's 'Zoom gaze', but in the sense of Rogers's 'complete acceptance' (Rogers 2012, 158), or Buber's confirmation of the other (Rogers 1995b, 55). The gaze, in fact, has been all but disabled alongside my camera and microphone, but despite this I feel a sense of closeness with Florence which is not awkward, but restorative.

When I interview Moira, she, too, mentions the connection she feels with other members of the social world. I wonder, I say to her, if the quality of that connection is affected at all by the online medium, if it's different from the offline-first meet-ups she used to go to, or if it feels just the same. She responds:

This group is a friendship group. Offline, I didn't leave with a best friend. I met associates, but we didn't keep in contact. Here, we know people's lives. We know their children, their cats, their husbands and wives. We're part of a family. (Moira, interview)

I begin to realise that perhaps the difference between the awkward closeness Abrahams and Pinheiro describe, and the comfortable intimacy the Strummers seem to experience, is that the sense of closeness is not merely parasocial, but supported by genuine trust between regular attendees, many of whom spend hours on the calls each week. As restrictions begin to lift, some members who live nearby one another start meeting up in small groups or pairs, sometimes to music together but sometimes just to enjoy each others' company. Others, who are more cautious, or just live further

apart, record duets remotely and share the results with the rest of us, or live-stream themselves playing and take song requests. One player invites me and a newer attendee I don't yet know well to her Passover Seder on Zoom, and we stay up late into the night talking about the past and future, laughing, crying, and sharing our hopes for what the expanse beyond the narrow place of the present might look like, until we suddenly realise it's 4A.M. As Moira puts it, the walls have fallen away, and it is beautiful. It feels as if, despite their wide geographic distribution, the network of pathways travelled by the Strummers are even more closely intertwined than I've become accustomed to in other social worlds.

I was able to find little documentation of similar newfound connections in other grassroots-level musicking social worlds during the same period, although since many of the Strummers' social connections took place in private spaces, both online and offline, it is entirely possible they occurred, but were only known to insiders. Rowan, though, seems to express doubt, describing successfully moving a community band's rehearsals to an online context during the same period, but noting that 'I have often wondered what the rapport in the remote platform would be had we not already developed relationships during our time together musicking and socialising in physical rehearsal spaces' (Rowan 2021, 3). By contrast, while the Strummers had been set up by a group who knew one another in person, more than half of the jams' regulars were not Strum-Along attendees, but this did not seem to impair rapport. MacDonald et al describe the practices of a Zoom improvisational collective during the pandemic which seems, structurally, fairly close to the Strummers; thematically, intimacy and the sense of a community are prominent, but this is expressed mainly through the experience of musicking in the sessions themselves (MacDonald et al. 2021); for the Strummers, conversely, the social connections flowed directly from the act of musicking, extending well beyond the jams, as Moira's comment ('we know people's lives') suggests. The regularity of sessions may well have contributed to this; the sheer amount of time spent together built trust, regardless of medium.

Post-Rogerian psychotherapists seem to agree that unconditional positive regard can be conveyed and received in therapeutic relationships conducted remotely (see Chigangaidze 2021; Hu and Huang 2020; Thompson-de Benoit and Kramer 2020). Van Doorn et al suggest that, despite high levels of doubt before transitioning to online practise, the relational elements of the therapeutic relationship seem unimpaired (Aafjes-van Doorn, Békés, and Prout 2020). It is worth noting that Thompson-de Benoit and Kramer suggest that depth of emotional experience not only seems to be undamaged in an online context, but that, in some cases, there might actually be a willingness to be *more* emotionally vulnerable (Thompson-de Benoit and Kramer 2020, 8). They suggest this results from the pandemic's climate of fear and uncertainty, but I wonder, too, if Saffron's observations about players' willingness to lead songs for the first time might play a role ('because they're in their own houses, in their own familiar surroundings, they think, "Oh, I'll give it a go!"). Despite the absence of the wall of strumming, muting all players except the leader allowed the Strummers to traverse desire lines in their musicking while experiencing themselves as playing with an unmuted other, fostering an unconditional positive regard which was perhaps needed all the more during a period of intense isolation for many. Although unmuting to lead a song might require them to step back on to a slightly more well-worn pathway in order to be heard, participants might have been more willing to make the leap as a result of feeling safe in a familiar environment, and, like Rosie or Bruce, being able to look away from the screen, and to briefly escape, experientially, on to a holicipatory desire line.

Killick's admission that holicipation can be a social act is illustrated almost painfully literally by the activities of ukulele players during the pandemic; it is clear, I think, that jams and strum-alongs like the ones the Strummers organised cannot be neatly placed into a category either of holicipation or participation. Clearly, they are a collective activity, encourage unconditional positive regard amongst their participants as a replacement for aesthetic valuation of skill, and can nurture social

connections. Experientially, all songs other than those a player chose to lead (usually not more than one or two a night) were constructed to feel like playing live with one other person, which was enhanced by the 'duet' method. Yet, at the same time, the reality of the jam was that players were playing alone; in essence, playing along to a recording, as I had done a few years before, scrolling through covers of Dodie's 'Rainbow' and picking along on my own ukulele (which was also a strategy used by Gina and Sally's group, alongside their regular Zoom jams). The leader of a song could not hear what was being played alongside them, and 'duetting' was really more of a practice of alternating solos; it was not synchronous playing. 'You must stay at home', read the Prime Minister's speech as the country locked down, and staying at home was, indeed, what players were doing. They *were* alone, physically. But it is impossible to deny that every single attendee of the sessions also experienced them as participatory. The blurring of the lines between holicipation and participation was more obvious even than it had been on YouTube; the boundaries seemed to have dissolved into thin air.

It is not until I interview Clark, a nightly attendee of the Strummers jams and a long-time host of a ukulele-themed podcast who was successfully hosting two jams built on the Strummers model, that I begin to be able to make sense of this in the context of offline-first jams, and of the wall of strumming. Immersed completely in the ukulele scene for over a decade, I was curious to gain Clark's insight into what he felt made the ukulele so popular during its third wave, and was surprised when his response sidestepped the role of community and participation entirely:

So, the third wave. To some degree, there's some argument about whether or not it started with Iz's (Israel Kamakawiwo'ole) 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow', or if it started with Jake (Shimabukuro) in the park with 'While My Guitar Gently Weeps'. And I think it's so tied up in the internet being able to instruct you on something, and you don't have to go and bring anybody else into it. You can do it all yourself. It doesn't matter what anybody else is playing. (Clark, interview)

What strikes me about Clark's answer is that he is, himself, such an active participant in the social worlds of the ukulele, leading groups, attending festivals and interviewing hundreds of players for his podcast, and yet his reasoning is so focused on the solitary, and on the autonomy the instrument enables. For a moment, as we speak, I'm uncertain what he means by 'it doesn't matter what anybody else is playing'. And then I realise: this was the precise function the wall of strumming had served during offline-first rituals. I think back to my earliest interviews, in which participants described only being able to hear their own playing amid the wash of sound; an experience so public and collective that it renders itself again private and solitary. In this respect, there suddenly seems to be little difference between offline-first and Zoom-based events; both are constructed around affordances allowing players to traverse desire lines in musicking independently, with plenty of room to explore, but those desire lines run parallel to others on their own journeys.

This might, then, have contributed to the success and persistence of groups like the Strummers during the pandemic; on some level, though perhaps not a fully conscious one, players were already accustomed to traversing pathways and desire lines which crossed these interstices, and establishing normative ritual practices accommodating them. The Strummers did appear to be more active than other forms of musicking I encountered during this period. While I was able to locate a few folk nights continuing their activity online during the first lockdown, most musicking activities seemed either to have died back as soon as it commenced or to have gradually petered out over its duration, resuming when restrictions lifted. By contrast, many ukulele strum-alongs remain active on Zoom, as if they were a natural fit for an instrument whose appeal, for many, already seemed partly based on a blurred boundary between holicipation and participation. Just as the YouTube convention was a natural extension of an online community for many of the young people I had interacted with at Summer In The City, so too the wall of strumming model reproduced the quality of learning online that Clark describes, inherently solitary and

social at the same time. The wall of strumming allowed desire lines to be forged at participants' leisure, supporting one another without disturbing their own desire lines, and nurturing an environment in which each participant could enjoy the very presence of others musicking alongside them, evoking unconditional positive regard. The Zoom strum-alongs and their offline counterparts, then, were based on identical principles; the variations in their practices were designed to achieve the same goals within the differing limitations of the virtual and spatial musicking event.

### **In the same room: past, future, and felt meaning**

This chapter represents a lens through which the rest of my project was retrospectively filtered, and marked a profound shift in my understanding of how the ukulele's social worlds and pathways actually functioned. I had left *Summer In The City*, a few years before, thinking of the social worlds of ukulele YouTubers as rather separate from those of the offline-first jams at which I had conducted fieldwork. While both functioned to produce belonging and unconditional positive regard in participatory social worlds, YouTube seemed subject to tensions and blurred boundaries between participation, platformisation and holicipation, which complicated this, and which I could not detect counterparts to in offline-first worlds. Although player pathways might sometimes travel between offline-first and online-first worlds, I thought, the two appeared to have developed independently of one another, and only rarely intersected. In a sense, offline-first worlds seemed simpler, almost mercifully so; pub jams and festivals were clearly collective, and players were not required to negotiate the strange simultaneous solitude inherent in the asynchronous musicking practices of ukulele YouTubers. I was also perplexed by the hybridity of ukulele YouTubers' pathways, extending between spatial and virtual contexts as if they were parts of a whole, when in offline-first worlds, the online seemed supplementary at best. Although the two world types shared certain values, they appeared nonetheless quite distinct.

The events of the pandemic and my involvement with the Strummers, I think, revealed I had been looking at this wrongly. As Clark notes, ukulele activity which is clearly holicipatory – for instance, playing at home, alone, perhaps in preparation for joining a pub jam – often begins by engaging with online content, whether in the form of an inspiring recording of virtuosic ukulele playing like the videos Clark had mentioned, or using online tutorial videos to reach a level of competence or confidence before starting to play with others. A blurring of participation and holicipation is inherently a part of everyday life in the age of the internet; our daily connections with one another were already synchronous and asynchronous, collective and solitary. Jenkins' piece on *Sequester* views the pandemic as a moment of reframing, taking social media from a solitary activity to a collective one:

Once we thought social media was isolating, cutting us off from the people around us. Now, it seems the only connection we have left... Our media takes us where we ourselves cannot go. We live on the interstices. (Jenkins 2020)

But we have lived on the interstices for decades, and Jenkins' own work on participatory and convergence culture shows this. Events like Summer In The City, spatial but centred around a virtual platform, make those interstices more obvious simply through juxtaposition. Zoom ukulele sessions do likewise, and were all the clearer for the suddenness of their implementation; almost overnight, the collective experience of musicking had been atomised, but then brought together again, albeit in an unfamiliar form. I recall not only the wall of strumming, but the use of Twitter at the Strum-Along, a way to take song requests in a room too crowded to hear them shouted out, part of the musicking ritual, already entangled; to appropriate Jenkins's words, all taking place in the same room. I remember the confessional comments sections of Dodie's videos: no one will hear this, but. If the emergence of the ukulele's third wave occurred alongside the increasing convergence of online and offline, and of participation and holicipation, which I have already suggested characterise

platforms like YouTube, then perhaps the practices of third-wave ukulele social worlds reflect an experience of a wider world in which these boundaries have already long broken down.

The story of this chapter is incomplete. I write its conclusion in the autumn of 2021; restrictions have lifted, but the pandemic is not yet endemic, responsibility devolved to vaccines and to individual behaviour. The Strummers continue to play together online; many meet regularly in person, too. In my interviews with them, a few of the Strummers had expressed an anxiety about what would happen to the jams when it was possible to play together offline again:

I'm concerned that when it ends, the people that I've met — because I mean, there's people from all over the globe, isn't there, that are going — that we'll never see them again. This has been sort of like the godsend of the pandemic, and then suddenly, you know, we'll never see these people again. And it's upsetting to think like that because I've met some really nice people. We all say we'll keep in touch, but, as well, for how long? Because that's what happens, isn't it, in reality?  
(Saffron, interview)

I think people will go...But I think this online thing, it is quite good for people who haven't got like a local kind of ukulele community, or, you know, might be out in the sticks, or whatever. It's a bit of a lifeline for those types of people, isn't it? And I can't go out every night, I've got kids and my missus does late night shifts. So it suits me because everyone's in bed, and then I can join in. But it's not for everyone, I think there'll be a bit of a mixture, and it feels a bit rubbish to think about that. (Tom, interview)

In practice, the 'mixture' Tom predicts is precisely what is playing out in reality. Some players have left the jams entirely; others (myself included, as I write up this thesis) have reduced the time we spend on the calls. But the 'mixture' was always there; some members had always attended in phases, or in fits and starts, a natural



result of the desire lines encouraged by the practices of both online-first and offline-first social worlds. The connection remains, whether we are reminded of it by those who occasionally return, by the photos they post on social media alongside another attendee they have met for the first time, by the albums they have released or the news they have messaged us. We all remain, as ever, on the interstices.

Moira, unlike some of the Strummers, displayed no anxiety about the unknown future. What struck me about so much of my interview with her was how she seemed to elide the past and the future with the joy the Strummers gave her in the present moment, which she summarised most aptly at the very end of our conversation:

People talk about lockdown creating depression and loneliness and isolation, and it's totally the opposite for me. I've got entertainment. I've got a feeling that people really care about me, I've made friendships. My mother-in-law told me, when I was young married, that her mother had said to her 'you should always have a tomorrow to look forward to.' And that's what the online jam has done. It's given me a tomorrow. (Moira, interview)

Moira seemed particularly skilled in identifying the felt meaning of her own present-moment experiencings (see Rogers 1995a, 141), perhaps as a result of her own actualisation; discussing the Strummers with me evoked, in the moment of interviewing, the unconditional positive regard she extended towards and received from them, and in turn allowed her to look joyfully back to the past conversation with her mother-in-law, and to the possibility of an expansive tomorrow. While it remains to be seen how the practices of the Strummers and similar social worlds will develop in the years beyond social distancing, there is, I think, much to be learned from the felt meaning experienced by their practitioners in the present. In a sense, one of the most remarkable things about the social world of the Strummers is that it is unremarkable; in fact, it bears most, if not all, of the hallmarks of the offline-first worlds which came before it. But the intensity of felt meaning, engendered by musicking through crisis,

that its participants shared underscores the importance of these practices, and offers a perspective from which to view its still uncertain future.

## 9. 'A despicable toy guitar for idiots': discourses of devaluation

Although, on the ukulele's pathways, everyone may be considered musical, musicking with the ukulele is not for everyone. Well before beginning my research for this project, I had started to become aware that the ukulele's third-wave surge in popularity was accompanied by a critical backlash against it, chiefly in journalism, on social media, and in informal conversation outside of the ukulele's immediate social worlds and pathways. This became clearer still when my thesis topic began to take shape; although usually received with interest or enthusiasm, explaining my research area was occasionally met with incredulity, laughter, or even horror. I found myself increasingly intrigued by the origins of this devaluation, and began to seek out examples of it more actively even before I had begun collecting ethnographic data, hoping they would deepen my understanding of the instrument's representation and reception during its third wave.

Shaw, in a piece titled 'For Everyone Who Despises The Ukulele' for internet media outlet *Buzzfeed*, collates 23 Twitter posts which form a usefully representative sample of the vehemence and sentiment of this criticism. These posts, however, are clearly selected primarily for their humorous tone, and were not particularly helpful in deriving a sense of the qualitative nature of the devaluation they illustrate: 'The thing about the ukulele is I really hate the ukulele', reads one (Shaw 2015). Further examples can be seen in journalism. McAlpine, writing for *BBC Music*, dubs the ukulele the fifth most irritating sound in music (McAlpine 2016), while Wallop, in *The Telegraph*, derides it as a 'comedy instrument', and 'hard to take seriously' (Wallop 2011). Further clues can be found in Marsden's article for *The Independent*, 'Am I the only person in the world who hates the ukulele?', whose lead image displays the author smashing a yellow ukulele, and which describes the instrument in its opening as 'irritatingly ubiquitous', and 'the instrument of choice for people who list tea and cupcakes as their interests' (Marsden 2014).

Marsden's article is, in fact, far more nuanced than its opening suggests, and presents, through interviews with enthusiasts, a humorously reluctant and thoughtful reconciliation with the instrument. The discourses of inclusion and accessibility so present within my own thesis seem central to turning the tide of his article's narrative, but they coexist with his resentment at the instrument's ubiquity in advertisements, and with the realisation that his antipathy towards it stems, in part, from values instilled by his own classical musical training. It was clear that to establish whether these views were representative, and to further unpack the source of the backlash against the instrument, I would need to collect further data of my own. As discussed in chapter 4, recruiting interviewees who harboured similar views was challenging, leading me to set up an anonymous survey which I hoped respondents would view as a kind of 'honesty box', and which led to the collection of responses which ranged widely in sentiment and included a substantial number of negative responses which offered a surprisingly vivid picture of the quality of the devaluation levelled at the ukulele during its third wave. Many of these responses were, if anything, even more emphatic in tone than the tweets reproduced in Shaw's article, and express the strength of feeling the instrument seems to evoke in some:

I did love it about 8 years ago; its ubiquity now (especially in adverts and TV incidental music) has made me want to burn most of them in a massive bonfire.

(Anonymous, survey response)

It's rubbish and I don't understand it...Before I played any instruments, someone persuaded me that joining a ukulele group would be a good way of starting. Against my better judgement I did, and it was a terrible idea. I now...have a proper instrument instead (a guitar). (Anonymous, survey response)

Honestly? I loathe it. Kooky, irritating shite. (Anonymous, survey response)

It is good when traditional Hawaiian music is played on it. It is a despicable toy guitar for idiots otherwise. (Anonymous, survey response)

Ukulele enthusiasts seem at least somewhat aware of this wider backlash against their instrument, which was more visible in positively-coded and ambivalent survey responses than in data from interviews or participant-observation. Kruse refers to the participants in his study as 'ukulele activists' who defend the instrument as a 'misunderstood underdog' (Kruse 2013, 157), and a few of my own survey's respondents reflected this tendency:

Overall, I like the ukulele, and don't hold it accountable for the bad rap it has gotten from its unfortunate trendiness among tourists and want-to-be bards. (Anonymous, survey response)

Who could hate this. I never want to be in the same room with anyone who hates the uke. I love it. Evokes the island, the sea, warm weather, happy times and holidays. It makes a pleasant sound, and often accompanied by lovely singing. What is not to love. (Anonymous, survey response)

People think it's too easy to play. I just wish some of these people would actually pick one up and try to play it. The uke is a very misunderstood instrument. (Anonymous, survey response)

In interviews, although the topic of the ukulele's devaluation occasionally arose, participants seemed more interested in leading the conversation back towards the experience and felt meanings of playing, and their relationships with others in their immediate social world; the views of outsiders were seemingly a lesser concern. Despite this, as my research continued, I began to realise that it was not necessarily that participants disagreed that the ukulele possessed the qualities that were used to devalue it by its detractors, but that they tended to acknowledge and embrace those qualities, rather than either acknowledging and devaluing them, or denying their

existence altogether. This chapter therefore represents an analysis of the primary discourses of devaluation which my data suggested were directed towards the ukulele during its third wave, as well as examining how participants in its social worlds respond to and recycle those discourses to further enable the traversal of desire lines within their own musicking practices, ultimately leading them towards musically actualising.

Firstly, this chapter considers criticisms constructing the instrument and its social worlds as 'twee', and in the gendered and age-based discourses which surround this term, suggesting that they are used to distance the ukulele from guitar culture. While this distancing might be pejorative when enacted by detractors, enthusiasts use it to reject the often demusicalising practices sometimes associated with the guitar, and reshape criticism of the ukulele as childlike into an opportunity to generate new 'musical possible selves' well into adulthood, as per Creech et al (see Creech et al. 2014). Secondly, the chapter examines criticism of the ukulele in terms of its proliferation into corporate advertisements, itemising the nature of this process in detail and, elaborating on chapter 7's discussion of the tensions between participation and platformisation, considering the potential appeal of participatory culture to advertisers as a self-concealing strategy which evokes empathy in consumers, and the slippage of meaning which results in antipathy towards players at the community music level. I note, however, that players themselves rarely seem interested in this process, considering it irrelevant to their own largely uncommodifiable practices. Thirdly, I explore criticisms of the ukulele as being 'played badly', suggesting that this is the result of a mismatch between conventional, skill-based modes of musical valuation, and the replacement of this with unconditional positive regard in the ukulele's own social worlds. I propose that the perception of lowered expectations, and awareness of the constructedness of skill-based valuation, enable participants to more freely pursue desire lines in their own musicking. To conclude, I consider how these discourses interweave, and ambiguities in participant reactions to them.

Although these forms of devaluation do not appear to discourage its players, who, in fact, often seem to openly acknowledge these qualities specifically in order to embrace them, it is worth considering whether the construction of the ukulele as dismissible by outsiders to its social worlds might be partly responsible for its relative neglect in scholarship, and for the 'hiddenness' of those who music with it. Cohen notes the 'contradictory views of popular music as socially, culturally, and economically significant, but also as something of little cultural or educational value that public sector organisations (including universities) should not help to fund or promote' (Cohen 2007, 225), and I think it noteworthy that, even amongst enthusiasts of popular music, the ukulele is so often constructed as the terrain of adults who refuse to grow up, of advertisers, or of musicians too incompetent to play, in Small's words, 'real music' (Small 1998, 212). While these discourses harbour complex, and often productive, felt meanings both for the ukulele's detractors and its enthusiasts, it is worth considering them critically. My own research, I hope, indicates something of the depth and range of activity taking place on the ukulele's third-wave social worlds and pathways, and positions it as worthy of further study.

