

Article

Melomaniacs: How Independent Musicians Influence West Hollywood's Cosmopolitanism

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Abstract

This article brackets the sociology of music and urban arts by exploring how independent musicians derive creative meaning and connections within the musically diverse place of West Hollywood, CA (WeHo), and describes the existing municipal conditions that enable professional musicians to experience their career trajectories as authentic to their selves. Findings from in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations with 23 local, professional musicians emphasize (i) the artists' authentic expression through innate musicality and live performances; (ii) feelings of acceptance and validation from connections to culturally hybrid audiences; and (iii) appreciation for the city's diverse musical stages with storied histories. In further analyses, original insights are generated into how musicians continue influencing WeHo's cosmopolitanism through their cultural omnivore attitudes and postmaterialist lifestyles. I conclude that the interconnectedness between these independent musicians and the structure of West Hollywood coevolves moral capital, contributing to a more legitimate and musically equitable urban space for artists to be recognized.

Keywords: independent musicians; music vocations; musical spaces; urban arts; creative city; audience connections; cosmopolitanism; moral capital



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1. Introduction

Melomaniac: a person with an unusual enthusiasm or fondness for music.

From the historic Sunset Strip to “out and proud” Santa Monica Boulevard, the 1.9 square mile urban space of West Hollywood (WeHo) has habitually served as a haven for emerging and established musicians and artists of multicultural genres and identities. And beyond securing its annals in music history, WeHo has routinely challenged the status quo and boundaries of the arts, which continuously helps to attract and protect artistic individuals of all backgrounds—including the more than 40% of WeHo residents who identify as LGBTQ+ (City of West Hollywood 2024a). Yet, while the megacity and “musical universe” (Crossley and Emms 2016) of Los Angeles may be well-known to arts researchers (Allen 2010; Currid and Williams 2010; Holden et al. 2007; Macias 2004; Schrank 2014; Smith 2007), I find the creatively inclusive “music worlds” (Crossley 2025) within West Hollywood to be overlooked within academic communities beyond its ties to progressive legislation, historical LGBTQ+ movements, and gender/race studies (Forest 1995; Christensen and Gerston 1987; Han et al. 2017; Ward 2003; Wisner et al. 2017). WeHo has certainly populated music magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, *Billboard* and *Spin* over the decades; however, beyond these mainstream publications, there is a notable gap in published research studies specifically exploring the harmonious bond between West Hollywood's social biography

and its musical cosmopolitanism. And since music has always had a strong association with space and place (A. Bennett 2017), more intention is needed by researchers to understand how musical cities and scenes are conceptually constructed and rationalized by those artists who belong to them.

The genesis of this research project is a culmination of my 43 years of playing violin, coupled with my 14 years of sociological interests surrounding *individual musicians* and their chosen *musical spaces*, as well as my eight years as a West Hollywood resident. Pursuing a life as a professional musician is to seek not only one's internal passion and agency as an artist but also to embrace the external structures in place that aid or impede one's successes and well-being within the vocation of *musician*. However, rather than build upon the "go-to" sociological topics surrounding working musicians, such as precarity and exploitation within music industries and gig labor markets (Cloonan and Williamson 2023), this project's goal is to explore the social interaction between independent artists' passion to create music and a city that allows for this successful music-making process.

There is no shortage of recent scholarship on individual musicians and their careers, especially *outside* of the United States in artistic regions such as the United Kingdom (Coulson 2012; Umney and Kretsos 2015; Haynes and Marshall 2018; Hoedemaekers 2018; Bull and Scharff 2021), the European Union (Vaag et al. 2014; Portman-Smith and Harwood 2015; Albinsson 2018; Kolbe 2021; Van Zijl and De Bisschop 2023), Australia (D. Bennett 2008; Bridson et al. 2017; Bartlett and Tolmie 2018); and Canada (Chafe and Kaida 2020; Price 2024), I posit two issues with data explicitly collected *within the U.S.* The first is a noticeable hegemony with the country's available arts research that skews toward *quantitative*, macro-level data collection from larger institutions (Markusen et al. 2006; Holden et al. 2007; SNAAP 2011; Jeffri 2015; Cohen 2016; Skaggs 2017; Frenette and Dowd 2018; MIRA 2018; NEA 2019a, 2019b; Yum 2020; Americans for the Arts 2023; P. Adler and Osman 2025). Second, the U.S. often groups multiple artistic careers within both its qualitative and quantitative samples—and subsequent theoretical papers—under the generalization of *artists* (e.g., actors, dancers, designers, filmmakers, fine artists, musicians, photographers, writers, etc.) (Jackson 2004; Alper and Wassall 2006; Iyengar 2013; Lingo and Tepper 2013; Markusen 2013; Lindemann et al. 2017; Woronkiewicz and Noonan 2019; Yum 2020; L. Adler 2021). I argue—as both a musician and researcher—that this blended artist taxonomy and limited *qualitative* focus on musicians and musician-specific U.S. careers can lead to inaccurate public assumptions as well as local, state and federal policy outcomes that do not distinctly benefit *working musicians* and the spaces they inhabit.

My project—which I will refer to as *melomaniacs* in this publication—seeks to bridge this epistemological gap by qualitatively studying the lifestyles and musicianship of 23 independent (i.e., non-commercial) musicians living and working in the city of West Hollywood, California. Employing an *interactionist* approach, the first section of the Findings explores how these individuals derive creative meaning and connections within the musically diverse WeHo spaces. I determine the existing municipal conditions that enable professional musicians to experience their career trajectories as *authentic* to their selves and their innate musicality. I describe how these connections and conditions yield *musical legitimacy* for the artists through live performance opportunities in smaller, historic venues with genre-crossing audiences. The second section of the Findings links interview themes to established social, political and economic theories to better understand the musicians' attitudes and lifestyles. These include Richard Peterson's *culture omnivore* theory (i.e., embracing hybridism and interaction among musical styles) (Peterson and Kern 1996) and Ronald Inglehart's *postmaterialism* theory (i.e., placing value on self-actualization, autonomy and quality of life) (Inglehart 2015). The Discussion and Conclusion analyze how these independent musicians continue in 2024 to influence the *cosmopolitanism* (i.e., metropolitan

humanity) of the historically artistic city of West Hollywood. And it is through this influence and interconnectedness between the individual musicians and the city's structure that *moral capital* (i.e., structural values and character) coevolves (Ratnapala 2023), contributing to a more inclusive and musically equitable place for artists to be recognized.

The significance and originality of this sociological study are presented in its arts-based research (ABR) (Leavy 2020) or avant-garde data collection and methods afforded within the independent sociology field—one whose two-phase research objective is to triangulate the sociology of music, arts advocacy and live performance. This is achieved by (1) the phase one in-person, in-depth interviews and ethnographic performance observations and (2) the phase two public sociological data sharing via a panel discussion and performance with the participants for the greater Los Angeles community, featuring not only the musicians' sonic talents and artistic companionship, but the cultural hybridity of their musicking (Small 1998). This intertwining of empirical data collection with post-postmodernism (i.e., ABR) creative data sharing—albeit at a micro-level event—invites the local population to appreciate their humanistic geography and morally valued ways of life (Forest 1995) in West Hollywood.

The impact of this melomaniac research is still unfolding within the lives of West Hollywood musicians and the city's general population. It is my hope that through the public's exposure to the sociological imagination (Mills 2000)—or the ability to understand how individual musician experiences are shaped by broader social forces—that greater discernment is achieved in viewing how local musicians' artistic meaning-making and individual pursuits of passion collectively impact the cultural prosperity of their communities.

