The transcendent experience in Experimental Popular Music performance

Adrian Brian Barr, B. Mus (Hons)

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Statement of Authentication

This work has not been submitted for a higher degree at any other institution and an undertaking that the work is original and a result of the candidates own research endeavour.

Signed: ____________________________

Adrian Barr
ABSTRACT

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Adrian Barr, B. Mus (Hons.)

School of Humanities and Communication Arts, Music

This thesis is an investigation into experiences of transcendence in music performance driven by the author’s own performance practice and the experimental popular music environment in which he is situated. Employing a phenomenological approach, 19 interviews were conducted with musicians, both locally and internationally, who were considered strong influences on the author’s own practice. The interviews focused on transcendent experiences in music performance and provided rich texts for analysis and comparison with existing models of transcendent experience. The main areas investigated are how transcendence was experienced, the musical and extra-musical aspects of these experiences, and how discussing the significance of these experiences is useful for one’s musical practice and in educational contexts. The framework of transcendent experience in experimental popular music developed in this thesis encapsulates a diverse range of personal and collective experiences of music performance. Despite this diversity, of individual musicianship, experiences and personality, a common experiential ground of experimental popular music performance providing a vehicle for shared musical experiences and meaning, including transcendence, is revealed. The outcomes of this study provide unique insight into the creative processes and
music-making in the form of experimental popular music and, in doing so, have potential implications for education and general musicianship.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis is an investigation into the way experiences of transcendence manifest in experimental popular music performance. Transcendence is understood as including “the property of rising out of or above things” (Adams, 1995) as well as “existence beyond; independent existence... held to exist beyond space, time, the physical world or experience – in some non-spatial sense of ‘beyond’” (Priest, 2005). It is these experiences that are spoken of as a movement through human acts and beyond them and transcending as mediated by human acts while putting us in direct contact with this ‘beyond’ (Roy, 2001). Whether ‘beyond’ or ‘above’, these ‘things’ include a sense of self, sense of time and sense of place. This non-spatial sense of ‘beyond’ may be considered as “a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and its initial validity” (Marcel 1976, cited in Roy, 2001, p.155). In particular, music affords a radical alteration in a person’s sense of self and where they are in the world at the musical moment (Benzon, 2001). This thesis investigates how these spheres may manifest and be experienced.

Transcendent experiences are considered something familiar to most people; every person has a unique story of the experience, with the intensity of the experience varying, but the transcendent experience seems to be universal (Jeddeloh, 2003, p. 8). Among the founders of modern psychology, William James (1902) articulated and incorporated alterations of consciousness into his theories of human mind and behaviour – encouraging the investigation and utility of transcendent experiences.

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different . . . which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation (James, 1902, p. 298).
Although it may be presumed that a transcendent experience is highly subjective, it is suggested that there is a commonality among transcendent experiences (Allen, 2000, cited in Vincs, 2002; Bloom, 2005). Such common experiences include a loss of self, time, place, limitation and language; a feeling of eternity, a sense of release, a renewal and new life, another world, satisfaction, joy, salvation, perfection, mystical knowledge, enhanced mental capacities, the ‘mysterious’ and being integrated with the universe (Allison, 2000, cited in Vincs, 2002, p. 5). Allison also contends that there are multiple triggers capable of producing a transcendent way of being, and these are explored in this study, although limited to those directly related to the chosen artists and their musical performance practice (2000, cited in Vincs, 2002, p. 5).

Another key thinker regarding transcendent experience is Louis Roy, O.P.\(^1\) who finds that a transcendent experience can be characterised as an event in which individuals, by themselves or in a group, have the impression that they are in contact with something boundless and limitless that cannot be grasped and surpasses human capacities (Roy, 2001, p. xi). Roy vouches that although transcendent experience can be a most valuable component of human existence and that many reach a positive judgement regarding the significance of what has been apprehended, others discount such incidents as purely subjective and not indicative of anything real (2001, p. ix). In contrast to this dismissive attitude, Roy looks at these experiences favourably and interprets them in accord with thinkers who envision the human self as essentially open to the infinite (2001, pp. xi-xii).

As a musician, I have been fascinated by my own experiences of transcendence, including changes in my sense of time, self, environment and the music itself, particularly through the combination of experimental and popular music. I’m also fascinated and inspired by these experiences in others, how they are experienced,

\(^1\) O.P. - Ordo Praedicatorum, Dominican Order of the Roman Catholic Church.
how they are communicated and how they can be facilitated. In my musical practice, this fascination has moved me towards an approach to music-making that often utilises repetition, rhythmic complexities, drones, and extended techniques that often have a textural focus, as these are salient features that facilitate my own experience of transcendence.

Although my own moments of transcendence in music performance have occurred sporadically since my serious music-making began 10 years ago, such experiences are still as vivid as though they had only just happened. I have had moments marked by adrenaline highs and emotional catharsis, but there have also been those special moments where I am lifted out of myself, where time bends to the point of standing still. There is tension and stillness in the one moment, giving me a sense of dizzying clarity. My transcendent experience provided a sense of suspension of thought – was I even thinking? It feels as though there may have been a single thought, or many, just floating there outside of time. I experienced a heightened cognizance of musical moment and my surroundings as they blended together. There have been times where I have felt electricity tingling through me. I have vague recollections of paying more attention to my surroundings only for the moment to release its embrace of me. This thesis examines these moments in my own performance practice and that of others.

I have been captivated and mystified by my experiences and often feel at a loss in terms of describing and analysing them. I have since encountered others’ descriptions of transcendent experiences of similar significance across a number of environments and disciplines both individually and in groups. Cognitive scientist, Benzon asks: “what makes a performance special?” and finds that there is no reason to believe the answer lies merely in the sound itself, but rather these human experiences are “complex phenomena that require complex explanations; any act or experience lies at the nexus of many causal threads, each one of which must be followed if we are to understand that experience” (2001).
The main research questions of this thesis, therefore address several of these issues:

How does transcendent experience manifest itself in contemporary, experimental popular music performance?

How do musical aspects facilitate the transcendent experience in performing experimental popular music?

How do extra-musical aspects of performance facilitate the transcendent experience in experimental popular music?

How does a musician/researcher discuss their own transcendent experience within their practice of music-making?

Through these questions, this study explores and discovers new elements of music-making by myself and others, by focussing on the transcendent experience in a cross-section of experimental popular music. By building upon previous research, and drawing on existing and more recent methods in the nature of self-insight through phenomenological enquiry, incorporating elements of heuristic enquiry (Moustakas, 1994), embodied enquiry (Todres, 2007), grounded theory and sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009), this study aims to demonstrate where, why and how the transcendent experience can feature in experimental popular music performance practice.

The research builds upon a model of phenomenological enquiry. I initially investigated my own experience, then artists in my own local musical world, and then looked to established Australian and international artists seeking their experiences of transcendence. I wanted to hear their stories with the view to understand this phenomenon in a larger framework, discover some characteristics of 21st century music-making and see how the characters and settings change and if anything potentially universal may be revealed.
**Experimental Popular Music under investigation**

The musical practice examined in this project is related to my own practice and is difficult to simply categorise or define. The term ‘experimental popular music’ (EPM) has been chosen by way of convenience to provide a link between artists who may come from very different sonic approaches but still have a number of common approaches to music-making. This is exemplified by the performers participating in this study: double-bassist Lloyd Swanton, pianist Chris Abrahams, drummer Tony Buck (*The Necks*); pianist/electronic artist Jon Hopkins; guitarist Leo Abrahams; guitarist/composer Luis Rojas and singer/keyboardist Chantel Bann (*Shanghai, The Red Room*); guitarist/singer Seth Olinsky (*Akron/Family*); guitarist Phil McCourt (*Captain Kickarse and the Awesomes*); drummer Cameron Brennan and bassist Alison Kerjan (*Meniscus*); clarinettist Karen Heath (*Ennïs Tola, The Grand Silent System*); guitarist Ryan McRobb (*mousetrapreplica*); bassist/guitarist Justin Ashworth; violinist Mirabai Peart (*Joanna Newsom, Splinter Orchestra*); trumpeter Holly Harrison (*Snip Snap Dragon, Space Project*); guitarist/composer John Encarnacao (*Espadrille, Warmer*) and saxophonist Brendan Smyly (*Espadrille, The Monstrous Now*); guitarist Jeff Martin (*The Tea Party, The Armada*); bassist Jed Maisey (*Space Project*), drummer Matthew Robertson (*Space Project*) and myself (*Space Project – guitar/vocals*).

Other literature that has engaged in defining artists of this cross-section of experimental popular music have used terms such as ‘avant-rock’ (Martin, 2002) when discussing artists such as Björk, *The Beatles* and *King Crimson*; ‘space-rock’ (Reisch, 2009) for earlier *Pink Floyd* and earlier *Radiohead* – both bands that moved beyond such associations with subsequent releases (p.5). Despite the label of ‘avant-rock’, Martin’s scope of artists moves well beyond rock music to artists such as Schoenberg, Merzbow and Coltrane, losing some impact and clarity from his defined genre (2002). In contrast to ‘avant-rock’, the notion of experimental popular music provides a broader stroke in which to represent the chosen artists in this
study to afford for their stylistic variety. Space-rock too, while certainly able to fit under the umbrella of experimental popular music, is too specific a title for it to apply to the artists featured in this study.

The music of The Necks, particularly live performances, seems to be a prominent and consistent vehicle for transcendent experiences of their listeners (Homan & Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell, 2005; Romeo, 2004). As well as being central to the notions of transcendence presented in this thesis, The Necks are a prime example of Australian musicians achieving an extraordinary level of improvisatory freedom and originality in their musical craft while retaining their status as a popular music act (Whiteoak, 2008, p. 37).

This study investigates how these experimental popular music artists might also engage with what is unknown and what experiences their music practice affords. Each artist and group can vary significantly in a sonic sense, details of which will be given in the artist profiles. While sharing a number of sonic similarities, it is often the cross-section of conceptual approaches that link my own heuristic enquiry with the practice of the participating musicians. In addition to my own cultural situated-ness, experimental popular music lends itself to exploring the unknown and the experiences it affords. Minimalist Terry Riley explains:

I think that music has to have danger, you have to be right on the precipice to really be interested... if you never get on the brink you’re never going to learn what excitement you can rise to. You can only rise to great heights by danger and no great man has ever been safe... (Terry Riley, 1970, cited in Nyman, 1999, p. 145).

Such an approach, as described by Riley, is reinforced by Jeddeloh, who considers the act of improvisation a metaphor describing the human, automatic behaviour that may lead to states of altered consciousness (2003, p.2). The exploration of musical precipices as described by Riley, is key to the identity and musical practice of the artists featured in this study, who have come from a multitude of backgrounds, of which commonly feature improvisation and jazz.
Jazz is seen by Jeddeloh to utilise both cyclical and linear temporal frameworks. Jazz music is usually constructed in a cyclical fashion using an ABA or similar structure, where the ‘A’ section holds the melody or main phrase of the piece, a middle section and repeating the head to finish the piece (2003, p.45). These cycles and sequences are seen as a useful tool to assure synchrony within an ensemble (p.45), as such sequences are regarded to be essential to the communication of a jazz song (p.86). Jeddeloh further defines jazz improvisation as “the spontaneous unfolding of new musical ideas within the loose configuration of a jazz composition” (2003, p.5). In more free forms of Jazz this configuration becomes increasingly loose. EPM can be diverse in its musical structuring including more loose and risky forms as evidenced by groups such as The Necks, whose improvised pieces are in a constant state of morphing from one gesture to another.

Jazz performers are considered to participate in an inter-subjective world through the sharing of musical language, goals and emotions (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.74). That is, there is “an ongoing correspondence between my meanings and their meanings” (Berger and Luckman 1966, cited in Jeddeloh, 2003, p.74). When this inter-subjective world gets expanded into experimental popular music (EPM), where groups and performers come from other musical backgrounds such as rock and improvisation, this correspondence becomes a vivid and colourful landscape of diverse expression.

This ethos of sonic and consciousness exploration that traverses a number of traditions in EPM is exemplified by the reflections of drummer Mickey Hart of The Grateful Dead. Hart’s describes the exploration of consciousness shared by many of his peers, exploring consciousness through psychedelic drugs, Hinduism, Buddhism, the occult or 20th century psychology – not explicitly shamanic, but that is essentially what Hart’s peers were trying to become without even knowing it (Hart, Stevens, & Lieberman, 1998, p. 174). “We were climbing around in the World Tree of consciousness like adolescents, intent only on the thrill that came from
playing in these dangerous spaces so far above the ground” (Hart et al., 1998, p.174) – a certain superficiality, or dilettantism where there is no explicit tradition integrated into their practices. The Western tradition that Hart and his peers inherited renounced the existence of these altered states of consciousness; insisting that the “tiny box of consciousness” that we all inhabited was all there was (Hart et al., 1998, p.174).

Hart describes the inherent tension of EPM: “I think of it as a zone – once in the zone the point is to go somewhere you’ve never gone before. That’s what we try for; it’s what keeps us fresh. It’s something The Grateful Dead has always tried to build into its music, but it’s become increasingly harder to nurture the more successful we’ve become. The tension between our obligations to our audience and our obligations to the bond of exploration that first drew us together, between entertainment and art, is one that waxes and wanes but never disappears. Sometimes we dance the dance better than other times; sometimes we stumble: it’s all part of the ride” (Hart et al. 1998, p.185). This sense of tension between the experimental and the popular in EPM performance is explored throughout the interviews in this thesis in which the artists paint a vivid and nuanced picture of the transcendent experience in experimental popular music.

In Sydney, Australia, there is a socially constructed EPM culture and community displayed in groups such as the Bird’s Robe Collective\(^2\) that embody the cultural realities brought to the community by those who partake. Meaning-making occurs in this context through music performance, a means of significant musical communication, dialogue and transformation. Taking cues from Jeddeloh’s description of a jazz ensemble (2003, p.95), the EPM ensemble is an example of a collaborative environment where the interaction patterns of a number of genres are combined together with an exploratory and experimental ethos that often has

\(^2\) The Bird’s Robe Collective – http://www.birdsrobe.com
nondeterministic outcomes. To develop this picture of experimental popular music, the next section focuses upon improvising jazz trio, *The Necks*.

1.1.1 *The Necks*

To further contextualise experimental popular music, I present a brief case study on *The Necks*. The initially Sydney based trio consists of Lloyd Swanton on bass, Chris Abrahams on piano and Tony Buck on drums. Since forming in 1986, *The Necks* have released fourteen albums since 1989 and have gradually built a cult following. From 2000, *The Necks* began touring outside Australia into Europe, and most recently into North America. Usually categorised as "minimalist," and avoiding the use of non-acoustically produced sounds in live performance (although the dense, multi-timbral soundscapes can sometimes suggest otherwise), their music has managed to realise significant dynamic variation inside seemingly, on the surface, modest and restricted parameters (Mitchell, 2005). David Stubbs describes these parameters:

> Their modus operandi is unique--taking a single musical idea, mulling it over endlessly, shading, embellishing and elaborating on it but never breaking away from it, for anything up to an hour (Stubbs, 2005).

When beginning their academic music education in the University of NSW jazz diploma course, Tony Buck, Lloyd Swanton and Chris Abrahams possessed an aesthetic and ethos that demonstrated a cultural and musical rebellion in Australian jazz improvisation (Whiteoak, 2008). They lacked their predecessors' belief that jazz was superior to popular music and drew significant inspiration from the ecstatic free jazz of John Coltrane, Sun Ra, Albert Ayler and Pharaoh Sanders and in doing so also generally avoided "the prevailing cool, restrained and (more marketable) older Australian modern jazz aesthetic" (Whiteoak, 2008, p.44).

*The Necks* are a combination of impressive instrumental facility with vibrant and bold collective imagination that has a philosophical commitment to making each
improvisation a journey of discovery. The musical output "is a description-resistant musical alchemy – music that has become much more than the sum of the three performers’ respective influences, abilities and imaginations: inspirational spontaneous composing to hypnotic grooves" (Whiteoak, 2008, p.44). The Necks embody an open-ended approach of patterned improvisation based on evolving musical gestures that simultaneously encompasses a wide range of genres, without ever settling into a single category, jazz being the possible exception (Mitchell, 2005). Their music can be “slow, fast, gentle, aggressive, multi-layered, minimalist, tonal, abstract, retro, futuristic, chilled, funky, trance-like, controlled, overwhelming, intellectual and sensual” (Walters, 2004).

The Necks’ improvisations feature repetitive gestures reminiscent of non-Western forms of music such as the resonances of Indonesian gamelan, the patience of Indian raga and the multiple layers of African polyrhythm (Mitchell, 2005). In the English new music magazine The Wire, Brian Morton articulates that The Necks’ studio album Drive By (2003) belongs to a…

Mantra-like idiom [that is] sufficient to make some American minimalist classics seem one-dimensional. ...One of the beauties of Necks’ music is how evanescent and unpredictable it is, even within its durational and timbral predictability. Few groups have applied themselves to such a restrictive aesthetic and then mined so much from it (Morton, 2004, p. 240).

In live performance the trio, who incidentally have a policy of not rehearsing, begin in silence and absorb the acoustics and feel of the venue, and after one of the three starts off the music on an instinct, the other two gradually follow (Mitchell, 2005). After casting off, the piece evolves, dwells and morphs, often building slowly to a crescendo that can be sustained without a ‘release’, only to unravel and fade into an intuitive, mutually agreed conclusion. This relationship is instinctive and aural rather than the response to any visual cues or visible interaction among the group (Mitchell, 2005). Jazz critic John Clare recalls an early Necks experience at Sydney University:
...the audience and musicians seem spellbound. The only dynamic element is the music, which unfolds like a time-lapse film of growing plants. Absolutely compelling...the surface seems static, but bass and drum patterns subtly metamorphose... pianist Chris Abrahams spills his expanding scales and arpeggios across the calm surface like a boy tossing pebbles – idly, or perhaps with great deliberation. Everything intensifies, almost imperceptibly, until the trio is humming like a dynamo, filling the room with belling overtones.... They present improvisations in which a hypnotic rhythm is invariably established, this being the only predictable element. It is a kind of jazz minimalism.... One of the most impressive elements is the way dynamic shifts give an almost supernatural presence to one of the instruments, without that instrument playing any louder (Clare, 1995, p.192).

With the prominent use of ambience and ‘hypnotic rhythm’, *The Necks*’ music bears some resemblance to the ‘music for imaginary films’ or ‘imaginary soundtrack’ genre affiliated with British artists such as Brian Eno or *The Cinematic Orchestra*, and electronic artists such as *Massive Attack* and *Spleen* (Mitchell, 2005). In contrast, bassist Swanton states “I don’t actually think that *The Necks*’ music is an automatic fit for most cinema or television. I guess it depends on what aspect of *The Necks* we’re talking about; because the band that gets up onstage and does a one-hour improvisation isn’t really going to fit with contemporary soundtrack requirements. Getting back to what we were talking about music and emotion - and its cousin, drama – what we’re about is not necessarily sufficiently dramatic in order to aurally sum up plot points that turn on a pin” (Swanton, cited in Curran 2012).

