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Songwriting and Studio Practice: The Systems Model of Creativity Applied to 'Writing Records'.Phillip McIntyreUniversity of Newcastle, NSW

AbstractJerry Leiber and Mike Stoller claimed that 'we don't write songs, we write records'. This studio based approach to creating records has had, and continues to have, a number of implications for the role of songwriters. For example, at the more general level it can be seen that the move away from writing songs to writing records has contributed to the alteration, advent and development of a variety of musical styles. However, for those directly involved in studio practice, the reconfiguring of the traditional role of the songwriter in favour of the record writer has implications not only at the point of composition but also at the level of arrangement, production and, inevitably, copyright. Drawing on data from an extended ethnographic study of songwriting (McIntyre, 2008) the author hopes that, by looking at these issues and changes through the lens of the systems model of creativity, a fresh perspective may be bought to the current understandings of studio practice and a contribution made to the musicological knowledge available to those engaged in researching the art of record production.

1 IntroductionSongs are the central artefacts of the popular music industry. Without them the music industry would simply not be (McIntyre, 2009a : 1). Songs are also, therefore, central to record production. While there are certainly other musical forms dealt with in the studio it would be correct to say that the vast bulk of material recorded has been in the form of popular songs. How they come into existence, how they are made, how they are created and the changes wrought in studio practice as recordings of songs replace the writing of songs, are therefore important aspects worth considering as one investigates the art of record production.

Similarly, gaining an insight into creativity and how it works should reveal something of the processes that underpin the creation of popular songs and go some way toward revealing the mechanisms of creation for record production. In this regard Keith Negus and Michael Pickering have argued that a 'critical interrogation of creativity should be central to any understanding of musical production' (in Hesmondhalgh & Negus 2002: 147).

The study of creativity, as set out by the author at prior ARP conferences (McIntyre 2007, 2008), gained considerable impetus from A.P. Guildford's 1950s address to the American Psychological Association, with this primarily rationalist view of creativity opposed to the commonsense understandings that persist to this day.

To reiterate some of these arguments (McIntyre 2007, 2008), it can be seen that there are two widespread views of creativity in common use. The first of these is the inspirational viewpoint and the second is the romantic view. Both of these are believed by many 'to be literally true. But they are rarely critically examined. They are not theories, so much as myths' (Boden, 2004:14). Likewise, the concept of genius is also contested (Howe 1999, Weisberg 1993). This concept has its antecedents in these romantic and inspirationist views (Watson 2005, Sawyer 2006). It has given rise to the constitution of self expressive, freely thinking artists (Kant 1982) who produce special works and is believed to be partially traceable to heredity or certain pathologies (see Galton and Lombroso in Rothenberg & Hausman, 1976). With these ideas as ground the idea of artists as unconstrained quasi-neurotic individuals (Freud 1959) impelled to work through various states of romantic agony has become commonplace. Additionally, there have also been speculative and commercially successful applications of associated concepts like lateral thinking which have been subject to limited empirical investigation (Sternberg 1999: 5-6).

Needless to say these lingering commonsense assumptions have garnered little long-term support within the scholarly research community concerned with understanding creativity and cultural production (e.g. Zolberg 1990, Wolff 1981, Bourdieu 1993, Csikszentmihalyi 1997, Sternberg 1999, Negus & Pickering 2004, Pope 2005, Sawyer 2006). When one scours this literature, starting with Aristotle's work on 'being' in his Metaphysics (1960: 142), there are definitional commonalities to be seen in delineating the term creativity. An amalgam of these reads in the following way:

creativity is a productive activity whereby objects, processes and ideas are generated from antecedent conditions through the agency of someone, whose knowledge to do so comes from somewhere and the resultant novel variation is seen as a valued addition to the store of knowledge in at least one social setting (McIntyre, 2009b: 1).