### **Twee, gender, and childishness**

Across my whole dataset of survey responses, 61 respondents cited 'twee' as one of the words they associated with the ukulele. This was the third most common response to this question across the survey, but it was the most common negatively-coded word. It was also the most common word submitted by respondents whose overall sentiment towards the ukulele was coded as negative. It seemed to be the case that those who disliked the ukulele often attributed that dislike to a sense of 'tweeness', but also that at least some ukulele enthusiasts were highly aware that the word 'twee' was used to devalue the instrument. I found this particularly intriguing because there appears to be relatively little scholarship unpacking the concept of 'twee' itself; much of the writing that exists on the term refers, specifically, to the

subgenre of indie music sometimes referred to as 'twee pop' (see Abebe 2005; Azerrad 2003; Gates-Shannon 2014). Abebe's excellent history of twee pop traces the birth of the subgenre to the 1980s, and notes that — much like the ukulele — it experienced a 'moment in the sun' alongside a simultaneous backlash from outsiders. However, the sound of the ukulele was not a particular feature of early twee pop; indeed, Abebe notes that a '60s-styled guitar jangle' was the subgenre's sonic hallmark (Abebe 2005).

There was little suggestion that respondents referring to twee were making deliberate reference to twee pop itself; it was clear that some semantic drift had taken place, and that the term was being used more colloquially.<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that 13 respondents devalued the ukulele in terms of its 'cuteness', and in each case, this appeared to be used almost synonymously with twee. However, cuteness was mentioned much less commonly than twee, and, as such, this chapter considers the ukulele's devaluation in terms of its cuteness to also fall under the category of twee.

Perhaps the most in-depth examination of twee comes from Spitz, who defines it as an emerging cultural aesthetic, nascent in the early years of the 21st century, a less cynical and softer reaction to 'hipster' counterculture which foregrounds handcrafting, beauty, and sincerity. Perhaps supporting his assertion that twee, in its casually-deployed sense, is a relatively recent phenomenon, only one mention of the term in my survey results came from a respondent older than 55. Although Spitz's reading of this aesthetic is overall a little uncritical, it nonetheless strikes at the heart of one of the strongest emergent themes in my own dataset of more negative responses, and in backlash against the instrument in journalism and social media, namely a particularly childlike form of femininity. Twee, suggests Spitz, liberates its followers from 'the pressure to be cool, swaggering, aggressively macho, and old at

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<sup>21</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that the ukulele has seen some use, particularly earlier in the third wave, by selected artists influenced by or associated with twee pop in the sense Abebe and others describe it; among the more notable of these are Allo Darlin' and Darren Hayman. Most artists in this social world, however, still rely chiefly on the guitar, and in any case this specific phenomenon was mentioned only by one participant.



heart' (Spitz 2014, 11); but by the same token, this endows it with a 'proud punchability' (Spitz 2014, 11), leading to backlash against it. I suggest that the ukulele's construction as feminine and childish similarly contributes both to its popularity amongst enthusiasts, and to the backlash levelled against it by outsiders.

When questionnaire respondents made direct references to gender, they generally did so only in passing, but it was nonetheless clear that for a subset of respondents, the instrument was coded as feminine, despite an even distribution of gender across all study participants:

It lacks the 'oomph' and fullness of a regular guitar. It seems to mostly be employed by women who are making very cute and twee music...it just seems to lack much utility outside that purpose nowadays. (Anonymous, survey response)

I like it when some people play it and hate it when others play it. It annoys me that the ukulele sound now makes me think of adverts with girly cover songs. (Anonymous, survey response)

It's really bad isn't it? It used to be ok many decades ago, but it's now just a cutesy wutesy instrument that's lost integrity due to all of those a) purposefully naïve covers by female YouTubers or b) ukulele community music groups that pop up at fetes. So yeah, it's just not great or cool. (Anonymous, survey response)

The association present in these responses between femininity, naïveté, 'girliness' and cuteness is also observed by Fox, who suggests that the cuteness and childishness for which the ukulele is often criticised is strongly gendered. He describes a co-worker sending him a cover of a Misfits song performed by a girl band which featured the ukulele, saying it had 'ruined' the song for him. 'Ruined', suggests Fox, was code for 'made girly' (Fox 2014). Szego, in her examination of the ukulele's use in the Canadian school system during its second wave, notes that the instrument was similarly gendered, and rejected, as feminine, by boys who could not incorporate

its participatory use into their 'gendered notion of "cool"' (Szego 2015, 53), mediated by their exposure to guitar rock, to which the ukulele — and the participatory model of teaching it was used to support in the school system — compared unfavourably.

Gendering the ukulele as feminine, however, is not necessarily restricted to the instrument's detractors. One of Kruse's participants describes the ukulele outright as 'fitting the female anatomy' (Kruse 2013, 160), and one participant in my own interviews, as well as one survey response, suggested that the instrument's size made it better suited to female players than the guitar:

I have small girly hands, you know. (laughs) And it was smaller and less strings, so I could actually get my hand around the neck and reach the chords easier than the guitar. (Kay, interview)

As a small woman, I enjoy having an instrument that I can easily hold and manipulate, unlike the guitar. (Anonymous, survey response)

Both of these comments were made by self-identified women, and positioned the ukulele as more accessible as a result of its size. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that they are basically essentialist, and should be treated with care; a participant in Clawson's study of women bassists makes a similar statement in the inverse, recalling being told by a male bassist that 'women couldn't play the bass — it is big and heavy and women's hands are smaller' (Clawson 1999, 204), which she acknowledges as sexist essentialism. Nonetheless, Clawson also notes that a number of her participants supply equally essentialist justifications for the bass's femininity, such as that women 'may be attracted to it because it's more earthy' (Clawson 1999, 206). Clawson suggests that, in fact, the number of women playing bass may partly stem from a narrowed sphere of opportunity, resulting from legitimating it as a feminine pursuit relative to the masculine guitar (Clawson 1999, 206), but her study nonetheless illustrates the tendency to seek meaning in the gendering of an instrument through its morphology. The ukulele is not unique in this respect; Sheldon and Price note that smaller and

higher-pitched orchestral instruments are more likely to be played by women (Sheldon and Price 2005), and Hallam et al find that this can potentially be traced back to instrument choice while still at school. Crucially, reflecting Szego's findings, they find that twice as many boys as girls are likely to learn guitar at school level (Hallam, Rogers, and Creech 2008, 12).

In fact, I suspect that the ukulele's perceived relationship to the guitar is key both to its gendering by both enthusiasts and detractors, and to its devaluing by outsiders. The guitar was more frequently mentioned than any other instrument by my participants overall, and demusicalised participants often mentioned it as an instrument they had attempted to learn, but had failed to, or felt too intimidated by, before moving on to the ukulele. The ukulele's cost and portability, which were so often cited as aspects of its accessibility, were also often presented in comparison to the guitar; some of the instrument's value to participants, then, seemed to be grounded in the comparative. Szego describes the ukulele as 'marginally positioned' in relation to the world of the guitar (Szego 2015, 44), arguing that this is in part, due to its morphological similarity, which leaves it particularly open to comparison. The guitar, and guitar rock, have tended to be gendered as masculine; Bayton notes that relatively few women have historically played the instrument in bands (Bayton 1998), and Clawson's study emerges from a seeming overrepresentation of women as bassists in comparison to the guitar (Clawson 1999). Frith and McRobbie characterise guitar rock by its exaggeratedly masculine player movements, and note, too, its male-dominated control and production (Frith and McRobbie 1990); meanwhile, Waksman views the guitar, when manipulated for elaborate solos, as a cyborg-like 'technophallus', coding masculinity into the virtuosity by which much guitar rock is characterised (Waksman 2001, 247). It is this association that Szego suggests may have contributed to boys' rejection of the ukulele in the school system during its second wave (Szego 2015, 54).

I see traces of a similar phenomenon in Hebdige's discussion of public perception of the motorcycle and motor scooter after the First World War. Hebdige reads the perceptual demarcation between the two as reflecting a divide between masculinity and femininity; the more 'primitive' and 'functional' motorcycle, he suggests, became fixed as masculine in the minds of the public, and the smaller, lighter scooter became correspondingly 'vulnerable to ridicule' as feminine (Hebdige 1988, 104). If the guitar's representation is one of hypermasculinity, it seems possible that the ukulele, morphologically similar but smaller, softer, and higher-pitched, perhaps easier to play for some (or at least perceived to be easier), and with a more even gender distribution amongst players, might have become feminised, and thus vulnerable to ridicule as twee, almost by default. Of note, too, is that Waksman, Frith and McRobbie, and Szego cite virtuosic skill, often in the form of solos, as a marker of guitar culture, which Waksman links directly to masculinity (Waksman 2001, 240). If, as I have already suggested, ukulele social worlds sideline skill as a metric of valuation in favour of unconditional positive regard, in doing so they detach themselves from masculine virtuosity, and default to being constructed as feminine.

There is, perhaps, then, a degree of misogyny, or at least suspicion of the feminine, inherent in some of the devaluation levelled at the ukulele. But twee, specifically, is not only gendered, but aged; not just feminine, but, to use Fox's word, 'girly'. References by participants to 'purposeful naïveté', to cuteness, and to infantilism, support this. These concerns can emerge not only from a misogynistic perspective, but from feminist concerns around women's self-presentation as childlike, and therefore passive. Klausner uses the instrument as a tongue-in-cheek illustration of what she perceives to be a wider cultural phenomenon of self-infantilisation by women. 'There's so much ukulele playing now', she suggests, 'it's deafening' (Klausner 2011). Spitz proposes that, even aside from its gendering, much of the distaste elicited by twee results from a perceived refusal to 'face the inevitable'. This, he suggests, quoting Diana Ross's 'When We Grow Up':

...is what makes Twee so sweet and so controversial. It's the French resistance, armed with one fight song after another, marching into battle singing, 'We don't have to change at all.' (Spitz 2014, 21)

Some of the suspicion levelled at the instrument, then, might emerge from a sense that ukulele players are refusing to grow up. Indeed, a few survey respondents made comments to this effect; some suggested the instrument was more appropriate for children to play than adults, while others alluded to the instrument being a 'toy':

It's an excellent instrument for children and I feel that is probably its primary useful role. (Anonymous, survey response)

It's a kids' toytown instrument. I only pursued it to get my child interested in fretted stringed instruments. (Anonymous, survey response)

It is good when traditional Hawaiian music is played on it. It is a despicable toy guitar for idiots otherwise. It is so easy that it is impossible not to be able to play the ukulele. (Anonymous, survey response)

Ukuleles have seen a resurgence in popularity in the British classroom during the third wave, replacing recorders as a first introduction to music (Morris 2007; Patrick 2017). Several participants mentioned the instrument's use in schools, generally favourably, suggesting this phenomenon was quite well-known; this might, perhaps have something to do with the instrument's association with childhood. There are also, however, clear parallels to the ukulele's gendering; a few participants mentioned in passing that they viewed the instrument's small size as making it particularly well-suited to children, recalling participants' statements about female anatomy. Some, like the latter two responses quoted above, compared it unfavourably to the guitar, and a few mentioned purchasing the instrument for a young person with a view to moving them on to other instruments, which might contextualise descriptions of the ukulele as a 'toy guitar'; while it might be viewed as useful in

childhood, growing up, to these respondents, meant moving on to a 'real' instrument. Indeed, Szego draws a direct link between masculinity and adulthood during the ukulele's second wave; she suggests that boys' rejection of the instrument stemmed from gendered models of specifically adult masculinity drawn from rock guitar practises; in doing so, she suggests, they not only reproduced constructions of maleness, but contested their own childhood. 'In other words', she suggests, 'they exercised their ability and desire to be understood as something other than children — as competent young men, perhaps' (Szego 2015, 55).

While the ukulele's construction through a lens of childlike femininity and positioning in opposition to the guitar can, at times, raise suspicion, for some enthusiasts it also seems to contribute to its potential as a tool for actualising through musicking. Some of my earliest fieldwork was conducted at a dedicated ukulele shop in London, which Morris, the manager, described as 'an alternative to the macho guitar shops of Denmark Street'; the shop was deliberately and self-consciously positioned as being apart from guitar culture. Sargent identifies a range of masculinities reproduced by interactions in guitar shops; one of these is staff in independent shops positioning themselves as an 'expert audience' to customers, watching them closely as they test instruments (Sargent 2009, 18–19). This allows customers and staff to bond over shared knowledge, but Sargent notes that it is often intimidating to less experienced players, and particularly to women (Sargent 2009, 19). In contrast, the ukulele shop staff seemed to actively avoid the 'expert audience' model. Staff would sometimes encourage customers to take instruments from displays and try them out, but then leave the shop floor completely as they did so. The shop was also laid out to encourage independence; prices were visibly labelled on ukuleles so that customers direct their own experience of the shop without needing to ask for help. Despite this, if a customer did not want to try out instruments or said that they could not play at all, staff would take ukuleles they were interested in down from the wall, and demonstrate them. While Sargent suggests that staff playing instruments on

customers' behalf can contribute to an atmosphere of paternalism, at the ukulele shop this was never done without consent, and I occasionally saw it followed by teaching a customer two or three chords so they could begin to try instruments out themselves.

What was striking about these practices was that, just like the jams and groups I participated in, they seemed designed to encourage the traversal of desire lines in musicking. Even if a customer had never held a ukulele before, they were nonetheless enabled, if they wanted to, to try out instruments, but were also offered guidance if they felt too intimidated to know where to start. For the ukulele shop, then, the ukulele's marginal position relative to the guitar seemed to represent an opportunity to draw on conventions established by the guitar shop, while simultaneously actively rejecting paternalistic practices. Rejecting these practices, in turn, also meant decentring musical skill and virtuosity, making the shop more accessible not only to women, but to less experienced players, including those with a history of experiencing demusicalisation. In leaving the room for customers to try out an instrument, too, the shop left available the opportunity for holicipatory musicking in what would ordinarily be a public space. By acknowledging and embracing the ukulele's demarcation from guitar culture, the shop seemed to amplify its potential as a tool of actualising.

Spitz's framing of twee as a battle cry of 'We don't have to change at all' might, indeed, describe how some of its detractors view it, but, through a Rogerian lens, I suggest that some ukulele enthusiasts might experience the childlike construction of the instrument quite differently. Rogers frames a central aspect of actualising as openness to experience, to the self, and to other individuals, exactly as they are, seemingly implying that sufficient experience of unconditional positive regard from another can result in the expansion of one's own capacity for unconditional positive regard (Rogers 1995b, 173–74). He quotes Maslow's description of the self-actualising individual, which suggests this openness is a characteristic of childhood often lost as an adult; self-actualisation is the process of regaining this childlike state of perception:

As the child looks out upon the world with wide, uncritical and innocent eyes, simply noting and observing what is the case, without either arguing the matter or demanding that it be otherwise, so does the self-actualising person look upon human nature both in himself and in others.' (Maslow 1954, 207, quoted in Rogers 1995b, 174)

If this is so, then the childlike sincerity of twee might be less a proclamation of 'we don't have to change at all', and more a declaration that — and here, in a nod to Spitz, I, too, quote 'When We Grow Up' — 'I'm going to be happy and do what I like to do'. Creech et al's suggestion that the musical possible self can be developed through active experimentation with provisional selves necessitates that participants must be willing to engage in that experimentation (Creech et al. 2014, 43). Since negative or feared possible selves tend to be responded to in later life by avoidance (Smith and Freund 2002, 498), the role of Maslow's childlike openness is clear; for one's musicking to be the subject of unconditional positive regard seems, even for demusicalised participants, to promote an openness to experimentation and the pursuance of desire lines in musicking and the development of provisional selves, which ultimately leads to increased musical actualising. That this childlike openness is positioned in opposition to guitar culture and conventional models of aesthetic valuation may, indeed, lead to its devaluation by those not versed in its norms of unconditional positive regard, but, simultaneously, it frees its participants from expectations they may previously have felt unable or unwilling to live up to in their own musicking.

### **'A) sad and B) terrible': the ukulele in advertising**

16 survey respondents mentioned the ukulele's use in corporate advertising as a factor in the distaste or suspicion they harboured towards it. Eight of these responses also made reference to twee or cuteness, suggesting a possible connection between the ukulele's construction as feminine and childlike, and its use in commercial media; in



this section, I aim to begin to unpack how and why this link might manifest. Respondents citing the ukulele's use in advertisements in their feelings of antipathy fell into two groups; the first group attributed it simply to the frequency with which they had recently heard the instrument in advertisements, and a perceived lack of stylistic originality in its use:

They've become a terrible advert cover cliché, and used pretty unimaginatively.  
(Anonymous, survey response)

Its ubiquity now (especially in adverts and TV incidental music) has made me want to burn most of them in a massive bonfire. (Anonymous, survey response)

I used to love it because of the Magnetic Fields, but the spike in popularity it enjoyed in the mid 2000s and its sheer ubiquity in twee adverts made me really hate it. (Anonymous, survey response)

This particular form of criticism is not unique to my survey respondents, but is reproduced in a few journalistic sources. Marsden observes that 'the plink-plonk of the ukulele is being harnessed by corporations and repeatedly used to sell us everything from dating services to mortgages' (Marsden 2014), while McAlpine suggests that it 'encourages advertisers...to recreate old pop songs as if they were a) sad and b) terrible' (McAlpine 2016). Similar sentiments can be located on social media and message boards dating back as far as 2011, and are almost universally negative in tone (see, for example, "Campaign to Ban Ukuleles & Whimsical/Twee Singing in Commercials" 2017; "Why Is the Ukulele so Popular on TV Adverts Today?" 2011; "Ukuleles - Why?" 2014). I have already described, in chapter 7, the rather homogeneous style of the ukulele's use both in television advertisements, and on YouTube, but it is worth exploring in depth here, since it goes some way to explaining the fatigue some respondents described. The style in question usually features a soprano ukulele, strummed percussively in a major key, or, less frequently,

arpeggiated fingerpicking. The tempo ranges from around 90 to 120 beats per minute; upbeat, but unhurried. In advertisements, the instrument is usually played without other ukulele players present, eschewing the wall of strumming; instead, it tends to be accompanied by other instruments. Glockenspiels are by far the most common of these, followed by (usually staccato) whistling; although piano and acoustic guitar sometimes appear, they do so less frequently. Drums are sometimes used, but handclaps and clicks are more frequent still, and sometimes hand percussion such as shakers.

The vast majority of adverts I encountered featuring a ukulele during the course of this project featured this style with only minimal variation. Its popularity seemed to persist in production music and royalty-free stock music libraries, which host original background music specifically written for use by advertisers and content creators. On AudioJungle, a large online music library, as of 2017, perhaps the peak of this phenomenon, out of a total of around 500,000 uploaded tracks, almost 20,000 had the tag ‘ukulele’ or ‘ukelele’, and auditioning the 100 or so top sellers of this list suggested that nearly all matched the style described above (“Royalty Free Music & Audio from AudioJungle” 2017; “Ukulele Royalty Free Music & Sound Effects from AudioJungle” 2017; “Ukelele Royalty Free Music & Sound Effects from AudioJungle” 2017). In 2016, when I signed up as an artist to the Tunefruit music library to further investigate this phenomenon, I received an automatically-triggered welcome email, stating:

The best sellers on our site are tracks that snap neatly in a business/corporate environment — happy, bouncy, and light enough to work well under voice over. Ukulele/glockenspiel is all the rage these days — bonus points for handclaps. (“Welcome to the Tunefruit Family - Welcome Email” 2016)

I found this particularly intriguing because this particular stylistic configuration was rarely heard in any of the ukulele social worlds I encountered while conducting research for this project; indeed, it is arguably incompatible with the wall of

strumming which played such a crucial role in many of them. Amongst ukulele YouTubers, a more minimal style, usually voice and ukulele only without other instruments, is common. Although a few indie bands, mostly in songs released from 2005 to 2010, make use of glockenspiels alongside the ukulele, clicking and whistling appear, from my findings, to have been used in only one popular single — Noah and the Whale’s 2009 track, ‘Five Years Time’, which reached seventh position in the UK charts (“5 Years Time - Full Official Chart History” 2021) — and thereafter seem to have become a hallmark of commercial ukulele music. In this respect, the style can almost be considered a genre in its own right; Fabbri defines genre as ‘a set of musical events...whose course is regulated by a definite arrangement of socially accepted rules’ (Fabbri 1982, 136), and the formulaic nature of much commercial ukulele music, as described above, seems to conform to this, making use of a set of definite and predictable rules. Despite the fact that this genre is widely used not only in television advertisements, but on YouTube, it has become the subject of growing cynicism amongst creators on the YouTube platform itself, as indicated by the reuse I described in chapter 7 of one particularly popular royalty-free track to soundtrack political speeches, and violent footage from video games.