*The Necks* appear to present sound and rhythms from a concealed soundtrack that plays just underneath the exterior of life and the present moment – if you were to slow things down and pay attention to each intricate detail. Despite their concerts being completely improvised, there is a sense of familiarity as gestures unravel and morph. Follow a trickle for long enough and often you find yourself in a torrent, unaware of how you got there. Despite complex musical relationships, there is an ease of engagement with the evolution, flow and decay of musical material.
The Necks’ music and particularly live performances seem to be a prominent and consistent vehicle for the transcendent experience as seen by album reviews and the survey provided by Romeo (2004). However, for something that has provided these experiences for so many others I have found thus far that there has been minimal writing concerning the artists’ experience of altered and transcendent states of consciousness during performance. In an interview with Demetrius Romeo (2004), bassist Lloyd Swanton touches on the effect The Necks’ music has on one’s state of consciousness:

We are trying to conjure that trance-like state just before you do nod off… where the normal barricades between the different parts of your brain start getting broken down, and so you make all sorts of connections that wouldn’t be made if you were alert. That’s actually a very rewarding and rich state to be in, so if people can hover there, that’s fantastic. I know as a performer with The Necks that my mind goes off into all sorts of bizarre directions. It really does trigger something. I don’t know how it works, but that’s one of the things - not the only thing, but certainly one of the things - we aim to conjure up when we’re performing (Lloyd Swanton in Romeo, 2004).

It is precisely these experiences, combined with my previously mentioned experience of The Necks’ performances that are investigated through the interviews.

Personal background

This section examines the developing musical experiences that have been part of my life in recent years through the lens of experimental popular music practice and powerful, sometimes transcendent, experiences in music-making. I present my own background as a means to initially engage with experiences of transcendence in music performance, to explain the shape of my research path, and to contribute to the emerging framework of transcendent experience drawn out of my experimental popular music practice.
Jazz pianist and musicologist Vijay Iyer stresses that any perspective on music and improvisation is necessarily situated in culture (2004). As such, any discussion of music perception or perceptual experience must account for the cultural situatedness of the very practice of perception (Iyer, 2004). And so it is that this research arises from the musical culture in which I am situated – that being a particular style of experimental popular music arising from my musical and cultural background.

My path towards this project began with improvisation and drone exercises during my first and second years studying music at the University of Western Sydney. Building from this, the musical shapes, colours and gestures of experimental popular music have enchanted me. As I traverse the landscape of my own musical domain, I can begin to personalise these powerful experiences and begin to celebrate and honour the fruits of these musical experiences.

These experiences provided another method of engagement with the ideas of unconscious processes of music-making from both Eastern and Western mystical traditions. In general, these experiences related to my engagement with a process of transformation where one’s sense of time, place and identity is altered. Thankfully, my tertiary education experience did not resemble music educator, Jackie Wiggins’ view of music performance in higher education as being of “a linear, reductionist frame that focuses on technique and memorisation” (Wiggins 2001, cited in Alberici 2004, p.13). Instead, my experience in tertiary music education grew to include philosophies of the Tibetan chakra system to guide a structured improvisation that began in my Honours year project as a means to approach the transcendent experience in music performance and propel my discovery of new aspects of music-making (Handel, 2001; Leland, 2004). The project was a very rewarding process of discovery, planting the seeds for a research agenda that I may pursue more constructively, creatively and thoroughly through my research and thesis. It is this drive to push and redefine myself in understanding some of the most powerful moments of my experience that forms
the core of this project – as new meanings are unlikely to emerge unless one’s usual perspective is altered in some way (Bignell, 2000, p.67). I therefore welcome the new and unknown to be elucidated on my journey of engaging with and examining the experiences of others.

Literature on transcendence and the study

Experiences of transcendence are at the centre of a multitude of Eastern and Western traditions; with ‘the power of music’ being a commonly accepted paradigm. It remains a challenge, at times frustrating, to investigate how, why and in what contexts we can be so strongly affected by music (Gabrielsson, 2001, p. 448).

Writing 13 years ago, Braud and Anderson (1998) illustrated research into experiences of transcendence, stating that “many of the most significant and exciting life events and extraordinary experiences – moments of clarity, illumination, and healing – have been systematically excluded from conventional research” (Braud and Anderson, 1998 p.3). Research into these ‘events’ and ‘experiences’ has progressed significantly in the past twelve years (Vincs, 2007; Jeddeloh, 2003; Alberici, 2004; Vincs, 2002), however there are still areas that would benefit from thorough investigation, particularly in contemporary music-making. As Moustakas suggests: “in every learner, in every person, there are creative sources of energy and meaning that are often tacit, hidden or denied” (Moustakas, 2000 cited in Hiles, 2001).

Roy describes the event of a transcendent experience as something experienced by an individual and/or group, a conscious sense of something ‘boundless and limitless’ that is beyond one’s conscious understanding and exceeds human capacities (2001, p. xi). Experiences of transcendence know no bounds and are

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3 Bignell identifies this as a product of the heuristic inquiry method, particularly the initial immersion in a topic.
found in a multitude of human contexts. Even in sporting pursuits, transcendent experiences are linked with an “innate exploration of human limits,” observing that sport proliferates out of a drive in the human race to realise more and more of its bodily possibilities and that both sport and the spiritual life grow out of our human urge to express the richness of existence (Murphy and White, 1995, p.113). Though it is possible to isolate the physiological activity associated with ‘magic moments’, the “transcendent, luminescent state achieved while in the act of improvising”, is still lacking a satisfactory scientific explanation for the qualities and nuances of this subjective experience (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.9).

Nachmanovitch uses the Buddhist concept of Samadhi to illustrate his understanding of the transcendent experience and its connection with everyday life (1990). He writes:

Buddhists call this state of absorbed, selfless, absolute concentration Samadhi. Samadhi is best known to be attained through the practice of meditation, though there is also walking Samadhi, cooking Samadhi, sandcastle-building Samadhi, writing Samadhi, fighting Samadhi, lovemaking Samadhi, flute-playing Samadhi. When the self-clinging personality somehow drops away, we are both entranced and alert at the same time (Nachmanovitch, 1990 p.52).

Of particularly interest here, of course, is ‘flute-playing Samadhi’. Buddhist and other cultural models and understandings of the transcendent experience are useful tools in enabling comprehension and the informing of these phenomena at a deeper level, in seeking descriptions directly from performers that may place their own music-making at the centre of transcendent experience. The dissolving of boundaries between a composer, performer and audience, particularly through improvisation, suggests the necessity of an integrative and holistic approach to music research (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.8). Through the process of heuristic enquiry and phenomenology-based interviews, I aim to present a model of musical

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4 Also mentioned by singer Lisa Gerrard of Dead Can Dance in interview (Ehrlich, 2003, p.8).
performance that embraces the diversity of music-making practices within experimental popular music and to determine the place of the transcendent experience in the music-making of experimental popular music artists.

With a heuristic basis, this thesis is in part a reflective document, in that my own experiences of transcendence are the initial subject matter from which heuristic enquiry proceeds. I rationalise this by arguing that by identifying and exploring that which I call my own transcendent experiences, I can then pursue, identify and analyse transcendent experiences of others. This, necessarily, influences the manner in which I approach my roles as a musician and academic researcher. It influences the manner in which I imagine and participate in musical relationships and musical environments. It influences the way I write and it influences the manner in which I relate to the world and others.

Researchers have traditionally avoided trying to quantify the subjective experience in musical performance, as empirical research design and experimental controls are incredibly difficult to implement into the complex environment of a music performance that affords musicians the freedom to perform (Jeddeloh, 2003, pp.5-6). Although with recognition of the research paradigm of practice-led research (Smith & Dean, 2009), performers are increasingly documenting their experiences, at times quantifying it. My research emphasises aspects of musical improvisation and has incorporated existing published interviews, ethnographic, phenomenological interviews to investigate my own and fellow artists’ existing musical practices. Additionally, analyses of musical, literary and social transcriptions and open-ended interviews have been included in this study. Some of the ideas in my research could be valuable and crucial stages towards a full account of the interpersonal and musical dynamics and discoveries of music-making.

The main survey of literature in Chapter 2 engages with and provides a range of perspectives on the research questions, specifically how transcendent experiences are represented and defined; the musical features such as improvisation, structure,
repetition, rhythm, drone and timbre feature in these experience; extra-musical aspects such as the performance environment, one’s instrument; and finally how transcendent experiences are articulated, particularly due to their potentially ‘ineffable’ nature.

Research aims

“Music allows us for its duration, to radically reconceive and reconstruct our relationship with the world. If we are to understand how this is possible, we must consider how that relationship is constructed in the first place” (Benzon, 2001, p.13). Here, Benzon argues that the self at the centre of this relationship is a construct predominantly motivated by the requirements of language, and that it is the linguistic nature of this self that allows it to be placed aside by and for music (2001, p.13).

McClelland (1991) suggests a synergy between transcendent experience and the ultimate purpose of musical experience – that is, to be able to go beyond consciousness of self, to be part of the music and unified with sound (p.161). Lisa Gerrard of Dead Can Dance states that “this is what’s so interesting about music: it allows both the composer and the listener to enter rooms that are part of the human psyche they normally wouldn’t enter” (Ehrlich, 2003, p. 164).

For music psychologist Sloboda, all music provides reflection of psychological inclinations and abilities of humans as composers, performers and listeners (2000, p. vi). As such, this links experiences of transcendence to the human condition at large. The actual experiences of those who have performed in the expanded sense of awareness and enlarged sense of self that are characteristic of the transcendent experience in music performance are a fruitful resource about other ways of being in this world (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, cited in Alberici, 2004, pp.11-12). Benzon (2001) also observes that, although there is no doubt that music affords us deep and powerful experiences that challenge our ordinary sense of reality (p.165),
transcendent experiences are regarded as incidental in the modern Western intellectual tradition; such experiences are discussed, “but not with the passion, precision and prestige granted to discussion of reason, language and science, justice and cognition” (p.17).

In contrast to this, considering how one examines their own transcendent experience, musicians themselves are seen to use a range of non-musical metaphors that suggest a mystical, sacred and magical quality to describe the process and outcomes of improvising (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.4). Improvising jazz guitarist Dr Jared Burrows reflects on this use of metaphor: “as in many activities of an artistic nature, there is a mystical element to musical improvisation that may be enhanced by the artist’s own desire to be seen as a kind of isolated genius with an exclusive access to the Muse” (Burrows, 2004). In contrast to the reports of musicians, accounts of ‘metanormal’ experiences are considered rare in sports reporting and publications, with many people actually having these illuminating experiences but being reluctant to talk about them (Murphy & White, 1995, p.2). In light of this apparent contrast, this research also explores the dynamics of how these experiences are shared and the value that is placed upon them by the research participants.

As an extension of Jeddeloh and Burrows’ observation of mystical implications to the improvisation process, composer and academic Samson Young (2009) observes that even modern day writings in music scholarship remain “plagued by poetic mystification of music’s ability to transfigure, transcend, and intoxicate” (p.8). Young argues that in the post-romantic era of scientific reason, the assertion for music as a spiritual pursuit is no longer necessary. Observing a history of music, Young states that it has already been seen how “the concept of music as transcendence single-handedly lifted music out of its modest annex of mere skilled and mechanical labour, into becoming a fine art worthy of philosophical and
Music education has accepted and is continuing to institutionalise the categorical breakdown of *highbrow* and *lowbrow* music that was previously articulated through levels of transcendence and spirituality (Young, 2009). Young finds that rather than music being demystified, musicology’s ‘internal rapture’ has been engaged by simply expanding the definition of transcendence to embrace a wider range of contrasting musical aesthetics. He states: “musicians will gladly live with the consequences of a more liberally defined concept of transcendence, so long as the last frontier is securely guarded” (p.9). That is, music’s transcendence will continue to be advocated and argued for to safeguard the superiority of all musics over all of the arts, for if music had not changed its status as a result of the growth of romantic aesthetics, musicology would cease to exist in academia today (p.9). To debunk the ‘mysticism’ of music and to subdue the boundaries between the musical and extra-musical is seen to invalidate music scholarship as an intellectual pursuit of significance, pushing “music back into the conservatories, and to forfeit the pedestal on which musicians have stood for many years” (Young, 2009, pp.8-9).

Therefore to balance, on the one hand, the apparent reality others experience, and on the other, the claim of romanticism, my study assumes that transcendent experience has a reality that goes beyond its supposed romantic origins. It accepts the potential to use transcendence as an aspect of romantic thought for promotional ends but seeks a more thorough grounded understanding of the transcendent experiences of experimental popular music artists in a meaningful way.
The problem of writing on transcendent experience is demonstrated by Penman and Becker’s (2009) study of musical experience, which was initially presented in separate humanities and science versions, stating that research into religion and altered states of consciousness made any empirical study highly problematic (p.50). In a similar vein, Hodgkinson’s (1996) investigation into Siberian Shamanism, suggested the danger of importing Western categories into a non-appropriate context, such as mapping shamanism into psychology or art (p.63). It is for this reason that I am focusing on a musical culture of experimental popular music, in which I participate, to drive and focus this study.

Difficulties also arise when discussing improvisation. Rzewski relates it to the art of magic tricks: “the trick itself is the thing that is interesting. The explanation of the trick, although it may also be interesting for the insight it offers into the magician’s craft, somehow loses sight of the essential experience of magic” (Rzewski, 2006, p. 491). Speaking directly of music, “a clever analysis of a Beethoven symphony, although it may reveal something about the working of the composer’s mind, is no substitute for the music itself” (Rzewski, 2006, p.491). As part of a broader conceptual approach in examining musical experiences, “one can improvise while talking; and one can talk ‘around’ improvisation; but it seems difficult to talk about it without somehow distorting the nature of the thing one is trying to talk about. A successful improvisation leaves you with nothing to say, as the thaumaturge (miracle) leaves you with your mouth hanging open… the spectator can only gaze dumbly… What is the effect of a good improvisation? One is left speechless. It just is what it is, that is all” (p.491). These issues reappear consistently in the course of the interviews and are explored more explicitly in section 2.4, chapter 7 and section 8.4. The opinions reported by some of the participants and many of the findings suggest that the benefits of writing this thesis may outweigh the risks.
This current chapter has introduced the key terms around the experience and notions of transcendence, experimental popular music. It states the research questions and the research aims, and discusses the heuristic basis as the point of the departure for the thesis. The chapter refers to issues in the literature to be engaged with pertaining to research into personal experiences of musical transcendence. It reflects on the aims of the research and discusses issues to be addressed in the research methods.

Chapter two consists of the main literature review, engaging with the pertinent texts about transcendent experience of musicians in performance connected to the experimental popular music paradigm, and how the experiences are described and defined. In contrast to other research approaches influenced by grounded theory, where the literature ‘exploration’ occurred after conducting pilot studies “to avoid developing preconceived notions about how musicians experience transcendence” (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.7), my literature review and data collection are an integrated process, informing one another as my skill as an interviewer developed. Chapter two will also examine texts regarding the musical and other related aspects such as a performer’s relationship to their instrument, performance strategies and musical features, with regards to how they relate to the experience of transcendence. Finally, the chapter explores how one may examine their own transcendent experience within their practice of music-making.

Guided by the research questions, chapter three will introduce the core methodological approaches, based in a phenomenological paradigm and how these approaches address the transcendent experience in experimental popular music. It is through a hybrid of phenomenological interview techniques and heuristic enquiry designed to support one another, that I approach these complex phenomena.
Chapters four, five, six and seven present the findings of the 19 interviews and discuss them in relation to the research questions, giving insight into the direct experiences of the performers.

Chapter eight features the main discussion, outlining the new knowledge, reflections on the research process and implications for further work in this field.
Chapter 2: Literature - Representations of transcendent experience

This chapter discusses the literature pertaining to experiences of transcendence in contemporary, experimental popular music performance and how they are described and defined. It also discusses the use of the term ‘experimental popular music’ as a frame for the artists interviewed in this study.

To explore manifestations of this experience in such a context requires that I discuss literature from a number of fields including musicology, music performance, phenomenology, the spiritual, anthropology and psychology. The discussion includes the findings of researchers, works of criticism and journalism, and audio recordings, but also drawing on the personal experiences of musicians. The chapter begins with definitions and theories of transcendence that inform the discussion regarding manifestations of transcendent experience in the literature and in musical practice. Following the central research questions of the thesis, musical and extra-musical aspects that facilitate transcendence are then explored and finally, how the musician as researcher examines their own practice.

In contrast to other research approaches influenced by grounded theory, where the literature ‘exploration’ occurred after conducting pilot studies “to avoid developing preconceived notions about how musicians experience transcendence” (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.7), my literature review and data collection are an integrated process, informing one another as my skill as an interviewer developed. This is due to the structure of my research design and the focus on heuristic enquiry, where my own experience is the point of departure for the research. This chapter will bring this literature together to form a foundation for the two pairs of methodologies used in the study by exploring the presence of transcendent experience in experimental popular music performance, the musical and extra-musical aspects of such experiences and how artists and researchers explore transcendence.
The transcendent experience as manifesting in contemporary, experimental popular music performance

This section explores representations of transcendent experience relevant to experimental popular music performance. Firstly it will explore definitions and theories of transcendent experience, focusing on music performance. Other aspects of the transcendent experience such as sense of self and sense of time and place are examined on psychology (Jung, 1959; Marshman, 2003), trance (Morelos, 2004), and the spiritual (Aldridge, 2003; Marranca, 2002; Young, 2009).

2.1.1 Defining transcendent experience

Not reserved for a specific group of people, creative writers, artists, musicians and athletes as well as normal, everyday people have described the dissociative element of ‘in-the-event-illumination’, characterised by the ‘surrender to the event’ and the ‘unitary moment’ associated with intense experience (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.17). In spite of the growing recognition of transcendent experiences, few people appreciate the great variety of experiences characterised by terms such as ‘play in the zone’ or ‘peak performance’ (Murphy & White, 1995). It is encouraging that research in this area has grown considerably, particularly in music performance (Vincs, 2002; Jeddeloh, 2003; Alberici, 2004).