WeHo: The Creative City

"Most cities import culture. In West Hollywood, we export it." —John D'Amico, West Hollywood Mayor, 2014–2015, 2019–2020

Nicknamed "the playground between Beverly Hills and Hollywood," West Hollywood was originally an unincorporated area in the center of Los Angeles County that burgeoned during the Golden Age of Hollywood (1920s–1960s) and laid the foundation to emerge as the center for music on the historic Sunset Strip and along Santa Monica Boulevard. It was during the 1960s and 1970s that WeHo became a major gathering place for all things counterculture—inviting hippies, musicians and artists to flood the region (Davis 2007). Musical icons such as Led Zeppelin, The Doors and Elton John won over crowds in then-emerging music venues such as The Troubadour, The Roxy and The Whisky a Go Go. "The Strip" and nearby areas of West Hollywood became the cultural center for punk rock and New Wave eras during the late 1970s. This progression evolved into the epicenter of the heavy metal scene during the 1980s, with groups like Van Halen, Mötley Crüe and Guns N' Roses redefining the standard for performative excess, and proceeded through to the apathetic Gen X grunge era of the 1990s. The artistic counterculture scene in the city was fluid and embodied through music for decades (see historical visuals in Figures 1–4).

At the acme of the colorful glam metal period in 1984, the idea for a City of West Hollywood was proposed by an unlikely coalition of LGBT activists, seniors (many of whom were Soviet Union immigrants) and frustrated renters. These groups coalesced to form a city with progressive policies and strong tenants' rights protections. WeHo still has an entire division dedicated to rent stabilization programs in 2024. The City of West Hollywood was officially incorporated as a 1.9 square mile, independent city in November 1984 and voted in an openly LGBTQ+ (termed "gay" in 1984) majority to the City Council. Many residents envisioned the cityhood campaign as an opportunity to create a "gay Camelot" or "gay capital" (Christensen and Gerston 1987) where the LGBTQ+ community would become, and remain, one of the largest and most politically powerful populations in

the city (Ward 2003, p. 69). Today, more than 40% of its 36,000 residents identify as LGBTQ+ (City of West Hollywood 2024a), with 48% of my melomaniacs participants also identifying as such. This statistic is particularly meaningful and relevant given that past research links elements of (1) creativity, (2) an orientation toward entertainment, (3) progressiveness and (4) responsibility to “gay identity and place” (Forest 1995).



Figure 1. Tower Records on Sunset Boulevard, 1975 (Photo courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library).



Figure 2. Izzy Stradlin, Axl Rose and Slash of Guns N' Roses perform onstage at the Troubadour for the first time in 1985. (Photo: Marc S. Canter/Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images).

Beyond its reputation as a catalyst for progressive legislation, social change and LGBTQ+ culture, West Hollywood’s “The Creative City” motto demonstrates its continued commitment to arts and culture well into the 21st century. For a city of its small geographic size, West Hollywood has one of the highest concentrations of public art in the United States (City of West Hollywood 2024b). The city’s Arts and Cultural Affairs Commission annually funds over 50 nonprofit arts organizations/artists through seven distinct grant programs. And an innumerable number of artists, arts administrators and professionals in creative fields live in West Hollywood, with 65% of its residents indicating they have a personal creative practice (Carlson 2016, p. 4).

Given West Hollywood’s high profile as an artistic, cultural mecca and lively musical scene (Wisner et al. 2017), I selected the region as the *musical place* for my melomaniacs

project. The rationale for the chosen *individual musicians* follows in the Data and Methods section.



Figure 3. John Taylor and Iggy Pop perform with Neurotic Outsiders at the Viper Room in 1995. (Photo: Jeff Kravitz/Filmmagic Inc.).



Figure 4. Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles performs a free concert in Plummer Park (West Hollywood) in 2022. (Photo: Mike Pingel/WEHO TIMES).

2. Data and Methods

"So, my identity is black, gay artist. And I'm left-handed." —Colten, 54, voice/piano, male

The study of music and the study of sociology complement each other esthetically in the research design process. Learning to play music involves an immersion within a culture that has rules, languages and rituals and, as a result, music is a form of sociology (Hennion 2017, p. 292). Musical sociologists have spanned well over a century and include such recognizable names as W.E.B. Du Bois, Max Weber, Theodore Adorno, Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, Howie Becker and Tia DeNora. Music-making can, in fact, act as an interactionist, interpretive device for sociological thinking, utilizing empathy, radical listening skills, proprioception (i.e., our "sixth sense") and understanding how social differences can be bridged (Gardiner 2003; Rabinowitch 2020; Maslen 2022).

This melomaniacs project invites both an *interactionist* and *interpretive* practice that, like playing music, requires participation and improvisation as well as self-reflection to better understand the complex relationships between the independent musician ethos and the urban area of Los Angeles. And because West Hollywood is a contemporary, progressive city, I selected contemporary, progressive methods—prioritizing for subjectivity, a qualitative arts-based research (ABR) approach.

2.1. Arts-Based Research (ABR)

Arts-based research (ABR) is the primary mode of qualitative, ethnographic inquiry in this project—from the grant proposal stages, through the sample selection and interview/ethnographic observation periods, and within the analyses and presentation finales. Choosing the ABR method allowed me to use my own artistic activity to understand and articulate the subjectivity of the musicians' experiences in West Hollywood. This form of research, which is defined in multiple ways, uses the arts to go beyond traditional word and number-based methods to access knowledge that might otherwise be inaccessible—exploring and even challenging human action and experience (Savin-Baden and Wimpenny 2014). The use of the creative data sharing panel discussion and performances with the musicians for the wider West Hollywood community (see Section 2.4) is an application of ABR. Empowering the musicians throughout the analysis and writing periods provided deeper insights into the human condition of being a working musician, embodying the creative expression themes uncovered throughout this research project.

2.2. Participants

The project's sample (i.e., melomaniacs)—whose privacy is protected with pseudonyms—comprises 23 musicians ages 25 to 81 years (median = 36; mean = 44). Self-described genders include 12 males, seven females, two nonbinary (of which one identifies as transgender), one female transgender and one male/female. 11 of the 23 (48%) identify as LGBTQ+. Marital status is mixed, and only five musicians have children. 10 instruments and 12 different preferred musical genres are represented in the study, with 18 participants having attained music/arts degrees at the higher education level (see Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the melomaniacs musician sample (n = 23).

Name	Gender	LGBTQ+	Age	Marital Status	Children	Instrument-Discipline	Primary Genre	Arts Degree
Jolene	Female		81	Divorced		Piano, Voice, Songwriter	Jazz	
Carl	Male	✓	30	Single		Voice, Guitar, Songwriter	Pop/Rock	✓
Peter	Male		59	Married		Acoustic + Electric Guitar	Instrumental Acoustic	✓
Benjamin	Male		70	Married		Bass Guitar, Composition	Progressive Rock	
Nadia	Female		32	Single		Violin	Jazz	✓
Prince	Male/Female	✓	31	Single		Voice	Drag	✓
Sage	Female		44	Married		Flute	Contemporary Classical	✓
Presley	Male		44	Married		Oboe, Conductor, Composition	Contemporary Classical	✓
Dylan	Male	✓	29	Partner		Voice, Piano	Pop/Rock	✓
Johann	Male	✓	29	Single		Guitar, Piano, Composer	Pop/Rock	✓

Table 1. *Cont.*

Name	Gender	LGBTQ+	Age	Marital Status	Children	Instrument-Discipline	Primary Genre	Arts Degree
Mary	Female	✓	27	Single		Voice, Electric Guitar	Pop/Rock	
Nelson	Male		31	Single		Electric Guitar, Composer	Rhythm + Blues	✓
Harmony	Female	✓	32	Single		Violin, Viola, Voice, Piano	Pop/Rock	✓
Colton	Male	✓	54	Single		Voice, Piano	Jazz	
Kamille	Female		63	Single	✓	Voice	Musical Theater	✓
Messiah	Nonbinary	✓	34	Single		Voice, Piano, Songwriter	Pop	
Sutton	Nonbinary Trans		25	Partner		Voice, Composition	Musical Theater	✓
Toby	Male		61	Married	✓	Piano, Composition	Jazz	✓
Aria	Female	✓	28	Partner		Voice, Piano, Conducting	Collaborative Piano	✓
Linus	Male		48	Married	✓	Double Bass, Electric Bass	Jazz	✓
Donovan	Male		62	Married	✓	Guitar	Brazilian	✓
Laurel	Female Trans	✓	68	Married	✓	Guitar, Piano, Conducting	Choral	✓
Eric	Male	✓	36	Married		Voice, Composition, Conducting	Choral	✓

As a West Hollywood resident, musician and avid concertgoer, I found gathering participants for this study to be the easiest part of the process. Serendipity and recommendation (i.e., non-probability convenience sampling) served as the default method. During the vetting process, the inclusion criteria consisted of (1) living in and/or deriving a musical life in West Hollywood, CA; (2) being engaged in music performance or composition as the primary source of income *or* striving to have music performance or composition as the primary source of income, of which the latter was extended to the younger quartile of musicians under 30 years of age; (3) maintaining a highly acclaimed level of performance; and (4) not being linked to a commercial entity such as a large music label/company (i.e., independent).