This definition can be shortened to reveal that across the literature creativity is primarily seen as the production of something that is seen to be novel and appropriate. Furthermore, much of this research has, for quite a lengthy period of time, espoused a psychologically reductionist approach. This approach has been countered with what can also be seen as a socio-culturally reductionist approach (Simonton, 2003). Significantly, in an Hegelian synthesis the research has now begun to see creativity as emerging from the confluence of a multiple set of factors at work. There have been a number of these confluence models developed (for a summary see Sternberg 1999) and, for this author, these also include the complex approaches to cultural production proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1993 and 1996).

One of these confluence models, developed principally by Mihaly Csikszentmilahyi, is that of the systems model of creativity. Csikszentmihalyi argues that 'we need to abandon the Ptolemaic view of creativity, in which the person is at the centre of everything, for a more Copernican model in which the person is part of a system of mutual influences and information' (1988: 336). From this perspective creativity emerges from the dynamic and fluid operation of 'a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation' (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 6). These interconnected parts are grounded in 'dynamic links of circular causality' (1988: 329) indicating the fundamental nonlinearity of the system. While 'each of the three main systems – person, field and domain – affects the others and is affected by them in turn'

(Csikszentmihalyi 1988: 329) it is important to realize that each component is necessary but not sufficient, by itself, to produce creativity.
For creativity to occur, a set of rules and practices must be transmitted from the domain to the individual. The individual must then produce a novel variation in the content of the domain. The variation then must be selected by the field for inclusion in the domain (Csikszentmihalyi 1999: 315).
2 Agency and Structure in the Recording StudioWith this systems model in place, a model that places an individual creative agent within a set of critical structures, it can be seen that a record producer's ability:
to make decisions, be they organizational, technical or musical ones will be circumscribed by their studio competence which is itself dependent on their immersion in and an understanding of the domain of record production. Their power to get others to make decisions in their favor is also both constrained and enabled by their connections to the field, the social hierarchy that holds the domain as a central part of its operation. This is to say that a record producer's agency, the ability to make and effect decisions, is dependent on the structures, principally the domain and field, they encounter and surround themselves with. As such their freedom to act is relative to the domain and field they work in (McIntyre, 2009b: 7).
This situation is transferrable and therefore applicable to songwriters. It can be seen that all of the actions a record producer or songwriter takes are located within, and thus affected by, the structures they engage with. However:
it does not follow from this that in order to be free agents we somehow have to liberate ourselves from social structures and act outside them. On the contrary, the existence of these structures and institutions enables any activity on our part, and this applies equally to acts of conformity and acts of rebellion …all action, including creative or innovative action, arises in the complex conjunction of numerous determinants and conditions (Wolff,1981: 9).
One of the most significant sets of conditions encountered by record producers and songwriters are the dynamics of history, which often sets the ground for what action is possible.
3 Historical Changes in Modes of ActionPeter Wicke has argued that the changes the historical shift in emphasis from the publishing industry as dominant player in the field of popular music to the recording industry being the dominant player is a significant one. With sheet music as the primary recording medium and form of dissemination for popular music 'conventional pop songs, the Tin Pan Alley hits, existed primarily within such musical parameters as melody, harmony and formal structure, which could be best worked out in musical notation' (Wicke, 1990: 13) adding that 'only an abstract framework of music can be reproduced in musical notation' (ibid).