There are several theories and notions of transcendent experience that feed into this project. The transcendent experience I am investigating bears resemblance to Maslow’s ‘peak experience’ (Maslow, 1994), Csikszentmihalyi’s ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), ‘Mu’ of Zen Buddhism (Sudo, 1998) a ‘state of chi’, ‘Samadhi’ of Hinduism and Buddhism (Nachmanovitch, 1990), the ‘ecstasy’ of various religious mystical traditions (Gabrielsson, 2001), the ‘aesthetic rapture’ of the European Romantic tradition (Bloom & Skutnick-Henley, 2005), ‘bright moments’ of musicking (Benzon, 2001), ‘metanormal’ (Murphy & White, 1995), ‘magic moments’ in jazz improvisation (Jeddeloh, 2003), ‘abstract experience’ (Feldman, 1968), ‘tuning in’ (Schmicking, 2006), trance in the performing arts (Morelos, 2004) or what minimalist music pioneer Terry Riley so eloquently calls getting “far out” (in Nyman, 1999, p.125).
Transcendent experiences are diverse and therefore difficult to define. It is often the case that terms become interchangeable, for example Penman and Becker use ‘trance’ and ‘ecstasy’ synonymously (2009), whereas Jeddeloh’s ‘magic moments’ are considered accompanying the transcendent state and the meditative state, as the biological phenomena are comparable (2003, p.8). In contrast, the terms used often seem contradictory. For example, the Nietzschean notion of the ecstatic Dionysian experience is one of self-negation, and thus transcendent of the self, however Vincs argues that in transcendent experience that the self is still present (Vincs, 2002, p.51). That is, Nietzsche’s ‘ecstatic experience’ is not a complete transcendence (Vincs, 2002, p.51). Furthermore, attempts at definition sometimes remove the subtle yet important nuance that characterises transcendent experience.

The Oxford English Dictionary presents transcendent as an adjective meaning “surpassing or excelling others of its kind; going beyond the ordinary limits; pre-eminent; superior or supreme; extraordinary; of an idea or conception: Transcending comprehension; hence, obscure or abstruse; the Kantian notion that the transcendent is not realizable [sic] in human experience”; “that which transcends, surpasses, or excels something else, or things generally.” Oxford Dictionaries presents the origin of ‘transcendent’ from of late Middle English: from Latin transcendent- ‘climbing over’, from the verb ‘transcendere’ (Transcendent, adj. and n., 2010). When seen in conjunction with the previous definitions offered by a number of authors above, these definitions provide the means to explore to what extent these experiences are realisable in music performance.

Among the reported characteristics of transcendent experience are those relating to experience of timelessness, sense of self, the elusiveness of the experience, flow, physical responses, trance states, spiritual experience, and other reports which seem to combine aspects of all these.

Rather than defining, Roy’s observations suggest that transcendent experience encompasses a sequence of six elements (2001, pp. 5-7). These six elements form a somewhat linear path through the transcendent experience. In italics, I have included how these elements fit into the research questions proposed in this thesis.
The preparation – cognitive and affective setting that conditions the experience, both short term and long term. **Q3: The extra-musical factors.**

The immediate occasion – that which triggers the experience; an action, person, vista, painting, music; to use a chemistry metaphor, a precipitating factor – bringing about a release of tension and emergence of a novel feeling. **Q2: The musical factors involved in transcendent experience; Q3: The extra-musical factors.**

The predominant feeling – an aesthetic feeling that penetrates into the intimacy and depth of the object at hand; aesthetic participants let themselves be reached by the object of art and respond to it with their whole being – a mutual gift between subject and object. **Q1: How transcendence is experienced.**

The discovery – a disclosure, an insight or discernment of something that has unrestricted significance; an awareness of something declaring confronting, challenging and engaging itself to us; not just emotional or subjective therefore has an objective reference (Ramsey, 1966, cited in Roy p.7). **Q1: How transcendence is experienced.**

The interpretation – a reflective act; awareness, initially elementary mirroring but moves into greater life significance; interpretations change over time; conditioned by mental framework prior to experience. **Q4: How one reflects and shares transcendent experience.**

The fruit – the benefit one obtains from the experience; perhaps a personal transformation that may occur both in short-term and long-term. **Q4: How one reflects and shares transcendent experience.**

At the stage of preparation and when the occasion presents itself, one’s intelligence and emotions cooperate and are shaped by a sense of the indefinite (Roy, 2001, p.163). Our imagination, affectivity and intelligence together react to the situation created by the context and the occasion, being struck by the presence of something that exceeds their power in all respects (physical, rational and emotional) (Roy, 2001, p.163).
Transcendent experience consists of discovering things anew, as if taken by surprise, a striking dimension of reality, and an unrestrained realm to which one feels open with the apprehension of being in contact with something that lies beyond one’s normal facility, ability or understanding (Roy, 2001, p.3). Despite mental preparation and reasoning prior to a transcendent experience, at the moment of ‘discovery’ it is considered normal to “forget the preparatory elements that preceded it and to be dazzled by the influx of light suddenly shining” (Roy, 2001, p.179).

Transcendent experiences do not afford any object-like knowledge, but rather simply call attention to themselves as noteworthy and as different from the rest of human life (Roy, 2001, p.163) – there is a depth in those moments that constrains one to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences (James 1983, cited in Roy, 2001, p.163). If transcendent experiences were to utter articulate sounds, they “would declare: ‘there is something extraordinary in the ordinary’” (Roy, 2001, p.163).

Morton Feldman’s notion of abstract experience gives a nuanced representation of the tension of the extraordinary within the ordinary of transcendent experience. He writes:

> The abstract... is not involved with ideas. It is an inner process that continually appears and becomes familiar like another consciousness... We would like to surrender to this Abstract Experience. We would like to let it take over. But we must constantly separate it from... that aspect of the imagination that is in the world of the fanciful. In my own work I feel the constant pull of ideas. On the one hand, there is the inconclusive abstract emotion. On the other, when you do something, you want to do it in a concrete, tangible way. There is a real fear of the Abstract because one does not know its function. The imagination is so many things; it can go so many ways... The Abstract Experience is only one thing, a unity that leaves one perpetually speculating. The imagination builds its speculative fantasy on known fact – facts that have their basis in a very real, a very literary world. Even when it is irrational, it can be measured in terms of the rational - like Surrealism. The imagination provides answers without a metaphor. The Abstract Experience is a metaphor without an answer. Whereas the literary kind of art, the kind we are close to, is involved in the polemic we associate with religion, the Abstract Experience is really far closer to the religious. It deals with the same mystery – reality – whatever you choose to call it (Feldman, 1968, pp. 103-104).

Feldman speaks of how it is necessary to have an established basis for the abstract experience, suggesting that indeed musical ‘facts’ of circumstance shape and drive
a transcendent experience and further, that it can be measured and approached from the rational.

Alberici defines transcendent experiences as those “reported to lift performers and audiences above normal physical and mental fears and limitations” (2004, p. 12), coupling with providing a sense of immediacy and of certainty (Roy, 2001, p. 175). Jeddeloh (2003) and Vincs (2002) also share these notions of transcendence. Roy submits that there are four types of transcendent experience: aesthetic, ontological, ethical and interpersonal (Roy, 2001, p. 9). The key factor for aesthetic transcendent experience may be, for instance, an uneasiness regarding one’s place in the sensory world, more than natural wonder at the beauty or ugliness of the world around us; the ontological type, an intellectual question; the ethical type, moral concern; the interpersonal type, a longing for communion that is more than a privileged relationship among human persons (Roy, 2001, p. 9).

The nature of the experience appears to make the lasting effects quite individualistic with various authors highlighting diverse aspects. According to Laski, some common characteristics include a profound loss of self while experiencing a sense of unity or interconnectedness, clarity of perception, a loss of the sense of external time, space, worldliness, and one’s individual limitations (1961, pp. 444-469). Simultaneously, one feels a heightened sense of joy, love, ecstasy and release that coincides with enhanced physical and mental capabilities, akin to the flow sensation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The shape of the experience may include a preliminary phase characterised by internal conflict and discomfort that can segue into a state of transcendence that includes the unitary experience, illumination, vision and ecstasy (Jeddeloh, 2003, p. 9). While crossing secular and non-secular lines, this is followed by a period of reflection and questioning of “what just happened?” and “what does it mean?” (Jeddeloh, 2003, pp. 9-10).

Outside of music performance, Murphy and White (1995, p. 38-66) categorise aspects of the transcendent experience in sport that can also apply to music performance: altered perception of size and field, where conscious attention is centred on one thing, subtler perceptual abilities manifest (awareness of the whole field of players, or the basket/hole becoming huge (and thinking you can’t miss);
alterations in time perception, changes in time resemble a dream-state; things going really fast and things going really slow, déjà vu experiences, time stopping; extrasensory perception: intuitive capacity probably a composite of several sensory modalities and abilities such as empathy and intuition; out of body experiences: linked to the detachment and awareness of the “other”, a sense of divine presence, source of strength outside the self, a nebulous figure or recognisable apparition.

Murphy and White also list the following as being features of the transcendent experience: acute wellbeing; peace, calm, stillness; detachment; freedom; floating; flying; weightlessness; ecstasy; power, control; being in the present; instinctive action and surrender; mystery and awe; feelings of immortality; and unity (Murphy & White, 1995).

2.1.2 Elusive experiences

Transcendent experiences appear to be elusive and somewhat out of one’s own control or jurisdiction. From Marcel Proust’s novel Remembrance of Things Past, the narrator is attempting to recreate and recapture a transcendent experience of drinking tea and eating biscuits:

I decide to attempt to make it reappear. I retrace my thoughts to the moment at which I drank the first spoonful of tea. I find again the same state, illuminated by no fresh light. I compel my mind to make one further effort, to follow and recapture once again the fleeting sensation. And that nothing may interrupt it in its course I shut out every obstacle, every extraneous idea, I stop my ears and inhibit all attention to the sounds which come from the next room. And then, feeling that my mind is growing fatigued without having any success to report, I compel it for a change to enjoy that distraction which I have just denied it, to think of other things, to rest and refresh itself before the supreme attempt (Proust, 2006, p. 62)

Proust’s prose articulates an experience that cannot be directly willed into existence, try as one might to replicate the original conditions in hope that the transcendent experience would reassemble itself. This is also articulated in music literature, where the ‘magic’ failed to cooperate and the brain dynamics could not be recreated; the magic itself was spontaneous and not something that is consciously willed (Benzon, 2001, p.76 & Roy, 2001, p.19). Such ‘spontaneous states’ are considered beyond the determining capacity of any particular centre or systemic organisation of them.
Benzon (2001, pp. 76-77) argues that musical experiences differ from Proust’s prose, as music-making is generally a group activity; ego loss is enabled and supported by the musical group (p. 77).

This elusive sense of ‘letting go’ is required of a performer in improvisational performance (Morelos, 2004, p. 52). The process of ‘letting go’ is seen as a process where facets of the “normal” individual personality are dissociated from the experience of performing – activity motivated by the ‘normal’ self are considered to be inhibitory to the experience of the creative state. Therefore questions arise as to what level of preparation is necessary in order for the performer to access such a state. Asplund (1997) argues that there are no set formulae, patterns, recipes, spells or algorithms that work predictably to engage with transcendence in music making, and provides this metaphor:

...If you value the song of a species of wild bird, you might have to put up a certain type of birdhouse, or other appropriate place for them to nest or feed in. Birds are not guaranteed because they have their own will, so the best you can do is provide the most inviting environment for them to inhabit (Asplund, 1997, p. 173).

Such a metaphor can be considered in light of the process of improvisation, but also resonates with the interview process and methodology employed in this study where how I approach the subject matter and engage with my participants largely influence how experiences will be shared. There is some element of consistency, however, for despite these experiences often being “sudden and unexpected, they can be cultivated through intentional practice” (Jeddeloh, 2003).

2.1.3 Sense of self

One of the common elements of transcendent experience is where one’s sense of self in altered in some capacity. A person is seen to have a core self that is carried from one context to another unaltered, and a transitory self that consists of perceptions that shift with context (Turner, 1988, cited in Brinner, 1995, p. 290).
A musician may shift rapidly between transitory selves, even projecting conflicting images to different people simultaneously. The principal variables affecting this transitory self include the degree of familiarity with other musicians present, awareness and assessment of the relative competence, confidence and authority of those musicians, and a sense of one’s own competence relative to the musical task at hand, including the performance context, type of piece, instrument, and role to be played...The transitory self is also affected by the degree to which a musician depends on other performers and, conversely, is able and willing to support them (Brinner, 1995, p. 290).

Brinner is suggesting that it is the short-term self that is most apparent during performance and is largely at the mercy of the circumstance. This is also supported by Roy, discussing that “a person can have a sudden illumination that radically changes one’s outlook on life; on the other hand, years are required for this basic insight to make a difference in one’s thoughts and actions” (Roy, 2001, p.20). This study investigates how these short-term/long-term selves are experienced and discussed in relation to the transcendent experience.

Applying a Zen philosophy to playing the guitar, journalist and musician Philip Sudo quotes guitarist/composer David Torn’s description of his performance experience:

I lose myself at some point during almost every musical performance. There’s some point of struggle and super self-consciousness, but I always get lost at some point. While I’m playing, there’s a pattern of struggling through something and then cracking through it by a weird combination of willpower and letting go. That’s the most enjoyable thing for me: ‘Uh-oh, he’s gone!’ (Torn, in Sudo, 1998, p.168).

This experience of losing and redefining oneself during a musical performance is a theme that reappears throughout this project. Torn is articulating a tension that exists in his sense of self, where the struggle is to overcome a sense of self-consciousness that is perceived to detract from the performance and put up a barrier to transcendent experience. This is also akin to artist Morton Feldman’s remark that “for a work of art to succeed, its creator must fail” (1968, p.14). As such, this project is engaging with Baruss’ (2003) notion of altered states of consciousness and definitions of self as a lived experience. This involves questions of the self as a fixed or unfixed identity and one’s experience of time through the transcendent experience and the everyday life-world5 and the stability of its boundaries.

5 A term employed by Husserl arising from his phenomenological analysis of experience.
Cognitive scientist Benzon also speaks of the fragility of a sense of self and how one may lose track of their own self in music performance. In particular, Benzon notes that of the artists he interviewed, the particular experience of loss of self wasn’t the strange thing, but rather the existence of such a thing at all (2001, p.12). Benzon lists three main features of transcendence experiences (2001, pp.147-148):

No Thought: thinking ceases, and the music plays itself. Moving beyond thought is an objective common to many meditative disciplines.

Altered Body Sense: one may feel light, or in extreme cases detached from one’s body to the extent of being able to remotely view oneself; also common in meditation.

Sharing: a sense of heightened communication with other musicians and the audience.

Notions of identity with regard to transcendent experience in music performance also resonate with trance performances in theatre and other performing arts (Morelos, 2004), raising questions about preconceptions of identity in music – are musicians playing as themselves, whereas theatre or film artists are playing as someone else?

In improvising we must momentarily suspend the sense of self, and of our own identity. This is a game, which can be dangerous if not played under controlled conditions. Under uncontrolled conditions, it can lead to insanity. Identity is learned. It is useful for survival. It is essential to remember who we are and what we are doing while we are crossing a street. At the same time, it is important not to think about every movement we make. We must trust the unconscious. When we act, we momentarily free ourselves from reflection. We simply act (Rzewski, 2006, p.493).

Music-making in an altered state of consciousness is a requirement for shamans. In order to re-enter the special psychological state involved, the shaman had to prepare through setting aside his or her normative, everyday persona (Hodgkinson, 1996, p.60). Likewise, a musician is seen as crossing a threshold from an ordinary state of mind into ‘performance mode’ (Benzon, 2001, pp.6-7).

‘Letting go’ is a process where elements of one’s ‘normative’ personality become separated from the performance experience, as activity driven by this ‘normative’ self is considered to inhibitory the experience of the creative state (Morelos, 2004, p.52).
Questions therefore arise as to the level of preparation that is required for the performer to activate and access this state, and also how the spontaneity of a trance performance is linked to a sense of authenticity and for it not to be considered ‘contrived’ (Morelos, 2004, p.52).

Such a transition may be the result of conditioning; certain things are occurring in the brain to prepare one for performance that produce a tangible physical state with definite sensations (electricity) and symptoms (perspiring) (Benzon, 2001, p.7). Benzon suggests that a conductor ‘becoming’ the composer of the piece he is conducting is akin to possession that is found in a number of cultures around the world (2001, p.12). But these “bright moments” are only seen as transitory - he observes that such moments often last longer than a moment, but however much time they span they nonetheless in a sense, occupy but a moment (2001, p.144).

The liner notes of saxophonist John Coltrane’s album, *Transcendence* (1961), feature a story where Coltrane describes his playing style to fellow saxophonist Julian Adderley: “well, I just get into this thing and I don’t know how to stop!” Deceptively simple and amusing, Miles Davis’ response to such a comment was simply that Coltrane should ‘try pulling the goddam horn out of his mouth!” This exchange suggests a tension between at least two approaches to improvisatory music and the experiences that are afforded through performance. Vincs provides a modernist reading on Davis’ comment, where “the self constructs each artistic act, and that each note or musical phrase uttered by a jazz improviser is a direct representation of that player’s ‘will’, thus defining the ‘self of the player’” (2002, p. 1). In contrast, Coltrane was referring to an approach to improvisatory music that is focused on transcending this ‘self’, where one is no longer preoccupied with “identifying self as the author of an artistic product; rather, ‘forces’ at work outside the ‘self’ control the creation of the music when the player dissolves the concept of ‘I’” (Vincs, 2002, p.1).

I move to extend this notion of transcendence to include Davis’ ‘modernist’ view of the self – that is, a transcendent experience through the integration of one’s identity with the music or one’s instrument. Such a perspective is the premise behind the Jungian notion of ‘individuation’. Essential to Jung’s theories of personal and social well-being, the notion of individuation presents the growth of the self from a largely
ego-dominated set of relations – between what Jungians call the (social) persona and the (often asocial) shadow self; between one’s ‘thinking, rationalising self’ and one’s ‘feeling, intuitive self’; the animus and the anima – towards the fully developed, or unified personality (Tucker, 1996, p.67). This is sometimes given spiritual significance, being referred to as the birth of the Great or Cosmic Self within (Tucker, 1996, p.67). To discuss such a state is to speak of the psyche’s experience of a transformative sense of wholeness, rather than seeing life through the lens of familiar and often estranging Western dualisms as (phenomenal) existence and (conceptual) essence; body and soul; mind and spirit (Tucker, 1996, pp.67-68). Expanding on this, my study explores how experimental popular music practitioners approach these dichotomies through their performance practice and elucidates the mindset of 21st century experimental popular music practitioners.

2.1.4 Time

Riley’s notion of ‘getting far out’ is particularly referring to a sense of timelessness, which, through his interest in oriental musics and philosophy, can lead to trance, mesmerisation and perhaps meditation (cited in Nyman, 1999, p.125). The concept of time being “manifold, not one, but a subjective intuition, not an objective property of the world” emerges as a key element of this study (Kramer, 1988).

These notions of time and duration have multiple layers, one of which is known as durée. The notion of durée (Bergson, 1998 cited in Jeddeloh, 2003, p.47) is deceptively simple in its translation of ‘duration’. Durée, rather than simply an explanation of time duration, is “more a philosophy of the conscious self” (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.47). It is seen as a state where the self is forgotten in the present moment while being “unconsciously informed by one’s past experience lodged in memory that is drawn up automatically” (Jeddeloh, 2003, pp.47-48). Durée “is the immeasurable, qualitative experience of the present and lived time, influenced by and continually adding to the past and distinct from external time by virtue of being a lived experience” (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.48).