Earlier, I cited this appropriation and mockery of the commercial ukulele style by creators as a means of highlighting and negotiating the tension between values of participation and platformisation on YouTube. I suspect, too, that some version of the tension between corporate and participatory values is responsible not only for the ukulele’s popularity in music for advertisements, but for a kind of slippage in meaning between the two that leads to wider resentment and devaluation of ukulele participation at the community level. A clue to this was offered by the second group of survey respondents, who attributed their antipathy not merely to the ubiquity of the ukulele’s use in advertisements, but to its use as a means of attempted concealment:

I'm... sick of hearing them in the background of adverts, being used as part of an effort to convince us that some vast multinational company is a cuddly little kitchen table craft business. (Anonymous, survey response)

Honestly? I loathe it. Kooky, irritating shite. Used to soundtrack ads in a way that's supposed to suggest warmth and characterful authenticity, but in fact is a dogwhistle to the screechingly smug middle class. (Anonymous, survey response)

Innocence, naivety, or general 'twee'ness... is now the cultural baggage that the ukulele carries...associating the instrument with a cynical deployment of over-the-top 'niceness'. This has been amplified in recent years by the ubiquity of usage in TV adverts in order to give a brand some kind of friendly innocuousness. (Anonymous, survey response)

Cook notes that music offers 'unsurpassed opportunities for communicating complex social or attitudinal messages practically instantaneously' (Cook 2004, 263). Accompanying an advertisement with only a few notes in a particular style is 'sufficient to target a specific social and demographic group and to associate a whole nexus of social and cultural values with a product' (Cook 2004, 263). The sheer range of products that the ukulele has been used to advertise during its third wave is remarkable for its diversity; Table 2 presents a list I kept while researching this thesis of advertisements using ukulele music. It excludes advertisements I actively sought out, and as such is non-exhaustive, but offers a sense of the diversity of brands adopting the style:

*Table 2: Example list of brands using the ukulele in their advertisements.*

<b>Company</b>	<b>Product</b>	<b>Sector</b>
Uncle Ben's	Microwave rice	Food/drink
Cadbury's	Oreo Dairy Milk chocolate	Food/drink

Cancer Research	Dryathlon sobriety campaign	Charity event
Eli Lilly	Erectile dysfunction drug	Health
Axa	Life insurance	Insurance
Virgin	'Experience days'	Gift
Sodastream	Sparkling water makers	Home appliance
Hive	Smart heating system	Home utility
Thinx	Alternative menstrual products	Health
Match	Online dating service	Website
Kaiser Permanente	Health insurance	Insurance
Etsy	Online handicraft marketplace	Website
Conservative Party	Electoral campaign for Theresa May	Political
Apple	iPad Mini, first generation	Technology
Dell Inspiron	Laptop	Technology
Comedy Central	<i>Scrubs</i> TV series	Entertainment
BBC	<i>Penguins: Spy In The Huddle</i> TV series	Entertainment
Yoplait	Yoghurt	Food/drink
Luma	Credit card	Finance
Kayak	Travel tool web app	Website

The demographic range depicted and targeted by these advertisements is seemingly as varied as the range of products, despite the relatively homogenous musical style used across them all. Their consistent mood, however, is a carefree, home-grown feel. Families and friends are shown at home, relaxed and intimate, eating, drinking, and laughing together. Insurance and health companies reassure me they'll be there for me. Match — whose advertisement is perhaps the best-known on

this list — shows two strangers meeting for the first time, as one serenades the other on a ukulele, connecting amid a bustling crowd, the small within the big. There is, I think, a parallel here between brands using YouTube creators as mouthpieces for their product, and between the ukulele's broader use to imply smallness and intimacy, the individual becoming a voice for the brand.

Authenticity is one possible interpretation of the aims of companies adopting this approach. Dolan associates the sound of a singular ukulele in a Stephin Merritt song with what she calls 'personal authenticity' (Dolan 2010, 457), expanding on Moore's broader typology of authenticity (see Moore 2002). Personal authenticity, suggests Dolan, is 'a feeling of honesty, sincerity, realness, but most importantly it is *a feeling* and what feels authentic to one person might seem fake and insincere to another' (Dolan 2010, 462). Negus and Astor suggest that viewing empathy as 'imaginative other directed perspective taking' which is personal and experiential (Negus and Astor 2021, 13), might be more fruitful than a focus on authenticity, with its implications of an essential truth beneath the surface of a performance; Dolan's description of subjective personal authenticity seems also to derive from this quality of experiential empathy. Empathy, as one of the six conditions Rogers defines as prerequisites for a therapeutic relationship (Rogers 1957, 829), is by definition a human trait; an individual may confirm the other, but a brand cannot. Yet there is also ample evidence suggesting consumer empathy positively affects response to advertisements (see Bagozzi and Moore 1994; Escalas and Stern 2003; Edina 2020; Rawal and Saavedra Torres 2017), and Edwards and Day, quoting a talk by Unilever's chair, propose that intimacy with consumers is a crucial aspect of marketing (Edwards and Day 2007, 7). I posit, then, that (as one of the quoted survey respondents proposes) the ukulele's presence in advertisements attempts to make a brand feel more like an individual, with capacity to give and receive empathy. The 'twee' aesthetic, with its focus on handcrafting and sincerity, only adds to this.

Even survey respondents who had never played the ukulele themselves were often aware of its reputation for being more accessible to beginners than the guitar, as well as with its associations with participatory culture, and with YouTube. It is perhaps these associations which are called upon when the ukulele is deployed in adverts. But the use of these representations to devalue the ukulele's social worlds more broadly suggest a bi-directional slippage of meaning may have taken place. Since ukulele music at the level of the social worlds discussed in this thesis is generally not recorded (and therefore uncommodifiable) in offline-first worlds, relying on gift cycles to circulate media like songbooks, and often takes the form of comparatively rough-and-ready vocal covers in online-first worlds, the commercial genre discussed in this section seems to represent an attempt to translate the instrument's participatory associations into a style more useful for advertising. For at least some listeners, however, the fact that this style does not exist outside of the commercial renders its self-conscious construction clear, destroying the illusion of homemade intimacy that its use is intended to create in the first place. The new associations created for these more sceptical listeners, particularly given the instrument's ubiquity in advertising, make it challenging to separate this corporate ukulele style from the instrument's use in grassroots-level social worlds. Some online criticism of the corporate ukulele style makes this lack of differentiation clear, with some users including tracks not featuring ukuleles at all in their critiques of the instrument. A blog post by Kulkarni skewering the style lists eight of the author's most-hated ukulele advertisements; but none of the listed adverts, to my ear, feature an audible ukulele (Kulkarni 2016). Even a recent campaign by drinks company Innocent, which self-consciously parodies the style, features a guitar in its soundtrack, but animated visuals which shift inconsistently between a four-string ukulele and a six-string guitar (Grigg 2021, 0:22, 0:29).

Spitz suggests a similar process takes place when twee is leveraged for capitalist purposes; when it becomes difficult to identify the verisimilitude of the presence of a movement already subject to suspicion for other reasons, mistrust increases.

'Microsuspicions of purity,' he suggests, 'feed the macrosuspicion some hold for Twee; it's simply too lousy with frauds and impossible to truly purify or regulate' (Spitz 2014, 14). But despite this, many participants in the ukulele's social worlds seem untroubled either by its appropriation in advertisements, or by the frustration this evokes in some detractors, and these players' reactions sometimes seem to suggest that this is because their own focus is on their unconditional positive regard for others within their social world. Marsden interviews Will Grove-White of the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain in his article on his own antipathy towards the ukulele, who advises him, 'Even at its worst...just listen to the person singing'. Another of his interviewees points out that enabling connection between players is what really matters (Marsden 2014). Asking my own interviewees about the instrument's commercial use tended to result in indifference, or even unawareness. 'It doesn't really make a difference to us, I suppose, does it?' responds Alice when the topic of the ukulele in advertisements is raised. For those whose practice is unrecordable, uncommodifiable, often even unheard by other players even amid musicking together, what is done with their instrument outside of their immediate social worlds often barely affects them; their concern is less with music than with the act of musicking alongside others already sharing their pathways.

### **The power of 'playing badly'**

As discussed in chapter 5, the ukulele's beginner-friendliness was commonly cited as a source of its popularity. Alongside its small size and low cost, this was most often attributed to the instrument being easy to play. All interviewees mentioned this beginner-friendliness in some form, as well as 291 survey respondents ('easy' was also the fourth most common word associated with the instrument amongst respondents). This was frequently cited as one of the qualities initially attracting participants to the instrument, and helped facilitate desire lines; the flexible practices of open events like jams, in particular, are designed to be accessible for beginners through simple chord



charts, peer teaching, and loaning ukuleles to attendees who have not yet committed to purchasing their own instrument. The wall of strumming also assists those early in their musicking journey, allowing basic playing skills to develop through mimicry and experimentation without the anxiety or embarrassment of being heard to be making mistakes. Perhaps most importantly, sidelining proficiency and skill to unconditional positive regard means even complete beginners can be genuinely and deeply valued in the musicking space. This is, of course, not unconnected to the rejection of guitar culture's masculine virtuosity, and is central to how players situate their own instrument in relation to the guitar. Both rejection of the guitar's virtuosity and the emphasis placed on the ukulele's beginner-friendliness also cater to demusicalised participants, for whom an emphasis on skill may prevent experimenting with developing provisional musical selves, and moving towards musically actualising.

This reputation is, however, a double-edged sword. Ten survey respondents mentioned the ukulele being 'played badly', or in an unskilled way, as contributing to their dislike of the instrument, and this is also a recurring theme in journalistic sources. Marsden realises his earlier disdain for the ukulele may have emerged from 'my classical training and tendency towards grumpiness...prompt(ing) me to rail against people merely having fun playing simple tunes' (Marsden 2014). McAlpine voices his annoyance that 'they're used as a basic, entry-level instrument...George Formby's expressive frails and trills have not made a comeback, so we're often left with nothing but half-hearted strumming' (McAlpine 2016). It is perhaps worth noting that Tranquada and King mention criticism of the ukulele as the province of unskilled players by the National Recreation Association during the instrument's first wave, so this argument is not solely contemporary (Tranquada and King 2012, 135). The third wave, however, has given rise to a particularly large number of social worlds and events which, as I have argued throughout this study, are frequently designed to be beginner-friendly and to sideline technical skill, which might further fuel this critique:

It is an instrument a lot of people own but few seem to bother to learn, which is irritating. I have heard it played very well and it can be great, but I have also heard a tonne of shit. (Anonymous, survey response)

Most of the time it seems to be an excuse for incompetent musicians to play treble-y, overly-twee, terrible cover versions and does not seem to inspire any kind of actual creativity. (Anonymous, survey response)

It's sort of like the recorder of the guitar family... people play 3 notes on it and suddenly they feel they have the right to critique musicians of considerable experience. (Anonymous, survey response)

It seems to have become the lazy person's instrument of choice, which means that everyone I see playing one lacks any significant musical talent. (Anonymous, survey response)

These views resonate with the construction of the ukulele as a child's instrument or, especially, a toy, which in turn echoes the demusicalising syllogism Small describes, in which 'our music...is the only real music' (Small 1998, 212). The learning done by ukulele beginners is not real learning; their creativity is not real creativity; their instrument is not a real guitar; their musicking is absent of real talent. These statements are irrelevant in most of the social worlds I encountered during my research. They are antithetical to Laura's assertion that 'everyone is musical'; They hinge on the assumption that some people are, in fact, not musical, and that these people are more likely to play the ukulele, and, therefore, that they are more likely to do so badly. What it means to play badly is a more complex matter. For Frith, bad music is 'music that doesn't communicate — between musician and audience, between musician and musician, between performer and composer' (Frith 2013, 28). But in Small's view, all musicking is communicative: 'whoever engages in a musical performance, of whatever kind, is saying...this is who we are' (Small 1998, 212), he

suggests. Taken together, Small's and Frith's models suggest that some quality that is successfully communicated within the ukulele's third-wave social worlds and the pathways interconnecting them is not necessarily being successfully communicated beyond them.

What is missing, I think, is unconditional positive regard, which I have suggested throughout this thesis is a defining feature of the ukulele's social worlds and pathways, enabling movement beyond demusicalisation and towards actualising and increased personal congruence, nurturing flexibility and encouraging participants to explore musical pathways based on their own desires. I have asserted throughout my discussion of these worlds and pathways that they function by putting norms and strategies into place which enable improvisation that is collective and participatory, yet also sufficiently holicipatory to allow participants on radically different musicking journeys and at radically different stages of musical and personal development to travel alongside one another, without disturbing each other's musicking. This, however, is a departure from normative models of musical valuation in 21st-century Britain. As Small notes, in Western (presumably Anglo-American) industrial societies, 'individuals are assumed to be unmusical unless they show evidence to the contrary' (Small 1998, 210). This assumption, he suggests, is disseminated both through media and everyday social interaction; families and teachers are often responsible both for outright demusicalisation and for perpetuating this more subtle assumption that to be musical is to reach a particular standard of skill, and that any musicking falling short of this does not represent real music (Small 1998, 210–12). To excise these values from the ideal relationships explored in one's musicking is a significant adjustment.

Unconditional positive regard, itself, is both radical and experiential. Rogers notes that unconditional positive regard:

...does not just happen. It is facilitated by the special conditions of the therapeutic relationship — the complete freedom to explore every portion of the perceptual

field, and the complete freedom from threat to the self which the client-centered therapist in particular provides. (Rogers 2012, 144)

My own thesis rests on the belief that the therapeutic frame is not the only context in which this experience can occur, and that the ukulele's third-wave social worlds and pathways are defined by nurturing it in the context of musicking, specifically. Sanford suggests that unconditional positive regard is certainly possible outside of client-centred therapy itself, and, indeed, notes that unconditional positive regard influences every interaction she has with another individual 'in some way', although the precise quality of the experience may change depending on her relationship with the person in question (Sanford 1984). Yet she also describes discovering unconditional positive regard in her more distant relationships as a process of searching and venturing, requiring action on her behalf. If unconditional positive regard for others' musicking is developed through actual participation and presence in the musicking space (however that participation manifests according to the desire lines an individual chooses to pursue), it is perhaps unsurprising that those outside the musicking space default to judging third-wave ukulele musicking by conventional metrics of skill, and are unable to intuitively adopt the way of being by which insiders relate to one another's musicking. Musicking, suggests Small, is always a ritual for storytelling and mythmaking; and 'you will believe in the myth only if you enjoy the ritual, and you will enjoy the ritual only if you believe in the myth' (Small 1998, 141).

Curiously, some participants involved in musicking with the ukulele chose to actively embrace this form of devaluation levelled at it by outsiders. A particularly memorable exchange during my fieldwork was with a man I met at the Strum-Along Jam A, who behaved guardedly towards me after I explained my status as a researcher, referring to me as an 'expert' and half-jokingly belittling his own playing. I noticed he scrutinised me more closely than I was used to during the first song, which contained an unfamiliar chord I struggled to fret; I was used to players seeming

absorbed in their own musicking. I met his eyes, laughing at my own mistakes. Afterwards, he lit up and warmed to me, declaring me 'one of us after all'. My status as an academic had positioned me firmly within the demusicalising structures Small describes; it was not until I showed my own weaknesses that he could trust that I was not present simply to evaluate the musicking taking place based on its participants' skill. 'Playing badly' allowed him to view me as part of the in-group, 'one of us'. For others, ukulele players' reputation for being 'unmusical' actually attracted them to the instrument:

I picked it up in the first place because it's not too difficult to play. You don't need to actually be musical to do it. (Anna, interview)

Actually, I started because I'd tried to learn the guitar and didn't get on with it. Whereas I'd heard the ukulele was an easy instrument to master, even for those with no real musical aptitude, and I found it easy enough to get to grips with despite all that. (Bella, interview)

These comments are bittersweet. Clearly, these interviewees retained some of the introjected skill-based values Small describes as contributing to the syllogism of demusicalisation, but had been able to disregard the implicit point which I suggested, in chapter 5, was tacitly appended to the syllogism ('therefore, you should not music'). Yet this also meant that the ukulele's reputation for being played by those who were 'not musical' allowed these participants — who viewed themselves, too, as 'not musical' — to pursue musicking with it. A few participants who *were* more technically skilled nonetheless preferred to music in spaces foregrounding unconditional positive regard. Pete described a drastic improvement in his skill as the result of attending a class emphasising technique. Despite this, he had chosen to leave, and to attend a series of more open ukulele jams instead:

It's interesting. I got into this and then it became quite sort of serious and heavy and stressful, and I needed to go somewhere else to sort of break the bubble a bit. (laughs) I don't want them to be upset that I don't feel, you know...but I got stressed out! You know, I got stressed out because I couldn't keep up. I knew I was getting better, I was learning things and I'd play them for people and they'd say 'oh, that's really excellent, that's really good,' and I know it is, but, really, I bloody hated the damn thing! (laughs) And I just wanted to enjoy it. (Pete, interview)

One form of 'bad music', by Frith's definition, is 'ridiculous music', which may involve either perceived musical incompetence or genre confusion; Frith's own example is an opera singer performing a rock song (Frith 2013, 28). Another means by which the ukulele's third-wave social worlds display an embrace of their own wider reputation for 'bad music' is at least some of the repertoire performed within them. The songbooks used in most of the worlds described in this thesis contain a mixture of older songs, chart pop, and rock. There is certainly an incongruity to the sound of Taylor Swift's 'Shake It Off' or the Red Hot Chili Peppers' 'Californication' being reinterpreted for mass ukulele performance; my survey responses suggested that the instrument harbours a reputation for fun and happiness, and using it to accompany a deadly serious rock song or a polished chart hit can be equally surprising. Stripping back bombastic and complex music, and drastically altering its timbre by replacing its sonic textures and percussive elements with, instead, a wash of soprano ukuleles strumming in unison, can be comical in itself. The work of 1990s 'speed metal ukulele band' Uke Til U Puke illustrate that this tendency can be traced to the earliest days of the third wave (see Anderson and Robertson 2003). This is accentuated by a custom in some ukulele social worlds of playing solos in songs on instruments even more closely associated with childhood than the ukulele, like kazoos or slide whistles. Even amongst professional players, this practice persists; numerous videos of the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain, perhaps the best-known British ukulele ensemble, exist,

playing works ranging from 'Ode to Joy' to 'Smells Like Teen Spirit', many featuring kazoo solos (see, for example, The Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

Dolan describes the 'simplistic forms, odd instruments...and amateur performances' of indie pop (and, indeed, twee pop of the kind Abebe describes) as engaging in kitsch, a form of aesthetic distancing which draws attention to its own mediation, and in doing so, displays awareness of its own flaws (Dolan 2010, 464–65). She refers to Adorno, who suggests kitsch unaware of its own status as kitsch is irredeemable, but that self-aware kitsch, which acknowledges its own flaws, conversely engages in a kind of self-redemption. Dolan proposes that kitsch music critically declares its own unpretentiousness, and in doing so frees itself to engage in sentimentality, cliché and silliness (Adorno 2002; Dolan 2010, 465). I would argue that these ukulele cover song practices, which earnestly emphasise the very elements of musicking mocked by detractors, function similarly to the process of 'lovingly embracing' kitsch Dolan describes. They openly and unashamedly acknowledge the very practices for which they are critiqued, and respond not only by reproducing but by amplifying them, a practice enabled, without shame or embarrassment, by the unconditional positive regard extending throughout, but not always beyond, their social worlds. As one survey respondent put it:

I love the accessibility of the uke, I love that it's really recognisable, but, honestly, I also love that it seems to rub people up the wrong way. Ever since I was a child, I smile when I hear one, and that hasn't changed. It produces this warming response in me. I found the negativity surprising, really. It's almost as if its accessibility was a bad thing. It's odd, isn't it? (Nathan, survey response)

For Nathan, the warmth of unconditional positive regard experienced through musicking with the ukulele was only amplified by knowing that the instrument 'seems to rub people up the wrong way'. If self-actualisation entails childlike openness to all experience, without fear or denial, this might explain why some participants

almost seemed to welcome this form of devaluation in particular. To acknowledge one's musicking is not universally viewed as 'real music', but to refuse to be demusicalised, and to continue musicking anyway — to continue 'to explore, affirm and celebrate one's link with the great pattern which connects the whole living world', as Small puts it (Small 1998, 212) — was to accept accessibility as a virtue rather than a fault, and to accept that everyone really is musical, without needing to conform to skill-centric values. In chapter 3, I noted that MacDonald et al distinguish between self-identity (composed of the archetypes and roles an individual might identify with), and self-esteem (the evaluation of self-identity in terms of its worth), and that Rogers suggests that shifting away from an external locus of evaluation towards an internal one can lead to greater positive self-regard (and therefore self-esteem). For some participants, knowledge of the instrument's wider devaluation seemed, itself, to facilitate a shift away from the external locus of evaluation:

I was classically trained on the piano (for like... almost 10 years?), and I have very complicated feelings about piano. I love music and making music, but with pianos I have a lot of other baggage going on, which can often make it difficult to connect really directly with the experience. There's a lot of pressure (which I put on myself) to be working to improve and to get things right with piano, so even if I start off playing something for fun it eventually starts to become work instead of fun. But when I started playing ukulele it was just easy and light and uncomplicated. I could stay in the experience of playing without getting pulled into working hard to improve. Even if I played well, it's a ukulele, so it would still sound kind of stupid, so the pressure to play well/correctly isn't there. I can just play and have fun and it's a great emotional release, and I can stop as soon or as late as I want. (Oliver, survey response)

I've never ever been satisfied with my guitar playing. Some of it is what other people expect of me. But I love the uke. I love that people's expectations, and I include myself in this, aren't that I'm a complete virtuoso. (Cara, interview)



Although Oliver's MII retained a sense that his musicking might sound 'stupid', and Cara's incorporated the idea that she was not a virtuoso, the conditions of worth these participants placed on those self-identities — their musical self-esteem — were profoundly altered. Clark showed a particular awareness of how the ukulele's devaluation shifted his own locus of evaluation internally. He also elaborated on the practice of playing surprising musical genres on the instrument:

Being a metal guy, you know, of course I've always played metal on it. It's one of those things where it's so dismissible by so many people that you can play what you want to play, whatever everyone else is playing. You get to play what you want to play because you're not supposed to be able to play anything on it anyway. (laughs) (Clark, interview)

For Clark, and, I suspect, for others, the devaluation and 'dismissibility' of the ukulele, particularly in terms of its required technical skill, facilitated additional freedom to pursue desire lines in his musicking. Knowing his instrument was, in a sense, unconditionally disregarded by those not travelling the same pathways as him allowed him to pursue those desire lines without needing his playing to be validated by outsiders. I wonder, too, whether the seeming acceptance participants like Clark showed towards the ukulele's reputation for 'bad playing' might have facilitated an adjustment of ideal musical self, and corresponding development of musical possible selves, in a direction that was closer to their present perceived self, enabling the actualising process. As Oliver and Cara both noticed, others' expectations of their own musicking could be easily introjected, leading to an ideal musical self which was either unrealistic or made it difficult to 'connect really directly with the experience' (or, as Rogers would put it, the perpetual flow of experiencings). The lowering or removal of these expectations allowed the development of an ideal musical self which was less focused on others' opinions, and could instead be derived from felt meanings.