Selected participants' careers include session/studio work (i.e., hired to perform in a recording session, oftentimes for a film score); music education positions; music technology/production gigs; paid open mic background musicians; live conducting and performance gigs; commissioned compositions; and touring.

Hobbyists or "enthusiasts"—of which there are a plethora in the greater Los Angeles region—were excluded. I also viewed social media pages and websites and used abductive reasoning to eliminate musicians who constructed online personas aligning with Los Angeles "fame and fortune" identities over musical identities (e.g., accounts showing more posts with celebrities or lavish material goods versus elements of music-making).

2.3. Data Collection

The melomaniacs data collection took place from January 2024 through December 2024, during which time interviews ranging from semi-structured to open-ended to life narratives were recorded—allowing for the musicians to guide the direction of the in-

interviews. Questions began with the musical backgrounds of the participants and then moved on to inquiries about creative meaning, connections, career challenges and successes, and the space of West Hollywood. All interviews were conducted in-person at the musician's home or studio, researcher's home or a public café. The mean interview time of usable data is 58 minutes. Musicians were paid \$50 for their participation following each interview. This compensation element is a principle of my ethical social research—to pay musicians for their performance and non-performance time—and was built into the research grant proposal.

Live performance experiences have proven to be among the most appropriate opportunities for deeper qualitative research in the sociology of music (Grazian 2004, p. 207). As such, the melomaniacs conversations were complemented with ethnographic observations and casual field notes in West Hollywood performance venues with the musicians (and their audiences) as concerts were booked (see Table 3 in Findings).

2.4. Analytical Strategy: Interactionism and Post-Postmodernism

The melomaniacs analyses are guided by (1) interactionist techniques (i.e., micro-sociological focus on how musicians create and interpret meaning through their face-to-face interactions) and (2) post-postmodernism approaches (also known as pseudo-modernism, hyper-modernism and meta-modernism). Most researchers are knowledgeable about postmodernist strategies, which have been applied mainly in the artistic and social sciences from the 1950s onwards. But since musicians and artists have been playing and creating in the more ambiguous post-postmodernist milieu since the 1990s, this method more appropriately aligns with my project. Social science definition and parameters of post-postmodernism remain unclear; I define it simply as allowing for flexible and combined analyses that always respect the individual musicians and their choices, given the rapidly evolving 21st-century artist world. This approach fosters sincerity and trust with the participants, while striking a balance between objectivity and subjectivity.

All interviews were uploaded and transcribed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. My inductive analysis process begins neatly with open-coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to break down the musicians' statements into meaningful segments by assigning codes and categorizing them based on emergent themes and patterns—with the end goal of proposing new theories (see Table 2 NVivo codes).

From there, hybrid methods follow to further contextualize the musicians' individual stories, lived experiences and meaning-making. This involves core narrative analysis, conversation analysis (to better understand the emotions expressed via voice timbres) and hermeneutic phenomenology analysis (producing descriptions of lived phenomena that can connect with the collective experience of others) (Godden and Kutsyuruba 2023).

It should also be noted that the post-postmodernism practices in melomaniacs utilize “collaborative ethnography” and “sociable sociology” (Sinha and Back 2014), both serving as allies in arts-based research. Subjects in collaborative ethnography shift from being informants to being consultants, moving from incidental collaboration to a more conscious and explicit collaborative strategy (Lassiter 2005). Musicians in this study are highly intelligent and inquisitive. They were eager to work together to be authors of their own lives and recognize themselves in this research. By building genuine relationships with the artists (i.e., sociable sociology)—and actively engaging them in the research process—trust (and friendships) were constructed over the year, rather than simply extracting information from them.

Table 2. NVivo open-coding themes in melomaniacs.

Name	Files	References
○ Audience	13	20
○ Background	21	63
○ Family Life	10	13
○ Parents	11	17
○ Challenges and Risks	22	47
○ Commercial	18	43
○ Connections	12	25
○ Identity	21	50
○ Instruments	18	32
○ Leaving the Industry	20	27
○ Other	20	48
○ Social Media	9	19
○ Solidarity	17	25
○ Songwriting	3	3
○ Space	22	90
○ Success	23	65
○ Valued-Recognition	20	31
○ Why Music	19	33

2.5. Creative Data Sharing: Engaging the Public Imagination

To operationalize the collaborative ethnography and sociable sociology aspects of my research design, the WeHo community was invited to learn about melomaniacs prior to this publication. In January of 2025, a group of 90 residents, local politicians, music lovers and tourists gathered at the West Hollywood City Council Chambers Theater to hear about the melomaniacs project. The free-of-charge evening featured a panel discussion with seven musician participants titled “Please Stop Asking Me What My Day Job Is: Defining Authenticity and Discovering Legitimacy as a Career Musician.” The musicians—a violinist, flutist, oboist/composer, vocalist, upright/electric bassist, conductor, and singer/songwriter/pianist—each spoke about the key themes and findings in the research. An eclectic concert with the panelists followed featuring original pop music, jazz violin compositions, Broadway music and a multimedia piece with flute and electronic dance music (EDM) (see Figure 5).

Additionally, when this project was presented in March 2025 at a DePaul University (Chicago, IL, USA) colloquium, a similar format was used with the participating musicians appearing live on screen for both researcher and audience to interact with during the findings and question/answer sessions.

Beyond my personal interests in public sociology and community organizing, I find this type of creative and visual data representation—both sonic and spoken—to offer a natural validity in my research. Real-time audiences (instead of readers) enjoy a more edifying experience with the combination of engaged scholarship and the extra layer of musician levity that is rather lacking in the data sharing process within arts research.



Figure 5. Melomaniacs data sharing event, January 2025 (West Hollywood, CA, USA). Photos: Craig Cochrane.

2.6. Limitations

Understanding that sociological research seeks validity and to be representative within its data and methods, this study acknowledges its relatively small sample size ($n = 23$) along with the singular, regional limitation of West Hollywood. Additionally, while I find the backgrounds of the melomaniacs participants unique—with almost all arriving in Los Angeles as “transplants” from 14 other U.S. states and two countries (i.e., Italy and Brazil)—the racial/ethnic limitations need to be noted. Two musicians identify as Black, two Pacific Islander and 19 White. This breakdown may mirror the 69% White demographics found within West Hollywood ([U.S. Census 2024](#)) but could present limitations in the conclusions drawn during analysis.

It is my hope to extend this musician research into other urban, musical places such as Nashville, Austin, Chicago and New Orleans wherewith the assistance of a larger research team and additional funding—I can grow the number of participants along with racial and ethnic diversity variables.

3. Findings

“I would say, like, 98% of my life is with music in my ears.” —Mary, 27, voice/electric guitar, female

The findings presented in this section center around authentic musicality, musical legitimacy through live performance, and audience connections in West Hollywood’s musical spaces. They represent the most salient coded themes from interviews and field notes. I then frame these themes together with established (albeit tweaked) social, political and economic theories—which are not typically applied to working artists—to better illustrate the impact of the musicians’ unconventional attitudes and lifestyles.