In contrast, as recording techniques developed, proliferated and out-competed sheet music, the emphasis on what was an important musical focus began to shift for the field of popular music. With the microphone supplanting the quill 'the human voice with its timbre and register, the niceties of intonation and phrasing, the sound characteristics of the instrument and the physical presence of metre and rhythm could now be controlled by technical means' (ibid) rather than literate ones. Sound became more important than the notational score. What now fascinated people from the field of popular music was not so much the ability to reconstruct melodic passages but how they sounded, how the tonality spoke and the ways the physical presence of sound itself contributed to a recorded performance. As Wicke further contends, when it became possible for the field:
to manipulate the sound properties of both instruments and voice and reproduce them precisely, the focus of musical performance gradually shifted from the written parameters, pitch, dynamics and formal development, from the melodic and harmonic aspects, to the reproducible details of the expression of sound... Now that sound had become the key factor, technical equipment and processes acquired a more decisive role (Wicke, 1990:13).
From this point a new approach to popular songs began to take hold which was epitomized by the rise to prominence of songwriter/producers such as Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, and later Holland-Dozier-Holland working in Motown's Detroit studios, who considered every aspect of a record as a part of the overall composition. Unlike their predecessors such as Irving Berlin, Lerner and Lowe, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hammerstein and Hoagy Carmichael, Lieber and Stoller were members of the first group of American songwriters to recognise and exploit the idea that 'songwriting didn't just mean writing songs, it meant writing records' (Palmer, 1980:2). They made the blunt assertion that, 'we didn't write songs; we wrote records' (quoted in Palmer, 1996:35). Simon Frith summed up this perspective by declaring that, 'twentieth century popular music means the twentieth century popular recording' (Frith,1988:12) not the record of something which, like some Platonic ideal, exists independently of the performance of it. From this perspective 'making a great record can be as much about great performance as great material' (Egan, 2009 :191). If this is the case one needs to consider when creating popular music not just the lyric and melody of a song but:
all of the elements that may go into the creation of a classic popular recording: what instrumentation is used, and the interaction between players; how it has been recorded, produced and mixed; and of course how the basic song itself is constructed and arranged (Rooksby, 2001: 9).
Jon Fitzgerald takes these ideas one step further by contending that:
various authors (e.g. Hesbacher 1973, p.297; Hennion 1983, p.163; Moore 1993, p.32) have stressed the importance of considering the sound recording as musical text... Hennion (1983, p.161) goes so far as to say that 'the song is nothing before the arrangement' arguing that creation 'occurs at the moment of orchestration, recording, and sound mixing' (Fitzgerald,1996:20 21).
4 The Changing Roles of Songwriters and Producers in the Field of Popular MusicIf Hennion is correct that songs most often come into existence at the point of orchestration or recording then one needs to consider the overlap that may occur in what a songwriter does and what a producer does to aid in a song's creation. The author has argued elsewhere that in addition to lyric and melody, a contemporary western popular music songwriter must also have some domain knowledge of 'form and structure, rhythm, harmony, arrangement, performance and production characteristics that enable their work to be manifest in a material form' (McIntyre, 2001:110). Similarly a record producer shares some of the same