## **Recycling devaluation, empowering powerlessness**

The thematic threads running through the devaluing of the ukulele are deeply embedded and intertwined. Kitsch, like tweek, is grounded in the embrace of nostalgia and childishness; in their playful use of kazoos and slide whistles, players also embrace the accusations of immaturity levelled at the ukulele, and accentuate the toy-like aspects of their instrument, deliberately distancing themselves from guitar culture. Spitz's conceptualisation of tweek seems to lack the self-awareness Dolan describes as important to kitsch, and, indeed, it is difficult to say whether players are consciously aware of their responses to these aspects of devaluation. Nathan's response is particularly interesting in this respect. On the one hand, he expresses surprise the instrument's accessibility could evoke antipathy; on the other, he 'loves' that it does, and this knowledge seems to intensify his experience of unconditional positive regard when he musics with it. Grove-White's description of the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain's formation expresses a similar duality:

It could have been any instrument; the ukulele just happened to be the instrument that was chosen – the outside instrument, the stupid instrument that no one liked.  
(Grove-White, quoted in Marsden 2014)

On the one hand, Grove-White implies, the project could have been achieved with any instrument; on the other, his ensemble seem highly aware of the ukulele's more critical representations during its third wave, amplifying them in their performances. My sense that the instrument's devaluation, especially in terms of advertising, barely crossed the conscious minds of some participants — that, as Alice suggested, it 'doesn't really make a difference' — also conflicts with the self-awareness shown in some of the kitsch stylistic practices of some ukulele social worlds.

This ambiguity may be partly explained by some forms of devaluation simply being more relevant to participants' real-world musicking practices than others. In a sense, although I have presented it in parallel with the themes of tweek and of playing

'badly', the ukulele's use in advertisements is an outlier in this chapter, in that it is almost entirely out of players' control. Twee may be viewed as a reaction to normative, masculine guitar culture and its virtuosity. Playing 'badly' is another, perhaps more deeply-rooted, expression of this, rejecting the skill-based norms many players had been subjected to through demusicalising processes, often long before first picking up a ukulele, but nods, in some of its practices, to the instrument's devaluation as a toy, another means of declaring it apart from 'real music'. Yet the ukulele's presence in advertising is also closely intertwined with both of these processes. Positioning the ukulele on the margins of guitar culture, and even on the margins of 'real music', renders it a more powerful signifier of participatory culture, which facilitates its use in growing consumer trust.

There is little acknowledging this can do to alter participants' practices; just as ukulele YouTubers are subject to larger strategic forces of platformisation, while the ukulele's late-capitalist leveraging in advertisements could be tactically commented upon in other social worlds, this would presumably not facilitate greater flexibility and musical actualising, as acknowledging kitsch and accessibility does. In addition, while it is difficult for ukulele YouTubers to ignore platformisation, since it directly affects and the musicking that occurs, and is seen, on their platform, participants in other social worlds are more able to disregard the ukulele's use in advertisements, since the survival of those worlds does not depend upon those advertisements. Instead, they can turn their attention towards the forms of devaluation they can actively recycle into sources of actualising. If, as Rogers puts it, actualising results in increased differentiation of the perceptual field (Rogers 2012, 143), leading to increased acceptance of the individual's experience without concern for the value judgments of others, there is no reason to consider all differentiated forms of devaluation within that field as equally relevant to one's musicking practice, and players seem to respond by amplifying what enhances their musicking experience, and discarding what does not.

This process of amplification is perhaps the most significant finding of this chapter. Far from damaging the health of the ukulele's social worlds and pathways, or limiting participants' pursuit of desire lines, the discourses used to dismiss the ukulele become recycled into a sense of freedom by participants, allowing them to explore desire lines which might previously have seemed unavailable to them, particularly for those with a history of demusicalisation. In embracing the lowered expectations of those outside their immediate social world, and the discourses of age and gender used to position their musicking outside of the values of guitar culture, participants were able to become, literally, more carefree. I have already mentioned that a few survey respondents used 'cuteness' interchangeably with 'twee' in their devaluation of the ukulele. Although cuteness was less commonly mentioned than twee, I refer to it here because Ngai's reading of cuteness as an aesthetic category is a particularly useful lens through which to view the process of recycling devaluation participants seemed to engage in. Ngai conceives of cuteness specifically as an aestheticisation of powerlessness; like tweeness, it is associated with the 'infantile and feminine' (Ngai 2005, 814), and connotes helplessness and vulnerability, stereotypes grounded in systematic oppression. However, Ngai notes that cuteness can also be subversive. By drawing attention to the stereotypes in which its aesthetics are grounded, it simultaneously affirms and subverts them, granting the cute object a paradoxical power (Ngai 2005, 823).

Ngai suggests that some of cuteness's power derives from its ability to evoke feelings of aggression, as well as feelings of care (Ngai 2005, 816). As such, her reading might suggest that participants derive their power in part from exercising control over the ukulele's detractors, by evoking feelings of aggression in them; indeed, Nathan's comment suggests this might be the case. But this does not quite seem to fit with other participants' relative indifference towards the views of those not travelling the same pathways as them, or with the relief some participants expressed at not needing to care what others thought of their musicking; the focus in every interview, including

when I mentioned the instrument's wider devaluation, was inexorably drawn back to the felt meanings of musicking, and to relationships with others in the social world. Here, there was certainly empowerment derived from aestheticising powerlessness, not only the powerlessness of cuteness and twee, but the powerlessness of separation from conventional models of musicality, and the metrics typically used to evaluate it. But, perhaps because unconditional positive regard could not be effectively communicated to those outside the social world and its interconnecting pathways, that power was enacted internally, within the musicking frame, and was used to liberate participants from demusicalising expectations. This, in turn, seemed to further strengthen unconditional positive regard between participants, leading them towards musically actualising.



## **10. 'Every single person in the room': whiteness and the limits of inclusion**

Early in my research, I noticed that some players tended to speak of inclusiveness almost as an inherent property of the ukulele, echoing Higashi's description of the instrument as a 'technology of inclusion' (Higashi 2011). In chapter 5, I discussed participants' descriptions of the ukulele as uniquely easy, portable and cheap, and suggested that perception of the instrument as particularly flexible is more important than whether that flexibility is empirically measurable. The social worlds I have discussed seem constructed around these experiences of the ukulele as uniquely accessible; their normative practices, infrastructure and resources are conducive to players' ability to readjust their ideal musical self towards a more realistic and inclusive one, and to begin the process of moving towards actualising, even — perhaps especially — if they had been unable to do so on prior musicking pathways. Perhaps understandably, then, some participants discussed the instrument's perceived inclusiveness as a direct, almost self-evident result of these properties. 'The basics are easy to learn,' stated one anonymous demusicalised participant, 'therefore they (ukuleles) are inclusive'. This chapter explores one possible limitation of that inclusion, along the lines of race.

The experience of inclusiveness many participants described was one I experienced myself throughout my fieldwork. Immersed in unconditional positive regard, I, too, had felt included. But the more time I spent in the ukulele's social worlds, and travelling its pathways, the more I began to notice a singular detail which felt clearly inconsistent with this inclusiveness. The social worlds in which I had conducted fieldwork were almost startlingly ethnically homogeneous; the vast majority of their participants, with only a few exceptions, were white, as were all but one of my interviewees. When first confronted with this realisation, looking back over my research, my dominant emotion was surprise; remembering Ellis's suggestion that

‘fieldwork is almost always an emotional experience’ (Ellis 2003, 109), this was what initially guided me towards the development of this chapter. My surprise emerged not only from the incongruence of this racial homogeneity with the inclusiveness and diversity emphasised by participants, but also from what I believed to be a strong association between the instrument and Hawaii, a majority non-white nation/state. The ukulele’s Hawaiian ‘adoption’ is documented at length in the existing scholarship (see Higashi 2011; Kruse 2013; Tranquada and King 2012; Thibeault and Evoy 2011), and I believed its connection with the island to be clearly present in the minds of my own informants; ‘Hawaii’ had been the sixth most popular word, and the most popular noun, associated with the ukulele by my survey respondents (see Table 3).

*Table 3: the ten most popular words extracted from survey responses and transcribed interviews, using MaxQDA. Eight additional respondents selected ‘Hawaiian’ as an associated word (not shown).*

Rank	Word	Frequency	%
1	fun	190	11.79
2	small	80	4.97
3	twee	61	3.79
4	easy	46	2.86
5	happy	41	2.55
6	Hawaii	40	2.48
= 7	accessible	29	1.80
= 7	portable	29	1.80
8	music	27	1.68
10	Cute	25	1.55



Not long after my own realisation, Giebelhausen and Kruse published their multiple case study of four community ukulele groups, noting that white players were overrepresented within the member base of all their case studies regardless of wider population demographics in the area each group was situated within, and suggesting that ‘the apparent predominance of white participation in ukulele groups could be a compelling area of future scholarly interest’ (Giebelhausen and Kruse 2018, 363). This chapter endeavours to build on their observation, but it, too, is limited. The starting point for sourcing literature and locating sites for fieldwork for every chapter other than this one was always *what was said* to me by others. This chapter, comparatively, centres a topic largely unspoken, and perhaps even unnoticed, by participants themselves. Its starting point, therefore, was in *what was not said*, almost in an inversion of the rest of the study.

More ethnographic data would ideally have been collected at this stage, directly exploring why more people of colour were not present in the ukulele’s social worlds. But to do the topic justice would, I think, require substantially more data collection, certainly extensive interviewing and perhaps fieldwork in other musicking spaces centring participants of colour. As a white researcher, this would also need to be conducted with delicacy and understanding, and at the late stage in my research at which this chapter was developed I feared I would not do it justice. To fail would run the risk of simply reinscribing the colonial practices of much early ethnography and comparative musicology, in which knowledge is produced through the study of people of colour from non-Western cultures by a purportedly ‘neutral’ white, Western scholar (see Nettl and Bohlman 1991; Berger and Stone 2019, 20; Cole 2001, x), in what Young, after hooks, describes as a ‘white ethnographic gaze’ (Young 2008; hooks 1997). This work should be done, but it might also be better served by a methodology foregrounding knowledge co-production to a greater extent than I had focused upon in my own project, to avoid retreading these colonial pathways. It might also be better conducted by a scholar who is a person of colour. Instead, this chapter has been

informed particularly by the approaches of Dyer (1997) and DiAngelo (2019), for whom the dynamics of whiteness itself become the object of study, so that the ethnographic gaze is, instead, directed inwards.

As such, this chapter adopts as its primary concern how the values of the underlying system of whiteness itself might be expressed through some of the practices of the ukulele's third-wave social worlds. It examines, first, a case study derived from survey data which concerns the real-world manifestation of wider dynamics of racial inequality, through a breakdown in unconditional positive regard at a school ukulele club, exploring how a student navigated a pathway to musically actualising in this context. In its second section, it reviews the ukulele's historical relationship to the colonisation of Hawaii, and describes a first-hand, experiential case of a ukulele event at which aspects of colonial history seemed to be reinscribed. Following this, its third section focuses upon another survey response concerning a respondent's unsuccessful attempt to raise this colonial history with other players, uses this to explore the means by which whiteness might render itself unnameable in the ukulele's social worlds, and considers post-Rogerian theoretical analyses on the challenges of developing unconditional positive regard in the presence of power differentials. To conclude, the chapter briefly re-examines two concepts explored elsewhere in this thesis in terms of their relationship to whiteness: firstly the instrument's gendering as feminine, and secondly the use of participatory/holicipatory practices such as the wall of strumming. It characterises the system of whiteness by its ability to conceal itself from acknowledgement, maintaining the equilibrium of racial power structures, and acknowledges the inclusiveness of third-wave English ukulele social worlds and pathways may be limited by underlying values of whiteness.

My intention here is not to judge the individual players or groups involved in my research, nor to devalue the real and profound lived experiences of inclusion reported by numerous participants on the ukulele's third-wave pathways. It is,

however, to implicitly position those pathways within a broader context. Nothing described in this chapter is particular to the ukulele; its social worlds and pathways are not uniquely exclusive or problematic within their contemporary English context, and much, too, has been written on the subject of whiteness in community music and music education more broadly (see, for example, Hess 2017, 2018; Bowman 2005; Bradley, Golner, and Hanson 2007; Bradley 2007). Its normative practices, however, are nonetheless expressive of deeply-rooted cultural and historical systems which maintain whiteness as a dominant paradigm in Anglo-American cultures, and this chapter endeavours to explore some of the qualities of that expression. The ukulele is experienced by many as uniquely inclusive, and I have argued throughout this thesis that its flexibility renders it unusually capable of enabling musical actualising. But it is, I think, important to note that 'uniquely' and 'unusually' do not equate to 'universally'. At times, during this project, it became tempting to view the ukulele's worlds and pathways in utopian terms, but it is, I think, my responsibility as a researcher to consider how this perspective not only ignores who might not get to experience that sense of utopian inclusion, but also how remaining ignorant myself, as a white scholar, might reproduce any systemic patterns of inequity underlying them. Stokes notes that ethnic identity is affectively ambivalent and ambiguous, 'as much about connection and contiguity as it is about difference and boundaries' (Stokes 2017, 23-24), and this ambivalence felt particularly present in the discourses of inclusion and exclusion I explore here.

Inevitably, the presentation of this chapter is challenging. When I began attempting to raise the topic of whiteness with some of my interviewees, I was often met with a lack of recognition ('well, it's not something I'd really thought about' was a particularly common response). I recognise my own failures as a white ethnographer in that I, too, did not know how to proceed with these conversations when met with an impasse. I have, myself, endeavoured to nurture an attitude of unconditional positive regard towards participants throughout the research process, which for much

of this project was relatively easy due to its subject matter; in general, I was engaging with participants to communicate with them about topics on which they were enthusiastic and keen to speak. When I did raise the subject of whiteness, my sense was that some interviewees felt that the attitude of unconditional positive regard I had led them to expect within the frame of the interview was momentarily breached, and this did not facilitate deeper exploration. This chapter aims not to repeat this fracturing process, and refrains from attempting, as Arnold puts it, to ‘tear apart in analysis’ participants’ experiences of inclusion (Arnold 2014, 258). It does, however, aim to begin situating the social worlds and pathways described in this thesis within a broader sociocultural context, and to uncover some of the ways in which the deeply-rooted values of that context are expressed in practice.

#### **Case study. Zara and Jo: musicking in the absence of unconditional positive regard**

Although substantive discussion of racial dynamics was conspicuous by its near-absence from my interview data, some responses to the anonymous survey I had set up early in the course of the project did indicate a wider awareness of whiteness and its power structures on the ukulele’s pathways. For the most part, these took the form of brief references; one respondent expressed a sense of boredom at ‘twee white indie musicians’ playing the instrument, and another associated the instrument with ‘mostly conventionally attractive white people (who) get the attention while playing’. However, two responses examined whiteness in more depth, through lengthier autoethnographic anecdotes. The first of these was submitted by a respondent who seemed to be a teacher or other member of school staff; she identified herself as a white woman, and, for convenience, I will refer to her as Jo. Jo claimed to have removed identifying information from her anecdote, and to have pseudonymised the individuals involved, but, particularly because her story involves third parties with safeguarding needs, I have given her student an alternative pseudonym and removed

any other possibly identifying information. Her response is otherwise reproduced in full below:

I run a ukulele club at my school (...) The ukulele has been an immensely productive instrument for beginner students who don't have a lot of money but have a lot of enthusiasm. It has also been the subject of quite a lot of contention: when I began to facilitate the ukulele club, there were about 9 attendees, mostly 9-11 year olds, and majority white. Over the course of 6 months, the class and racial composition of the group changed a lot. This was mostly owing to a girl joining who was seen as not having enough experience or entitlement to the instrument by some of the club members. The latter all had their own ukuleles at home, but Zara did not. She was also the first member of the group that was South Asian (...) and Muslim. There was a lot of personal animosity directed at her, that generally related to her a) not having the same amount of knowledge as others in the group and therefore seen as holding people back, and b) her apparent social misdemeanours in the school, which comprised her 'indebtedness' to others after borrowing things, and her general lack of social calibre.

Eventually the animosity got so great that there was a mass exodus of the white, predominantly middle-class members of the club. Some weeks ukulele club literally only comprised me and Zara, and occasionally two or three other kids (though no white kids, strangely!). At the beginning of this school year, Zara asked if her sister could join the club, despite having no ukulele and no experience. I said it was fine, and then the following week Zara also brought her (...) brothers, who also have no experience. It soon became apparent that, using the ukulele Zara had borrowed from school, she had taught all of her siblings at least 4 or 5 chords, and they were already very adept at playing them. For the past six weeks I have continued to hold ukulele club which has now become a kind of family club (though not exclusively), and they have all been learning how to play 'Let It Go'. They are all ultra enthusiastic about the instrument, and I think the size of it is particularly useful (...) None of them have their own instrument but they borrow one from school and appear to literally pass it around, sharing knowledge

amongst each other at home. So yeah, without the ukulele these kids would possibly never have started learning an instrument formally and that's so awesome, notwithstanding the possibly racial turf war started by former members of the club. (Jo, survey response)

Jo describes a fracturing of unconditional positive regard in the musicking space along racially-inflected lines. Despite this, her anecdote is striking in its dialectical approach to Zara's story, and to the complexity of her musicking journey. Despite the alienation she was subject to, several aspects of Zara's experience nevertheless echo those of participants who did experience positive regard in the ukulele's social worlds, and who described its pathways as uniquely and unequivocally inclusive. Jo attributes the instrument's accessibility to the 'family club' in part to its small size, recalling the tendency I had seen in other social worlds to view the ukulele's portability as an aspect of what was perceived to be its unique flexibility. Some of the practices of the ukulele club, and of Zara herself, also resemble those of the social worlds I had visited earlier in my research. Zara's ability to borrow a ukulele from the school, and use it however she chose, reminded me of the jam nights I had visited at which instruments were freely loaned out to anyone who wanted to try one. The informal mentorship that Jenkins describes as a cornerstone of participatory culture also seems to be present in the initiative Zara took to teach her siblings the instrument. Without prompting, or even, apparently, active encouragement, she had pursued a desire line entirely of her own making, in order to mentor her own family members.

Earlier in this thesis, I argued that improvisatory ritual practices in the ukulele's social worlds foster the development of desire lines, and, in turn, unconditional positive regard between participants. Here, however, despite the presence of similar ritual practices, and Zara's pursuit of desire lines in her own musicking, positive regard was absent. Although Zara had put the informal mentorship of participatory culture into practice, she was able to do so only with her own trusted family members, and not within the ukulele group itself. The pillars of participatory culture which were

*not* available to her were the strong support for creating and belief that all contributions matter, which, in chapter 7, I connected to Rogers' description of 'accepting the whole potentiality of the other' (Rogers 1995b, 55). Although Zara was perhaps able to experience unconditional positive regard from Jo and her siblings, the normative practices of the ukulele club itself were not sufficient to support it in a musicking space dominated by students who already harboured animosity towards her.

None of what Jo describes is particularly surprising in the context of peer racism in education. Although the literature suggests that name-calling is the most common form of race-related peer victimisation amongst children, exclusion from social groups is also commonplace (see Gillborn 1995; Kelly and Cohn 1988; Smith and Shu 2000; Veland et al. 2009), and two qualitative, interview-based studies by Shah describe a sense of alienation amongst British Muslim students in particular; of wanting to belong, but feeling rejected (Shah 2009, 531, 2019). In music education, clear racial inequities are also present. Musical participation at school and university level is significantly stratified by ethnicity, with white students overrepresented (Derbyshire 2015, 3). Black, Asian, and minority ethnic students, meanwhile, are underrepresented at university level, both in music and in other creative arts ("Equality in Higher Education: Statistical Report 2014" 2014, 122; Mantle 2017; Ratcliffe 2016). Zara's story is perfectly consistent with these studies.

Jo's account was particularly striking in its stark divergence from the stories told by other participants in the ukulele's social worlds. Her description of Zara's peers perceiving her as 'not having enough experience or entitlement to the instrument' is, I think, particularly arresting in the context of the rest of my research. Earlier in this thesis, I suggested that skill and experience are often set aside entirely as modes of valuation of musicking on the ukulele's pathways. Even on YouTube, where those involved in musicking were constantly negotiating participation alongside the demands made by platformisation on numbers and status, instances like the 'Freckles

and Constellations' video still seemed, almost unconditionally, to encourage participation for participation's sake. The description of Zara's 'lack of social calibre', too, immediately reminded me of Ginny, who had described the ukulele night she regularly attended as a place where she could experience belonging, alongside other 'outcasts and misfits'; the musicking social world she frequented was a place she could go to escape rejection, and to experience unconditional positive regard however she chose to participate, her presence valued in a way that was not always the case elsewhere in her life. For Zara, however, there was no such security; her alienation from her peers was consistent both outside and inside the ukulele group. She could not escape it, and had opted instead to bring those she knew she could trust to tread the pathway with her.