3.1. Authentic Musicality and Self-Expression

“Why am I still a musician? Because I love it. It brings me joy like nothing else, to be able to connect with somebody while playing music and to just be on the same beat as somebody, like physically, and just being in the same moment as somebody.” —Aria, 29, voice/collaborative pianist/conductor, female

Authenticity is a buzzword; so much so that Merriam-Webster awarded “authentic” the Word of the Year in 2023. The discourse in scholarship surrounding its meaning in music is vast (Moore 2002; Grazian 2004; Allen 2010; Blake 2021; Newman and Smith 2016; Negus and Astor 2022). As I describe this finding, an important distinction to articulate is how we view authenticity within the sociology of music: are we thinking about the authenticity in music as an *object* (e.g., fixed compositions, genre constructions or commodification) or are we thinking about it as an *activity* (e.g., performance interactions or process of music-making) (Roy and Dowd 2010, pp. 184–87)? In his book *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Small (1998) argues that music “is not a thing at all but an *activity*, something that people do” (p. 2). This finding—as well as the larger melomaniacs project—primarily centers around *activity*, or the musicians’ interactions with and connections to music and music-making (i.e., musicking), because understanding authenticity entails focusing on the *act* (Moore 2002), which occurs when a songwriter or performer “succeeds in conveying the impression of integrity and unmediated communication” (Negus and Astor 2022, p. 163).

To understand the musicians’ behaviors that reflect their core beings (i.e., their authentic selves), it helps to explore the artists’ lifelong relationship and identity with music, as depicted by three of the older, more established musicians:

“It [music] was something I could do when I was a little child. And it’s almost like I already knew music when I came to this life. I already knew how things worked, no one had to tell me so. It embodies more than your feelings. It embodies your whole spiritual, mental, physical, everything self. So, I don’t even think of myself as a musician. I just do it at this point. I can’t do anything else. I mean, I don’t think I could do anything else.” —Jolene, 81, piano, female

“It’s just because there’s really nothing else and I don’t have any reason to look for anything else. I’m going to live and die as a musician, and I’ll play up until the day I drop. Because this is what I do. This is who I am. And it’s important.” —Toby, 61 piano, male

“I felt almost as if I didn’t really have another choice, that it was so ingrained in me to play music. I tried to do other things when I was in college, but music was always the thing that gave me inspiration and energy. And when I woke up in the morning, that’s what I thought about and wanted to do. . . and even after 30 years of touring, it’s still the main driving force. Music was something that I excelled at. And you know, it would have been easier if I would have chosen something else. And it’s not an easy life. But I just can’t imagine doing anything else.” —Peter, 59, acoustic guitar, male

Musicians in this study describe music as the one thing they knew they were supposed to do in life, whether through composition/songwriting, teaching or performing. Peter touches on the struggle of a long-term musical career, which is a significant thematic code in the sample’s interviews and is congruent with past literature on precarious employment in artistic fields (Umney and Kretsos 2015; Chafe and Kaida 2020; L. Adler 2021). However, the ethereal drive of musical expressivity in this sample eclipses the reported financial and non-financial challenges expressed in interviews. Two mid-career musicians spoke

candidly about coming to terms with the realities of achieving economic or commercial wealth in the independent field:

“I came through classical music and commercial artist fame was not ever a consideration. I mean, maybe you’ve heard of one flutist in the last generation that’s a household name? And we [musician spouse] have made a lot of connections with the film music industry, film music composers, but we’re always on the artistic side of it. My goal was always to be a musician and somehow be middle class at the same time. And that was, like, really what I hoped to be.” —Sage, 44, flute, female

“I honestly thought it was just going to be too far-fetched to ever get signed. But I think I had to convince myself it wasn’t about getting a label or getting a contract. It’s just about spreading good vibes, you know? And yes, it is the dream, if I could be on the radio, it would be beautiful. But it’s such a bullshit industry that I’m not going to let that take away from my joy.” —Johann, 29, guitar/piano/composer, male

This hierarchy of placing innate musicality—or their internal emotional, imaginative and musical intent (Pfleiderer 1963)—over the desire for fame or financial wealth associated with Los Angeles commercial music industries is what I personally witnessed as venerable authenticity throughout the year of research.

I joke that musicians do not come with a certificate of authenticity, and certainly not in a city like Los Angeles where I have witnessed value being placed on the status of celebrity more times over than on the status of talent. The “famous for being famous,” “famesque” or “celebutantes” are sobering sobriquets for some of the mainstream, commercially driven artists who arguably seek fame and fortune over their artform. But surprisingly to me, the musicians in this project do not disparage fellow artists for seeking or attaining this path as described below by Donovan and Presley. There is a critical consensus among the participants on their desire for more personal income in their careers or to sell more show tickets. But that same group feels musicians should make money however they wish to make money:

“Are you there for the fame or are you there for the art? I think there’s something natural and healthy about wanting to be compensated for what you bring to the table. That’s one thing. Another thing is if you’re in a fame mindset and nothing else matters, then that’s where your mindset is. For me, it’s that I connect to music. . . there’s a relationship between music and me. If you picked it for fame, this is what you’re going to go for. But the connection that you have and the satisfaction that you get out of pursuing your art? I think there’s a reward there.” —Donovan, 62, guitar, male

“No one said it was going to be easy. That was in the brochure. . . and anyone who’s successful in the music industry, as a performer, they are doing what they need to do to be successful. They are singing songs that are tailored to make them the most marketable, songs about things that will sell the best. Now, some might call that selling out, but I disagree. They’re just using their musical skills to be funded as a musician. I don’t think that’s selling out. Frankly, if you’ve heard of anybody, it’s because they’ve sold out in some way.” —Presley, 44, oboe/conductor/composer, male

This data brings into question the “selling out” myth among the independent musician field—or that artists who are considered marketed under the influence of capitalist social relations of production (Bridson et al. 2017, p. 1), and are often seen as “selling out” or “sell outs” as they move up. It is regarded by some as a process not of claiming institutional

space but of being claimed by the dominant culture (Blake 2021, p. 565)—in this instance, the L.A. commercial music scene. But musicians in this project speak about the need to keep moving forward in the field. “And if your interest is in the most commercial music possible,” as Benjamin, a 70-year-old bass guitarist/composer, shares, “that’s not something I would consider as a pejorative to hold against anybody.”

Or as Linus, a 48-year-old double bassist, keenly said at the West Hollywood melomaniacs panel discussion, “Selling out is just a grunge term from the 90s.”

Negus and Astor (2022, p. 170) state what matters is not what authenticity is but what it does in music. With this group of melomaniacs, their musicality allows them to express themselves with integrity while being honest to their solid sense of artistic self. It helps them connect with people in performative spaces, leading us to the next finding.

3.2. Legitimacy from (Live) Audience Connections

“I think if I zoom out, then, of course, I don’t want to just do this for myself.”

—Dylan, 29, voice/piano, male

When I speak to non-musician audiences about what to ask career musicians (and what not to ask¹), I usually suggest beginning with simple inquiries about why they are musicians (see Finding 1) and how they define success. Mostly because I know they will love the answers and begin to appreciate how a musician’s mind works. The normative, presumed definitions for artists’ career success in the United States are not dependent primarily on musical quality but rather on metrics surrounding monetary well-being, recording sales and social media followers—oftentimes dictated by an artist manager or label and consistently measured from the consumption lens (i.e., fan-based) versus the producer (i.e., musician) lens (Greenfeld 1984; Jarvin and Subotnik 2010; Tilly 2013; Corman 2019). This “popular success” definition—and the economic, sociological and musicological analyses surrounding it—tend to evade deeper meanings behind the word (Hennion 1983) for individual musicians rather than explain it.