Rather than pulse, or notes as the spaces in between, it is duration that defines the nature of musical time. Created rhythm engages us and invites one to entrain with it
– not merely reacting to the rhythm, but coupling with it as a synchronised communal rhythmic experience (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.93). This durée is a space where the explicit nature of music fades away, where those involve lose their sense of self and couple with others in their own, yet communal and implicit inner time. The foundation of this implicitness is time, established by the rhythm and meter of the music and the “internal body-mind rhythms of the participants” (p.93). This is demonstrated by the live improvisatory performers of The Necks, whose use of musical time is often an elastic pushing and pulling, swelling and receding, with each member producing a distinct and independent facet while simultaneously being entwined in the texture as a whole.

Musicians report experience of “being in the moment with no consciousness of standard time or space, no reference to the past, though the past is constantly feeding them the musical images and feelings” (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.48). The state is selfless, without conscious reference yet still drawing from the past, “constantly evolving the present into the future” (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.48).

The time it takes to play a piece of music may be regarded as musical external time, whereas inner time, distinct from ‘real time’, is the world inhabited by the performers and the audience while being absorbed by the piece in a meaningful way (Jeddeloh, 2003, pp.49-50). When musicians describe their transcendent experience as a state of losing consciousness or awareness of what is happening outside the performance, it is being in that durée or inner-time state they are referring to (Jeddeloh, 2003, pp.49-50).

Connecting this with the lineage of experimental popular music, an account given by Terry Riley, fascinated by the works of John Cage that were introduced to him by La Monte Young, says “We dragged garbage cans down the stairways around the halls outside the theatre” (Schwartz, 2008, p.16). Although evidence is lacking that suggests Philip Glass was interested in environmental sounds like Young and Riley, it is clear from his other interests such as the Indian Raga, that he shared a fondness for a sense of stillness in sound that could disrupt the comprehension of the passage of time that had hitherto been a cornerstone of Western musical tradition. Philip Glass states:
In Western music we divide time – as if you were able to take a length of time and slice it the way you slice a loaf of bread. In Indian music (and all non-Western music with which I’m familiar), you take small units, or ‘beats’, and string them together to make up larger time values (Philip Glass cited in Schwartz, 1996, p.110).

It is clear that all three composers had discovered the concept of stasis as something unexplored and in stark contrast to the role of Western music up until then.

2.1.5 Representations in psychology literature

Representations in psychology literature of transcendent experience include surveys of ‘peak experience’ (Maslow 1997; Gabrielsson, 2001), analytical psychology (Jung, 1948) and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Gabrielsson observed (2001) that music psychology rarely came to grips with questions that most people consider the most relevant in music – simply, how are we affected by music? Gabrielsson’s project began from people approaching the researcher about exceptional experiences of music affecting them deeply in ways they could not understand.6 The SEM (Strong Experiences of Music) Project started in 1996 with Gabrielsson and Wik as principal researchers. SEM draws strongly from the groundwork for psychological inquiry into peak experiences by Abraham Maslow; however the writing on peak experiences didn’t provide examples of what people shared about their peak experiences.

When pertaining to music, Maslow’s research found that music, particularly the ‘great classics’ (which we may assume to be of the Western Classical Tradition), to be one of the easiest ways of getting peak experience (Gabrielsson 2001, p.431-2). Panzarella’s (1980, cited in Gabrielsson, 2001) research provided examples of participants’ reports (50 participants) and procedures for obtaining and analysing them. Gathering reports on “intense joyous experience of listening to music or looking at visual art” from a sample of 103 participants, Panzarella used content analysis followed by factor analysis, revealing four main factors of the experience: a) renewal ecstasy – an altered perception of the world in a more positive light; b) motor

6 (Gabrielsson, 2001, p. 433)
sensory ecstasy – physical responses (heart rate, breathing, posture locomotion, shivers, chills, tingling, etc.) and quasi-physical responses (feeling ‘high’, floating); c) withdrawal ecstasy – loss of contact with physical and social environment; and d) fusion-emotional ecstasy – merging with the aesthetic object (Panzarella, 1980, pp. 74-77). In this study, experiences with music featured (b) and (d) most frequently. Of the participant samples, classical music appeared to be the sole elicitor of peak experiences in the studies by Maslow (1994) and Panzarella (1980). Gabrielsson found Panzarella’s definitions such as ‘intense joyous experience’ seemed to imply limitation of the types of experience of the participants; in contrast, the SEM was looking for descriptions of any type of strong experience with any kind of music (2001).

An alternative perspective comes from the analytical or psychodynamic tradition of psychology. Jung describes the unconscious as “the ever-creative mother of consciousness” because of its significance for the realisation of a balanced wholeness of the psyche (1948, p. 365). However, simply accessing the contents of the unconscious is meaningless if the information is not assimilated into consciousness. He maintains “in the final analysis the decisive factor is always consciousness, which can understand the manifestations of the unconscious and take up a position towards them” (p. 212). This is the process of balancing both conscious and unconscious processes – the essential task required for individuation.

Conscious and unconscious do not make a whole when one of them is suppressed and injured by the other. If they must contend, let it at least be a fair fight with equal rights on both sides. Both are aspects of life. Consciousness should defend its reason and protect itself, and the chaotic life of the unconscious should be given the chance of having its way too – as much of it as we can stand. This means open conflict and open collaboration at once. That, evidently, is the way human life should be. It is the old game of hammer and anvil: between them the patient iron is forged into an indestructible whole, an ‘individual’. This, roughly, is what I mean by the individuation process (Jung, 1969, p. 288).

This description of individuation can be applied to Jung’s perception of the role of art in a more collective “individuation” of humankind through the assimilation of the collective unconscious into the consciousness of an era. In order for this material to be assimilated into the collective consciousness though, it must be expressed in “the language of the present” (Jung, 1922, cited in Marshman, 2003, p. 23). As such,
studying late-20th/early-21st century experimental popular music will provide a distinctive look into the zeitgeist of music-making in a unique cross-section of artists.

Flow

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi conceived the term ‘flow’ to articulate a state of focused absorption – a melding of action and awareness, where one’s consciousness, mind and body are directed in harmony without hesitation or trepidation (1990, 1997).

Conversely, some individuals have seemingly never experienced flow while playing their instrument. Generally, these participants in Csikszentmihalyi’s studies appeared to lack self-confidence in their music playing and to lack the openness to discovery, new experiences and feelings that encourage flow experiences (1990, 1997). Furthermore, these participants tended not to embrace goal setting. More generally, the findings strongly hint that establishing explicit experience goals may facilitate these flow experiences.

In studies of the ‘flow experience’, nine main characteristics were used to describe such states across a wide range of experiential contexts (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Such experiences were said to have involved sensations of “clear goals every step of the way”; “immediate feedback to one’s actions”; “a balance between challenges and skills”; “action and awareness are merged”; “distractions are excluded from consciousness”; that “there is no worry of failure”; that “self-consciousness disappears”; that “the sense of time becomes distorted”; and finally, that “the activity becomes autotelic” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, pp. 111-114). The elements of challenge, achievement and satisfaction invoked by such experiences help explain the states of well-being and ecstasy that are frequently associated with culturally sanctioned trance experiences (Morelos, 2004, p.45).

The flow state that is commonly mentioned in improvisational performance has been described as ‘optimal experience’, where one’s activities are “going well as an almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness” where the resultant feeling is “so desirable that one wishes to replicate it as often as possible”
The experiences that lead to such feelings were found to have “often involved painful, risky, difficult activities” that extended one’s personal capacity and therefore also included an element of novelty and discovery (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, cited in Morelos, 2004, p.45). Due to the complexities in experimental popular music making, I argue that such music-making practices align it with activities that involve risk and stretching one’s capacity.

Characteristics of a peak experience include total attention on the object in question, complete absorption, disorientation in time and space, transcendence of ego, and identification or fusion of the perceiver and the perceived. Peak experience is considered positive and desirable, where one may experience a total loss of fear, anxiety, inhibition, defence and control. Further, these experiences provide a sense of the sacred:

The emotional reaction in the peak experience has a special flavour of wonder, awe, of reverence, of humility and surrender before the experience as before something great (Gabrielsson, 2001, p. 431).

Laski (1961, cited in Gabrielsson, 2001, p. 432) investigated people’s experience of ‘transcendent ecstasy’, revealing four broad categories (interestingly, classical music was the most frequently mentioned trigger among the arts):

Feelings of loss (loss of time, place, sense, self)

Feelings of gain (gain of timelessness, release, satisfaction, joy, salvation, perfection, and new knowledge)

Feelings of ineffability (indescribable experience, eludes verbal communication)

Quasi-physical feelings (light and/or heat words, improvement words)

Other research, conducted by Bloom and Skutnick-Henley, surveyed ninety adult classical instrumental musicians in order to ascertain some important features that may encourage flow states for instrumental musicians (2005). Bloom & Skutnick-Henley’s participants completed an anonymous, mail-in written survey that comprises numeric rating and write-in reports about the experience of flow while playing a musical instrument. Their research pursued the identification of important
elements that promote flow states among instrumental musicians and discovered the two most salient features that acted as predictors to flow experience were those of self-confidence and self trust; and the desire to experience and express feelings through music (Bloom & Skutnick-Henley, 2005, pp. 26-27). Bloom and Skutnick-Henley state that additional study and refinements are needed to develop confidence about the core factors that promote the flow experience. My research will extend Bloom and Skutnick-Henley’s findings through investigation of different performance contexts, in particular, a particular genre, individual practice or in a group and performing live or recording in a studio. This revealed that almost half the differences between respondents regarding susceptibility to flow experience could not be accounted for by the core factors, calling for future research that identifies additional factors in this regard. Bloom & Skutnick-Henley see an expansion of their methodology to include interviews with musicians and music educators potentially being a fruitful path to discover new factors and further validate those found in their study. This study can be seen, by focusing more on non-classical musicians, including improvisational players and composers, as a natural next step. Also, gathering data from professional musicians, as opposed to the amateurs focused on by Bloom & Skutnick-Henley, may facilitate a more comprehensive picture of how flow experience fits into transcendence in experimental popular music.

2.1.6 Trance

Trance can articulate an important facet of transcendent experience. Of particular interest is research in the field of performing arts (Morelos, 2004) and to explore how it may sit with transcendent experience in experimental popular music performance.

In his thesis focusing on the phenomenon of trance in the performing arts, Ronaldo Morelos states that trance performances “can represent a human striving for some form of cosmological reasoning – for a ‘guiding force’ or ‘higher entity’ capable of directing human action towards ‘its own image’ – towards what might be seen as a more ‘evolved’ form of action or being” (Morelos, 2004, p.38). Such a performance state resonates with Vincs’ (2002) doctoral research where such experiences were desirous, if not essential, to developing and improving one’s own musical practice.
based in jazz improvisation. This draws upon the notion that being culturally accessible is essential for trance to resonate meaning (Morelos, 2004, p.5).

To expand, this brings to question the motivation behind an artist’s musical practice and links to the second research question of this thesis – does a particular approach to music-making facilitate a particular type of experience, i.e. why experimental popular music?

The phenomenon of trance has at times been almost dismissively referred to as ‘possession’ or ‘dissociation’, apparently with the rationale of there being a perceived threshold of ineffability – the inexplicable was thought to belong to the depths of consciousness that were outside understanding (Morelos, 2004, p.27). Trance is also described as a temporary state of consciousness experienced as a ‘transcendence’ of awareness from one’s ‘normal’ by means of an ‘intensification’ of mental or physical processes (Rouget, 1985, cited in Morelos, 2004, p.5). Being ‘in a trance’ involves feelings of dissociation, possession, and channelling, hypnotic states and altered states of consciousness (p.2) where actions and motivations of the performer are attributed by performer and audience as manifesting from outside a performer’s normative facility and behavioural lexicon (Morelos, 2004, p. i). Thriving on the belief of transcendence of the material realm, trance experiences move “into the realms of concepts and ideas, of intelligence and intuition – realms that are commonly described and conceptualised as ‘spiritual’” (Morelos, 2004, p.23).

Striving for a state of consciousness that is considered to awaken creativity and insight and create an opening to ‘another reality’ (Morelos, 2004, p.34), channelling is considered to embody a particular form that emerges from cultural memory, with the performer accessing manifestations of a ‘spiritual master within’ – an ‘archetype’ and a role that guides and informs the experience of trance (Morelos, 2004, pp.34, 53). Such experiences resonate strongly with those of channelling the ghosts of jazz musicians past (Jeddeloh, 2003). As such, this study will also explore the cultural memory of experimental popular music practitioners.

Brian Eno recalls U2 singer Bono talking about an experience of channelling in the recording studio:
I usually think we go into the studio to find music… I felt this time it found us! And it was really like that. Do you know this thing, they talk about ‘channelling’… that’s actually what it felt like. It didn’t feel like ‘me’ sitting there playing, making decisions… I just… I wasn’t making any decisions, really…. there was just this thing unfolding, and my fingers just happened to be a part of it. It seemed to be separate from my will somehow (U2.COM, 2009).

This experience of Eno and Bono resonates with the notion of ‘shamanising’ (Hodgkinson, 1996). ‘Shamanising’ is analogous to a dialogue between voluntary and involuntary elements of cognition and is conceptualised as being a channel for an influence that is both internal and external to the shaman – as a Tuvan shaman articulartes, “I give energy to people through the drum, but I get energy from the spirits” (Hodgkinson, 1996, p.63). This is also reflected in the study by Morelos (2004). Beginning with the individual, the induction into a trance state begins “where one experiences an identification process, an intensified involvement, a sense of isolation from the ‘normal’ environment, a certain amount of instruction, a sense of initiation, an invocation process, and the imagination of the individual must be activated and engaged” (Morelos, 2004, p.16). The induction procedure resolves into a process of interaction with the environment and is outlined below (Morelos, 2004, pp.16-19):

**Identification**: The reframing of an individual’s sense of self and identity is a primary objective of an induction process. The identity structure is of an individual or a group nature, as such it represents a particular set of characteristics and values that are both internalised and invoked by the individual.

**Involvement**: the process of induction requires the intensified involvement of the individual in order to take effect. This intensification of involvement can take the form of an act of concentration – as in the focusing of attention upon an object – or an act of limitation – as in the confining of attention to particular objects. Intensified involvement is an essential preparation for the sense of “heightening” of subjective experience, as well as for the generating of states of receptivity to relevant stimuli in the individual (i.e. an act of limitation may be a repeated phrase in *The Necks*’ improvisations).

**Isolation**: the individual must be isolated from their “normal” environment for the duration of an induction process. Inductions utilised in an established practice
generally invoke a sense of isolation through mental techniques that employ intensified involvement such as concentration and focus.

**Instruction:** the individual may learn a certain amount of information and technique in the induction process. The individual may be guided along a particular direction of development.

**Initiation:** the individual is given a sense of initiation into a ‘closed system’ of beliefs and values – or a social entity. The essential part of the experience is the sense of having been initiated – the sense that one is entitled and equipped to engage in a particular practice.

**Invocation:** the individual must realise an invocation process in the course of an induction procedure. The invocation is the act of bringing about the required state or process. The invocation is a mental preparation and a cause for the trance practice state that is realised through engaging the imagination in the process of initiating particular psychological and physical processes through the use of ‘inner world’ actions. The invocation process produces the necessary suspension of one’s ‘normal’ sense of self for it to be exchanged by the state of consciousness that was realised in the course of induction.

**Imagination:** it is essential that the individual’s imagination is activated and engaged by the induction process. The imagination represents the individual’s ability to focus on a sense or an image to bring about the appropriate state of consciousness and the social-psychological process that is required. One may imagine a predetermined set of internal actions, such as the case of an induction procedure in an established practice, or an undetermined flow of internal actions and images in the case of performances that feature improvised interactions.

**The Closed System:** these elements function within a system of processes that can coalesce into a state of being ‘closed’ as a cycle. In attaining such a ‘closed’ state, a dynamic is generated whereby a field of experience manifests. Whilst the cycle is maintained, the sense of the ‘reality’ of the experience continues, ebbing and flowing according to the ‘intensity’ or momentum within the closed system. Such a system is
activated by training, preparation, interaction, as well as by certain events or
corporations (Morelos, 2004, pp.16-19).

This schema provides a framework by which to explore the transcendent experience,
also tying into the musical and extra-musical elements that surround a performance.

There are numerous examples of the role of rhythm in producing transcendent
experience. Most examples of percussive trance can be placed in two broad
categories – firstly, a possession trance where drumming is used to rouse the spirits
or the gods for transmission into the body of another person, such as a dancer (Hart,
et al., 1998). The second is known as a shamanic ‘communion trance’, where in
contrast to the possession trance, the spirit or soul of the drummer is said to “ride his
drumbeat like a horse up to the spirit world, where he... transacts his business in an
active rather than a passive way” (Hart et al., 1998, p.163).

Musical experience and religious experience are considered highly subjective, with
trance often being considered as either fraudulent or psychotic (Penman and Becker,
2009, p.49). In addition to this suspicion that trance is either fakery or pathology
such as hysteria, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia, Penman and Becker find there is
a widespread confusion between trance and meditation (Penman & Becker, 2009).
The following table (Table 1) outlines how they distinguish trance from meditation
experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meditation</th>
<th>Trance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensual deprivation</td>
<td>Sensual overload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silence/chanting</td>
<td>Music/drumming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stillness</td>
<td>Movement/dance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private/solitude</td>
<td>Public/communal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short or long duration</td>
<td>Short duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No amnesia (memory intact)</td>
<td>Often no memory of event</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Penman & Becker’s Model of Meditation and Trance (2009) p.50

This comparison provides a model by which to compare experiences of performers
in experimental popular music and how trance and meditation experience contrasts
with those of transcendence.
Flourishing on the conviction of transcendence of the material realm, trance is also linked to the spiritual, where experiences move into the archetypal realms of concepts and ideas, intelligence and intuition – realms that are commonly described and theorised as ‘spiritual’ (Morelos, 2004, p.23).

2.1.7 The spiritual

The spiritual is also a prominent feature of a number of approaches to transcendent experiences, often providing a structure by which to engage with the experiences. Musicians often use a range of metaphors to depict both their methods of improvisation and their experience of a transcendent, ‘magic moment’ (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.4). These non-musical metaphors often infer a mystical, magical or sacred quality to share their experiences of improvising (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.4). This section presents literature regarding shamanic practices, mystical experiences and music-making practice and how they relate to the spiritual. Both art and trance are seen as gateways through one’s self to other ‘mental’ or ‘spiritual’ dimensions (Morelos 2004, pp. 45-46). Improviser and educator Stephen Nachmanovitch writes:

> Spiritual traditions the world over are full of references to this mysterious juice: chi in China and Ki in Japan (embodying the great Tao in each individual); kundalini and prana in India; mana in Polynesia; orënde and manitu among the Iroquois and Algonquins; axe among the Afro-Brazilian candomblé cults; Baraka among the Sufis in the middle East; élan vital on the streets of Paris. The common theme is that the person is a vessel or conduit through which a transpersonal force flows. That force can be enhanced through practice and discipline of various sorts; it can become blocked or bottled up through neglect, poor practice, or fear; it can be used for good or evil; it flows through us, yet we do not own it (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 32-33).