That Zara persisted in forging a desire line to mentor her siblings in musicking may have been a function of her family's or teacher's support, or her own personal resilience and determination. She could, however, have easily experienced the events Jo describes as demusicalising. The other group members' perception of her as 'lacking entitlement' bears overtones of the second point of Small's syllogism, which positions proficiency as an aspect of entitlement to musicality. Small notes that, as well as enabling the exploration of ideal relationships, musicking also functions to affirm those relationships, and in doing so solidifies pre-existing values:

...it allows those taking part to say, to themselves, to one another and to anyone else who may be paying attention: these are our values, these are our concepts of ideal relationships, and, consequently, this is who we are. (Small 2011, 183)

While other participants had described the affordances of the ukulele and the practices of its social worlds as freeing them from external expectation, then, the practices of the school ukulele club reinforced, rather than counteracting, the inability or unwillingness of Zara's classmates to accept her as she was. Her story is explored here in part simply to note that the ukulele and its attendant social worlds and



pathways are not inherently or automatically inclusive and resistant to demusicalising processes, but remain subject to the wider systemic context of racial inequity within which its participants coexist; DiAngelo notes that ‘who we are’, and therefore what we express, results from internalising powerful forces of socialisation which, once in place, simply seem natural unless challenged (DiAngelo 2019, 21). It is also to note that unconditional positive regard is not necessarily an inevitable product of nurturing desire lines through improvisatory musicking practices. Indeed, Wilkins cites ‘unconditional negative regard’ – unconditional positive regard’s polar opposite, marked by one person displaying contempt towards aspects of another – as the root of racism and other group-based prejudices (Wilkins 2000, 26). In a musicking environment in which the other’s experience is not fully accepted, unconditional positive regard cannot flourish, regardless of the affordances in place to encourage it.

Wilkins also notes that unconditional negative regard need not always take the form of contempt held within conscious awareness. It can also involve neglect, so that one or more aspects of another person ‘remain unseen and unresponded to even when warmth and acceptance are extended to other parts’ (Wilkins 2000, 26). The person displaying this form of unconditional negative regard, he suggests, may be unconscious of what remains unseen, ‘and may even experience themselves as totally warm, accepting and caring towards the other’ (Wilkins 2000, 26). The next section of this chapter explores what I perceived to be a possible manifestation of this phenomenon at a pseudonymous ukulele festival. It considers the ecstatic response of an audience, apparently unaware of Hawaiian histories of colonisation, to a performance of hula, and interprets it as a reenactment of similar transnational performances during the age of the island’s annexation. Reception of the performance, informed by colonialist images of the hula as spectacular, sexualised, and Other, seemed to circularly reinscribe the power relationships producing these discourses. Despite the audience’s apparent warmth and enthusiasm towards the performers,

their acceptance, filtered through a lens of exoticism, might have placed unconditional positive regard in the space at risk.

### **Case study. Consuming the other, confirming the Other: reinscribing colonial history**

The UK Uke Fest is one of the larger events I attend during my fieldwork, running over a long weekend and with a daily capacity of about a thousand. The main hub for the festival, where I spend most of my weekend, is the town hall, a large building which perpetually hums with activity. The main room, a huge theatre in which acts are scheduled throughout the weekend, is constantly so full that I struggle to find a seat when I arrive. It's a sweltering summer day, and by now I've been conducting fieldwork for around eighteen months. I've started to develop a sense of real curiosity, and perhaps a slight unease, at how many of the pathways I've found myself on have been so heavily populated by others who move through the world, in one sense at least, like me. In this space, with a thousand others, I notice again that the sea of faces filling the venue is overwhelmingly white. I blend in, invisibly. Although the festival takes place in an affluent county which is itself largely white, players have travelled from all over the country to attend; it's another transient meeting point, a social world of social worlds. I bump into numerous players I've met in London during the weekend.

The main stage is decorated with a Swinging Sixties theme; giant, hand-painted cut-outs of peace signs are attached to the proscenium arch, and bold protest posters are pasted across the front of the stage. Nearly all the players I see onstage are clad in brightly-coloured aloha (or Hawaiian) shirts, in a simultaneous nod to the ukulele's associations with the island, and to the festival's retro mood; popularised in the 1960s, when Hawaii's clothing manufacturers campaigned for employers to introduce 'Aloha Fridays', employees were encouraged to wear aloha shirts as casual attire to the workplace at the end of each week (Arthur 2006, 27; Keane and Quinn 2010). I

notice that Hawaii feels, generally, a little more thematically present at this event than at most others I've visited; most of the social worlds I've spent time in play mainly Anglo-American popular music, with little in the way of Hawaiian-coded songs, and although I've encountered a few players in aloha shirts elsewhere, they're comparatively ubiquitous here. The music here is also a little more diverse than I'm used to, and several performers include a single Hawaiian song (most often 'Aloha Oe', which I will hear eight times throughout the weekend) in their sets.

Although my survey results suggested the ukulele was popularly associated with Hawaii, in practice, this association seemed a little inconsistent, perhaps even superficial. In interviews, Hawaii was mentioned only twice in passing, and neither participant was interested in exploring the island's association with the instrument in more depth. Aside from including Hawaii in the lists of words associated with the ukulele, 21 survey respondents also mentioned Hawaii in one of their prose responses, but again these mentions were usually brief. In both interviews and survey responses, references to Hawaii fell into one of two categories. The first, and most common, associated Hawaii with a sense of 'happiness', which was often left largely conceptually undefined, and was usually implied to be an inherent sonic property of the instrument, rather than due to the respondent's personal relationship to the island, for example:

It is an instrument that has a beautiful and happy sound. Sometimes I think it may be due to the reentrant tuning of the ukulele or simply because the instrument is associated with Hawaii. (Anonymous, survey response)

The second category was less common, but used Hawaii to criticise the widespread use of the ukulele, implying its unsuitability for playing anything other than Hawaiian musical styles, and underscoring, again, a relatively undefined sense of difference and otherness in Hawaiian music:

The ukulele is a small guitar with so much less range than a regular guitar that it only really sounds good for niche stuff like Hawaiian resort music. Remove the ukulele from my Hawaiian resort music and I won't mind, put a ukulele in any of my other music and I'm confused. (Anonymous, survey response)

In no case did a respondent delve more deeply into the reasons *why* Hawaii might be associated with happiness, or why Hawaiian musical forms might be viewed as so different from more familiar ones. Only one respondent, James, whose story will be explored in the next section of this chapter, referenced an understanding of the island's history, or the ukulele's role in that history; in all responses besides his, Hawaii was presented as apolitical, ahistorical, a symbol of happiness and perhaps difference, but with little additional depth or context.

In fact, the ukulele's historical relationship to Hawaii is far more complex, and more politically weighty, than these responses suggested an awareness of. In chapter 2, I discussed the ukulele's creation by Portuguese settlers in Hawaii, its adoption by the king, and its use as accompaniment to nationalistic hula kui songs. In 1893, when the Hawaiian monarchy was threatened and ultimately deposed by American sugar planters, hula kui songs would be written in protest (Tranquada and King 2012, 63). When the island was finally annexed by the USA in 1897, protest songs were written in opposition, a symbol of Hawaiian national identity under threat in the last years of the 19th century (Tranquada and King 2012, 65; Imada 2011, 14). Following the deposition of the monarchy, however, representations of Hawaii as an exotic island paradise were used to encourage tourism to the area, and to build support for territorialisation (Costa 1998). One aspect of this was modern songs depicting the island, often including the ukulele. These were written both by Hawaiian musicians and by Tin Pan Alley composers, and became tremendously popular in the contiguous United States (Garrett 2008, pp 186-187). These aspects of the instrument's history — its dual roles in resisting colonisation, and in nurturing it — seemed to be outside of

most participants' awareness, as they had been outside my own before commencing my research.

As evening draws in at the festival, the headline act, Kimo (a pseudonym) is announced, and enters to cheering from the audience. He's the first indigenous Hawaiian player I've seen perform at a British event. I notice he's wearing a white linen button-down, making him one of the only a few men in the room not clad in an aloha shirt. He plays songs in the modern hula style popularised transnationally after annexation, all of them in English, and performs with a virtuosity I haven't previously witnessed at a ukulele festival, elaborately fingerpicking melodies and counter melodies. Halfway through his set, a young hula dancer, Kalei (a pseudonym) takes the stage, and begins dancing, spotlit, while he plays. As she enters, the crowd immediately explodes into loud cheering, whooping and whistling. Some of the groups in the crowd begin mimicking her arm movements. In the front row, a group of white men in synthetic lei garlands, perhaps in their 50s or 60s, get out of their seats. I recognise them from one of the cover bands billed on the main stage earlier in the day. They form a line in front of the stage, and start to copy Kalei, raising their drinks aloft and wiggling their hips. One leans across and whispers in another's ear, and the two burst out laughing. Kimo continues to play. Later, waiting at the bar, I will overhear two middle-aged men beside me commenting on the skill of the performers. One of them is especially complimentary. It's clear he enjoyed the performance, I surmise, before he says, 'I wouldn't mind a bit of that, eh!'. 'We're too old for her, mate,' jokes his friend, and he throws his head back and laughs.

It's not that the crowd is unappreciative of Kimo and Kalei's talent; whooping and cheering, they might be the most enthusiastic audience I've encountered during my research. It's not that they're dismissive of the performers' skill; when Kimo teaches a technical ukulele workshop the next day, tickets sell out within half an hour of its announcement on the festival website. The crowd is genuinely eager to learn from him; they value his presence. But I find myself thinking back, obsessively, to

what I know about hula kui and its political significance, the ukulele's role in reviving Hawaiian nationalism, and, later, in selling the island to the mainland. I remember that, without Tranquada and King's book, acquired for my doctoral research, I might not have known these details myself; I have simply never heard them spoken of in the ukulele's social worlds. In my hotel room that night, I will learn that 'Aloha Oe' was composed by Hawaii's last Queen, Lili'uokalani, and underwent a resignification following her deposition which saw it adopted by indigenous Hawaiians, as a symbol of the land and culture lost to American imperialism (Imada, 2013). I don't believe the men dancing with their drinks held high have any idea of this context. Despite the protest banners adorning the stage, the instrument's cultural history is absent from the scene.

I find myself all too easily reading the performance as a re-enactment, however unwitting, of responses to the ukulele and to hula in the early 1900s, after the monarchy's deposition. The ukulele's first wave of popularity in the USA began with its introduction to the Hawaiian Pavilion at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915 (Tranquada and King 2012, 199), where it was used to accompany the hula in a daily show. Greenhalgh suggests the purpose of such expositions was to serve as 'imperial propaganda', moving people from colonised cultures into the spotlight 'for everyone to gaze at' (Greenhalgh 1991, 82), while Poignant compares the structure of the exposition itself to colonialist processes, acting as a 'zone of displacement' for its performers, and a 'place of spectacle' for onlookers, which affirmed Western superiority (Poignant 2004, 7). In practice, Kamahale argues, this took place through a flattening-out of cultural meaning. While traditional hula was revered for its complex spiritual storytelling, and hula kui for its political and emotional weight, in repackaging it for white American audiences its context was lost, transforming it 'from sanctity to commercial product' (Kamahale 1992, 42). Imada reads transnational hula performance in spectacular events like expositions, particularly while annexation was still contested, as a tactic to underscore racial and

gendered difference to a white audience, and affirm the 'civilisational superiority of Euro-America' (Imada 2011, 161).

This process of affirming difference reflects discourses of exoticism, which Sheppard defines as a 'form of representation' in which (usually non-Western) cultures are constructed as essentially 'different and distant' from the culture of the intended audience (Sheppard 2014, 871). For Taylor, power is at the heart of exoticism; colonialism, imperialism, and globalisation determine 'who has the power of representation of Others' (T. D. Taylor 2007, 18). Said's concept of Orientalism refers to a form of exoticism which is clearly political; it positions non-Western cultures — the 'Orient' — as essentially subordinate to the West, depicting them as a prime target for imperialism. Costa proposes that, in the years preceding annexation, Hawaii was specifically depicted to Americans as an untamed, carefree paradise; she refers to this process as 'paradisal discourse', and describes it as a subset of Orientalism, suggesting it fosters an 'acquisitive' mindset in which outsiders are invited to consume Hawaiian culture (Costa 1998, 307). Music, Borgerson and Schroeder claim, was crucial to this process of 'packaging paradise' (Schroeder and Borgerson 2008, 11). Distributing Hawaiian popular music through record releases and radio airplay, they suggest, far from a neutral, apolitical pleasure, was an essential component of selling the island as a 'conceptual resource', neutralising its political history and positioning it as a 'primitive paradise' (Schroeder and Borgerson 2008, 11), ripe for discovery.

As the audience cheer and dance, I can't help but wonder whether they're — we're — seeing the performers through a lens of exoticism, passed down most directly through these colonial images of Hawaii, but primed by representations of difference of all kinds which stretches back far beyond them. Spotlit in the middle of the vast stage bedecked with peace symbols, the performers are seen in their own 'zone of displacement', abstracted from cultural context. The crowd's cheering expresses their appreciation, but feels distant from the reverent reception Kamahale describes in response to early hula. The good-humoured mimicry of the men at the front of the

stage starts to feel like an attempt to embody the exotic spectacle, and experience it for themselves. The objectification I had overheard in the bar is itself not without exoticist precedence. Said notes a 'remarkably persistent' link between sexuality and the relationship between the West and Middle East, which he connects to a narrative of 'conquest of maidenly coyness' which affirms the dominance of the coloniser and depicts the Orient as 'penetrable' by outsiders. Imada suggests, similarly, that much of the power of transnational hula performance was derived from sexualising its performers. 'Hula,' she suggests, 'became a proxy...for White spectators to experience sexualised contact, however imaginary, with new Native others' (Imada 2011, 168), constructing the figure of the Hawaiian woman as essentially Other.

If these discourses are present, I don't believe they're being reinscribed calculatedly or deliberately; in fact, I believe they're the result of these colonial images being the only perspective on Hawaii most of the audience have ever engaged with. O'Brien attributes the stereotyping and clichés often associated with Hawaii and the other Pacific Islands in popular culture to 'fragmentary knowledge of the islands, their people, and the history of Western colonisation' (O'Brien 2006, 3), and it is worth underscoring that the British perspective on America's colonial relationship with Hawaii brings with it an additional, geographical distance which might only intensify the 'difference and distance' of exoticism. While England is steeped in its own colonial legacy, including colonising some Pacific islands, it was not the intended audience — or consumer — of paradisaical discourse, which, as Borgerson and Schroeder note, was intended to encourage tourism so that Americans could experience (and consume) the island for themselves. Relatively few people of Pacific Islands descent live in Britain, meaning the voices of indigenous Hawaiians are also comparatively rarely heard ("BBC Born Abroad: Other Oceania" 2001). English players, then, are not only distanced from Hawaii through exoticised images of the island, but through an additional level of abstraction resulting from receiving those images second-hand, from cultural products created for American audiences. This might go some way to



explaining the rather superficial terms, rarely elaborated upon, in which Hawaii tended to be discussed by participants. The construction of the island as a paradisaical site of happiness and difference was based on exposure to images originally intended for American audiences, their details and depth lost in cultural translation.

Yano suggests the ukulele's rapid adoption in Japan was enabled by its 'in-betweenness', which she describes as being produced by its perceived informality, portability, approachability, and potential for both simplicity and virtuosity (Yano 2015, 320). These ideas should, by now, seem familiar. Throughout this thesis, I have proposed that the ukulele's third-wave normative practices are characterised by the ability to freely traverse new pathways in musicking, flexibly experimenting with various methods of participation, which, regardless of skill or seriousness, allow players the relational experience of unconditional positive regard while musicking with others. The specific qualities Yano lists, too, have also appeared throughout this thesis: participants often mention the instrument's portability as an aspect of its low barrier to entry; its perceived informality is subject to derision by outsiders, but is viewed as liberating by enthusiasts; its normative practices are constructed to enable simplicity and virtuosity to coexist even within the same session. Yano does not explore, as I have endeavoured to in this thesis, how the ukulele's flexibility actually manifests in practice, but she does suggest it renders it an ideal signifier of the paradisaical Hawaii of the imagination: 'if paradise needed a musical instrument, then the ukulele fitted the bill' (Yano 2015, 322). Like Said's penetrable and consumable Orient, the ukulele, Yano suggests, made paradise seem accessible, exemplifying happiness, difference, freedom and choice. In England, at least, these fragments of paradisaical discourse seem to be all that remain of the island itself, abstracted from context.

However inadvertent, I view the reception of the performance described in this case study as running the risk of, at least potentially, negating unconditional positive regard in the musicking space. The performers are the intended recipients of positive

regard, yes; the audience's conscious intention may well be to 'confirm the other'. But it feels a little as if Buber's and Rogers's 'other' is consumed, digested, and reflected back to the performers no longer as the other in the sense of a complex subject that is not oneself, but as the Other of exoticism; spectacular and sensual, different and distant, but ultimately emptied of agency and meaning. If this is so, the audience's response resembles the unconscious neglect Wilkins describes as one form of unconditional negative regard. Despite responding warmly to Kimo and Kalei, the cultural and historical aspects of the performance remained 'unseen and unresponded to' (Wilkins 2000, 26). This, then, presents a challenge to unconditional positive regard. Bozarth contends that nondirectivity, in which the client or participant is viewed as being the director of their own experience, with the therapist's role being simply 'to create an atmosphere of freedom in which he can move in his thinking and feeling and being, in any direction he desires' (Rogers 1995b, 108–9), is a foundational aspect of Rogers' work which enables the development of unconditional positive regard, and which, I think, reflects my own conceptualisation of desire lines. Exoticism, conversely, is inherently directive; it is never an acceptance of the other as they actually are, but a remaking in the eye of the beholder.

Lietaer views unconditional positive regard as a form of openness towards the other, and congruence as a form of openness towards the self, asserting that the latter is a necessary condition for the former. Acceptance of oneself 'without fear or defence', he suggests, permits acceptance of others. In its absence, 'the chances are great that I dare not see certain parts of the client's experience, and that I will minimise or reject some of them' (Lietaer 1984, 44). The next section of this chapter, referring to a story submitted by another survey respondent, will consider the connection between the unknowingness I encountered in my own fieldwork, and the concept of 'daring not to see', perhaps in itself an integral aspect of whiteness.

### **Case study. James: exnomination and fragility**

The second survey response examining the ukulele in the context of race, which I received shortly after my aforementioned fieldwork experience, was submitted by a respondent I will refer to as James, who identified himself as a white man. In the section of the survey for words associated with the ukulele, James had entered 'misunderstood', 'complicated', and 'whiteness'; his response to the main survey question ('how do you feel about the ukulele?') was characterised by a similar ambivalence. His story is a little tongue-in-cheek in tone, but is emotionally rich, moving from recounting his initial appreciation for the instrument's affordances, to a deep unease at the tendencies he had more recently perceived to have emerged around it. His response is reproduced below, with potentially identifying information redacted:

For the better part of a decade, I played baritone uke as my main instrument in my band. For touring, I loved its portability and the way it had its own sonic territory in the mix, never competing with the electric guitar or other instruments. I loved that I was always the first one packed up after a gig. When it came to songwriting, I found the ukulele often suggested more possibilities than the guitar in terms of chord changes and especially chord phrasings (something I still haven't figured out the reason for — the guitar should be more flexible with two more strings, right?). I traveled to Israel to work with Ukuleles For Peace, and I loved seeing the much-lauded accessibility of the ukulele in action, helping Jewish and Arab kids play songs in Arabic and Hebrew together in a ukulele orchestra — I especially loved the feeling of empowerment the kids clearly had when they would master a new chord or a new song.

Around the year 2011 or so, I noticed that nearly every interview I did mentioned the ukulele, and I got a lot of questions about how 'fun', 'innocent', and especially 'quirky' it was. And suddenly it seemed that the ukulele was everywhere, and the strumming of Eddie Vedder and Zoey Deschanel and Israel Kamakawiwo'ole were inescapable and increasingly insufferable. That year, I was invited to

perform at a ukulele festival, and the organisers asked if I would also be able to give a talk about any aspect of the ukulele I wanted. I said yes, and prepared a multi-media presentation and lecture about the colonial history of the instrument. Plugging in my computer, I looked out at the crowd and realised that every single person in the room was white, over 50, and wearing a Hawaiian shirt. Every single one. Needless to say, my arguments about the history of appropriation of Hawaiian culture and the exoticisation of the Hawaiian Indigenous 'Other' did not go over well. As I left the building, I vowed to put my ukulele away until this global, faddish tornado of cuteness and twee innocence passed. I switched back to the guitar, and while I continue to play my ukulele at home, I'm still waiting until it's safe to play it in public again. (James, survey response)

James's response relies rather more on inference than Jo's in that it barely mentions race outright. Including 'whiteness' in his list of ukulele-associated words, coupled with his brief description of the audience for his presentation, were the only suggestions he gave that he viewed the 'faddish tornado' he had described to be racialised (I will return to the broader cultural association between 'cuteness' and whiteness later in this chapter). Nevertheless, he was the only respondent to name outright the preponderance of white third-wave ukulele players I had noticed myself during my fieldwork. The part of his account that left me most curious of all was his description of his presentation and, especially, the audience's response to it, which touches on a tendency to refrain from naming, itself intimately linked with whiteness, and in turn with Lietaer's considerations of openness to the self. If lacking knowledge of Hawaiian colonial history was one functional cause of the absence of context I had experienced at the UK Uke Fest, leaving the audience's views of Hawaii to be shaped solely by second-hand colonial images, James's story seems to describe an effort to fill in some of these gaps in contextual understanding in his own social world. The response he recalls receiving, however, strongly suggests that his audience's openness to understanding was incomplete. Although he does not give details of how exactly the topic 'not going over well' actually manifested in reality, his use of 'needless to

say' implies a sense that the apparently hostile response he received was an expression of an underlying structure linked in some way to the demographic of his audience.