My original interview guide involved questions about personal success in Los Angeles as an independent musician. The answers given were ubiquitous with the participants’ attainment of *invention* (i.e., *songwriting/composition*), *individual expressivity* and *joy* as shared by three musicians below:

“[Success is about] When I get to produce the music that I want to produce on my terms, you know, professional and artistic terms.” —Donovan, 62, guitar, male

“Does it make me happy? Am I satisfied? If it’s not making you happy, you’re not successful. Like, why are you doing it? If you’re not passionate about it, it’s not going to make you happy either. And if you’re not giving something of value to people in whatever you do, that’s not success to me. That’s gonna make me cry.” —Kamille, 63, voice, female

“I can tell I’m making a positive difference. I will go to Pride, and I will get up with a microphone for five minutes and say something and people will thank me. And I try to carry that gratitude and let it stay with me, so I can remember why I do this and why it’s so important that I never stop.” —Sutton, 25, voice/composition, nonbinary trans

The responses given by Kamille and Sutton in the first few meetings helped evolve the interview guide when *success* began to attach itself significantly to *audience connections*, as reemphasized by two of the younger musicians:

“My minor is in rhetoric. Like the big thing about rhetoric is that there’s the writer and the reader or the speaker and the audience. And some may define rhetoric as

the relationship between the two, which is like, ‘Hello?’ That’s, like, music. That’s music performance for me.” —Harmony, 32, violin/viola/voice/piano, female

“I’m thinking about how much joy can I radiate from this music? How much joy can I allow myself to channel? Like how much passion can I channel through me and hopefully somebody sees that in the audience. I think it’s more like you become a vessel for you and you become a vessel for the art. You become the vessel for the intangible.” —Aria, 29, voice/collaborative pianist/conductor, female

Aria and Harmony describe the construction of shared meaning with both the self and the audience yielding the finding of *musical legitimacy*—or the innovation, local validation and diffusion for their musical lives and vocations (Johnson et al. 2006). The participants are musicking together—whether performers or audiences—by harmonizing their contributions and making their collective action successful (Crossley 2022). This creative connection with their live audience becomes a separate achievement and a fundamental goal for this group of artists. And this musical legitimacy—which is derived from the culturally hybrid and genre-crossover audiences I witnessed during the ethnographic observations—will be continued in the later findings about West Hollywood spaces.

Social Media Connections

“They can be impressive for 45 seconds and get their thumbs up. Its success is to the detriment of the actual music world. . . and music in general.” —Toby, 61, piano, male

It is worth noting that social media is viewed as a double-edged sword in this study, with both benefits and disadvantages in the digital attention economy or “grab” economy for independent artists. The artists acknowledge the necessity of the social platforms to survive—both in promotion and visibility in times when the music industry continues to change technologically and rapidly. It is a vehicle for both and proven to generate solid results for musicians in other research as well (Haynes and Marshall 2018). However, the dichotomy within the “experience economy” (Zhang and Negus 2021) is especially evident when musicians discuss audience connections and high-quality performances that they value from live, physical venues versus digital music spaces. This melomaniacs group struggles to authentically connect and find the same musical legitimacy from online platforms—especially with the blurred boundaries between the fans and friends roles (Baym 2013). Two musicians speak about the control of *access* and *status* that social media regulates:

“I love playing live. I grew up playing live. In terms of the audience, I just feel like that’s how I can really minister, like in live space more than on the Internet. Access to playing live is now mitigated by social media, and if you want bigger touring opportunities, you need a bigger following and more Spotify streams. So, if I really want to be on tour, I got to win online first.” —Messiah, voice/piano/songwriter, 34, nonbinary

“Most regular citizens don’t know how to value an artist. Your sense of potential or status is through social media. And if they see you’ve got a viral video or say, ‘Oh, you were in something with a million views!’ or ‘you’ve got 10,000 followers!’ or whatever it is, your stock starts to go up in their mind. Which is not to say it’s not legitimate, I’m just saying it’s only one way to view the world. . . through financial creation and value creation.” —Nadia, 32, violin, female

Or Carl, a 30-year-old guitarist/singer/songwriter who questions the longevity and quality of success available behind social media:

“You get these people who have lots of fans and followers on their social media. And a record label swoops in and helps them with the creation and marketing of a song and those people may or may not have put in the time in the years to be developed as an artist. And if they’re not developed, as many of them aren’t sometimes, you don’t really get, like, a big artist’s career from that. You get, like, a temporary moment. And that’s not necessarily what I would view as success because that’s not an artist career. It’s just a moment in time. And then the movement fades and society moves on.”

The role of self-defined success may influence how we now think about the mores and social behaviors of this group of individual musicians. But the role of their audience connection in their musicking might influence how we think about musical spaces, which brings us back to the urban place of West Hollywood.

3.3. *Intimacy and Inclusivity Within WeHo’s Music Worlds*

“West Hollywood is an idea that is so necessary for the survival of those of us who are not from here and who look towards this beacon with hope that we might get to be ourselves one day.” —Eric, 36, voice/composer/conducting, male

The findings thus far have touched on the individual, independent musicians in West Hollywood who embody authentic musicality and source their musical legitimacy through audience connections. The significance of space and place with these first two findings is key to incorporate at this point since mapping the relationship between music, space and place demands an understanding of how the three overlap and intertwine within WeHo’s 1.9 square mile city. There is a full range of creative and social interests that inform this relationship, and it is the social contracts between the actors playing a variety of roles (namely, musicians, audience members and support roles) (Crossley 2025, p. 160) that compose West Hollywood’s “music worlds²”—unfolding and evolving within its small and historic concert halls.

The introduction to this article highlights how venues along the Sunset Strip, Santa Monica Boulevard, and beyond contribute to West Hollywood’s status as a musical mecca. The history of these halls, dating back to the mid 20th century, is palpable. The Melomaniac musicians in this study speak about the spirit of the legends born here and share stories of their first experience performing in the renowned spaces. Peter (59-year-old acoustic guitarist) recounts going into the iconic Tower Records³ store to witness his level of achievement:

“I remember going in and finding our album and seeing our trio’s name card on the CD stack. And that was a significant moment where I had felt we had achieved some amount of success... that we’re in West Hollywood, in Tower Records, and we had our own name card.”

Musicians (and other artists) have a historical tendency to concentrate in the creative and bohemian enclaves of particular cities in search of inspiration and experience (Watson et al. 2009, p. 9). And in West Hollywood, the integration of music and lifestyle is part of the small city’s institutional spaces. People experience a world of strangers and acquaintances, especially true in its intimate music venues. And it is through contact with others that people learn to live in diverse environments and hybrid cultures develop (Ehrenfeucht 2013, p. 60)—offering a slight anomaly to Crossley’s (2025) definition of “music worlds” which he generally coheres by *geographical location* and/or *musical styles* (e.g., New Orleans jazz scene). In this case, my field notes from rehearsals and concerts illustrate these hybrid cultures of *both* musicians and music fans embracing the motley, overlapping musical styles/genres happening within the same venues or next door to each other, as different

artists take the stages each hour. As [A. Bennett \(2017\)](#) states, “Both as a creative practice *and* as a form of consumption, music plays an important role in the narration of place in the way in which people define their relationship to local, everyday surroundings” (p. 2). It should also be restated that this melomaniacs sample of 23 musicians represents 10 different genres (see [Table 1](#)).

The venues throughout West Hollywood—including music-specific venues and multi-purpose restaurants/clubs with performance stages (see [Table 3](#) with notes)—are categorized as small with capacities under 500 people. In reviewing receipts from the concerts I attended, ticket prices ranged from \$0 (city-provided concerts) to \$25, with \$20 being the mode price. When these types of venues—with low economic legitimacy (i.e., ticket price) but high cultural legitimacy (i.e., music genre and historical media attention status)—have been studied in the past, they have proven to exhibit greater levels of innovation ([Tai 2023](#)). I witnessed this innovation expressed through original songwriting, genre-mixing and band dynamics with the melomaniacs participants—corroborating Tai’s theory.