Whilst spiritual conceptions of the transcendent experience, such as Nachmanovitch’s idea of being channelled through the person are valuable in enabling comprehension of this phenomenon at a broader, inter-cultural level, to expand on Nachmanovitch’s work I am seeking descriptions that places music-making in performance at the centre of transcendent experience. Also, characteristics of the transcendent experience cross secular and non-secular lines (Jeddeloh, 2003, pp. 9-10). In doing so, I present a performer-focused model that embraces the diversity of experimental popular music-making practices.
Mystic or ecstatic experiences are considered to be extreme cases of normal body-mind function rather than a notion of religious anomaly or psychological pathology (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.17). Likewise, transcendent experiences are only considered the beginning of mystical life and should not be equated with mysticism itself (Roy, 2001, p.3). Transcendent experience is an event (usually datable) or significant episode that is shorter than and part of a more lengthy process (Roy, 2001, p.146). As such, transcendent experiences in music performance also have connections to experiences of gaining a second, third or even fourth wind in sport (Murphy & White, 1995, p. x).

Jeddeloh (2003) connects the four qualities that describe a mystical experience proposed by William James to the descriptions musicians have given of their ‘magic moment’ (1981, cited in Jeddeloh, 2003, p.11). These characteristics inform the approach by which the interviews in this study are conducted:

Ineffability – defies expression and therefore needs to be experienced to be understood; translating the language of music and the indescribable feelings associated with the playing is difficult.

Noetic quality: provides a sense of insight and is a state of knowledge; a unique knowing or understanding is achieved upon reflection.

Transiency: mystic states are short lived and cannot be sustained for long periods; the moment itself is short lived and easily lost if the conscious self notices it and dwells upon it.

Passivity: once the mystic state is achieved it feels as if the subject’s own will is lessened; musicians describe a sense of the music flowing through them rather than them playing the music (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.11).

From apparent deep sleep to wide-awake, conscious and lucid cognizance, the intensity of transcendent states range on a continuum (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.9). This sensation continuum may include “states ranging from the dream-like to the lucid, from relaxation to intense arousal, from total nothingness to inspired creativity, from reality to hallucination, and/or from angst to ecstasy” (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.9).
Demarcations along this continuum are often blurred, with many accounts of transcendent experiences describing them as ephemeral and fleeting, while the post-transcendent experience ‘aftereffect’ is often said to remain as a feeling of positive emotion – sometimes to the extent of enlightenment (Laski, 1961, p.6), bringing into question where such an experience might actually start and end.

Shamans are known as technicians of ecstasy; they have developed techniques that allow them to enter esoteric states of consciousness (Eliade, cited in Hart et al., 1998, p. 163). Moving between ‘everyday’ realities and the alternative state of consciousness of the ritual, the jazz musician can be likened to a shaman, mystic, or a prophet (Harner, 1980 cited in Jeddeloh, 2003, p.18). The skilled musician can conjure euphoric states within themselves, and also in conjunction the audience, that manifest on a continuum from lighter states of joy and inspiration to deep, euphoric states by projecting rhythms, emotions and expression (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.18).

Just as the shaman of old travelled deep into the psyche, emerging with the symbolic and experiential knowledge to inspire others with a profound respect for - and love of- the living Cosmos, so have many twentieth century artists journeyed into the unknown, in (conscious or unconscious) search of a potentially healing vision (Tucker, 1996 p.72).

My research builds upon Tucker’s work, exploring how such an approach to music making may still be alive and well in 21st century, experimental popular music performance.

Musicians have also been encountered “who speak of ghosts; in particular inspirational jazz performers who have gone before whose riffs they have practiced and copied, embedding as schemata” (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.10). Such experiences are illustrative of a musician’s foundation of the unitary experience linking and resonating with another musician, whose style and skill has been inspirational (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.10) and is engaged with in an arguably spiritual sense.

Engagements with the spiritual inform the music-making experience. The spiritual is also considered to be at the core of improvised music-making (Burrows, 2004). The type of deep, interpersonal connections that can manifest through creating improvised music with others is about “being” and “becoming” together (Burrows, 2004, p.14). The spiritual also links in with experiences of channelling. In contrast to
previous literature regarding channelling and trance experiences, improviser Mary
Oliver tends not to consider improvisation in a sense that she is giving herself over to
a higher entity due to the amount of intelligence and thought behind creating an
improvisation (Oliver, 2006). In contrast to the aforementioned experience of
Coltrane, to attribute an improvisation to a higher source does not do the performers
justice due to the considerable preparation involved in obtaining the optimum result
where musical outcome is free from pretensions, truthful to the music, the other
musicians and the audience (Oliver, 2006). For Oliver, “if there is ‘spirituality’ it is in
holding to the highest calibre of output and performance… that is the beauty of it”

2.1.8 Other representations

Other representations of transcendent experience include the physicality of
experiences, collective consciousness, merging with the ‘Absolute’ and previous
pleasurable associations with music. The collective consciousness attained by
improvisers is a higher state of consciousness that can be shared through acute
concentration on the medium of sound and the activity of listening (Burrows, 2004,
p.14).

Rather than seeing altered states of consciousness as merely brain-based, Jeddeloh
vouches for the impact of the body-mind function at work in the transcendent state
(2003, p.17). Physiological and psychological components of transcendent
experiences have been studied and articulated (Sloboda, 1994, 2000) therefore are
no longer the esoteric practice of mystics but accessible by us (Jeddeloh, 2003,
p.25). In particular, techniques such as breath control, focused attention and audio-
visual stimulation can facilitate an altered state of consciousness (Jeddeloh, 2003,
p.94).

Each culture and tradition has its own schema, methods and language for
suppressing one’s self-consciousness and opening up in order to decouple from the
self and unite with the ‘other’. This state is articulated as becoming one with the
‘Absolute’ while simultaneously being “aware of our oneness” (James, 1982, cited in
Jeddeloh, 2003, p.18). Jeddeloh states that if the idea of the Absolute encompassed
additional entities other than a Godhead, the notion of unity becomes one of relationship with a more localised or generalised ‘other’, which, “in the case of music, can be the self, the other musicians, the composer, the listeners, the instrument or even the memory of someone” (2003, p.18).

In the context of jazz, musicians and listeners may learn to associate a feeling of bliss with a certain song due to one’s memory of a previous pleasurable state (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.41). As experimental popular music often features improvisation, the identity of a ‘certain song’ can become blurred, problematizing the application of this to experimental popular music. In the music of The Necks, for instance, each concert is completely improvised providing no correlation between experiences and recollection of a ‘certain song’.

### 2.1.9 Summary

The theories and descriptions of transcendent experiences offer a broad range of states of consciousness that are dissociated from our ordinary consciousness. There are many terms that are used to identify and describe the transcendent experience. The sheer power and potentially blissful experience of these events have driven people throughout history to revere, prolong and cultivate them. The contexts of these experiences include religious, spiritual and secular endeavours, whether in states of stress or carefully considered contemplation and can be stimulated by rhythmic audio and visual activity (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.24).

There are contrasting perspectives on how the self informs the musical experience. Depending on the role of the self, it may determine the apparent elusiveness of transcendent experience. This project draws on the models of Roy, Penman & Becker, Morelos and Panzarella in relation to how they might pertain to the experiences of musicians in experimental popular music.
Representations of Transcendent Experience | Main Themes
--- | ---
Definitions | From the Latin ‘trancendere’ – ‘climbing over’
 | Wide range of definitions across spiritual, religious and secular disciplines
Elusive Experiences | Outside of one’s control
 | Cannot be ‘willed’ into experience
 | A spontaneous ‘letting go’
Sense of Self | Self dissolves, suspending one’s sense of identity
 | Sense of being part of something greater
 | Short-term self vs. long-term self
Time | Sense of time dissolves alongside sense of self
 | Not an objective property
 | Inter-subjective, yet personal sense of time
Psychological Literature | Peak experience
 | ‘Flow’ state
 | Individuation
Trance | Links to channelling, possession, shamanising
 | Temporary state of mind
 | Induction into a ‘closed system’
The Spiritual | ‘Cosmological reasoning’
 | Provide structure and framework for experiences
Other Representations | Embodied experience
 | Not exclusive to mystics, but available to all
 | Uniting with the ‘other’

Table 2 - Representations in the Literature
How musical aspects facilitate the transcendent experience in performing experimental popular music

This section provides descriptions of musical features that have been prominent in the literature, including improvisation, drones, rhythm, rubato, repetition, timbre and dynamics. Improvisation can permeate many aspects of music-making, including structure, drones and musical content to extra-musical features of a performer’s state of mind. For instance, Neil Young speaks of moving through ‘the wall’, that is, the ‘end of notes’ where “there is only tone, sound, ambience, landscape, earthquakes, and pictures, fireworks... where music takes on a particular atmosphere that doesn’t translate the way other music translates” (Benzon, 2001, pp.144-145). Once one goes ‘through the wall’, there is no going back – Benzon observes that sounds are no longer circumscribed by the concept of music itself; they are simply just present, like forces of nature, a force that takes one’s mind from a mundane consciousness to an altered consciousness (2002, pp.144-145). In the temporal wash of music in process, there are often no objective absolutes, no unquestionable authorities or immutable points of reference (Brinner, 1995, p.290). Aspects of time, pitch, volume and timbre are all relative, subject to the production, perception, and negotiation of participating musicians and modulated by each individual’s sense of self: self-assurance and self-worth relative to the other players present (p.290).

Despite this list, it is not the intention for a taxonomy of musical features to merely produce a reductive cause/effect relationship between musical elements producing particular experiences. Although there is distinct value in this line of enquiry, I will also explore how musical elements – improvisation, structure, repetition, timbre, rhythm and drones – work in conjunction with transcendent experience, leading to questions of whether transcendent experiences may be central to the interviewees’ musical practice.
2.2.1 Improvisation

Although improvisation may be generally viewed as a doubtful expedient, a conjuring trick or even a vulgar habit, one of the immediate and direct effects of improvisation is that it secures the total involvement of the performer (Bailey, 1993 p. ix). Improvisation is seen to provide the opportunity for players to completely identify with the music (Bailey, 1993 p. ix). Alvin Curran states:

Improvisation is the art of becoming sound. It is the only art in which a human being can and must become the music he or she is making. It is the art of constant, attentive and dangerous living in every moment. It is the art of stepping outside of time, disappearing in it, becoming it. It is both the fine art of listening and responding and the more refined art of silence (Curran, 2006, p.483).

It is this notion of identity that ties in strongly with one’s sense of self that may become subverted for the transcendent experience.

Improvisation and the act of creating in the moment requires a kind of boundary-less, social openness and exposure on the part of the artist – “putting it all out there and exposing it for all to see… [the] ultimate act of courage, completely selfless yet simultaneously a selfish act of self-expression” (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.82). It relies on an automatic sensory motor function that affords performance without conscious operation (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.71). Jeddeloh considers process of improvisation as a metaphor describing the automatic human behaviour that may bring about altered states of consciousness (2003, p.2). Focusing on jazz improvisation, Jeddeloh defines it as “the spontaneous unfolding of new musical ideas within the loose configuration of a jazz composition” (2003, p.2). The magic moment is a transcendent, luminescent state achieved while in the act of improvising (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.5).

In the interactive and relational dynamics of musical free improvisation, it is argued that one’s identity is defined through active processes that function to orientate the social self (Sansom, 2007, p.13). On a psychological level, Sansom argues that such activities elicit “qualities of meaning associated with more primordial experiences in which the distinctions between self and other, I and you, the personal and the social are first felt” (Sansom, 2007, p.13).
As a connection into altered states of consciousness, improvisation is seen to connect strongly to descriptions of shamanic musical practices: the process of making music is actually that notion of ‘letting go’ of intention to the extent that whatever work is going to be made literally comes through the performer (Meredith Monk in Marranca, 2002, p. 29). It has to do with unpredictable results and affirming a creative process, not yielding to the predominant culture of product-oriented consumerism that, facilitating a chance to return to some of the values of process and inquiry, curiosity and discovery that Monk espouses as the core of art practice (Marranca, 2002, p.29). The act of improvising is considered an act of intentional conscious disengagement that invites ideas from the subconscious, akin to a musician who learns to focus and empty themselves of routine musical ideas and diversions in order to open up to new combinations (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.22). These aspects of improvisation will provide juxtaposition to the ‘intentionality’ necessary for phenomenological enquiry and various formats of musical media (live performance, CD, DVD, etc.) in the other parts of this study.

Comparing structured and in particular scored music in relation to the diversity of EPM, to speak of transcendent experiences in improvisation necessitates me to explore music that is not improvised and scored. Benzon speculates that the varieties of what he calls ‘ecstatic’ experience, where the self is set aside, have more to do with performance itself than with the difference between improvisation and performing a score (2002, pp.12-13). Improvisation is a potent tool for accessing areas of consciousness and memory that trance states also access – areas that are regard to contain the ‘free-flow’ activity of consciousness (Morelos, 2004, p.118). This ‘free-flow’ provides the immediacy inherent in improvisation and encourages the emergence of unanticipated form-elements (Sansom, 2007, p.13).

Learning to improvise is an ongoing process of acquiring and embedding knowledge and experience, and subsequently drawing from the stored knowledge, crafting improvised meaning from hitherto unconnected ideas (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.93). Improvisation may be best described as an automatic process with an overall ‘macro-awareness’ of the music and the environment, coupled with a non-consciousness around the actual process and act of composing while playing (Jeddeloh, 2003, pp.93-94).
By focusing their attention on a piece’s melody line or riff as a way to clear one’s mind and focus, improvising jazz musicians possess an inherent knowledge of the processes behind cultivating a sense of unity with others (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.21). Through the openness towards possibilities of expression and order that free improvisation embodies, tensions between abstracted informal features and structurally determined formal elements are essential not only to its quality, function, and meaning, but also to the formation of the musician’s motivation (Sansom, 2007, p.11). This is tied in with jazz improvisation where musicians are seen to have a storehouse of riffs/motifs with emotional associations that allow them to play freely, “allowing the body to respond in its own intuitive way” (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.30). The sense of unity between musicians manifests through coupling and the blurring of one’s sense of self in the improvisation process, with the cultural and contextual patterns embedded in each musician facilitating unity and providing a quasi-socially constructed, common grammar of transcendence (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.21).

2.2.2 Structure

As the form and structure of the transcendent experience is under investigation, so too is the form and structure of the music itself. Considered as the “result of sustained involvement with detailed information that is structurally organised”, trance invokes “imaginative and affective engagements that are maintained as interactions between the performer, other performers, the environment and audience of the performance” (Morelos 2004, p. i). Experimental popular music is diverse in terms of style, with detailed information that is not necessarily always structurally organised.

EPM often recalls the ‘space-rock’ genre of Pink Floyd, in particular pieces ‘Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun’ and ‘Interstellar Overdrive’, that build to disorientating crescendos – also known as ‘breakthrough’ moments – that take away musical roadmaps in an effort to rearrange one’s perceptual capacities (Reisch, 2009, p.8). That is, the structure of the music can inform experiences that alter one’s sense of self. This is problematized by The Necks, where the roadmap only exists in the present moment, not by previous design but rather as an inherent virtue to their approach to music-making, to drive the improvisation onwards. Schmicking argues “ineffable experiences apply equally to ‘reproducing’ musical compositions as to
improvising music” (2006, p.10). The interviews conducted in this study investigate this through the lens of experimental popular music, where roadmaps aren’t always the driving force behind the music’s structure.

Dynamic structure is also a significant element. Brinner considers cumulative loudness as just one way, perhaps the coarsest, of generating excitement within a music performance (1995, p.202). The Grateful Dead describe the challenges of discipline so as “to throttle back in such a charged atmosphere, years to learn that if we patiently feed the rhythms, if we manage to vibrate in time, to resonate, then the big wave will come” (Hart et al., 1998, p.230-231). This wave, one may assume, is that of a transcendent experience. Hart’s experience resonates with the process of feeling, listening and performing the rhythm that involves an active, embodied integration process (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.71).

### 2.2.3 Repetition

It is well documented that repetition can be a powerful feature in transcendent experiences in a number of contexts including experimental settings (Newberg, D’Aquili, & Rause, 2001; Szabo, 2004) and African ritual (Maas and Strubelt, 2003). Maas and Strubelt observe that the trance inducing phase of Iboga (Gabon, West Africa) initiation ceremony music contains a noticeable increase in the instances of rhythmic changes as a consequence of the overlapping of the contrasting, very fast rhythmic elements (2003, p.16).

Aesthetic phenomena can function in multiple dimensions such as physical actions and expressions, where a single performed physical gesture concurrently generates “resonance towards the mental, mythical and transpersonal dimensions” (Morelos, 2004, p.45). To connect this to musical practice, there is particular correlation with the music of The Necks, where repetition and expansion of a single musical gesture is often the basis of their improvisatory pieces. This use of repetition and development creates shared resonances that function on the levels of imagination,
emotion and memory of both performer and audience, reflecting an interpersonal ‘dreaming’ of the group that transcends individual existence (Morelos, 2004, p.45). The significance of the ‘dreaming’ implies the use of unconscious faculties used in such music performance and link the use of repetition, particularly in the way employed by The Necks.

Philip Glass shared a penchant for a sense of ‘immobility’ in his search for a sound that could disrupt the comprehension of the passage of time that had hitherto been a cornerstone of Western musical tradition. In Schwartz’s book, Minimalists, the chapter on La Monte Young and Terry Riley points out the fascination the composers shared with environmental sound or ‘noise’ (Schwartz, 2008). In an account given by Riley, fascinated by the works of John Cage that were introduced to him by Young, says “we dragged garbage cans down the stairways around the halls outside the theatre” (Schwartz, 2008, p.16). Although evidence is lacking that suggests Philip Glass was interested in environmental sound like Young and Riley, it is clear from his other interests such as the Indian Raga, that he shared a predilection for immobility in his search for a sound that could disrupt the comprehension of the passage of time that had hitherto been a cornerstone of Western musical tradition. Philip Glass highlights this:

In Western music we divide time – as if you were able to take a length of time and slice it the way you slice a loaf of bread. In Indian music (and all non-Western music with which I’m familiar), you take small units, or ‘beats’, and string them together to make up larger time values (Philip Glass cited in Schwartz, 2008, p.110).

It is clear that all three composers had discovered the concept of stasis as something unexplored and in stark contrast to the role of Western music up until then. Investigating first hand the musical practice of artists such as The Necks will illustrate how such ideas have found their way into other popular music forms, in particular EPM.