What I believe James's story gestures towards here is a tendency DiAngelo names 'white fragility'. DiAngelo posits that racism as it is commonly defined — as 'intentional acts of racial discrimination committed by immoral individuals' — is a faulty premise (DiAngelo 2019, 9). Instead, she understands racism as a powerful underlying system of inequity into which every individual is socialised, and from which white people as a group derive systemic benefit. In framing racism as located in intentionally malicious acts, white people are able to self-exonerate, fostering 'a confidence that we are not part of the problem' (DiAngelo 2019, 8). White fragility refers to a defensiveness that is triggered by calling attention to this system of inequity, which is experienced as a personal moral judgment by the recipient, meaning that any racial stress becomes intolerable. DiAngelo uses Bourdieu's concept of habitus, ingrained and repeated norms at various levels of consciousness, to explain this; challenging or even revealing the system of whiteness is subconsciously perceived as disequilibrium in the habitus, and defensiveness or fragility is an effective strategy for restoring balance (DiAngelo 2019, 8). James's audience had been effectively socialised, through the colonial images described in the previous section of this chapter and the systems of whiteness that underpinned them, into an awareness of Hawaii and the ukulele as exotic, apolitical, and Other, which was subconsciously agreed upon within the field (or social world) of the ukulele festival at which he was speaking; to draw attention to or deconstruct it was to disturb the equilibrium of the habitus, and potentially the power structure underlying it. This could only be rebalanced by closing off the opportunity for reflection upon it, negating the possibility of congruence.

Dyer suggests that whiteness is defined by refraining from calling attention to itself. To be white is to be socialised to view oneself as the default: 'Because we are seen as white,' he argues, 'we characteristically see ourselves and believe ourselves

seen as unmarked, unspecific, universal' (Dyer 1997, 43–45). This, proposes DiAngelo, encourages us to view ourselves as individuals who exist outside of collective socialisation, and, in turn, enables us to construct an essentialised Other in relation to ourselves, allowing, as Said puts it, for 'a heterogenous, dynamic and complex human reality' to be approached 'from an uncritically essentialist standpoint' (Said 1979, 329). Our whiteness, meanwhile, remains largely invisible to us, and, therefore, so does our collective power. Fiske refers to this phenomenon as 'exnomination', a term taken from Barthes who uses it in reference to the unwillingness of the dominant social class, the bourgeoisie, to be named (Barthes 1973, 138). Fiske views this self-invisibilising as a strategic means for preserving power relationships, describing it as 'the means by which whiteness avoids being named and thus keeps itself out of the field of interrogation and therefore off the agenda for change' (Fiske 1996, 42).

This may well be the reason the colonial images of Hawaii described in this chapter had gone undescribed and unexamined, and, perhaps, why I received the response 'It's not something I'd really thought about' from several participants when raising the issue of the preponderance of white players on English ukulele pathways. It is not that this response is untrue, or consciously evasive, but the unknowingness it expresses may be a direct response to exnomination; if we, as white players, are conditioned to view whiteness as the non-specific default, then there is nothing remarkable about a room filled with white players. To suggest otherwise, as James did, unbalances the habitus, is experienced as accusatory, and can only be resolved by shutting it down. To refrain from participating because one does not feel included becomes a matter of 'just individual choice', as one anonymous interviewee stated when I brought up the underrepresentation of people of colour in the ukulele's social worlds; a personal problem, rather than one linked to underlying power structures.

It is worth noting here that the UK Uke Fest audience's reception of the performance through a lens which I interpreted as shaped by exoticism, and the defensiveness with which James's audience responded to his presentation, are not

only the result of the exnominative structures of whiteness; they also uphold and reinscribe those structures circularly, allowing them to become self-sustaining. Said proposes that knowledge and understanding can, in and of themselves, be 'instruments of conquest' (Said 1979, 308). He argues that Orientalist scholarship's interpretation of the Middle East as primitive and exotic is perpetuated by subsequent Orientalist scholars, who circularly validate, respond to, and build upon the convictions of their predecessors, sustaining their presumed truth for future generations of scholarship. It is worth noting that although neither James's experience nor my own involved the creation of an exoticist discourse by a performer, Said's ideas still hold relevance to them. Locke makes a distinction between approaching exoticism by considering 'foreign-sounding' style elements in music, and looking beyond the sonic material to *how* that music, in the full, multi-sensorial context of its performance, is used to represent the Other as Other (Locke 2007). Given that Small's model of musicking is expansive enough to consider audience members as participants in a performance (Small 1998, 76), it seems reasonable to assume that exoticism can be upheld at the point of a performance's reception. In their collective responses, the festival audience communicated to one another that the hula was indeed an apolitical marker of paradisaal happiness and difference, and James's audience confirmed to one another that others in the social world, too, wanted to restore the equilibrium of the habitus and affirm the structures underlying it. Interpretation of a cultural product may itself be viewed as a creative act, and one which can reinscribe power differentials.

I propose that the effect of this on unconditional positive regard in the musicking space is twofold. First, clearly, it is incompatible with Lietaer's conceptualisation of unconditional positive regard as complete openness to the other, enabled by congruence as complete openness to the self. If the complexity of human reality is flattened out by white fragility as a defence mechanism, if the Buberian/Rogerian other is confirmed only after being digested into the Other of exoticism, then any

acceptance, however sincerely intended, will necessarily be incomplete. The process of rebalancing the habitus DiAngelo describes may be viewed, in Lietaer's words, as 'daring not to see' certain parts of the other's experience or context out of fear that it will destabilise the self. As Rogers himself puts it:

...Understanding is risky. If I let myself really understand another person, I might be changed by that understanding. And we all fear change. So as I say, it is not an easy thing to permit oneself to understand an individual, to enter thoroughly and completely and empathically into his frame of reference. (Rogers 1995b, 18)

Since exnomination is a circular process, which operates to sustain itself and maintain existing power structures, it presents an obstacle to this understanding, and therefore to unconditional positive regard. The second, more troubling implication of this is that it can also potentially render even its own status as an obstacle to openness impossible to see. Margolin interrogates the Rogerian approach using a framework informed by Foucauldian concepts of power; non-directivity is, for Rogers, predicated on the idea that a therapeutic relationship is one from which power and authority are excised entirely (Rogers 1942, 109). Margolin views this as an impossibility, claiming that psychotherapy always inherently unfolds within a power relationship, and that true non-directivity is therefore not only 'mythic' but also functions by concealing its own power (Margolin 2020, 132). He analyses a recording of one of Rogers' own sessions to show that he does, indeed, unambiguously direct his client, but seems to be unaware of doing so (Margolin 2020, 136–41). Truax, similarly, notes that Rogers' affect seemed to differ in warmth depending upon how closely a client mirrored his own style of speaking, in direct contrast with Rogers' assertions that his acceptance of clients was, indeed, without conditions (Truax 1966). Kahn expresses concern that therapists who adhere to the belief that Rogerian methods remove their own bias from the therapeutic frame may actually be *more* likely to display bias than those working in other modalities, since the influence of their personal standpoints may remain unchecked (Kahn 1999, 104–5).



Although in the fields to which I am applying Rogers' framework there is no clear authority figure present, as in the therapist-client relationship, the ukulele's worlds and pathways, too, unfold within broader power relationships and systemic structures. As Small notes, the relational aspects of musicking do not only explore and affirm relationships within the musicking ritual, the performance space or the immediate social world, but extend outwards to the external world:

The way people relate to one another as they music is linked not only with the sound relationships that are created by the performers, not only with the participants' relation to one another, but also with the participants' relationships to the world outside the performance space, in a complex spiral of relationships, and it is those relationships, and the relationships between relationships, that are the meaning of the performance (Small 1998, 46).

Musicking within the ukulele's social worlds and pathways, then, not only takes place within broader systems of power, but actively reflects and affirms them in the relationships it explores. Belief in the ukulele as universally inclusive, then, may itself be the result of exnomination, allowing practitioners not to see their own roles in the system of power, and, in doing so, to preserve and maintain them. Unconditional positive regard, therefore, may not be truly unconditional across lines of power, and may also serve to conceal its own conditionality; if, as I have argued, unconditional positive regard is a central characteristic of the ukulele's social worlds, the potential implications of this for would-be musicking participants who are people of colour are troubling.

This issue cannot be solved within the musicking space alone; it is contextualised within socialised power structures which extend into every area of life, and the ukulele should not be expected to be capable of independently overpowering the broader dynamics of racism and othering. Acknowledging these dynamics, however, might be viewed as a first step. In the therapeutic context, Kahn proposes that, rather than non-directivity, emphasising fallibility, which Orange defines as 'an attitude

recognising that what we “know” or understand is inevitably partial and often mistaken’ (Orange 1995, 43), may be more helpful. In terms of differing demographic and social standpoints, specifically, Levy refers to Hook et al’s concept of ‘cultural humility’ (Hook et al. 2017), which involves conscious self-reflection, collaboration, and non-judgmental listening on the part of a therapist with a different social standpoint from their client, as a pre-requisite for authentic connection and unconditional positive regard within the therapeutic frame (Levy 2020). Within the musicking frame, too, cultural humility may be a prerequisite for unconditional positive regard of another’s musicking; congruence and inclusiveness across power lines may otherwise be impossible, regardless of the affordances of an instrument, or the normative practices of its social worlds and their rituals. Zara’s story shows that the ukulele is not necessarily capable of independently overpowering these broader dynamics which lead to racial othering, and that its affordances do not inevitably produce unconditional positive regard, but can also produce discrimination, expressing values of broader underlying prejudice; James’s story, meanwhile, indicates that ‘daring to see’ these values may be a challenging but vital task in its own right.

### **Discourses of whiteness**

The colonial images of Hawaii discussed in this chapter are only one manifestation of the structures of whiteness, and this chapter will close by briefly considering how two of the discourses discussed elsewhere in this thesis might also be reinterpreted through the lens of whiteness; firstly, the ukulele’s gendering as feminine and its association with childhood, discussed in chapter 9, and secondly, the wall of strumming and navigation of holicipation and participation introduced in chapters 5 and 7, respectively. I have already shown how the ukulele’s association with childlike femininity has been used during its third wave to devalue it, and, in turn, how that devaluation can be recycled into a paradoxical empowerment which

supports unconditional positive regard of others and the self. The 'cuteness and twee innocence' mentioned in James's survey response refers to this discourse of specifically feminine childishness, but his response was unusual in that it implicitly linked that discourse to whiteness, although he did not expand further on this. Another survey respondent connected this childlike femininity to a contemporary cultural archetype referred to as the 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl' (or 'MPDG'), a term originally defined by Nathan Rabin, which ultimately served as a useful lens for considering how this gendering, too, might also be racialised as white. The MPDG:

exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is an all-or-nothing-proposition. Audiences either want to marry her instantly...or they want to commit grievous bodily harm against them and their immediate family. (Rabin 2007)

The ukulele is often mentioned in association with the character archetype (see O'Ryan 2013; Penny 2013), including by Rabin himself (Rabin 2014), which, as Solomon puts it, has since 'taken on an intertextual pull' (Solomon 2017, 4), and has been expanded on so extensively by other authors (see, for example, Baldegg 2012; O'Ryan 2013; Pasley 2012) that Rabin now regrets coining the term due to its overuse (Rabin 2014). The MPDG is described as a symbol of 'infantile eccentricity' (Harris 2012), and sometimes as 'childlike' or 'stunted' (Pasley 2012), yet still desirable. But perhaps the most intriguing work referring to the trope is an essay by Winfrey-Harris titled 'Who Is The Black Zooey Deschanel?', which suggests the MPDG's feminine innocence and reclaimed childishness might, in fact, only be inhabitable by a white woman. The archetype, she states:

is bound by class and race. The cult of domesticity defined idealised womanhood centuries ago — and that definition included both perpetual childhood and whiteness. The wide-eyed, girlish, take-care-of-me characters that Deschanel

inhabits on film are not open to many women of color, particularly black women. We can be strong women, aggressive women, promiscuous women...we can do Bonnet bohemian and Earth Mother...but never carefree and childish. Even black *girls* are too often viewed as worldly women and not innocents. (Winfrey-Harris 2011)

Winfrey-Harris describes a set of socially-constructed expectations and assumptions resembling what Patricia Hill Collins refers as to 'controlling images', which she suggests are applied to groups based on their subject positions, identities, and access to power, and which also serve to maintain existing power structures (Collins 1991, 266). Collins notes that during the era of slavery, upper- and middle-class white women were encouraged to aspire to images of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity; as a function of patriarchy, these images limited and controlled them, but simultaneously perpetuated their domination of black women, to whom controlling images of servitude and neglectful working mothers (who 'dared to violate the image of the submissive, hard-working servant') were applied instead (Collins 1991, 268). There is perhaps a resonance here in how the ukulele's devaluation by outsiders is sometimes recycled to engender a sense of freedom, enabling exploration of desire lines which might previously have seemed unavailable, and becoming, literally, more carefree. That the very characteristics used to devalue, and in turn, to liberate it seem to borrow from controlling images of white femininity might reinforce the structures of white exnomination discussed in this chapter. If, as chapter 9 suggested, the ukulele's devaluation during its third-wave revival has actually aided its participants in freely traversing desire lines in their musicking, then its power for those participants might be viewed to be gained, too, through an admission of its own apparent powerlessness, and an embrace and subversion of the controlling images applied to it. If the particular form of femininity used to devalue it is racialised in terms of whiteness, however, that powerful powerlessness might potentially seem less available to participants who are people of colour.

Indeed, some of the practices which I have asserted define the ukulele's third-wave pathways and desire lines during its third wave may, themselves, be viewed as potentially harbouring an uncomfortable relationship with the systems of whiteness and its exnomination. I have already proposed the wall of strumming technique as a key improvisational strategy in the ukulele's third-wave social worlds, encouraging the traversal of desire lines. The sidelining of skill as a mode of aesthetic valuation, a key feature of the development of unconditional positive regard of others' musicking in these social worlds, is possible in part because, as Lasson puts it, the wall of strumming means that 'the sound the group makes is determined by the best people in the room, not the worst' (Lasson 2011). Although throughout this thesis I have interpreted this as creating space for individual exploration within the collective, it is worth acknowledging that that exploration cannot be fully heard by the rest of the group. Similarly, the sheer volume of content present in YouTube's ukulele social worlds can mean that there is always an element of the solitary within collective musicking. ('I know no one will see this, but...'). This seemed to nurture a sense of safety and liberation amongst participants. Being only partially heard by the collective secured the positive regard received from others as truly unconditional, which facilitated individual musical actualising. But there might, perhaps, be more ontological discomfort in the playing of a person of colour becoming partly drowned out by a crowd of mainly white players. The ideal relationships represented in musicking practices may not always signify the same discourses of freedom and flexibility to would-be players whose standpoints are more marginal within a wider social context influenced by the dynamics of whiteness and its exnomination.

None of this is to say that ukulele players who are people of colour will, or should, necessarily feel uncomfortable in third-wave English ukulele social worlds, or on their attendant pathways. Although the great majority of players I encountered during this project were white, they were not universally so, and a few players who were people of colour were present at some ukulele events, successfully traversing

desire lines in their own musicking practices. A delicate negotiation of the sociological and the psychological, of the individual and the collective, is a central theme of this thesis, and this is no exception. But it is worth, I think, revisiting Zara's story, and considering the desire lines she traversed to begin developing her own musical identity, as well as that of her siblings. According to Jo, it was not until the 'mass exodus' of the white students who had shown her such hostility that her journey on these desire lines really began, enabling her to bring trusted family members, with whom she *could* experience genuinely unconditional positive regard, into the space on her return to school. Zara, like any other ukulele enthusiast, is an individual with her own unique lived experiences of musicking. But those experiences also took place within a real and material context of racial othering. If, as Small suggests, musicking is about exploring ideal relationships, then the symbolic structural implications of musicking practices are not neutral; they inevitably express both broader social dynamics and individual experiences, and it should therefore be acknowledged that not all players will necessarily feel equally supported in musically actualising within them.

## **11. Discussion: the (un)hidden musicians, and taking the ukulele seriously**

First and foremost, this thesis has endeavoured to, as Finnegan puts it, ‘uncover the system that lies behind the practices of music-making’ in the ukulele’s third-wave social worlds and on its pathways (Finnegan 1989, 297), as well as to uncover and document the practices themselves. The title of this chapter alludes to the ‘hidden musicians’ of Finnegan’s work, although the practices she describes are, arguably, more hidden than my own; backlash against the ukulele by outsiders to its social worlds indicates, if nothing else, that wider awareness of the instrument’s resurgence does exist. Its rise to popularity has, in at least some cases, also altered the direction of more mainstream cultural practices: Dodie’s chart success and the instrument’s use in advertisements are indications of this touched upon in this thesis. But despite this, the musicians (although they might not refer to themselves as such) discussed in this project are still, in many respects, hidden. Although the ukulele’s third-wave surge is documented by media coverage, and by a few scholarly articles, the actual mechanics of how its social worlds and pathways function, and how its players interact with those mechanics, have largely not been made explicit prior to my own study. While Thibeault and Evoy, Kruse, Reese, and Giebelhausen and Kruse do document in detail the norms and practices of the social worlds they describe (one each in Thibeault and Evoy’s, Reese’s, and Kruse’s articles, and four in Giebelhausen and Kruse’s), they do not consider their participants’ relationship to, or pathways taken between, ukulele social worlds other than the ones focused on in their case studies, and do not make reference to groups with different norms of membership or degrees of openness. Beyond this, little research exists into the range and depth of ukulele activity outside Hawaii.

This may partly result from a sense that the ukulele is in some way particularly ‘dismissible’, to use Clark’s terminology again, or that music made with it is not ‘real

music', an aspect of Small's syllogism levelled against it by some of its detractors, but also embraced by many of its enthusiasts. If, as Cohen has suggested, popular music studies as a field of research has been limited by conflicting views of its object of study as simultaneously culturally significant, and too trivial to be worthy of deeper scholarly consideration (Cohen 2007, 225), then the ukulele might be seen almost as a microcosm of the same phenomenon; significant enough to feel outright ubiquitous to some of its detractors, and to draw thousands on to its musicking pathways, but not serious enough to pay attention to in any real depth. Even some interviewees who were themselves dedicated to musicking with the instrument expressed surprise that there was 'enough to say' about their practices to pursue doctoral-level research into; others belittled their own lived experience (one interviewee described herself as 'just someone who turns up and strums', and several others apologised for 'not knowing much' at the beginnings of their interviews) as a source of knowledge, not understanding what I could achieve by speaking to them. As Finnegan notes, her own object of study

...is partially veiled not just from outsiders but even from the musicians themselves and their supporters. Of course in one sense they know it well – these are not secret practices. But in another it seems so natural and given to the participants that they are often unaware both of its extent and of the structured work they themselves are putting into sustaining it. We all know about it – but fail to notice it for what it is. (Finnegan 1989, 4)

In this thesis, then, I have aimed to uncover the practices of ukulele players during the third wave of the instrument's popularity, and to argue for the significance of these practices, as well as their depth, their seriousness and their complexity. I have suggested that the functional affordances of the ukulele's social worlds and pathways are not haphazard or coincidental, but characteristic. They also do not merely reproduce other musicking practices which are commonly taken more seriously, and in some cases actively subvert or reject such practices. I have also suggested that they



indicate an expression of values which are also characteristic, and which may differ even from other participatory forms of musicking which do not necessarily foreground skill in their negotiation of convergence. This chapter aims to explore in more depth some of the core findings of the study, and to contextualise this research within the more broadly related scholarship, as well as to suggest avenues for future exploration. I initially examine some of the particularities of social worlds and pathways documented by the study, before moving on to an analysis of the humanistic, person-centred values expressed through their practices. Lastly, I consider some of the recurrent hybridities, tensions, conflicts and blurred boundaries which emerged from the research, and conclude by considering the thesis's key knowledge claims, as well as its main gaps and avenues for further research.

### **Mapping the particularities of social worlds, pathways, and desire lines**

The previous exploratory ethnographic work considering the ukulele's third-wave social worlds has considered exclusively stable-membership, but not demographically specialist, offline-first worlds. I have shown that this is not the only type of social world centring around the ukulele, and that there are some differences between the practices, as well as the values and priorities underlying those practices, of different forms of ukulele social world. In doing so, I have suggested that openness is a potentially relevant metric by which to identify these differing forms of social world. 'Openness' or 'closedness' are, really, inadequately reductive terms in their implication of a blunt binary, since the reality is more of a spectrum along which a particular social world can shift according to the desires of its members and organisers. It does, however, highlight that not all social worlds are of an identical form to those described by Kruse and by Thibeault and Evoy, particularly at its extremes; attending open jams or strum-alongs (which are sometimes open even to passers-by with no prior interest in the ukulele) represents many participants' first step on to a musicking pathway, and, indeed, many remain on these pathways

throughout their musicking journey, although others move on to more closed forms of social world, or, often, participate in multiple forms of social world concurrently. At the other end of the spectrum are social worlds which cater to attendees of a particular demographic, either implicitly or explicitly, and which have seemingly gone entirely unidentified by prior scholarship; in chapter 6, I suggested that the practices of these social worlds may be particularly likely to foreground belonging, through collective exploration of MII, as a prerequisite to exploring IIM and to musically actualising.