Table 3. Present-day music-specific venues in West Hollywood’s 1.9 square mile urban space. Note: Additional shows take place in multipurpose venues such as restaurants/clubs throughout WeHo including popular drag shows at Hamburger Mary’s, The Abbey, Micky’s and Rocco’s.

	2024 WeHo Music Venues	Year Built	Capacity *
1	Troubadour	1957	500
2	Whisky a Go Go	1964	500
3	The Roxy	1973	500
4	Viper Room	1993	250
5	Bar Lubitsch	2006	100
6	Peppermint Club	2013	200
7	Sun Rose	2022	150
8	Backbeat On Sunset (Hotel Ziggy)	2022	300

* per website, not certificate of occupancy.

In tandem with this elevated level of innovation, I also noted a manifestation of a “person–environment relationship” ([Williams and Horlor 2022](#), p. 246) in the interactions between the musicians and their surroundings in relation to both their immediate physical setting and the wider socio-cultural setting. The local musicians in this project are also in tune with the cultural significance of this wider socio-cultural environment, as highlighted by some statements shared when discussing the musical place of West Hollywood:

“Everyone here wants to see what someone can come up with and that’s a wonderful way to operate. As an artist, that’s an immense amount of freedom you can feel. I am a better artist for being here. If I had stayed in the Midwest and stayed playing in the orchestras, playing all that music, I would not be a tenth of the musician that I am now. From being here for ten years and hearing all of the music and seeing all of the performances and meeting all the people that I’ve met here and experiencing the life here.” —Presley, 44, oboe/conductor/composer, male

“My first experience living in West Hollywood was when I was 19 years old in 1975, sleeping on the couch. There is such a treasure trove of artistic spaces... there’s a place here for me. WeHo is my artistic home. I might reside in another town now, but WeHo is absolutely at the very center of my artistic spirit.” —Laurel, 68, guitar/piano/conducting, female trans

Laurel, a female trans musician, articulates above what the LGBTQ+ coterie of participants collectively expressed to me about being a musician in WeHo. 11 of the 23 musicians in this sample identify as LGBTQ+ (mirroring the West Hollywood LGBTQ+ demographic). While this statistic may not take on analytical prominence in this study, it should be noted how these particular artists speak candidly about the musical belonging or acceptance they feel inside and outside of the city's venues:

"I see WeHo definitely as a safe space for queer people, as a place with really strong connections to art and to queer culture, queer community. It matters a lot to me that I have so many options of places to go to be with. . . be with people like myself. We have a lot of alphabet soup here." —Sutton, 25, voice/composer, nonbinary trans

"Growing up gay and growing up with ADHD I felt there were lots of threats to my sense of belonging in the world. . . music was something that I was really good at and something that I was consistently validated for. I latched onto as a sense of like, this is how I can belong to a tribe. Like this is going to be where I can source my self-worth from." —Dylan, 29, voice/piano, male

"As a queer person, music was always a way where I could say, 'Here's a little piece of myself that I would not be able to express otherwise.' And beyond that, there is something so wonderfully queer to artmaking. Obviously, straight people can make great art, but sometimes humans are best when there is diversity, when there are multiplicitous points of view and means of expression. And I think that is part of the queer aspect of humanity here [in WeHo]. It's like an ability to not be stuck to sameness." —Johann, 29, piano/guitar/songwriter, male

Being part of an accepting and artistic community of fate (Calhoun 2020, p. 197)—as discussed above by Sutton, Dylan and Johann—suggests an important bond among LGBTQ+ people via their "queer musicking" (Jennex and Marsh 2021). Everyone is connected to others and, through them, to all. This is especially evident within my field notes as I observed the blended modes of participatory and presentational musicking (Crossley 2022) among those musicians identifying as LGBTQ+ and their respective audiences. This bond gives us capacities for mutual understanding and appreciation, especially within the arts, which serve as symbolic anchors (Lewis 1992) in WeHo—as signs of community, belonging and a shared past. These collective forms of queer musicking experiences historically found within West Hollywood concert halls bring together "vulnerability, intimacy and shared precarity" (Jennex and Marsh 2021, p. 6), binding the musicians' individual experiences as well as those of countless others whose marginalized lives may have been impacted.

3.4. Emerging Theories Within Findings

Choosing the profession of musician might seem confusing or nebulous to non-musician populations. One solution I discovered to help elucidate the vocational reasoning is the use of established social theories, adapted for the artists' (e.g., producers) life courses. This method allows for vivid descriptions of the musicians' lived experience (i.e., phenomenology) together with reflective interpretations of their meanings (i.e., hermeneutics)—particularly evocative, embodied and empathic moments (Friesen et al. 2012) commonly found in musician research. The three social, political and economic theories presented in this section—which are not commonly applied through the framework of individual musicians—complement the themes found within the interviews and live performance observations, offering interpretive meaning to the musicians' alternative attitudes and lifestyles.

3.4.1. Independent Musicians as Cultural Omnivores

“There’s so many different types of music happening in L.A. and WeHo, and there’s so many different types of work you can do as a musician every day. . . I don’t know what that is, but there is some invisible fiber there. It’s like a root system, but it starts to expand kind of as one.” —Nadia, 32, violin, female

Harmony, a 32-year-old WeHo string player and vocalist, winsomely commented during our lunch, “I was in a pop string quartet, a bluegrass band, a fusion rock, indie rock band. And I’ve always liked film music. I guess Pandora calls that left field pop. And I also really love EDM.” Her affinity for varied musical tastes and talents may appear anomalous for someone raised in a classically trained piano household. But her attitude is representative of the melomaniacs sample—they are curious and open-minded with interests in wide-ranging genres and instrumentations.

The hybridism and interaction among musical styles, or *cultural omnivorousness* (Peterson and Kern 1996), have become increasingly common, with artists moving freely among different genres (Morel et al. 2021, p. 388). Cultural sociologists are well-versed in Richard Peterson’s (1992) original cultural omnivore theory which suggests individuals actually embrace a wide range of cultural tastes (e.g., music), encompassing both highbrow and lowbrow forms, rather than adhering to a narrow, exclusive taste (Bourdieu 1984). While edifying to read, the cultural omnivore thesis originated as a consumption (i.e., fan-based) perspective and has continued to be written about as such, which lends itself to quantitative modeling using consumer data (Sintas and Álvarez 2002; Vander Stichele and Laermans 2006; Alderson et al. 2007; Warde et al. 2007; Katz-Gerro and Jæger 2013; Bertacchini et al. 2021; Nault et al. 2021). However, studying the production and consumption of music together allows patterns to emerge more clearly (Bull and Scharff 2017).

The musicians/producers in this study present themselves as cultural omnivores in their willingness to cross established genre boundaries and, more importantly, engender fulfillment while doing so. Presley observes this happening collectively in WeHo between producers and consumers:

“I feel like there is a willingness to want the arts around here [in WeHo], like all music, dance, visual arts, all of them together, regardless of genre or anything. I feel like everyone here wants it in different ways. But they want it to be around.”

Of equal intrigue, research also finds that cultural omnivore *consumers* are more trusting and risk-taking. They are less class-conscious and more liberal on gender role attitudes and sexuality, with personality traits leaning more extroverted and more open to new experiences (Chan 2019). These traits also parallel aspects of queer musicking experienced in West Hollywood. Small (2016) describes this as a political process and argues that “musicking has long functioned as a means of self-definition, who we are or think we are socially” (p. 193).

These observations are also similarly patterned when compared qualitatively to this project’s musicians/producers. This allows us to contemplate the influence of these artists’ attitudes on West Hollywood’s progressive values, which have composed the city’s reputation for decades. Taken together, this study’s findings of the producer/consumer omnivorousness suggest a possible expression of “cosmopolitan postmaterialism” (p. 1), with the artists’ attitudes relatively autonomous from both class hierarchy and status rivalry (p. 31).