2.2.4 Rhythm

There is an innate tendency for humans to synchronise with rhythmic objects, processes and beings (Jeddeloh, 2003 p.43). Rhythm is seen to lead to coupling or phase locking, or entrainment (Benzon, 2001). Entrainment is considered an
integrated, embodied and interactive process that describes a number of rhythmic processes interact and influence one another so as to morph and eventually lock into phase together (Clayton, Sager, & Will, 2005, p. 2). The propensity for rhythmic processes to adjust in order to link to other rhythms has been articulated across a wide variety of natural and social schema, including speech patterns and the behaviour of groups of animals (Clayton, et al., 2005). Further, rhythm is entwined with this concept of time – “rhythm is what time does, whether it comes to us in the pattern of the seasons or in the pattern on the face of a watch” (Hart et al., 1998, p.118). As such, rhythm is an integral element to exploring transcendent experience.

Rhythm is used by the shaman, who “rides his drum like a horse... entrains with the rhythm of the drum and it carries him deeper into trance... [creating] a ripple in time, ensuring the shaman can find his way back from the timelessness that is mentioned in almost all accounts of the other world; a beacon for time travel” (Hart et al., 1998, p.177). Hart is describing how rhythm is a point of departure into the transcendent experience and also a point of return – providing a system for transcendence to occur.

Rhythm is considered linked with time, a silence separated by two pulses (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.38). Pulses and silences in a sequence constitutes a rhythmic pattern, as the groupings of sounds with the silences are naturally created in one’s body-mind, resulting in a discerned beat, with variety and complexity of rhythm developing with musician experience (Hirsh and Watson, 1996 cited in Jeddeloh, 2003, p.38). Once perceived, it is likely that one can produce that rhythm and couple with the pattern, providing credibility to the claim of a strong link between somatic components and consciousness (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.43). In performance, drummer Mickey Hart describes it as “a feeling not unlike trust settles over you as you give yourself to the rhythm. You don’t fight it, but instead allow yourself to be propelled by this insistent but friendly feeling. All sense of the present moment disappears; the normal categories of time become meaningless... Your mind is turned off, your judgement wholly emotional. Your emotions seem to stream down your arms and legs and out the mouth of the drum; you feel light, gravityless (sic), your arms feel like feathers. You fly like a bird, when the rhythm is right” (Hart et al., 1998, p.117-118).
The key to coupling, ‘locking’ the musicians and potentially listeners in an entrained state is through is pulse (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.71). These ‘temporal regularities’ are seen to entrain one’s processing facility, with the core of the impact of rhythm being a fundamental pulse, coupling with the body-mind and entraining the listener (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.43). The rhythm experience is characterised by accenting one or more pulses in a repeating pattern that are maintained with consistency so that pulses, silences and accents are predictable and may be anticipated (Jeddeloh, 2003, pp. 43-44). Concerning tempo, Jeddeloh sees that where music is performed as a collective activity, it is necessary for it to be reasonably consistent for other musicians to coordinate their individual performances and so that the listeners remain coupled (2003, p.39).

It appears as though Jeddeloh is primarily focusing on relatively strict metric and pulse divisions that remain somewhat constant. Taken to the extreme, there is a requirement in Balinese Gamelan ensemble to interlock precisely, severely limiting the possibilities for improvisation (Brinner, 1995, p.202). This juxtaposes somewhat with The Necks, where each member of the trio is often playing in a contrasting tempo with fluctuating metrical groupings yet there is still a sense of rhythmic entrainment that goes beyond players falling into a strict pulse. Such an approach is problematized by what John Clare refers to as The Necks’ ‘hypnotic rhythm’. It is my interpretation that Clare is referring to the rubato quality of The Necks’ rhythmic work. For instance, Tony Buck’s percussion is not limited to short sounds with fast attacks on drum skins and cymbals that adhere to a strict metrical pulse, but rather a vast aural palette of scrapes, insistent brush strokes, cymbal washes, shells and drum rims rubbing against one another in an often un-metered ostinato that pushes and pulls with itself and the band members.

Of my own experience of seeing them in concert, my body would move, but not ‘in time’ with the instruments. The underlying dynamic is the aforementioned ‘hypnotic rhythm’, where each instrument does not ‘lock in’ directly but is felt in relation to this often visceral yet inaudible ebbing and flowing of rhythm. The tension and release formula that permeates much Western music seem somewhat absent here, certain phrases lock in momentarily only to wander off to meet one another somewhere down the track and establish another relationship that is familiar yet contrasting. The
Necks’ use of rhythm actively dislodges this embodied, pulsed experience of rhythm into a multi-dimensional, elastic engagement with the musical process.

Ornstein had shown the connection between one’s experience of time-duration, and the way in which events are discerned, grouped, and stored as information (1969, cited in Hodgkinson, 1996 p.62). It appeared where the rhythmic-grouping unit was continually variable and where there was a constantly varying tempo, that the usual habitual modes of information processing would become disturbed (Hodgkinson, 1996). Fluidity of tempo was then hypothesised as the method by which the shaman for set up the audience for successive psychological identifications with spirits encountered on the shamanic journey (Ornstein, 1969, cited in Hodgkinson, 1996, p.62). The Necks’ rhythmic gestures often include un-metered ostinato patterns that push and pull with each other performers’ patterns.

My own experiences with rhythm are largely based in polymetric figures such as 6/8 against 5/4, 7/8 and 5/8 rhythms. Rather than a strict, tightly controlled or metronomic feel, the contrast in rhythms create a loose sense of ‘floating’ and ineffability, providing a gateway into my own transcendent experience.

In the scope of this research, the rhythmic approaches of experimental popular music provides a unique engagement with the concept of entrainment as an integrated, embodied and interactive process.

2.2.5 Drones

Drones often form the basis of improvisatory music; as something marginal or esoteric, drones occurred at the very centre of European culture through the use of mediaeval church organs and have become a key element in modern music (Boon, 2003, pp.60-63). Akin to the use of rhythm by the shaman as a point of departure, so too the drone, which is considered to embody the vastness of the ocean of sound possibilities while simultaneously providing points of navigation; a constant by which the mind can move back and forth (Boon, 2003, p. 65).
From the point of view of performers, the creation of drones, even according to someone else’s instructions, feels like an intense collective experience and endeavour (Boon, 2003, p.64).

Important for this project, Boon sees that a drone can facilitate powerful changes in individual consciousness (Boon, 2003, p.63). The formlessness of ‘dark’ drones (use of dissonance, long decay, distortion and degradation of tones) may be what can unshackle the boundaries of individual identity and could be the cause of the ecstatic, ‘high’ quality often stimulated by drone music (Boon, 2003, p.67). In particular, artists mentioned in this project such as The Necks, mousetrapreplica, Leo Abrahams, Jon Hopkins and Space Project often utilise drones in improvisations and compositions.

Boon’s ethos is to use drones as a way not to “hide behind Cage’s culture of chance… [and] become conscious of what music can be, [to] dive deeper in that vast field of sonic relationships that, at least in the West, remains almost totally unexplored” (Boon, 2003, p.69). Further, drone is considered the ideal means for expressing alienation from customary forms of the sacred (Boon, 2003, p.66), hinting at its role in the ethos of the music I am investigating and also its link to the altered consciousness of the transcendent experience.

Morelos speaks of ‘isolation’ as a necessary condition for induction into a trance state, where one’s ‘normal’ environment is subverted for the duration of an induction process (2004). Trance inductions utilised in a pre-existing practice usually elicit a feeling of isolation through mental practices that employ intensified engagement such as concentration and focus (Morelos, 2004, p.17). This subversion also resonates through the use of drone as a musical feature, where they are seen to interrupt the pleasure the brain takes in compositions built on an infinite variety of notes, combinations and changes (Boon, 2003, p.61).

Drones interrupt the pleasure the brain takes in compositions built on an infinite variety of notes, combinations and changes (Boon, 2003, p.61). This draws out the question of “which is more important: that which changes or that which stays the same (Boon, 2003, p.61)?” However, it need not be a question of either/or, in fact Boon states that it cannot be.
Linking the aforementioned activities of the shaman to experimental popular music, “the drone beckons one into an open field of activity that is always in dialogue with ‘archaic’ or traditional cultures and a ‘tribal spirit’ (Boon, 2003, p.64). Boon sees drones as being unsuited to commercial recording formats such as CD, due to their length and the dependence on the acoustics of the room in which they are produced (Boon, 2003, p.64). However, here is not the place to discuss matters of music consumption and the restrictions of recorded media. More importantly Boon is hinting that the ‘magic’ and capacity for altered states of consciousness of the drone lies within live performance. It is this ‘magic’ that I am investigating.

2.2.6 Timbre

The role of timbre in transcendent experience is somewhat more elusive in the literature. Despite this, timbre is considered a salient feature at certain pivotal moments in music performance.

The attainment of a particular physical or mental state is an interactive goal between musicians that is aesthetic in nature (Brinner, 1995). This is illustrated by the “ringing” sonority of Bulgarian singing ensembles and barbershop quartets which exemplifies achievement of a physical sensation as a measure of successful interaction between voices; Yugoslav men speak of vocal sonorities that cause their hair to stand on end (Averill, 1990; and Racy, 1988, p.146 cited in Brinner 1995, p.202). Here, timbre is connected strongly to the response of the performers.

2.2.7 Summary

This section has explored the links between musical aspect and transcendent experience in the literature. Although it is well documented that the musical aspects of improvisation, structure, timbre, rhythm and drones can facilitate the transcendent experience, it is of particular interest how these will pertain to the experimental popular music form. Rhythm invites one to couple and entrain with it. People’s experiences of the music of The Necks challenge conceptions about rhythm and
how performers engage and harmonise with it and bring into question the apparent necessity for rhythm to be regular and pulsed in order to entrain people together.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Musical Features</th>
<th>Link to Transcendent Experience</th>
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| Improvisation    | ➢ Identifying completely with the music  
                      ➢ Potential for performance without conscious operation  
                      ➢ Primordial experiences  
                      ➢ Connections to shamanic musical practices  
                      ➢ Engaging with the subconscious |
| Structure        | ➢ Linear and cyclical constructs  
                      ➢ Repetition, evolving gestures  
                      ➢ Morphing gestures, dynamic structure that is not always clear  
                      ➢ Linked to improvisation  
                      ➢ Shapes experience |
| Repetition       | ➢ Stasis, immobility  
                      ➢ Disrupting passage of time |
| Rhythm           | ➢ Polyrhythm, polymetrics  
                      ➢ Looseness, floating  
                      ➢ Entrainment vs. elasticity of rhythm  
                      ➢ ‘Hypnotic’ grooves |
| Drones           | ➢ Interrupts pleasure from change, focus on stasis  
                      ➢ Seen to induce shifts in consciousness  
                      ➢ Dialogue with ‘tribal spirit’  
                      ➢ Intense collective experience |
| Timbre           | ➢ ‘Ringing’ sonority  
                      ➢ Linked to drone  
                      ➢ The ‘end of notes’ |
| Style            | ➢ Hybrid styles – improvisation, rock, jazz, classical, avant-garde, electronica  
                      ➢ Conceptual links between artists, rather than sonic similarities  
                      ➢ Tension of being ‘popular’ vs. experimental |
| Ethos            | ➢ Exploring new ‘zones’, discovery  
                      ➢ Minimalist |

Table 3 – Musical features linked to transcendent experience

The interactive processes in EPM ensembles are emergent, with unpredictable outcomes - therefore distinctly tailored for non-deterministic outcomes. By virtue of
this, there is plenty of scope in the varieties of EPM musical structure for creative exploration.

Developing skills of improvisation involves continually procuring, embedding and storing knowledge and experience from which to draw upon and craft disparate ideas into improvised meaning (Jeddeloh, 2003). Improvisation may be best articulated as an automatic process where a musician simultaneously maintains an acute, yet broad awareness of the music and the environment coupled with a lack of consciousness regarding the actual process of composing while playing (Jeddeloh, 2003, pp.93-94). It is through this state that the musician’s self and immediate body-mind facilities are no longer the focus – this allows one to be receptive to coupling and entrainment with musical colleagues.

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**How extra-musical aspects facilitate the transcendent experience in performing experimental popular music.**

Many of the non-musical aspects of performance could arguably be considered to be musical, but for the structuring of the thesis these elements will be separated out and where necessary, their musical connections will be made. These elements include performance preparation, performance context, and relationship to one’s instrument, relationship to the ensemble, time and the performer’s state of mind.

Penman and Becker’s results imply that it is not exclusively the music per se that produces the response, but rather the subject’s relationship to it that is important (2009, p.64). Further, many behaviours that occur alongside a musical performance are guided by culturally instilled practices, that can be based in traditional religions, rituals and/or political events, to become part of one’s nonverbal communication set and have become integral to the present-day musician’s conception of music (Davidson, 1997, pp. 211-212).

### 2.3.1 Performance preparation

Thoughts on performance preparation are linked with notions of how one might be in control of a musical experience. Even in non-deterministic improvised performance, the warm-up is central to finding the sense and state of ‘compelled’ movement – as
one tries to work with the ‘impulse’ and the sense of ‘being moved’ that is created from within the embodiment (Morelos, 2004, p.80). Those who understand and have had transcendent experiences have educated themselves to focus the body-mind and cultivate situations for transcendence to occur, suppressing the consciousness and releasing the mind’s awareness from one’s ego (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.20). This begins with an act of clearing thoughts, emotions and perceptions from the consciousness (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.20). These gestures are reflected in The Necks, who always start from silence. However, it remains to be seen to what extent transcendent states are understood in experimental popular music and whether there is indeed an element of auto-didacticism in accessing transcendent experiences.

2.3.2 Performance context

In a similar vein to sport, where athletes feel the effect of a playing field on their bones, implicitly creating a sacred time and space (Murphy & White, 1995, p.107), so too a performance context impacts on a music performer. Performers are more likely to perform at a higher level when the performers are “co-acting”, that is when they are in front of others or in competition (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.79). Humans require meaning for a ritual to be personally relevant, so the performance context, such as an intimate and dimly lit club, is important in order for the individual to be absorbed into the ritual experience (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.17).

My own experience of watching and listening to The Necks perform at the Sydney Opera House in the Playhouse Theatre (2008), I noted:

There is a strong sense of ritual; Lloyd Swanton tuning his bass, Tony getting comfortable and arranging instruments, Chris removing his spectacles (perhaps he doesn’t really need to see), then silence… Waiting. This silence is not just for the band to get comfortable, but for the audience as well. Silence doesn’t really feature much 21st Century Western Society (or according to John Cage, not at all), so initially it may feel a little awkward for some. But this silence quickly inspires a (dare I say) ‘Cage-ian’ sense of openness and acceptance of whatever it is that may come. And come it does. The Necks create an atmosphere where your unconscious can come out to play.
Here, the act of live performance is significant in itself, Lisa Gerrard of *Dead Can Dance* states:

> I’m sure [transcendence is] not gonna happen just by someone putting a CD on their stereo – maybe a touch of it – but these are things that are communicated for a community that embraces these things together. It happens in live performance (Gerrard, in Ehrlich, 2003, p.170).

### 2.3.3 Relationship to instrument

Not just relying on engaging with the sound itself, it is essential to engage with the elements surrounding the sound production – the paralinguistics of music-making. As the direct means of a musician producing a sonic output, one’s relationship to their instrument is considered an essential piece of the transcendent experience. One’s instrument is seen both as a vehicle and potentially a hindrance to the transcendent experience.

Where a musician’s subsistence and inspiration are deeply connected to their instrument, such a relationship can often become anthropomorphic (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.76). The musician is intent on affiliation with their instrument, customising it, being intimately aware of its ‘feel’, adapting one’s lifestyle and physical space to accommodate it, augmenting it with technology, detecting discomfort, yearn for it when playing a borrowed instrument and exploring various musical environments (pp.76-77).

Possessing ‘flawless’ technique and ‘perfect form’ does not assure the peak moments that are regarded as the quintessence of music (Werner, 1996 cited in Alberici, 2004, p.13). Perhaps what is problematic is the definition of ‘flawless technique’, which is evidently a misnomer if such a technique deprives one of their full musical expression. Benzon speaks of unimpeded, effortless execution of musical gestures – as though the instrument may not even be present (2001, p.145), suggesting the instrument becomes assimilated into the musician’s sense of self. Schmicking articulates this experience:
Once the drumsticks have become familiar, the world of haptic things recedes and now begins, not at the outer skin of the hands holding the drumsticks, but at the ends of the drumsticks where the tips are touching the drumheads and cymbals; the sticks becoming the instrument through which one perceives – a bodily auxiliary (Schmicking 2006, p.13).

Such an experience is referred to as ‘gesture feeling ineffability’, where the understanding of the correct hand, bow or mouth position and technique, how the drumsticks rebound, or how to play a particular rhythmic pattern, cannot be communicated exhaustively through verbal reports– it has to be obtained by some inceptive physical experience (Schmicking, 2006, p.14).

Consider the sensation you have when hammering a nail. You feel the impact of the hammer on the nail head, but you have no sensory organs on the hammer head… you must learn to project these sensations to the appropriate point in space – a process that may also involve relating these sensations of touch and movement to visual space (Benzon, 2001, p.155).

The relationship to one’s instrument inevitably includes the physicality of the playing gestures. The challenges of experiencing transcendent moments while still maintaining control over one’s instrument are a precipice performers tread:

I know that it’s possible to ride the rhythms of a drum until you fall into a state of receptivity that can be construed as the beginning of trance. When I’m drumming, I like to get as close to this state as I can, yet I also know that I can’t let myself go completely because if I do, my drumming will deteriorate and I will quickly lose the state. There have been many times when I’ve felt as if the drum has carried me to an open door into another world, yet if I let myself pass through the door I can no longer drum and that yanks me back. Perhaps this is why the shaman has an assistant who takes over drumming as the trance deepens” (Hart et al., 1998, p.176).

Such experiences are also of interest in an improvisatory framework, often found in experimental popular music, where concerns about staying ‘on task’ may be more or less relevant.

2.3.4 Intra-Ensemble relationships

An enquiry into intra-ensemble relationships provides insight into inter-subjective dimensions of music-making. There is a perplexing, inexplicable and mystified dimension to musical collaboration, most prominent when performing live – that is, the interactions between performers that differentiates a ‘vibrant’ ensemble
performance, where performers and audience experience ‘the vibe’, from a ‘mechanical’ joint playing (Schmicking, 2006, p. 17). Relationships within an ensemble will be explored in terms of both short-term events and outcomes and also broader, long-term relationships. The social construction of a group culture is an intimate process, exchanging likeness and difference, where “musicians open themselves up and become vulnerable; they are willing to step out onto a high-risk, unstable branch with others, trusting that whatever happens the outcome will be worth the effort and, hopefully transformative” (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.80).

Benzon notes that literature on altered states of consciousness focus primarily on individuals, with little being said about interaction between individuals and calls for altered states of consciousness from music be considered as ‘coupled’ interactions between brains (Benzon, 2001, p.148). As important as it might be that one endeavours to understand individual experiences, we must also understand how the processes of these individuals are affected by coupling of those in a group (Benzon, 2001, p.77).

The music is a vehicle for a collective intentionality, one that slips beneath the barriers of individuality and the imperatives of autonomous selves. Music is a means of sharing what is otherwise an individual, private experience, that of trance. In music deeply shared, my rhythms and your rhythms are the same. And thus we are the one (Benzon, 2001, p.157).