Nevertheless, these differences are subtle, and exist within a wider set of shared pathways manifesting in practices which nurture unconditional positive regard between musicking participants, and allow movement towards individualised musical actualising. This research, then, builds upon Giebelhausen and Kruse, who note that there is no ubiquitous experience or set of practices in community ukulele groups, but that 'some important values (e.g., fun) might be common' (Giebelhausen and Kruse 2018, 347). My research suggests that while this may be broadly true, the details of the picture are more complex. The practices I encountered in my own research were indeed, on the surface, heterogeneous across different events and social worlds, but were overall marked by their foregrounding of improvisational strategies, supporting participants to pursue, experiment with, and try out musicking with the ukulele according to their own preference and level of desired commitment, which could (and did) change throughout an individual's musicking life course or even within a single session. Normative practices might, therefore, appear to be quite different between different rituals and social worlds, but were united by allowing participants to find their own way into musicking however they were most comfortable, which often facilitated the musical actualising process. This was not cited outright as a goal of these practices, but there was a near-universal focus on accessibility in all the social worlds encountered, which Kruse and Giebelhausen also describe in their multiple case study of group leaders. In essence, what unified the

practices of these social worlds was their ability to cater to the varied experiences and preferences of their participants, and this seemed to represent a central expectation which produced all other practices.

These improvisational strategies have not, to my knowledge, been explicitly itemised by any prior authors on this topic, although their traces are implicitly present in Giebelhausen and Kruse's observations of varied experiences (Giebelhausen and Kruse 2018), and in Kruse's brief description of each participant in his own study taking on an 'independent level of ukulele identity' (Kruse 2013, 164), as well as in Reese's descriptions of *communitas* (Reese 2019). They are most obviously visible in very open worlds and events, but seemed to be almost universally present (with the possible exception of the social worlds of YouTube, which I will return to later in this chapter). They do not always resemble the melodic, and often virtuosic, improvisation of jazz or avant-garde music which tends to highlight solo playing within a collective, although they may take this form for some participants. Rather, they often cover elements of musicking which might traditionally be discounted as aspects of 'the music itself', but which are clearly part of the musicking process, such as instrument acquisition, repertoire selection, and learning through experimentation. At very open events, even the choice to play, to listen, or simply to socialise at the bar during a particular song are often left up to in-the-moment, individual decisions by participants in the musicking event. At offline-first events, these strategies are enabled partly through the creation of a kind of critical mass of participants playing the same instrument, which also produces the wall of strumming effect I have already described at length; in online-first, Zoom-based events, they are enabled by the affordances of the videoconferencing platform which allows participants to be seen musicking, but not — unless they are leading a given song — heard. In practice, this means that a few individual participants musicking in a manner which might otherwise be distracting or irritating to other players (such as by playing without proper tuning, with poor technique, or by trying out ambitious new chord voicings or

strumming patterns for the first time) does not, in any real way, impair the group's experience of musicking. At the most open events, choosing not to join in for a particular song or even an entire event makes little difference to the experience of the rest of the group.

This flexibility extends Finnegan's useful model of pathways perhaps beyond its reasonable limits. While she notes that pathways are never permanent, and how closely followed they are varies, they are also 'for the most part, abiding', and 'part of the existing cultural forms rather than something that needed to be calculated afresh each time' (Finnegan 1989, 307). 'Calculating afresh each time', however, seemed almost a singularly defining quality of many of the practices described in this thesis; as such, pathways alone seemed an inadequately descriptive model. As such, I have proposed that, as well as pathways similar to the more enduring and collectively-hewn ones Finnegan describes, the ukulele's third-wave resurgence may be characterised by desire lines, which lead participants off the pathway travelled by the rest of the group according to personal preference, and may move in parallel to the collective pathway, or meander away from it without breaking off entirely. Exactly how easy it is to create a desire line may depend on the degree of openness of the event and its attendant social world; for example, in a stable-membership group who play public concerts, it may not be normative for a song leader not to turn up at all and to choose to play at home instead, but a wide range of playing styles and levels of commitment to practice will probably still be present. In an explicitly open jam, conversely, skipping a week, or leaving midway to attend a second event may be commonplace.

Although Yano describes the ukulele's perception as especially flexible (Yano 2015, 320), she does not elaborate on how this flexibility manifests. In elaborating this concept of desire lines and their intersection with more fixed pathways throughout this thesis, particularly in chapters 5, 6 and 8, I have endeavoured to elaborate on what Yano's rather broad statement looks like in pragmatic terms. My primary research

aims, beyond itemising the practices and norms of the ukulele's third wave of popularity at the 'hidden' community level to whatever degree possible, was to begin to answer the questions: why the ukulele, and why now? This study cannot confidently claim to prove that desire lines are unique to the ukulele, in part due to the apparent absence of literature on musicking pathways diverging from the model proposed by Finnegan. However, Russell's consideration of recovering musicality after demusicalisation in a college folk class suggests that this degree of flexibility may not be as normative within folk music worlds; although her students do discuss being rewarded for 'trying and failing' (Russell 2015, 350), there is still an emphasis on formal pedagogy and linear progression of musicking skill, enabled by the 'safety' Russell's class provides in part through rotating between familiar breakout groups (Russell 2015, 349).

By contrast, the 'safety' demusicalised participants in particular described in ukulele worlds did not depend upon how enduring the membership of a given social world was, but was woven into the fabric of musicking practices themselves, and involved a peculiar individualisation, or even anonymisation, in which the musical experimentation of a participant could easily go completely unheard by others as a result of the critical mass of players and the wall of sound, or as a result of literally being muted in Zoom-based social worlds. In (at least offline-first) folk musicking worlds, this degree of anonymity in musicking is presumably not always present, since participants playing the same or similar instrument is not an inherent feature of the social world, although it is certainly possible, depending on the instrument choices of the attendees of a given folk night. In addition, Turino argues that the folk revival was in part the product of a desire to make music without the pressure of 'comparison to the stars' (Turino 2008, 157); while this may be the case, this was not enough for some demusicalised participants in my own study, who also feared being judged by ordinary players they perceived as more skilled than them (Lola's description in chapter 6 of her community choir as 'so exposed' illustrates this).

The practices of the ukulele's social worlds seemed to be designed to limit this sense of exposure even further. Flexibility (and unconditional positive regard, which I will turn my attention to in the next section of this chapter) did not demand special effort from participants, and was facilitated by individual players generally being difficult to hear at all, unless their own desire lines led them towards participating as a leader or soloist. Future research might well investigate the validity of the desire line model in other grassroots musicking worlds, such as folk music; although I suspect desire lines might well be present in other forms of musicking, they did seem to be so characteristic of the ukulele, and to enable so many participants who had never felt able to music with others before, that it would not surprise me to learn that its social worlds emphasise them to an unusual degree. The three most cited reasons for the ukulele's popularity by participants were its perception as easy, its low cost, and its portability; these are, I think, surface-level expressions of the instrument's perceived capacity for flexibility. Although the underlying condition uniting these qualities was not necessarily stated outright, its low barrier to entry in skill and cost, and adaptability to *physically* moving from place to place are all facets of the desire lines characterising its social worlds.

For some participants, at least, it seemed important to position the ukulele's practices as separate from other forms of musicking, although others viewed the instrument as only one tool in a musical toolbox, and some would ultimately grow to view it as a steppingstone on a pathway leading them towards other musicking social worlds. I have shown in chapter 9 that the ukulele, for some, is understood through a gendered and aged lens enabling an active and self-conscious demarcation from the guitar, which is used to further justify its more flexible normative practices. The guitar's relationship to gender and age is already well-established, and several scholars have indicated that instrument choice is itself closely linked with gender (see, for instance, Abeles and Porter 1978; Clawson 1999; Green 1994, 1997; Delzell and Leppla 1992; Hallam, Rogers, and Creech 2008); building upon Szego's consideration

of the instrument's gendering during its second wave (Szego 2015), I have demonstrated how this manifests in the third wave. I have also shown how the instrument's positioning as marginal to the guitar promotes the flexibility and development of desire lines. Whether or not the ukulele's social worlds and their forms of musicking really *are* uniquely flexible, their perception by some participants as essentially different from those of other established musicking forms is important in itself, since it also leads them to be perceived as more accessible, particularly to players with a history of demusicalisation.

### **Person-centred values in third-wave ukulele musicking**

I believe that the shared practices of flexibility and individualisation displayed by ukulele social worlds during the instrument's third-wave resurgence express underlying values which are, at their heart, humanistic and person-centred. The first two years of my research were conducted with little understanding of person-centred psychology or of the Rogerian conditions which would ultimately find themselves at the heart of my theoretical framework. My field notes from the sites I encountered during this time make note of 'a paradigm in which everyone is welcoming and accepting no matter what, because *any reason not to be is absent*', and 'a warmth and acceptance that everyone is on their own different journey that's hard to describe'; I had identified the shift in valuing others' musicking from being grounded in the perception of skill to being grounded in unconditional positive regard, but I did not, at the time, have the language to describe this. This is one of the greater regrets I find myself holding at this stage of the writing-up process; I suspect that my own interviewing process, which, especially early on, was often very much a two-sided conversation, in which I at times would ask quite direct and lengthy questions about themes I had perceived as emergent from prior interviews, might have been quite different from the outset, and would have relied on Rogerian active listening techniques from much earlier in the project. Nevertheless, I believe this thesis suggests

that the application of a person-centred theoretical framework to other forms of musicking might well be enlightening to future research into musicking practice.

I began learning Rogerian listening techniques only after much of my fieldwork had already been completed. I was surprised at just how effective a focus on truly 'getting out of the way' in a listening role could be, and it was this that led me to Rogers' theories of the role of unconditional positive regard in personality development, and to his considerations of non-directivity as inherently therapeutic, which gave language to my observations. Rogers' view of his clients as the directors of their own experience, who would naturally begin actualising given an environment in which they were treated non-judgmentally and with unconditional positive regard, without being steered towards a societally-influenced desired outcome (Rogers 2012, 58–59), immediately led me to think of Small's description of demusicalisation as a process externally imposed on the individual. As Small puts it, echoing Laura, 'everyone is born capable of musicking' (Small 1998, 209). For Small, removing demusicalising influences, which are inherently directive and based upon external conditions of musical worth, will lead inexorably towards musicality; for Rogers, removing similar external conditions of personal worth, and treating a therapeutic client with unconditional positive regard, will lead inexorably towards actualising.

The three qualities of the instrument (ease, cost and portability) I have already argued lead to its perception as particularly flexible may also be viewed as expressions of this non-directivity. They are united by the removal of obstructions: the ease of playing the instrument, in particular its shallow initial learning curve which was mentioned by participants in every social world I encountered, removes the obstruction of skill development when first picking up the instrument; its low cost removes the financial obstruction which may arise when first considering taking up an instrument; its portability both removes much of the burden of transporting an instrument between musicking events, and causes it to physically take up less space in the player's home and everyday life, so that engaging in musicking with it becomes



driven more prominently by their own desire. Some research exists exploring person-centred values in the context of music therapy (Noone 2008; Pickard 2018), but there is a dearth of literature examining these concepts in ordinary musicking rituals not constructed as psychotherapeutic.

Given that Standal views positive regard as a basic human need (Standal 1954), and that Rogers views actualising as a natural tendency of any organism when circumstances obstructing it are removed (Rogers 1995b, 117–20), it strikes me as strange that there is so little research considering how and whether they might be enabled in everyday musicking social worlds, by ordinary individuals seeking musical actualising, particularly after demusicalising experiences. This thesis, I suggest, shows the potential application of humanistic psychological theories to this everyday musicking. Whether the desire lines I describe as characteristic of the ukulele's social worlds exist to a greater extent than they do in other forms of musicking is difficult to state confidently, in part because the qualities of flexibility and subsequent unconditional positive regard seem not to be looked for in other, similar studies. The person-centred framework which informs my own lens on the ukulele's social worlds might, then, represent a fruitful potential avenue of exploration for scholars of other musicking social worlds whose participants describe both the particular warmth and acceptance, and the particular sense of freedom and non-judgement, that seemed to characterise the worlds and pathways discussed in this thesis. If psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious can be, and are, employed to useful effect to interpret ethnographically-gathered data on musicking, then, I propose, there is no reason that Rogers' theories of personality cannot be similarly applied. In an ethnographic study, in particular, which also treats participants as experts on their own experience, the form of the Rogerian lens might be particularly appropriate to the content of the research.

Can the ukulele's third-wave social worlds be described as a therapeutic space? Although the musicking ritual cannot reasonably be seen to replace formal

psychotherapy for frank mental ill health, certainly, the role played by the characteristics of the space I describe in humanistic terms does seem to go beyond merely the preventative and into the realm of the reparative. The impact on demusicalised participants, in particular, of musicking in a relational context is the clearest indication of this, and I believe it is arguable that their experience frequently exhibits the six conditions Rogers views as necessary for personality change to take place (Rogers 1957, 95–96), even if in realms restricted to the musical. Table 4 illustrates how these conditions might manifest in the space of the ukulele musicking event, presupposing that the ‘client’ Rogers describes is the demusicalised person, and that Rogers’ ‘counsellor’ is replaced by others in the musicking space alongside whom the demusicalised person is participating.

*Table 4: Rogers’ six conditions, and how they might manifest when transposed to the everyday musicking space of the ukulele social world.*

<b>Conditions</b>	<b>Manifestation in ukulele musicking space</b>
Psychological contact between client and counsellor (demusicalised person and other)	Small holds that musicking is the exploration of ideal relationships (Small 1998, 219); even without other social interaction (which frequently does take place), musicking may be viewed as psychological contact in and of itself
The client (demusicalised person) is incongruent	If the ideal self includes musicking or ‘being musical’, demusicalisation creates incongruence between the ideal and real self.
The counsellor (other) is congruent	Participants in the space are generally at varying degrees of congruence between real and ideal musical self. More experienced participants and organisers tend to be more musically comfortable and more congruent.
The client (demusicalised person) receives empathy from the counsellor (other)	Cross et al argue that musicking itself may produce ‘empathic processes and states’ resulting in ‘mutual affective alignment’ (Cross, Laurence, and Rabinowitch 2018, 26) and allowing entrainment and flexibility, as in offline-first ukulele musicking. Negus and Astor describe experiential empathy as ‘realised in creative practices and

	collective actions' (Negus and Astor 2021, 12), including in the online realm.
The counsellor (other) shows unconditional positive regard towards the client (demusicalised person)	Unconditional positive regard replaces skill and technical ability as central metric of valuation, facilitating a warm and accepting environment for musicking.
The client (demusicalised person) perceives acceptance and unconditional positive regard	With some possible exceptions (see chapters 9 and 10), participants feel accepted, experience the warmth extended towards them, and able to experiment with new ways of musicking and musical possible selves.

It is worth noting that, although participants most often described participation in ukulele social worlds as transformative to the musical self specifically, a few others, particularly Ginny, described a more general sense of acceptance which had not previously been accessible elsewhere, and which was experienced as personally transformative. The empathy and warmth experienced in the musicking space may also have the potential for significant impact during times of crisis; the experiences of the Strummers during the pandemic indicated a substantial effect on wellbeing facilitated by social bonds which were formed through musicking without co-presence in a physical space. Since Maslow describes belongingness as a prerequisite for self-actualisation (Maslow 1954, 43–44), and the flexibility built into the improvisational norms of these spaces allows participants to feel secure that nothing they can do in the process of musicking is likely to damage their social relationships with others, unconditional positive regard nurtured through musicking may also create a sense of belonging and enhance friendships with others on pathways leading through the social world, which might enable actualising beyond the realm of music. Further research might well examine other forms of musicking during the early pandemic, and their impact on their participants' sense of self, both musical and

extramusical, to establish whether the experiences of the Strummers were mirrored in other musicking social worlds.

What is particularly interesting about the person-centred qualities of third-wave ukulele musicking practices is that their design means that positive regard requires no special effort from participants. The improvisational practices I have already described begin before the musicking ritual proper ever takes place; it is not that participants are asked to patiently tolerate each others' mistakes, to ensure that any repertoire they choose is accessible to beginners, or to make certain that shy participants can be heard well enough to call out requests. Rather, the affordances of the musicking ritual itself means that mistakes are unlikely to trouble or even be heard by others, repertoire is selected from extensive songbooks carefully pieced together through years of prior work and often shared widely, and a range of options exist for making requests which vary depending on the social world in question, from Zoom's chat function in online-first spaces to the Twitter messages used by the Strum-Along. Positive regard in the musicking space is therefore unconditional because the normative practices of third-wave ukulele social worlds are constructed to remove or at least minimise possible conditions on it. This may have implications for constructing musicking rituals and other forms of collective activity; what might an educational institution or business look like if possible obstructions to positive regard between individuals in its space were consciously removed or mitigated?

In chapter 10, I also began to consider some of the possible limitations to the inclusiveness facilitated by these person-centred practices, building on Giebelhausen and Kruse's observations of the overrepresentation of white players in their own multiple case study (Giebelhausen and Kruse 2018, 363). Further research into this area is, I think, urgently required; my own research into the manifestations of whiteness in the instrument's representation suggested that deeply-rooted, underlying systems of power might be detectable in responses to the instrument's colonial history, as well as, perhaps in the very act of gendering it as an aspect of

rejecting less accessible practices. These systems could not always be overcome in the musicking space to make desire lines pursuable by everyone; Zara's story of othering indicated that person-centred practices may not always be enough to support unconditional positive regard between musicking participants when other power structures are also in play. Additional ethnographically-informed data on this topic would be welcomed, but should be conducted sensitively to avoid reproducing the power structures it seeks. My research in this chapter also builds upon earlier studies of humanistic therapy suggesting that the person-centred approach might risk unawareness of its own fallibility, including when confronted with power differentials (see Kahn 1999; Margolin 2020; Truax 1966); as well as considering how other musicking practices might reflect or benefit from attention to the approach, it is also worth considering the risks inherent in applying it.

Conversely, chapter 9 considered how certain forms of devaluation of the ukulele by outsiders can seemingly become a source of empowerment to certain participants. In chapter 5, I described Small's syllogism of demusicalisation, and suggested an implicit addition: '...therefore, you should not music' (Small 1998, 212). The form of devaluation which suggests that the ukulele is often played badly is particularly relevant to participants' responses to this. Some players' attachment to the instrument was described as a direct result of its reputation for being played by the 'unmusical'. It was as if participants had introjected the demusicalising syllogism, accepted that they were not viewed as musical, retained the self-identity it had given them, but then ignored the implicit addition, so that their self-esteem was unaffected, allowing them to pursue musicking anyway. Accepting others' views of their musicality as inadequate, but without introjecting them, seemed to allow their locus of evaluation to shift to an internal one; subsequently, the person-centred approach of the pathways on which they musicked helped to bring their real musicking selves into congruence with a new, more personal, and often more realistic ideal.

### **Hybridities, tensions, and conflicts: opposing forces and blurred boundaries**

A complex interplay of seemingly opposing forces underlies the practices, worlds and pathways described in this thesis, which I have suggested are produced partly through an increasing blurring of boundaries between online and offline communication in everyday life. This section endeavours to itemise some of the most central hybridities, tensions and conflicts emerging from my research for this project. While Yano names the ukulele's 'in-betweenness', she does not explore what is meant by this in real-world contexts (Yano 2015, 319–20); in this thesis I have attempted to demonstrate how the instrument's perceived flexibility actually manifests in its musicking practices, which are driven by a blurring of boundaries between stable pathways of belonging and infinitely flexible desire lines, and between real and ideal musical self. These practices take place within a context of boundaries that are equally blurred, between online and offline, between casual and serious leisure, between participation and platformisation; and, too, between participation and holicipation, togetherness and aloneness. This section also argues that the ukulele's characteristic third-wave practices, marked by this perpetual navigation of blurred boundaries, aptly mirror the convergent conditions of online and offline in contemporary life, in the wake of the increasing influence of social media, and that this may be partly responsible for the instrument's third wave of popularity, offering a means of negotiating convergence through musicking.

In chapter 7, I identified the values of participatory musicking on YouTube as existing in tension with both platformisation and with holicipation. In some respects, YouTube's ukulele social worlds, particularly those centring performance-oriented channels, are the 'odd world out' of those I describe in this thesis in terms of their relationship to platformisation. The participatory values which are so present in the offline-first social worlds described in chapters 5 and 6, and in chapter 8's Zoom group, are certainly no less visible on YouTube, and participatory culture on the platform (which itself, I asserted in chapter 7, leans on unconditional positive regard

in its 'belief that contributions matter') more generally has already been discussed at length in scholarship (see, for instance, Bloom and Johnston 2013; Burgess et al. 2009; Jenkins 2009; Waldron 2013b). The sense of person-centred safety I have described as so central to offline-first worlds, and to Zoom jams, is, however, rendered far less certain on YouTube as a result of context collapse and platformisation. To upload a performance to YouTube is to be comfortable with potentially exposing one's playing to others, perhaps many others; the process of musicking is transformed by the act of uploading into a thing, which can be potentially commodified by the forces of platformisation. Nevertheless, my research indicates that YouTube is not siloed entirely from the wider network of pathways which extend through and beyond both online-first and offline-first ukulele social worlds.