3.4.2. Independent Musicians Embracing Postmaterialism

“Well, my mother said it [conservatory] would be such a waste of your brain. . . she just wanted safety and security and a happy life. . . we, I think, built a very different life than what she maybe had pictured.” —Sage, 44, flute, female

The musicians in this project all recall being deeply drawn to music as children—both in object and activity. 22 of the 23 musicians began studying music in their elementary years, with 18 attaining music or arts degrees at the higher education level. I link this inescapable musical imagination to their valuing of self-expression and belonging over economic and physical security, which political scientist Ronald Inglehart coined as *postmaterialism* in his 1977 tome “The Silent Revolution.” He also posits that our basic values reflect the conditions that prevailed during one’s pre-adult years (Inglehart 1988).

Since its publication, the postmaterialism theory has situated itself within comparative politics and intergenerational displacement, and has been quantitatively studied to explain economic and political outcomes such as democratization, GDP, inflation and unemployment (Newman 2002; Welzel and Inglehart 2005; Inglehart 2015; Kafka and Kostis 2021). These sectors are beyond the scope (and interests) of this paper, which would enable the postmaterialism argument in full. But the crux of postmaterialism is not beyond the scope—a thesis emphasizing a lifestyle of self-actualization, autonomy and quality of life as opposed to more traditional needs and economic security (i.e., materialism).

While it must be noted that attaining this more bohemian artist lifestyle still requires “resources” as Becker describes in *Art Worlds* (Becker 2023)—typically including time, skills, equipment, space and money—which could be perceived as contradicting the liberal reading of postmaterialism as a detachment from material conditions. The point of this theory-linking is that the musicians in this study do not seek the traditional “9 to 5” careers associated with financial security, familial priorities and material wealth. There is an anomaly within this group when compared to the norms of “fame and fortune” seekers found within the larger Los Angeles region associated with material wealth, nicknamed “Tinseltown⁴.” Furthermore, when we cogitate the foundations of postmaterialism—namely self-expression (as opposed to survival) and secular-rational (as opposed to traditional) beliefs—together with the values of independent WeHo musicians, a correlation presents itself. This connection is expressed by Benjamin (70-year-old progressive rock bassist) who sat on a couch with me in “The Hills” above West Hollywood as he stared off and tried to make sense of it:

“There’s no rational reason for it. There are moments in a performance, whether you’re playing or listening, or even if you’re listening to a recording, where something happens that it just, I don’t want to use the word transcendent, but it’s so powerful and so personal that I think it’s the juice that keeps you going to the next thing. And at a certain point, you’ll keep doing it whether you get paid or not.”

Holding this *postmaterialism* theoretical point together with the *musicians as cultural omnivores* position, we’ll wade into how they amalgamate alongside the values and prosperity within the structure of West Hollywood.

3.4.3. Moral Capital in West Hollywood

“I think if you want to take this and make it more into a career, you can do it here in West Hollywood. You can have that experience here. And I think if you know where to look and you’re an artistic person, and no matter how you identify, you can live here and have a full artistic life.” —Carl, 30, voice/guitar/songwriter, male

Large spaces don't always create change. Smaller spaces allow this to happen. And West Hollywood is a solid case study—a trailblazing municipality on progressive policies, culture, art and entertainment for more than four decades. A 31-year-old drag singer named Prince—whom the city has funded through its arts grants—enlightened me on the role of an urban space in yielding creative change, as we sat under a café's banner that read "We are Loud and Proud!":

"I just ingratiated myself in West Hollywood almost strategically because, well, this is where the opportunities are. I've always been such an interdisciplinary fan. And WeHo really lives that value. They have a commission for everything. They think about how urban art intersects with infrastructure in a way that forces this level of connection at different parts."

I'll use a less-known yet promising concept for sociological (versus economic) inquiry to elucidate what Prince describes above: *moral capital*. In this research, I define moral capital as the social forces behind our structural values or the intangible and invisible resource known as *character* (Valverde 1994, p. 217). Or to put it more artistically, it's our city's *soul*.

When we also look at moral capital in relation to a city's cultural prosperity, another positive correlation presents itself—especially when the arts are placed at a higher, hierarchical seat. Ratnapala (2023) posits ways that societies can enhance their stocks of moral capital and describes how commerce coevolves with moral rules, leading not only to prosperity but also the accumulation of moral capital. When we examine West Hollywood's cultural prosperity using a Ratnapala lens, we see that its independent musicians have contributed not only to the city's economic vitality but, equally important, they influence the quality of life and social well-being of its constituents throughout the metropolitan region. The social interaction achieved through West Hollywood musicking—driven by the individual musicians—orients to "meaning" (Crossley 2020) and shapes itself into what I argue are collective *moral meanings*, or moral capital. The city's musicians are, in fact, a social force that is coevolving moral capital, and benefiting the common good and meaning of their community.

4. Discussion

"When I meet someone new and tell them I'm a musician, I find they either think I'm a rock star or I'm just crashing on my girlfriend's couch without a job. They don't seem to know or are not aware of the middle ground, the working musician. . . we call each other 'blue collar artists.'" —Linus, 48, double bass/electric bass, male

In my introduction, I reference the hegemony of macro-level quantitative studies and the sweeping or reductive samples of *creative artists* present in the United States' arts research—instead of giving the deserved categorical attention to *musicians*. Rather than disregarding this scholarship, my melomaniacs project provides an empirical extension by initiating a real-world, qualitative exploration and arts-based research (ABR) design of the cultural relationship between West Hollywood and its attraction for independent musicians. A study of this type has not been conducted to date, nor has it been presented in a way that uses collaborative ethnography with its participants and creative public sociology with its community via musician panels and concerts (i.e., ABR). To further the discussion, I will coalesce the project's findings and theories thus far by using the sociological concept of *cosmopolitanism* as a framework to better understand the societal implications of the individual musicians and their chosen musical spaces and places.

4.1. Cosmopolitanism

This paper explores the connection between the small city of West Hollywood and creative and diverse lifestyles, with music serving as a central focus and mode of expression for this culture—both historically and in the present day. So how do we contextualize this phenomenon?

Social scientists who have a proclivity for Pierre Bourdieu's theories might start by explaining that the city's structure serves as a breeding ground for the artistic practice or *field* (i.e., arena of production, appropriation and exchange of goods, services, knowledge or status)—with the comingling (or colliding) of different habitus (i.e., our individual dispositions or cultural DNA) (Bourdieu 1985). And if you don't have a city, then you don't have a field or a social arena in which specific musical habitus may be realized.

I used this Bourdieusian framework in my last study on professionally educated independent musicians in New York City to explain how the sample exemplifies what it means to embody musical knowledge authentically—thereby legitimizing their way of appropriating and appreciating their virtuosic cultural capital, and in turn, resolving the theorized conflict they experience between their musical and economic capitals. But for West Hollywood, I will step away from the Bourdieu lenses and focus on the sociological concept of *cosmopolitanism*, which more aptly connects with the genre-crossing diversity inherently found within the cultural omnivore attitudes of the musicians (Saito 2011) as well as to the structural moral capital of the city.

The term cosmopolitanism is messy and multifaceted, and takes many forms within numerous academic anthologies and ethical/philosophical debates (Delanty 2006; Stokes 2007; Skey 2012; Cicchelli and Octobre 2018; Calhoun 2020), which are again beyond the scope of this paper. For this melomaniacs study, I ground the definition of cosmopolitanism simply as *our humanity*—our interpersonal relationships and the social institutions we have created both socially and historically. It is how we experience, understand and judge the world through our lifestyles and identities, including the conditions in which laws, institutions and practices are defined.

Let's consider the musical sphere of West Hollywood's cosmopolitanism—its metropolitan humanity—as we reflect on the presented findings of participants' (i) authentic musicality; accumulated musical legitimacy; and appreciation of live audience connections. And then as we abstract the theoretical findings of the musicians (ii) embracing cultural omnivorousness, genre-crossing attitudes; placing higher value on postmaterialist versus materialistic lifestyles; and serving as a social force that coevolves moral capital within its urban borders.