This collective intentionality fosters a sense of community and purpose. It is this sense of community where musicians, the composer and listeners can facilitate the transcendent experience.

The experience of what Schmicking calls, ‘tuning in’ is seen as part of an ineffable experience in which performers establish a relationship and ‘connect’ with each other in performance. It is seen as a ‘merging of perspectives’ between performers. Schmicking states that performers watch one another to enhance their connection through synchronisation and anticipation and that it even more salient in improvised music. When musicians work together in an ensemble they discuss their interdependence in a variety of ways, mentioning important frames such as “trust, support, soloing, comping and descriptions of each individual’s contribution are used to implicitly describe this interdependence” (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.78). The amiability of
the relationships between members is a crucial variable in the implicit learning process (Davidson, 1997, p.214). It is interesting to note that of The Necks, only the drummer makes occasional glances at the other members (but not even to communicate), who aren’t even facing each other and this is another aspect investigated in my study.

Curran reflects on the sense of community afforded by these experiences:

> After performances, rather than return to reality as if we had been casually experimenting in a scientific lab, we returned often with the shared knowledge that we had all been somewhere, on a voyage in the same illusive and unnameable space; unified by making the same music together, as if it had been composed, magically composed… and this music we knew was ours, we had in fact composed and performed it in the moment… (Curran, 2006).

A prerequisite of the ‘vibe’ will be that each performer listens deeply to the other performers with the knowledge that other performers are reciprocating this listening. We may explain this as a coalescing of perspectives from all performers involved - such an approach is linked to phenomenology (Schmicking, 2006, p.17). Merleau-Ponty offers:

> The other is not shut up inside my perspective of the world, because this perspective itself has no definite limits, because it slips spontaneously into the others, and because both are brought together in a single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception. There is a reciprocity or mutuality in genuine performing: while making music my being-in-the-world expresses itself by means of sonoric gestures. At the same time I listen and respond to the gestures of my co-performers and I realise (from their nuanced ways of responding to my gestures) that conveyed to our listening and replying to my gestures (Merleau-Ponty, 1962 in Schmicking, 2006, p.17-18).

Reciprocal interaction and awareness is considered to take place primarily at the pre-reflective level, implying that ‘genuine’ ensemble playing is not something that can be “talked into” occurring (Schmicking, 2006, p. 18). It is considered independent of audience attention and virtuosity (Werner, 1996), and by knowledge about good performance, despite their necessary but ultimately limited use of enhanced auditory attention to establish, recognise and maintain the musical dialogue (Schmicking, 2006, p. 18). It is essential that musicians open themselves to the other ensemble members and their gestures; and this opening is not sufficiently comprehensible and
explainable by categories such as perceptual attention alone (Schmicking, 2006, p. 18).

On stage the relationship between the players is almost totally intuitive. The unexpected is still courted; magic won’t happen unless you set a place at the table for it. On a really good night there’s a sense of danger and adrenaline in the music. Where you’re playing you think you’re the only one keeping it together. Then when you stop playing and the thing doesn’t immediately fall apart you realise everyone is holding on, everyone’s got a piece of it, but still none of them are holding on real tight. The potential of musical embarrassment – disaster – is always there (Hart et al., 1998, p.230).

Here, ensemble relationships are also considered on a larger scale. When considering the relationship he had created and maintained with his fellow band members in The Grateful Dead, Hart sees that “each member has a piece of the map; the territory, where we are embarking on a collective journey in which they are all allies” (Hart et al., 1998, p.230). Guitarist Garcia continues:

This is part of the tradition of music, where music comes from. A magic of one sort or another. For us, The Grateful Dead, that has been part of what’s kept us going all this time. It’s sort of stumbling into this area where there’s a lot of energy and a lot of something happening and not a lot of control... [and] the sense of the individual control disappears and you are working at another level entirely. Sometimes this feels to me as though you don’t have to really think about what’s happening. Things just flow (Garcia, in Bailey, 1992 p.42).

At other times Hart saw the music as something that organically grew over twenty-five years; a living entity that exists in another time-world that can only be accessed when all of them are on stage (Hart et al., 1998, pp.228-230). This study contains musicians in ensembles that have been performing for many years (The Necks, over twenty years) and also much shorter duration.

2.3.5 States of mind

Across the literature, there appears to be a number of consistent mental features in transcendent experience. The core tenet of trance experience is that, in the widest sense, it is necessary that all modes of performance have distinct and specific states of consciousness so as to be effectively embodied and enacted, and that certain embodiments and enactments, specifically performances, cultivate distinct states of consciousness (Morelos, 2004, p.2).
Benzon observes that people have the capacity for self-direction and self-scrutiny of which language is an essential part. This ‘inner voice’ is also considered an important aspect of transcendent experiences, and specifically, when such a voice disappears. “The inner voice does speak – perhaps looking ahead and preparing, noting a mistake, or expressing annoyance at the loud bore chatting away in the front row. But when you are completely swept up in the music, the little voice disappears” (Benzon, 2001, p.152-153). This is seen as a connection to one’s sense of their own body - Benzon states that the presence of inner speech serves to moor one’s sense of intentionality in one’s body – when that speech is silenced, one is released and floats free outside of the body (p.153). Singer Lisa Gerrard of experimental-folk group Dead Can Dance also expresses the notion of vulnerability and surrender:

When there is a ‘soul’ in a work, it means that the music has allowed one to unlock a door within her or his unconscious mind and through confidence [has] allowed oneself to surrender (Gerrard, in Ehrlich, 2003, p. 165).

This notion of surrendering to one’s unconscious mind is also espoused by Jung, where this surrender is essential in producing the ‘true’ work of art:

The true work of art however belongs to the other class of works that flow more of less complete and perfect from the author’s pen... These works positively force themselves upon the author; his hand is seized, his pen writes things that his mind contemplates with amazement. The work brings with it its own form; anything he wants to add is rejected, and what he himself would like to reject is thrust back at him. While his conscious mind stands amazed and empty before this phenomenon, he is overwhelmed by a flood of thoughts and images which he never intended to create and which his own will could never have brought into being. Yet in spite of himself he is forced to admit that it is his own self-speaking, his own inner nature revealing itself and uttering things which he would never have entrusted to his tongue. He can only obey the apparently alien impulse within him and follow where it leads, sensing that his work is greater than himself, and wields a power which is not his and which he cannot command. Here the artist is not identical with the process of creation; he is aware that he is subordinate to his work or stands outside it (Jung, 1922 cited in Marshman, 2003, p.22).

Here, Jung describes an experience that is outside of one’s conscious control, where one’s sense of self is subverted in the musical act – not annihilated – present enough to observe but nonetheless required to step aside for the work to take its course. Also suggested here is that states of consciousness in performance are guided by sets of implied or direct traditions and assumptions. Morelos questions,
“Bodily functions and sexual acts can be described as trance states, as different states of presence. But who is present? The self is, in effect, constantly reconstructed within models of existence” (Morelos, 2004, p.17). When considered in an improvising music ensemble, different conventions and expectations exist within a group – i.e. the way the artist relates to the music that is happening as whole. Mickey Hart et al., states: “Your mind is turned off; your judgement is wholly emotional. Your emotions seem to stream down your arms and legs and out through the mouth of the drum; you feel light, gravity-less, your arms feel like feathers” (Hart et al., 1998, p.230).

2.3.6 Summary

This section has explored representation of transcendent experience through extra-musical elements of music performance. There are essential relationships between musician and other musicians, the ensemble, their instrument and the audience (see Table 4). In particular, the common theme was one of separating one’s activities from the ‘everyday’ and ‘conscious’.

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Table 4 – Extra-musical aspects of Transcendent Experience
How a musician/researcher articulates their own transcendent experience within their practice of music making

How one examines their transcendent experience is an aspect of my thesis that explores the process of examination and reflection on transcendent experiences that closely informs my methodological process. The main elements here are the potential ineffability of experience, my own self-reflections on transcendent experiences and the process of writing a thesis that leads into the subsequent methodology chapter.

For Schön, knowing-in-action is demonstrated through “our spontaneous, skilful execution of the performance; and we are characteristically unable to make it verbally explicit” (1987, p.25). This performance can be riding a bicycle, performing brain surgery, painting a picture, and playing music. “Knowing suggests the dynamic quality of knowing-in-action, which, when we describe it, we convert to knowledge-in-action” (1987 p.26). For a performer this knowing-in-action comes from years of learning an instrument, of playing, of knowledge of different music, of listening. However, when “a familiar routine produces an unexpected result…or although the usual actions produce the usual outcomes, we find something odd about them because, for some reason, we have begun to look at them in a new way…[there is an] element of surprise” (Schön, 1987 p.26). This surprise may be pleasant or unpleasant – and we can respond by reflecting in one of two ways:

“We may reflect on action, thinking back on what we have done in order to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome” (p.26).

or “we may reflect in the midst of action without interrupting it” (p.26) – reflect-in-action.

In contrast, Jeddeloh argues that such reflection in the midst of action interrupts the ‘magic-moment’ (2003). The magic moment in jazz is seen as a musically driven, body-mind conscious experience where actions, feelings and thoughts are embodied sensations (2003, p.26). Consciousness is inserted only when something is encountered to bring the musician into awareness, such as an environmental
aspect that is unusual or out of context (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.57). This reveals when a jazz musician experiences a ‘magic-moment’ state and becomes unduly conscious of the musical context the state is lost – that is, conscious awareness isn’t completely lost but much of the unnecessary external stimuli is momentarily set aside, only to return and impinge (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.57).

A range of metaphors are often employed by musicians to describe both their approaches and methods to improvising and their transcendent experiences, ranging from the language of “cooking in the kitchen” to spiritual language (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.4). They also describe feelings of being entirely focused and inspired that are analogous to those of a scientist experiencing a ‘eureka’ or ‘breakthrough’ moment (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.10). Roy observes that one does not speak of transcendent ‘experience’ in terms of practical wisdom nor expertise or sense data – rather one speaks of an experience, a single occurrence. When someone exclaims ‘that was an experience!’ we understand that an unusually moving, powerful and memorable event has occurred in this person’s life (Roy, 2001, p.146).

Roy observes that transcendent experience is mediated according to three phases. Firstly, it is ‘pre-formed’ by all the factors that enter into the preparation and the occasion. Secondly, it is ‘con-formed’ by the imagination and the higher levels of intentionality in one’s response to the indefinite and thirdly it is ‘post-formed’ by the interpretation that accrues after the event (2001, p. 179).

Drummer Mickey Hart reflects that research into the trance states of shamans revealed that other scholars writing on the subject were not drummers themselves; “they hadn’t ‘ridden’ a drum anywhere nor had played to the point of trance” (Hart, et al., 1998). Although they acknowledged the drum’s centrality in shamanic performance, few were able to bring a performer’s view to the role that percussive sound or percussive rhythm might be playing in the maintenance and elaboration of that performance (Hart et al., 1998, p.174). A performer’s view has since emerged strongly through research by Vincs (2002) and Jeddeloh (2003) where the various aspects of performance practice (practising, rehearsing and performing) were engaged through the frame of transcendent experiences. My research adds to this
lineage by exploring music practitioners and forms of experimental popular music that hitherto have been unexplored through such a frame.

It may be in the nature of improvisation that it cannot be described in words. At the same time, it has rational aspects that can be conceptualized, just as dreams can be interpreted. Although it may not be possible to seize the essence of improvisation with words, it is possible to apply its techniques to writing. The writer can imagine that one is a player in a many-sided game played in one’s head. The ball is an impulse, as yet unexpressed, which must be transferred from perception to memory, and from one memory to another, retained long enough so that it can be expressed in symbolic form (Rzewski, 2006, p.495).

Here, the private, existential side of transcendent experience is not considered most important, but rather the discovery that can be put into symbols and shared. At this point the speaker’s, artist’s or writer’s spiritual disposition and capacity to convey profound apprehensions are brought into play (Roy, 2001, p.17).

Benzon surmises that there is no specific need for memory-creating processes to be active when performing or listening to music – unless you’re a critic and need to write a review (2001, p.161). A composed work without a score has been committed to memory, it has to be retrieved but there is no need to lay down new memories of the performance itself. Benzon also states that an improviser calls on well-learned routines, but has no need to learn new ones during performance (2001, pp.161-162). Again, such a perspective is problematized by The Necks, who as a group do not rehearse, with performance and recording studios the only time they play together. I argue that, despite the event of a Necks concert and the performers’ understanding of their instruments is a well-learned routine – it remains to be seen whether new routines may be learnt in performance.

To express a new experience, one inevitably has recourse to images, concepts and words that are familiar. The experience, however, need not be restricted within a fixed world view where such images, concepts and words may be used in a creative fashion affording innovative ways for one to account for their experience (Roy, 2001, p.8). A personal narrative that purports to stay very close to the actual occurrence may be very moving but additionally, the interpretation can be conveyed by novel combinations of symbols in prose, poetry, drama, painting, sculpture, architecture, ballet, music and so on (Roy, 2001, p.8). Such channels help us discover anew how
mystery impacts on human consciousness, being equivalent to Jung’s visionary mode of artistic creation – in contrast to creation that is from a more readily intelligible and less profound psychological mode (Jung, 1966 cited in Roy, 2001, p.8). Jung sees that the object of such vision lies beyond the psychic life of the individual, belonging to a primordial experience revealing itself in the imagery of the collective unconscious (Roy, 2001, p.8).

Conversely, there is also an attitude of ‘just going out and doing it’; wisdom exists in not talking about the spiritual side to a particular activity and a refusal to build up false expectations about it (Murphy & White, 1995, p.4). Murphy and White interpret a certain Zen proverb in such a way – “if you experience illumination chopping wood, keep chopping wood. If there is something in the act that invites the ecstasy, it doesn’t need extra hype or solemn benediction” (Murphy & White, 1995, p.5).

As in the puppet theatre, modes of production in music performance had become veiled in mystery, and we may have no wish to venture behind the proscenium arch (Sloboda, 2000 p.vi).

Likewise the experience of philosopher Bruce Benson was that:

On learning that I was working on a phenomenology of music making, one philosopher commented to me that, although he was also a musician, he had never wanted to think philosophically about music. He was worried that it might diminish the pleasure he derived from playing and listening to music. Somehow it was impossible to miss the hint of a suggestion that I follow his example. No doubt there are ways of thinking and writing about music that could have that effect. Sometimes it seems that philosophers have lost sight of the musical experience itself, so that music ends up being treated as an ontological puzzle (Benson, 2003, p. ix).

The same may well be true of investigating transcendent experiences through music-making; one may be worried that such an investigation may spoil the mystery and excitement of such an experience. Thankfully, this has not been the case.

The other risk in speaking candidly with people about these experiences is that experiences of dramatically altered states of consciousness can be traumatic. Most people have trouble accepting metanormal powers and states of mind if they do not have a context for them nor language or philosophy to support them (Murphy & White, 1995, p.4). Although Lisa Gerrard of *Dead Can Dance* is very much open to
such ‘metanormal’ states, she does reflect on the use of language as a traumatic obstacle to communicating experience:

To me language gets in the way of communicating. I mean, I could convey to you in six seconds what I feel my work is about if I could communicate with you telepathically. Instead, we’re going down this clumsy, awkward road, trying to explain things that really should not be explained. In a way, trying to explain is forbidden; you do it and it puts holes in your energy. But at the same time we need to make an effort to explain, as long as we stay true to what we feel. But it can be extremely traumatic, because you see the whole, and you see this finger pointing toward some form of perfection, and it brings you into the reality of how imperfect we are as human beings. To get stuck in that ping-pong between realities is very traumatic (Gerrard in Ehrlich, 2013 pp.166-167).

Likewise, guitarist Jerry Garcia states:

It’s kind of hard to report on but it’s a real thing. I mean we’ve checked it out with each other and after twenty-five years of exploring these outer limits of musical weirdness this is stuff that we pretty much understand intuitively but we don’t have a language to talk about it (Bailey, 1993, p. 42).

Another potential issue is that accounts of transcendent experiences “can be exaggerated through inflated memory after the fact, through sentimentality, through sheer bad writing” (Murphy & White, 1995, p. 103). Inevitably they can also be suppressed. “How many of these accounts are like the fisherman’s tale where the fish grows larger with each telling” (Murphy & White, 1995, p.103)?

However, when looking at trance experiences, one’s trance episode may conclude with a loss of consciousness and collapsing to the floor, thus trancing is hard to fake (Penman & Becker, 2009, p. 49).

2.4.1 Ineffability

Issues of ineffability pertain to how one may articulate their transcendent experiences in words. Raffman sees music ineffability as a characteristic of knowledge: ineffable knowledge will be conscious knowledge that defy communication through words (1993, cited in Schmicking, 2006). Thus the expressions ‘ineffable (knowledge)’, ‘in-effability’ relates to situations where the performer-listener often has a clear knowledge of something but cannot articulate with words in such a way that is detailed enough for another person to pick out this ‘something' out of a range of
comparable stimuli (Raffman, 1993, cited in Schmicking, 2006, p.11). Ineffabilities become prominent whenever skilled performers, e.g., during lessons or rehearsals, try to describe ‘exactly’ or ‘exhaustively’ the qualities that differentiates ‘real’ musical expressiveness from poorly articulated playing (Schmicking, 2006, p.20).

Schmicking outlines three major types of ineffable experience as they pertain to music (2006, pp.11-12). These fit with the research questions for this study:

Structural ineffability: one cannot report global musical structures (RQ2 – musical features)

Feeling ineffability: knowledge of pitches, intervals, and rhythms cannot be expressed without preceding sensual experience (i.e. knowledge of what an interval of a third sounds like, or a trumpet sounding different to a trombone) (RQ3 – extra-musical features)

Nuance ineffability: some microtonal variations of pitch cannot be perceived categorically and therefore cannot be type-identified and verbally reported (RQ4 – reflections on experience)

Of particular interest and perhaps concern for this project is:

One of the most puzzling properties of musical experience lies in the fact that parts of it, and often the deep, moving facets, are ineffable, i.e., we know what we are experiencing but we cannot put it into words adequately or exhaustively (Schmicking 2006, p.9).

Engaging with ineffable phenomena, the prevalent notion of consciousness asserted by William James (1902) and developed through psychotherapists Jung and Freud, and subsequently in others has brought about a dependence upon “notions such as ‘unconscious’, ‘subconscious’, ‘dissociation’, ‘archetypes’ and ‘repression’ and other signifiers for a fractured experience of the ‘self’ and the ‘world’” (Morelos, 2004, p.27). Although these concepts have extensive value as schemata to conceptualise the intricacies of human experience, they have often been resorted to as the only workable understanding of ‘ineffable’ phenomena (Morelos, 2004, p.27).