Firstly, the pathways of participants who play mainly in offline-first worlds frequently extend to tutorial-oriented channels, which many players reported using to practise and try out new techniques between spatial sessions. Secondly, my experience at the spatial YouTube convention in London indicated that the sum total of ethnographic data on platforms like YouTube is not necessarily located entirely within the platform itself. There are few other ethnographic studies (with the exception of Lange, 2019) regarding social media platforms which extend to spatial conventions or meetups specifically for users of the platform, and this strikes me as a frank oversight; a post on YouTube's official blog as far back as 2010 suggests that spatial gatherings of YouTube viewers and creators were already an established phenomenon (Quagliarello 2010). YouTube's users are ordinary individuals whose communications with others, like most of us in the present day, take place over both online and offline channels, and I suggest that Jenkins' concept of convergence can be usefully extended to consider not only the distribution of information across multiple online platforms, but across both online and offline media. As Postill and Pink suggest, the work of the social media ethnographer should mirror this (Postill and Pink 2012, 124). Summer In The City provided my view of YouTube with far more

nuance than would have been the case if my investigations had remained entirely online, presumably because such conventions are one part of many YouTube users' experience of *YouTube*. It was crossing over into the offline space of the online-first world which introduced me to creators' articulation of the creator-viewer divide (a concept which has previously gone entirely undescribed in scholarship, despite being commonplace terminology in YouTube's social worlds), and emphasised how they used convergent communication channels to carve out flexibility for themselves, and positive regard for one another, although this was certainly more tactical and therefore required more labour than in the other social worlds described in this thesis.

The Zoom group described in chapter 8 also highlights the convergence of offline and online with particular clarity. It is worth noting that mine is one of only a few studies thus far considering grassroots-level musicking during the early pandemic, and I believe it to be among the first documenting synchronous musicking during this period which neither fell into the category of avant-garde/experimental (as in MacDonald et al. 2021), nor made use of specialist software such as JamKazam or Jamulus (as in Rowan 2021). As such, the practices I describe may well be applicable to a wider range of musicking settings than those discussed in other published scholarship from the same period. The Strummers represent a curious example of hybridity between online and offline; their practices borrow from the flexibility of offline-first spaces, and are underpinned by the same person-centred values, but this is achieved through repurposing features of the videoconferencing software on which their communications rely. At the time of writing in late 2021, the Strummers continue to play together online on a nightly basis, but many who live locally to one another also now meet in spatial contexts. Their relationships and musicking are neither fully online-first nor fully offline-first; their pathways move fluidly across both contexts, converging and diverging. Their experiences might inform future research into more hybridised, online-offline musicking practices, particularly in the wake of the pandemic.



In chapter 8, I suggested that the ukulele's popularity might be partly down to the result of how its practices reflect this convergence of online and offline. As Clark noted in our interview, the instrument's third wave coincided with the increasing popularity and influence of social media, and facilitation of the ability to self-teach. Information acquisition can easily take place without verbally communicating with another individual; chord charts can be found with a cursory internet search, and YouTube is replete with playing techniques, tutorials, and covers which can be heard and practised completely alone. Or can they? These holicipatory practices also rely upon participation. Each video and chord chart has been uploaded by another player, who may or may not be physically visible in the medium in which it is presented. Although a ukulele player on YouTube cannot apprehend their audience in real-time, they can experience their reactions in textual form, and their audience can experience one another in the same way. Even on live-streaming platforms like Twitch, elements of slight asynchronicity and delay in these reactions are present. Creators can also choose to turn off or filter comments so that awareness of the other is unilateral, and there is also the phenomenon I described in chapter 7 in which a sufficiently large volume of content or comments in response to that content create a paradoxical hiddenness ('no one will see this, but...'). Aloneness is togetherness, and togetherness is aloneness.

Every event and social world described in this thesis, whether online-first or offline-first, makes use of normative practices which involve the blurring of participation, or playing together, with what I have referred to throughout this thesis, after Killick, as holicipation, or playing alone (Killick 2006). This was most apparent over Zoom, in which slight asynchronicities and latency altered how the sense of collective participation was achieved compared to in the offline-first space. But being muted on Zoom created the same sense of safety as did the wall of strumming in a pub full of players; participants experienced the musicking ritual as playing together, but without being heard (and therefore without being judged). Offline-first practices

were built around affordances which enabled desire lines and unconditional positive regard, specifically by blurring participatory and holicipatory practices. YouTube's paradoxical togetherness and aloneness was reflected and mirrored by the practices of less context-collapsed social worlds. It was almost as if they had (perhaps unconsciously) borrowed the elements of online-first practice which enabled the expression of person-centred values — choice, flexibility, mobility — and discarded its limiting influences, transposing these elements into a context of uncommodified musicking and rendering Stebbins's P-A-P triad opt-in, rather than inescapable. In this respect, the ukulele's third-wave resurgence may be viewed as a product, and a negotiation, of a world in which the boundaries between collective and solo musicking, and between togetherness and aloneness more broadly, have become more eroded than ever before.

Platformisation, to use Zhang and Negus's (2021) term, is both a significant root cause of the convergence of online and offline which is reflected in the ukulele's third-wave practices, and, perhaps, the most substantial limiting factor of YouTube's social worlds in terms of the ability to traverse desire lines. The increasing influence of digital platforms on everyday life is what produces the blurring between holicipation and participation described above, which is mirrored on the ukulele's network of pathways and in its social worlds, both online and off. It also, however, leads to the commodification and algorithmic promotion and censorship of content on platforms like YouTube. This, I suggested in chapter 7, leads participatory culture to be viewed as a potentially lucrative commodity in its own right, allowing corporations to access, and arguably appropriate, trust which might otherwise be unavailable to them, as well as using participatory content and its aesthetics to conceal that very appropriation. The ukulele is only one example of this broader commodification of participatory culture and its aesthetics, but it is a representative one. Although scholarship does exist regarding the corporate appropriation of participatory culture, this tendency towards self-concealment does not seem to have been explored in the same terms

elsewhere. Further research might pursue the ramifications of this tendency in more depth.

In chapter 9, I also considered a similar appropriation of a particular style of ukulele music which has become popular in advertisements, to the degree of rendering it almost a genre in and of itself. Again, although this has been common knowledge in YouTube's social worlds for some time, to the extent of becoming an in-joke amongst participants (see "Royalty Free Ukulele" 2014), and was also commonly cited as a source of resentment towards the ukulele by its detractors in my own study, this style, its use in advertising, and the backlash against it, seems to have gone completely undescribed in scholarship until this point. My own exploration of it in this study is rather limited, and considers it largely in the context of its detractors' responses to it; my attempts to contextualise it suggest that it may have originated on YouTube, and to have become popular amongst television advertisers shortly afterwards, in part because of its association with the participatory platform, but the exact chronology of its emergence remains rather unclear to me, is regrettably beyond the scope of this player-focused study, and might be an interesting avenue for further investigation. Outsiders to the ukulele's social worlds frequently seemed to consider the corporate style of playing to be identical to that heard within grassroots-level ukulele ritual events; I have shown in chapter 9, however, that the corporate style has distinctive features, and that eliding the two is therefore reductive.

### **Final remarks: breadth, depth, and (path)ways forward**

This doctoral thesis represents new and original research on the ukulele's third-wave social worlds, pathways, and practices outside of Hawaii. It examines the neglected practices of the instrument's highly active social worlds in the English context, and itemises the range of overlapping pathways players choose to take beyond the offline-first, fixed-membership groups described in earlier scholarship on the topic. In many respects, my research questions (why the ukulele, and why now?)

are arguably still overly ambitious in both their breadth and their depth, in part due to the relatively small number of prior studies, and my aim to offer as much of an overview as possible of forms of ukulele musicking and pathways taken between them is similarly so; although I have attempted to offer representative case studies here which indicate my own experience and interpretation of these worlds and pathways, they are necessarily a very partial view. I have felt an almost perpetual pull throughout my research for this project between this breadth and depth, wanting to explore more Zoom groups, more specialist-demographic groups, more festivals in different locales, but finding myself limited by time, resources, and, ultimately, word count. What this thesis does prove, however, is the depth, complexity, and meaning of the range of ukulele activity taking place during the instrument's third wave in England, and online; its musicking activities are neither trivial nor simplistic, and their impact on their participants is often profound, and worthy of additional study.

In particular, there is more work to be done into the ukulele's presence across social networks other than YouTube; although YouTube's viral videos of ukulele performances coincided initially with its resurgence into the public consciousness, other multimedia social platforms have emerged in the years since I first began writing this thesis, and it might be enlightening to consider players' pathways within and through them. I also suggest that further consideration of the topic might explore more systematically the influence of locale on offline-first musicking, in particular. My own research took place in England, a choice directed partly by convenience of access, but it would be interesting to see similarly detailed research done into the range of ukulele musicking practices in other locales, to consider their qualitative similarities and differences from those I describe here. It would also potentially be worthwhile to consider whether the person-centred values I have described as characteristic of third-wave ukulele musicking, as well as their production of desire lines and extension of Finnegan's pathway model, are present within other forms of musicking, and, if so, how they manifest qualitatively. Rogers' model of personality seemed such an

immediately comfortable fit with the experiences participants described, and which I experienced myself in my fieldwork, that I was shocked to discover it had not been applied more widely in the interpretation of grassroots musicking.

This thesis's findings rest on the emotionally rich content of the thoughts and experiences shared with me by every one of its participants, across every medium and setting in which I collected data, from interviews in dimly-lit pergolas in East London gardens, to participant-observation in festival halls too packed to strum even a miniature soprano ukulele, to the hundreds of anonymous participants who poured their hearts out in the holicipatory-participatory hybrid space of my survey. During the process of interviewing I found myself reassuring participants who thought that they might not be able to furnish me with useful information that 'you are the expert, not me'. The more time I have spent sifting through the content of our conversations, the more certain I have become of the truth of this statement. Their thoughts and reflections offer a rich and precious insight into not only the particular place and time of this study, but into the depth and range of human experience, both within and beyond the musicking frame. In 2006, Finnegan wrote, of *The Hidden Musicians*:

I believe a place still exists for a study of the kind represented by this book – an ethnography specific to its place and time both in the content of what it documents and in its historically situated approach, struggling to expand into a greater understanding of the pluralism of multiple musics, of musical practices not just works, and of the active pathways trod by practising musicians... As well as resonating with experiences elsewhere, these individual musicians and their arts are unique to a time and place, realising their complex and imaginative musical action in a specific and multifaceted setting. (Finnegan 2007, xiv)

Sixteen years on, this remains, I think, no less true. Although the shape of the pathways and worlds Finnegan describes may have been altered and extended by new realms of communication, to take seriously the situated practices of individual musicians and participants in musicking, including – perhaps especially – those

which may initially seem worthy of dismissal, is as valuable an endeavour as ever before.

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## Appendix A. Field sites visited

Pseudonym	Frequency	Dates attended	Description
The Strum-Along A	Weekly	March - September 2016	Very large open jam (150 attendance), central London, meeting in pub basement.
The Strum-Along B	Weekly	March - September 2016	Small open jam (10-20 attendance), central London, meeting in pub basement.
The Strum-Along C	Weekly, but in practice not always	March - April 2016	Very small open jam (though in practice, with 5-10 regular attendees), outskirts of London, meeting in pub.
Ukulele Shindig	Weekly	February - August 2016	Open jam (50 attendance) meeting in bar. Street level, often attended by passers-by.
Ukulele Speakeasy	Monthly	September 2016 - January 2017	Theatrical, cabaret/burlesque aesthetic (30-50 attendance). Implicitly queer space but not exclusively so.
Ukulele Universe	N/A	February - October 2016	Specialist ukulele shop. Observed shifts and classes, and worked on shop floor when required
Intermediate group A	Weekly	January - April 2018	Stable membership (12 members), general-interest. Pedagogically-oriented. Occasionally performed concerts which group members could choose to join, or not.
Intermediate group B	Weekly	September - December 2017	Stable membership (12 members), general-interest. Pedagogically-oriented. Occasionally performed concerts which group members could choose to join, or not.
Advanced group A	Weekly	January - March 2018	Stable membership (8 members), general-interest. Pedagogically-oriented. Occasionally performed

			concerts which group members could choose to join, or not.
Beginner group A	Weekly	September - December 2017	Stable membership (15 members), general-interest. Pedagogically-oriented. Occasionally performed concerts which group members could choose to join, or not.
The Strummers	Daily	August 2020 - March 2021 (initially sporadically)	Zoom collective (10-60 attendees), general-interest, initially UK-hosted but later more international hosts. International attendance. Open but regular and close relationships formed. Founded by members of The Strum-Along.
Pluck Together	Weekly	3 evenings, September 2020	Zoom collective (10-30 attendees), general-interest, USA-hosted, international attendance. Modelled on the Strummers. Open but regular attendees.
U3A Ukes	Twice weekly	December 2017 - February 2018, 3 sessions	Closed group for retired players. Located rurally in the Home Counties.
UkeAlong	Monthly	January 2018, 1 session	Open jam (30 attendance), located rurally in the Home Counties
The Pluckers	Monthly	January - March 2018, 3 sessions	Open jam (50 attendance), suburban location
Ukulele Singalong	Monthly	3 sessions, February - June 2016	Unusual hybrid event. Stable-membership group with large repertoire list, individual audience members encouraged to volunteer as lead vocalists. London/touring
Ukulele Collective	Fortnightly	January - July 2016	Small open jam (5-10 attendance), in practice stable membership, no public performances, meeting in university space and attended largely but not exclusively by students

The Ukulele Club	Weekly	3 days, January 2016	Large jam/concert hybrid (20-50 attendees), weekends, family-friendly.
Queer As Uke	Yearly, group meets weekly	3 evenings, December 2017-2019	Concert and gathering hosted by queer women's ukulele group, also featuring other performers.
Summer In The City (real name)	Yearly	3 days, August 2017	Spatial convention in London for YouTube fans and content creators
UK Uke Fest	Yearly	2 days, July 2017	Medium ukulele festival in town hall, South East England. Ticketed, general-interest. Featuring jams, performances and workshops.
Ukes By The Coast	Yearly	2 days, June 2017-2018	Small ukulele festival in English coastal town. Ticketed, implicitly catering to retired players.
The Big Ukulele Fest	Yearly	2 days, July 2018	Medium ukulele festival in suburban area. Ticketed, general-interest





## Appendix B. Interviewees

Pseudonym	Description	Duration of involvement with ukulele at time of interview (approximate)
Alice	Mid-60s, retired. Never played an instrument before, demusicalised, describes self as 'not musical'. Began playing during pandemic, and taking lessons online, but has never attended a spatial jam.	<1 year
Anna	Late 20s, picked up ukulele years previously but plays irregularly. Sometimes attends London-based jams, sometimes plays alone at home. Does not play any other instruments and considers herself 'not very musical'.	>7 years
Bella	30s, wanted to be able to play music but struggled with the guitar. Had heard ukulele might be easier, so tried it as an alternative. Has taken group classes and travels to festivals when she gets the chance.	>3 years
Bruce	40s, has played at open jams for years and collects ukuleles, but felt too nervous to play in a context where he could be heard until the pandemic and getting involved in virtual groups. Has now started writing his own songs. Plays 'a little bit' of guitar but no other instruments.	<10 years
Cara	30s, accomplished classical guitar player who tends to place pressure on herself to perform and practise. Finds ukulele enjoyable because of its comparative simplicity and feels there are fewer pressures on her. Particularly enjoys open jams.	>2 years
Clark	NB: non-British interviewee, based in USA. Very enthusiastic and accomplished ukulele player. Attended and organised numerous festivals and groups prior to the pandemic, and runs ukulele-related podcast. Involved	'16 years, 8 months and 5 days'

	with organising Pluck Together, and near-daily attendee of the Strummers.	
Ellis	Early 20s. Pair interview with friend Grey. Very active songwriter, not involved in any groups but keenly aware of YouTube's social worlds.	>5 years
Gina	Late 60s, retired. Pair interview with friend Sally. Previously helped organise closed group with Sally, now attends closed online group. Involved in folk music for much of her adult life.	5 years
Grey	Early 20s. Pair interview with friend Ellis. Occasional singer-songwriter, not involved in any groups but keenly aware of YouTube's social worlds.	>5 years
Hayley	Late 20s. Pair interview with friend Kay. Musical family but demusicalised, longed to be a musician when younger. Picked up ukulele in early 20s, now a singer-songwriter. Linked socially to Ukulele Universe and friend of Neville.	>4 years
John	70s. Involved with UkeAlong and U3A group, but sporadically. Enjoys playing alone. Also plays guitar. Considers self reasonably proficient but not a musician.	>6 years
Kay	Late 20s. Pair interview with friend Hayley. Trained music producer and keyboard player but by her own admission lacks confidence. Struggled with guitar but used ukulele as transition to guitar and bass. Occasionally writes songs on ukulele. Linked socially to Ukulele Universe and friend of Neville.	>5 years
Laura	Late 30s, organiser of the Strum-Along and the Strummers. Very accomplished teacher and musician, extensive experience of	>10 years
Lindsay	50s, regular attendee of suburban group and occasional attendee of various jams and	<1 year

	festivals which she travels to. Demusicalised and describes self as 'a bad musician'.	
Lola	40s, long-standing member of Queer as Uke. Plays keyboard and sings, considers herself a musician, but finds some other community music activities too exposed.	>3 years
Maria	40s, sporadically attends several London jams and travels to festivals. Demusicalised, abandoned musicking while at school and picked up the ukulele a couple of years previously. Unsure if she thinks of herself as a musician.	<3 years
Moira	70s, occasional attendee of the Strum-Along but lives rurally so unable to join regularly. Consistent attendee of the Strummers since the start of the pandemic.	>3 years
Neville	30s, Ukulele Universe staff. Highly accomplished guitar and ukulele player, plays professionally in multiple bands.	>10 years
Pete	50s. Performance artist, but considers self a 'non-musician'. Learned ukulele initially for specific event. Attended technique-focused classes but did not enjoy them so moved on to playing in jams. Customer of Ukulele Universe.	<2 years
Robert	30s, former Strum-Along regular who moved away, then rejoined during pandemic when Strummers moved online. Also plays guitar. Considers self 'sort of a musician'.	>5 years
Rosa	Late 20s. Classically trained pianist, enjoys open jams with friends, primary school teacher who uses ukulele to write educational songs. Considers self a 'nervous musician'.	>1 year
Rosie	NB: non-British interviewee, based in USA. 30s. Regular attendee of the Strummers, sometimes attends other virtual online groups, but describes self as 'too shy' to attend a spatial group.	<4 years

Saffron	50s. Confident singer, but newer ukulele player. Involved in the Strummers and a few local groups in her area in the suburban north of England.	>1 year
Sally	60s, retired. Pair interview with friend Gina. Organised closed group before pandemic, now runs closed Zoom group for members who already know one another from the spatial group.	>5 years
Tim	70s, retired. Very active and enthusiastic player, involved in U3A Ukes and UkeAlong, practises regularly alone, and puts on informal concerts for residents of his retirement community. Feels he is not a musician, but that he might become one in the future.	2 years
Tom	40s, regular attendee of the Strummers and own local suburban group. Ukulele collector, enthusiast and busker, highly accomplished player. Considers self 'not really a musician'.	>5 years

## Appendix C. Interview questions

1. Can you tell me about your own journey with the ukulele?
2. **EITHER:**
  - a. (If social world affiliation not known): Do you play alongside other people?
  - b. (If social world affiliation known): What does (social world name) mean to you?
3. How does playing or hearing the ukulele make you feel?
4. Do you consider yourself a musician? What does that mean to you?
5. Why the ukulele?



## **Appendix D. Interview consent form**

1. I confirm that I have understood the purpose of the study, that it has been adequately explained to me, and that I have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw without giving reason.
3. I agree to take part in the above study.
4. I agree to the interview being audio recorded for transcription purposes only.
5. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes (unless otherwise specified) in the thesis and any subsequent publications.





## Appendix E: Survey questions

All questions were optional.

Question	Question type
1. How do you feel about the ukulele?	Text field
2. What 3 words do you associate with the ukulele?	3 text boxes
3. Do you play the ukulele yourself?	Boolean selector
4. What does that mean to you?	Text field
5. Have you ever been involved with a ukulele group?	Boolean selector
6. What does that mean to you?	Text field

Demographic question	Question type
Age	Multi-option selector (17 or younger/18-24/25-34/35-44/45-54/55-64/65-74/75 or older)
Gender	Text field
Ethnicity	Text field
Location	Text field



## Appendix F. Survey description

I would like to ask you to participate in data collection to gain a broad sense of people's impressions and feelings about the ukulele, whether positive or negative; their participation in ukulele groups, or lack thereof; and some demographic information to see if these opinions and experiences can be in any way mapped to identity or social demographic. These results will inform my PhD thesis. **The survey is for anyone and you should not feel that a lack of knowledge or experience with the instrument should keep you from forming an opinion on it.**

The survey includes ten questions in total but **all questions are optional** and **you need not answer all (or any) of them if you do not wish to.** Questions are informal and may be answered as formally or informally, in as much or as little detail as you like. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary.

The information you provide is confidential and there is no risk to you as a participant, but anonymised quotes may be used. Your IP address is anonymous to SurveyMonkey and I will not be collecting your location (except for the extent to which you choose to answer question 6 on your location). Results from the survey will be treated as a source of background information for my PhD thesis and any subsequent publications, alongside literature-based research, participant-observation, and interviews with others.

No personally identifying information will appear in any publications resulting from this study.

By filling in this survey you indicate that you understand its purpose and consent to the use of the data as indicated above.