4.2. Musicians' Influence on West Hollywood's Cosmopolitanism

Walter Pater (1893) famously penned, "all art constantly aspires to the condition of music," referring to a state where art's form and content are so closely intertwined that they become inseparable, creating a unified and euphonic experience. I oftentimes use this poetic notion of music as a metaphor for the collective, creative space of West Hollywood, suggesting that all cities should constantly aspire to the conditions found within WeHo.

Since its founding, West Hollywood has provided concrete places that offer spaces for musical creativity and musical inclusivity. The city has also sustained networks (i.e., commissions, grant committees, media, etc.) that foster and support both this musical creativity and musical inclusivity. However, cities are not corporal, and the decisions to continue as "The Creative City" do not occur in a singular, isolated fashion for the individuals and organizations—they are interconnected. And this interrelation between musicians and their public, as well as active participation on the part of the public in the "social production of art" (Greenfeld 1984), proves to be congruent in the urban space of WeHo.

The city's cultural social networks or "music worlds," together with their participatory and presentational modes of musicking—including historical queer musicking—function as a mechanism for building unity between and across West Hollywood's cosmopolitanism.

The thesis of this West Hollywood melomaniacs project (see Figure 6, which was presented at the community data sharing event as part of the ABR, collaborative ethnography project goals) reveals that the city's cultural prosperity is morally influenced by its independent musicians—artists who began flooding its borders more than 60 years ago with the dreams of becoming professional artists. Their innate musicality, fueled by postmaterialistic lifestyles and cultural omnivore attitudes, engenders a cosmopolitanism that fosters musical intelligibility (Stokes 2007) for its public and imagines a place of musical belonging and equity for fellow melomaniacs.

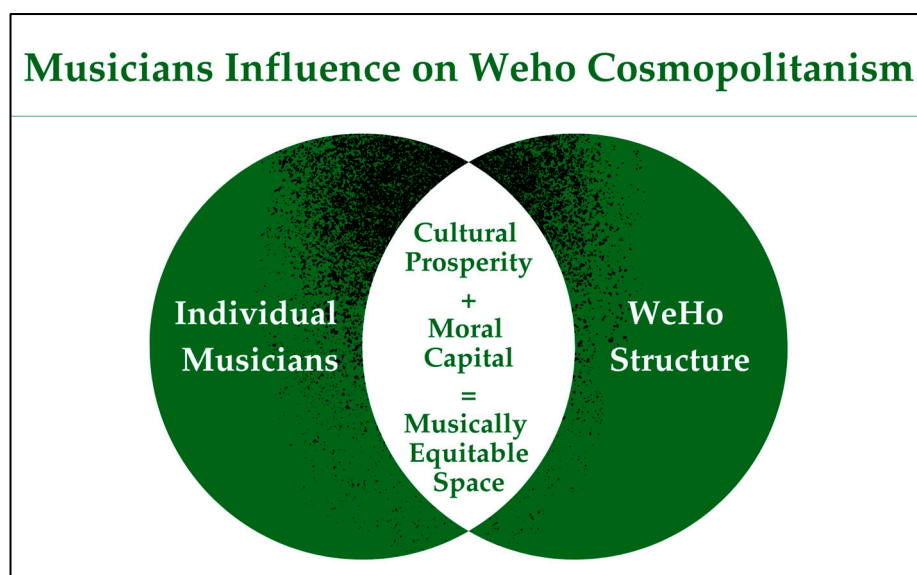


Figure 6. A visual representation of this Discussion which was presented at the January creative data sharing event with the participating musicians (i.e., ABR and collaborative ethnography) in West Hollywood, CA, USA.

5. Conclusions

"I think it's okay to ask that [what's your day job?], but it's what comes next that is the issue. . . the disbelief, or the asking a second time. And I think some people are genuinely curious. But I do think it would be fun to ask someone who says they're an accountant or an investor or they do insurance, 'Oh, is that all you do?' It would be fun to see what they say." —Nadia, 32, violin, female

Erin Cech's (2021) "The Trouble with Passion" probes the ominous side of career advice to "follow your passion." The book reveals the significant downside of the passion principle: "the concept helps culturally legitimize and reproduce an exploited, overworked white-collar labor force and broadly serves to reinforce segregation and inequality." My melomaniac research certainly corroborates the theory presented in this very well-written and researched manuscript, but mostly when viewed narrowly through the sociological darlings and "go-to" topics of *labor*, *neoliberalism/capitalism* and *inequality*. However, the findings from this West Hollywood project posit an alternative, interactionist way to approach the pursuit of passion (and happiness)—explicitly when applied to working musicians. The artists in this study do not collectively view themselves as exploited or disadvantaged. 23 of the 23 participants expressed gratitude and used terms such as "lucky" or "privileged" during the interviews when speaking about playing music for a living. They answered "musician" when asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" in

their elementary years. And they pursue their artform as a vocation—not as a hobbyist or enthusiast—because their musical imagination is inescapable.

So, what does this all mean?

Subjective well-being and other related concepts, such as life satisfaction or happiness, have become the focus of an expanding range of research within the social sciences (Bertacchini et al. 2021, p. 2). It is my hope that the trend continues, especially in sociology sectors. This paper tangentially contributes to these studies by identifying metropolitan conditions beyond economic and material (i.e., more intangible and less observable drivers) that explain musician behaviors and choices, including the municipalities they gravitate toward and their micro-level perspectives.

This qualitative study and creative data sharing methods (i.e., arts-based research) shed light on the ways a group of independent musicians—multifarious in age cohorts, backgrounds, sexualities, instruments and musical genres—kindle their lifelong, innate musicality and discover legitimacy in their careers through live performance connections and less normative definitions of vocational success in their “music worlds” of West Hollywood. The participants present anti-philistine mindsets while striking career mediums somewhere between pragmatism and idealism. They can appear eclectic and perhaps eccentric in genres and musicianship, but interact decorously and symbiotically with each other and the supportive WeHo residents and audiences.

The Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 report (Americans for the Arts 2023) boasts that when you invest in arts and culture, you are investing in an industry that strengthens your economy and builds more livable communities. While a welcome message, this melomaniacs article advocates for thinking beyond the traditional monetary investments emphasized by financial, economic, and tourism contributions found within arts and culture studies—expanding beyond those measures to include critical thinking about topics such as *societal interaction*, *moral meaning*, and *social impact* that participatory and presentational modes of music-making and queer musicking create. By constructing our municipalities as vehicles that structurally enhance moral capital and cultural prosperity, we create tolerant and inclusive cosmopolitanisms that “show up” in voices and venues for its musicians (and other artists), and not just to stimulate the economy or demonstrate the financial rewards of the arts—but because they realize the common good that working musicians bring to their communities.

As sociologist and musician Les Back posits, “Music is a resource to understand what culture is but also to point to utopian possibilities of what it might become” (Back 2023, p. 5). If we use this outlook when pondering how the arts—in this instance, music—factor into the development, or renewal, of our urban cosmopolitanisms, we can build more musically equitable spaces and places, and move toward abolishing the reactive question of asking our working musicians, “what’s your day job?”—a dreamy zenith in my advocacy work. When and if this moment is attained, an artistic, urban paragon has certainly been composed.

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Notes

- ¹ Questions not to ask working musicians: (1) What's your day job? (2) How much money do you really make in this city playing music? and (3) Do you have a "real" job?
- ² Crossley's "music worlds" concept denotes a relatively cohesive cluster of musical interaction (i.e., West Hollywood) within the broader universe (i.e., greater Los Angeles area) of such interaction in a society (Crossley 2025, p. 160).
- ³ The Tower Records in West Hollywood opened in 1971 and was the first Southern California location of the Sacramento-based chain, and arguably, the most famous. It closed in 2006 when Tower Records went bankrupt. In 2023, Supreme—a retail store primarily selling clothing, accessories, and skateboards—renovated the building and opened in the location.
- ⁴ A derogatory nickname referring to the glitz and glamour yet often fragile or superficial world of entertainment in Los Angeles.

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