domain knowledge given that:
A producer should be able to envision several kinds of production for a given song, hear various instrument parts and harmony arrangements in her head, and have a good idea how everything will work together in the studio. As a producer, it's your job to know how different tempos, time signatures, grooves, effects, recording techniques, and many other elements will affect the impact of a song on listeners. A producer has to be equal parts arranger, musician, recording engineer, songwriter, and A&R rep" (Watson, 2006:166).
One can see from these descriptions cited above that, even though there are two supposedly distinct and relatively traditional roles being described here, and by implication two different domains of knowledge, they share some remarkable commonalities in terms of making a song manifest as a material entity. It is, in fact, the song's manifestation as a material entity, be that as a lead sheet or as a rudimentary recording, that allows it to be copyright. Until then it doesn't legally exist.
However, the world concerned with copyright still conceives of songwriting in early sheet music terms (McIntyre, 2007: 88-89). This is understandable given the almost simultaneous rise of both Romanticism and the historical development of copyright but the wish to perceive aesthetic production as the result of singular author figures and the desire to easily assign property rights to those individuals has been a convenient marriage. Given the recent developments in the way records are being produced it seems that the basis for these laws appears to be somewhat archaic. The case of Paul Mac and Daniel Johns, whose combined talents form The Dissociatives, is illustrative of this point.
In producing their most recent work Paul Mac, a dance music producer and classically trained musician, contributed his domain expertise in song structures and arrangements, instrumentation and orchestration to the partnership. Daniel Johns, an autodidact typical of the rock world he primarily exists in with his band Silverchair, supplied the melody and lyric once the music bed had been constructed. If this description is accurate the way collection agencies have perceived the legal aspects of copyright would see Mac described primarily as an arranger and Johns would be the designated songwriter, as he created the lyric and melody, and the arrangement those components were nested within was predominantly supplied by Mac. Mac, however, insists:
That's not quite accurate. We both wrote the music from the chords and everything. But, I think those definitions are so old-fashioned. I think it was James Brown's quote 'well hang on, it's such a white way of looking at it.' You can't copyright a waveline or a drum beat because it's always the melody that's deemed to be the thing of value. I think songwriting is not just melody, words and chords. It's also a headspace. That's the lesson of techno. So I think whoever's programming sounds, if you're doing that, I think it's of equal value. So I think we've looked at it as a sort of new way of sharing the songwriting (McIntyre, 2007: 88-89).
It can be seen from this case that while the roles utilized in bringing a song into a material form has become a fluid and dynamic proposition in terms of who does what there are legal implications those involved in this process need to contend with. As perceptions of creativity also change from predominantly romantic ones to those that see creativity coming about as the result of a confluence of multiple factors, including a variety of collaborative modes, legal recognition of the new roles that have developed recently in the creation of records will eventually be accommodated by the fairly laggardly and most often reactive legal structure that underpins the field of popular music.
Paul Begaud, one of the songwriter/producers who is now typical of what could be more accurately called, following Lieber and Stoller, a record writer, works within and across the changing roles that have amalgamated songwriting and production. He suggests that:
We need to remember that this is a fairly natural progression for musically talented people to have. It's like these talents run through all aspects of 'being a good musician'. Some obviously do certain 'things' better than others, but generally musicians will want to perform live, record their music and write songs (Begaud, personal correspondence, 2003).
Begaud's own progression and development as a record writer is a case in point. Begaud began his musical career by being immersed in both the field and domain of popular music just as the systems model indicates all creative people are. From the age of twelve he attended a talent school in Sydney NSW learning and performing a significant number of popular songs. The studio owner had an up-to-the-minute eight track recorder installed in the studio they were operating in and Begaud had unlimited access from the time he was fourteen. That studio was the basis of his acquiring the domain knowledge of record production. 'I learnt to programme tracks, record, produce and mix them' (Begaud, p/c, 2003). As he progressed from this form of what could be called an apprenticeship in the field of popular music Begaud developed a set of work habits that he carried forward into his professional career.
In a professional sense, when I produced the first Human Nature album I worked the same way. I would produce the tracks up in my home studio (i.e. bedroom) then we would go into a studio and cut the vocals (producer/engineer) and then we mix them. All my pop projects work the same way. Sometimes the record company will send the song o/s to be mixed by a specialist mix engineer and sometimes I'll work with an engineer if I'm producing and want to concentrate on just that (and not engineering). With the advent of my (pretty serious) home studio I can do everything here now just like most people can from their bedrooms. I think it comes down to creativity and knowing how to use the tools available in the best way (Paul Begaud, p/c 2003).
Begaud's understanding of where he fits, in terms of his development as a record writer, has its references in the amalgamation of the traditional roles of songwriters, producers and engineers:
In regard to the producer, engineer and songwriter I feel this came about with the introduction of keyboards, sequencers and drum machines. You had producers who created funky sounding R&B and pop dance music who could create entire backing tracks without the need for any other musicians. Thus they built the track from scratch and then produced the singer. Babyface really made this popular in the 90's. Jam and Lewis the same with Janet Jackson records. They were also great songwriters who could deliver hits from woe-to-go for record companies trying to promote new artists. Where the artist did write, they would collaborate with the producer. I remember at one time in the US Babyface had the #1,2

and 3 chart positions as writer and producer at the same time. In regard to the 'engineer' being tacked onto the producer/songwriter, this has probably come from the home studio scenario in the last few years only. Computer based recording systems have forced musicians to be more   to have greater creative control (Begaud, p/c 2003).

This scenario may be currently typical of the pop world but Wally Gagel suggests that the changes in role the term 'record writer' suggests may be somewhat genre specific. He asserts that:

Someone who goes in to produce rock and roll bands and get a band vibe and work off of the live musician/song experiences going in, they're still going to probably produce records in a very similar fashion. It'll always be about creating the best vibe in the studio and getting the bands really excited and helping out with the music and the arrangement. So that's not going to change, but the thing that the home studio aspect has probably changed the most is electronic music and bands that can basically do things on their own, at home, in their bedroom. So the people who are going to come up as producers in that [genre] have to really know what they're talking about in their own world. They have to be able to use the programs that do that, and they have to be right up to speed with these bands. And then you have the Babyface types, where it's almost like the Motown days; you have these producer/songwriters coming in, and they're really dictating what happens with the artist, they're really just using a singer. It seems to be splitting a lot more, so I can't say there's any one role, because each genre has its own vibe. But most changes are definitely in the electronic stuff (Wally Gagel in Massey, 2000: 325).

Despite the differing modes of creative action that Gagel asserts are being applied in various modes of collaboration across a variety of genres, what these cases of record writing suggest is that there may need to be a way of explaining creativity that is less focused solely on the individuals involved and one that moves toward a focus on the basis of collaboration in various studio settings.

5   Collaborative ActionIn their book, Group Creativity: Innovation Through Collaboration (2003) Paul Paulus and Bernard Nijstad set out a diagrammatic explanation of the way in which they believe collaborative action to take place. This model (see fig. 1) explores the ways an individual's expertise, knowledge and skills sets are deployed in collaborative work.

Fig 1: Diagram of collaborative process from Paulus & Nijstad, 2003: 334.

As Kerrigan and McIntyre (forthcoming) explain, the model posits the view that the acquisition of information is firstly necessary through learning to enable agents to acquire the skills and expertise needed to process action at the individual level before this processed information moves into the group situation for collaborative action, assessment, evaluation and verification. As the information is manipulated and changed it moves through the system with an iterative and recursive process being generally implemented. The knowledge cycles either back through the individual members of the group for further iterations or, once the group is satisfied with their efforts, is moved out of the group's immediate sphere. Eventually the creative material that has been developed in this process reaches social verification at the point of audience contact. While the diagram is laid out differently to the systems model of creativity Kerrigan & McIntyre argue that:

the movement of ideas, knowledge sharing and critical feedback on processes and products is comparable to the system's model in that the group creativity model also identifies individual, field and domain interactions necessary to produce artefacts (2009: 14).

The fact that these models coincide demonstrates, at one level, that creative action of the type necessary to write records is a dynamic, interactive and complex process built on multiple factors at play regardless of the genre being looked at. The changes that 'record writing' has bought to record production in general have become increasingly fundamental to the creation of cultural artefacts in the studio and, on a larger level, indicate that few cultural forms, or the processes used to bring these forms into being, remain stagnant. Things move, change and adapt as new ideas, technologies and ways of operating are developed and introduced into any cultural sphere. Without this dynamism at play cultures atrophy and dissipate. It was ever thus.

6   ConclusionIt appears that current approaches to 'record writing' employ traditional songwriting techniques in association with traditional production roles or, depending on the emphasis and starting point, combine production roles with songwriting techniques. For some genres these roles have melded to the point where there is no perceived distinction being made at the point of production. This has led to some reconsideration of the assignation of copyright on the part of some record writers. Regardless of which approach is used this creative action occurs within specific structural frameworks, legal, technological, artistic, social and cultural, that can be seen, at one and the same time, to be both constraining and enabling for 'record writers'. This process can be exemplified by the systems model of creativity which, in coordination with Paulus and Nijstad's model, accounts for both individual and collaborative action on the part of record writers. This research also points to the idea that creativity, the production of novel work that is socially and culturally valued, can be conceived primarily as a rational process rather than a romantic or inspirationist one.

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