The beneficiaries of transcendent experience often do not find the words with which to talk about it, however, such people indicate that they are aware of having being
touched, moved and grasped in a unique way and of having discovered something highly significant (Roy, 2001, p.7). Particularly through music, the disconnection of musical dialogue from verbal and rational reflection may have promoted a propensity in performers and audiences to marvel at and romanticise the event and experience of genuine musical dialogue (Schmicking, 2006, p.18). Even if that may be the case, it will still contribute to the knowledge base of 21st century music makers, as such issues bear implications on the significance of transcendent experiences, perceived as they may be.

Presenting a more extreme approach engaging with transcendent experience, psychologist William James viewed them as indescribable, ineffable states that defied description through normal language, and is better expressed through alternative means such as music and poetry (1982, cited in Jeddeloh, 2003, p.11). Biggs refers to three types of knowledge: implicit, tacit and ineffable knowledge (Biggs, 2004). While experiential feelings are considered ineffable, experiences themselves aren’t considered necessarily ineffable (Biggs, 2004 p.19). In practice-based research there is a focus on experiential content, and such experiential content is only represented by feelings; it is not a requisite that practice-based research is ineffable (p.19).

There is no conceptual system that has relevance to the gamut of empathetic experiences of interaction and that facilitate distinguishing the vibrancy of musical performances from the vibrancy of other activities, such as a philosophical dialogue, the dynamics of a sporting team or dance troupe or affect-attunement between parent and pre-verbal child (Schmicking, 2006, p.18).

Experiences are not, as a matter of course, ineffable. Experiential feeling is ineffable, but experiential feeling should not be the primary emphasis of practice-based research (Biggs, 2004). Rather, Biggs espouses the target of having a representational relationship to experiential content (2004, p.19). Therefore, there is a question about how the representations detailed in this chapter may obscure the unique subjectivities encountered in the interviews. Do the terms and concepts contained in the discourse presented in this chapter assert themselves between the interviewer and participant? Having uncovered and examined this diversity it is now
possible to be attentive to its influences in the verbal interchanges that attempt to negotiate the apparently ineffable aspects of transcendent experience. This is an essential aspect of the epoché process as a preliminary to phenomenological analysis.

Schmicking focuses upon the performer’s experience and highlights the embodied knowledge of the ‘skilled performer-listener’, i.e., anyone who plays an instrument to the level of knowing how it feels to play an instrument, either to play herself or to listen “passively” to others making music (Schmicking, 2006, p.10). Burrows argues that although one can attain a sense of deeper understanding of the activity of music making through analysis, all the designating and deconstructing of the improvisational process leads to the essential mysterious power of improvised music to consciously and unconsciously join the thinking and feeling of musicians and listeners (Burrows, 2004 p.14). This ineffability is an obstacle that I will need to directly engage with to achieve something worthwhile from this study.

Literature review summary

The literature reveals the transcendent experience to be complex, multi-faceted and nuanced. What is this transcendent experience and what happens when a performer enters into this transcendent state? The transcendent experience is a potent, embodied state of awareness and consciousness that necessitates qualitative description. The project has explored the musical and extra-musical aspects of the transcendent experience such as how the relationship between the self and other impacts this experience.

The theories and descriptions of transcendent experiences suggest a broad range of states of consciousness that are dissociated from our ordinary consciousness. There are many terms that are used to identify and describe the transcendent experience. These intensely powerful and potentially blissful experiences have compelled people throughout history to esteem and pursue them. The contexts of these experiences include spiritual and secular endeavours, whether in states of stress or carefully considered contemplation and can be encouraged through rhythmic audio and visual activity (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.24).
There are contrasting perspectives on how the self informs the musical experience. Depending on the role of the self, it may determine the apparent elusiveness of transcendent experience. This project draws on the models of Roy, Vincs, Penman & Becker, Morelos and Panzarella in relation to how they might pertain to the experiences of musicians in experimental popular music, and how musical aspects facilitate the transcendent experience in performing experimental popular music.

This chapter has explored representations of transcendent experience in the literature. Although it is well documented that the musical aspects of improvisation, structure, timbre, rhythm and drones can facilitate the transcendent experience, it is of particular interest how these pertain to the experimental popular music form. Rhythm invites one to couple and entrain with it. Experiences of the music of The Necks challenge conceptions about rhythm and how performers engage and entrain with it and bring into question the apparent necessity for rhythm to be regular and pulsed in order to connect people together.

The interactive patterns of an EPM ensemble are tailored for non-deterministic outcomes. By design there is plenty of space in the varieties of EPM musical structures for creative exploration, where playing EPM is an emergent process with unpredictable outcomes. These unpredictable outcomes are often through the integration of improvisation. In the process of improvisation, focus is taken away from the musician’s self and immediate body-mind processes and opening the self up to coupling and entrainment with musical colleagues.

The experiences discussed in this chapter often appear suddenly, as if a threshold has been reached, giving rise to a temporary, altered and embodied state of consciousness. Transcendence experiences occur in both secular and non-secular endeavours, turbulence or stillness and can be brought about by ongoing rhythmic activity. The benefits of the transcendent experiences tend to be valuable, socially inspiring, creative and transformational in character and can provide a prolonged sense of energy, liberation, and renewal. There are progressive stages leading up to a transcendent experience that may provide a guide for an intentional path towards the experience. Although transcendent experiences are often abrupt and unexpected, they can be fostered through deliberate practice.
This section has explored representation of transcendent experience through extra-musical elements of music performance. There are crucial relationships found between musicians, one’s instrument, the ensemble and the audience. In particular, the common theme was one of separating one’s activities from the ‘everyday’ and ‘conscious’.

In the following chapter, the methodologies chosen to investigate the transcendent experiences in this project are presented and discussed.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Transcendent experiences in music performance are complex and multi-faceted requiring a holistic approach for their investigation and explication. When one’s own self-insight as a form of embodied understanding, as well as an approach to music making, is part of the enquiry, encouraging bodily-informed understanding of oneself, a multidimensional and synergistic methodological approach, is required. Reflecting on the fact that “the ultimate terror and excitement of a qualitative project is not knowing at the start where it will end” (Richards 2005, cited in Bazeley, 2007, p. 125), this section will present the research strategy, explain the rationale for my choices and some anticipated objections to my methods.

To restate the research questions:

How does transcendent experience manifest itself in contemporary, experimental popular music performance?

How do musical aspects facilitate the transcendent experience in performing experimental popular music?

How do extra-musical aspects of performance facilitate the transcendent experience in experimental popular music?

How does a musician/researcher discuss their own transcendent experience within their practice of music-making?

In order to study the transcendental moments of experimental popular music performance, a research paradigm is needed that is sensitive to the quality of the experience. In Aldridge’s research of music and altered states of consciousness, he calls for a research approach that accepts the individual as they are (Aldridge, 2006). To this end, the advantages of an alternative, quantitative or experimental approach would require “the use of procedures that control musical stimuli and
measure the immediate, continuous response by the participants” (Gabrielsson, 2001, p. 448). Conversely, “such a situation is necessarily artificial…. and may obscure or inhibit the phenomenon” (Gabrielsson, 2001, p. 448). For continued research of strong experiences of music, whatever they are called, a flexible interplay between naturalistic and experimental approaches seems appropriate in order to combine their respective advantages and compensate for their respective drawbacks (Gabrielsson, 2001, p. 448).

Tesch (1990, cited in Grocke, 1999, p. 52) identifies four major categories of qualitative research that focus on the processes of phenomena.

- Characteristics of language
- Reflection (heuristics)
- Discovery of regularities (repeated patterns)
- Elaboration of meaning

This study traverses these four categories. Characteristics of language are significant due to the possible ineffability of expressing in words their response to the subject matter. The heuristic element is present due to the relevance of my experience and that of my fellow members of Space Project, with the elaboration of meaning being the process of discerning commonalities and uniqueness within the themes. One of the common threads in my approach to these categories is phenomenology – a study of the lived experience of a phenomenon (Grocke, 1999, p.52). Phenomenology is the methodological basis by which this research investigates transcendent experiences in music performance. These elements are expanded on below.

It is necessary for the qualitative methodologies that utilise a phenomenological basis through a phenomenology driven heuristic enquiry (van Manen, 1994) to also be sensitive to the embodied nature of these experiences. Therefore what is also informed by embodied enquiry (Todres, 2007) and sensory ethnography (Pink,
2009) as a way to conduct verbal interviews, self-insight and other data collection in the research. I will also discuss issues pertaining to the combination of phenomenology and grounded theory methods (Baker et al., 1992) and how the contrasting elements of the methodology inform one another and me as researcher through the unfolding interview process. The design section outlines a research strategy that articulates the epistemological links between research questions and methodology. The process of identifying and selecting the interview participants were is explicated, as is the process by which the raw data was analysed and adapted to conceptual categories.

Drawing inspiration from Alberici (2004), it is also assumed that both the literature and the interview data of transcendent experiences in music performance will be considered the texts that direct the study towards meaning. Roederer states that the transcendent experiences in performance of music are generally subjective phenomena that are not voluntarily disposed to quantitative measurement, and would also appear to be quantum systems (1975, cited in Alberici, 2004, p.13). He likens transcendent experiences in music performance to a quantum system, where “one cannot observe and measure isolated parts without irrevocably changing the whole” (Roederer, 1975, cited in Alberici, 2004, pp.13-14). This study has the assumption that commonalities throughout the interviews may facilitate a practical understanding of the richness of transcendent experiences in music performance, and also may point towards the potential for this knowledge to be integrated into other music performance contexts such as performance, practice or education. Overall, the aim of the qualitative research endeavour is that it is faithful to a meaningful human world (Todres, 2007, p.13). As stated previously, in contrast to other research approaches influenced by grounded theory, where the literature ‘exploration’ occurred after conducting pilot studies “to avoid developing preconceived notions about how musicians experience transcendence” (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.7), my literature review and data collection are an integrated process, informing one another as my skill as an interviewer developed. This is due to the
structure of my research design and the focus on heuristic enquiry, where my own experience is the point of departure for the research.

It is important to note that in a holistic sense, the researcher is assumed to be an inherent part of a collaborative experience with the interview participants (Alberici, 2004, p. 24). Essential to this process is for the interviews to not search for, or presuppose a clear-cut and assumed answer to a specific question, but rather “attempt to reconstruct and re-live transcendent experiences in music performance through the stories of those who have directly experienced them” (p.24).

Drawing inspiration from Vincs (2002, p.12) in applying a method of investigation capable of addressing the principal interests of my music-making, it was essential to begin with an amenable approach to the methodology, trusting that a way forward would manifest through self-reflection and reflection on interview process and technique. Such a method echoes an approach to analysing dreams – slippery, intangible but strikingly ‘real’ experiences – Jung writes, “I resolved for the present not to bring any theoretical premises to bear upon them, but to wait and see what they would look like of their own accord” (Jung, 1989, p. 170). While not as optimistic as Jung regarding any potential epoché, I resolved to allow my participants’ reflexive knowledge to come forth.

The purpose of the interviews is to address the research questions by investigating the systems that performers employ in order to generate their own forms of performance, their conceptualisation of individual experience, notions of ‘self’ and conceptualisations of the transcendent experience.

The aim in the presentation of interview data is to offer adequate detail to create a sense of truth for the reader, but also raise the data by intertwining ongoing interpretations, experiences and the literature into a model of the transcendent experience guided by the research questions. Guided by the research questions, the study incorporates some key analytic principles and procedures of grounded
theory with, at the same time, the intention to demonstrate a high degree of theoretical sensitivity in this research (Suddaby, 2006, pp. 640-641).

Of the research questions, it is the fourth, ‘how can a musician/researcher examine their own transcendent experience within their practice of music making?’ that directly addresses methodological application and process. This question is answered in three ways: first in the heuristic process of self-enquiry of myself as researcher; second is the interviewing of musicians and the observations of the process of self-examination through the interview process; and thirdly how the findings may be communicated and received. All of these are part of the data gathering but a response to the research question itself will be discussed in the final chapter.

This chapter outlines the methodological mosaic, detailing the core analytic principles used in generating the data and demonstrating how the data is used to generate key conceptual categories. It will also give a sense of my own theoretical sensitivity, that is, my receptiveness to new or fresh interpretations of the data through a combination of literature, data, and experience. This chapter will also outline the synergy between the research questions and the methods used to answer the questions.

Research design

The design of the project aims to highlight the synergy and epistemological link between the four methods of enquiry. These methods are paired as follows – phenomenology and grounded theory; embodied enquiry and sensory ethnography.
Figure 1 – Overall Research Design

Figure 1 represents the process of the research and how the methods are combined. The study begins with my existing musical practice to drive the initial investigation into my own experience and provide a musical framework. This leads into the self-interview, heuristic process. Subsequently, this moves onto an analysis, which in turn informs the process of selecting and interviewing other musicians in this study. Embodied enquiry is embedded in my own experience and sensory ethnography focuses on the interview environment and interview ‘experience’.

One of the main aims of the research is to gain an understanding of the transcendent experience as it occurs in EPM. Data for this research was gathered
by interviewing EPM artists and through an embodied enquiry into my own practice with my musical group, *Space Project*. In order to collect this data, it was deemed necessary to have working definitions of the transcendent experience and EPM and these topics have been explored in the literature review in chapter two.

The research design is heuristic in that it is a “process of delivery [that] leads investigators to new images and meanings regarding human phenomena, [and] also to realisations relevant to their own experiences and lives” (Moustakas, 1990, cited in Bignell, 2000, p. 67). The heuristic approach is really the beginning of the enquiry and involves constant immersion in, and reflection on, the factors (including my early experience) that have influenced the emergence of the topic and conceptual proposition, together with the search for a methodology appropriate to the topic.

The main component consists of a study focusing on the experiences of musicians playing EPM, in particular the ‘transcendent experience’ where one’s sense of self, or time of the music, may become elastic, energised or distorted. Interviews and enquiry begin with my own artistic practice and that of *Space Project*. It then moves to interviewing other artists such as Lloyd Swanton, Chris Abrahams and Tony Buck (*The Necks*); Jon Hopkins; Leo Abrahams and others listed and described in the participant outline. Subsequently, informed by the preceding investigation, the focus then returns to self-investigation and *Space Project*. This approach to purposive sampling contrasts with Alberici’s study where anonymous participants responded to a call for those who had experienced transcendence in music performance (Alberici, 2004).

Examining the significance of the transcendence experience in my own musical practice, in terms of evolving as a creative musician, opens out the project into heuristic inquiry, for the question of the transcendent experience is about one’s own quandary and personal challenge in the quest to understand the self and the world in which one lives (Moustakas, 1994). The heuristic process is essentially autobiographical however the project also allows my goal of transcendent music-
Phenomenological enquiry

Phenomenology offers an exposition of space, time and the world as they are 'lived' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. vii). Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that aims to elucidate the experiences of a phenomenon as they are lived in order to assist in a wider understanding of the encounter (Creswell 1998, cited in Grocke, 1999, p.106). Phenomenology may be seen as a broad yet coherent movement that addresses foundational issues in epistemology, ontology and ethics (Spiegelberg, 1971, cited in Todres, 2007, p.1) that began with philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Husserl’s primary concern was epistemological: how knowledge about the world can ‘come from’ a reflection on what appears to consciousness (Husserl, 1970). His intention was to repair an emerging split in Western philosophy between inner and outer, mind and body, subject and object. In contrast, Heidegger focused more on ontological concerns: the different kinds of being, the nature of being per se, and the context within which being arises (Heidegger, 1962; Heidegger, 1988). Husserl and Heidegger, although concentrating, respectively, on epistemology and ontology, both understood that these concerns are intimately related, and that they also had ethical implications.

It is recognised in phenomenology that experiences are multi-faceted and complex and to retain the essence of the experience it must be studied in its entirety, not reduced to measurable units (van Manen, 1997). The apparent elusive nature of the ‘transcendental’ experience (Palmer, 2006) makes it suitable, if not necessary, for phenomenological investigation. Phenomenology does not deal in facts, causal-effects relationships, generalisation or speculation. Instead it aims to “transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence” (van Manen, 1997, p.36). Thus phenomenology is appropriate for studies of complexities and mysteries of life...
that necessitate considered and reflective approaches. What could be more of a mystery than the transcendent experience!

To give further clarification, van Manen considers phenomenology as a human scientific study, arguing that it is:

- Systematic – uses a practised mode of questioning, reflecting and focusing.
- Explicit – it articulates the meaning embedded in the lived experience.
- Self-critical – continually examines its own goals and methods.
- Intersubjective – needs co-researchers to develop a dialogue relationship with the phenomenon, thus validating the phenomenon.
- Human science in that the subject is always human experience (van Manen, 1997, p11-12).

Van Manen’s definition of phenomenological enquiry is based upon the move from a Cartesian mode of separation between subject and object to an understanding of the inseparable nature of the subject and the world.

There is a strong synergy between aspects of transcendent experience and a phenomenological methodological process. In transcendent experience, opening up to sensory input during the process of moving into a meditative state is an analogue form of phenomenological bracketing of existing embedded schemata. This subtracts the interpretive process, facilitating a basic and uncluttered view. This model necessitates one to shift attention from operative control and acquisition to passive acceptance and observation (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.53). This provides a process to penetrate the sense of detachment reported by improvising musicians, an acquiescent acceptance of musical ideas as they arise, while remaining active in the improvisation process (Jeddeloh, 2003, pp.53-54).

Phenomenological studies are designed on the premise of describing the essence of a given phenomenon, with participants selected because they have first hand
experience of what is being investigated. Sampling is therefore purposive in keeping with the intention of illuminating the richness of individual experience, and as such the sample size is kept intentionally small (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992, p. 1358).

Being such a vast area of enquiry, phenomenology contains a number of prevalent schools of thought that go under the greater heading of phenomenology. Transcendental Phenomenology, as articulated by Moustakas’, recognises Husserl as the founder of transcendental phenomenology, in which an experience is investigated and understood through a process of intuition and reflection (Moustakas, 1994, cited in Grocke, 1999, p. 52). Experiences are viewed from two perspectives: what was experienced (the textural description, known as the Noema) and how it was experienced (the structural description, or Noesis) (Grocke, 1999, p.53). Experiential/existential phenomenology does away with the ‘transcendental observer’ required by Husserl. These tools of research are found in multi-modal forms: dance; drama; drawings and improvised sound (Lett, 1993 in Grocke, 1999, p.53).

Phenomenological research allows data to be obtained from a variety of perspectives: self-reflections (heuristic descriptions); interviews with others about their experience of the phenomenon under study; by gathering writings about the topic, or by depictions of the topic in question as expressed through works of art, such as dance and poetry (Polkinghorne, 1989). Each of these forms of enquiry are utilised in this project to enable triangulation of my research findings and provide a stronger basis for verification and understanding of the transcendent experience.

Studies that utilise phenomenology are necessarily retrospective and recollective (van Manen, 1997, pp. 11-12) in that they require the participants to reflect on the experience. They may be concerned with the person “as they come into being” (Aldridge, 2003, p. 106).

A common method of gathering data in phenomenology is through interviews. Phenomenological interviews are semi-structured and open-ended in order to
understand the *depth* of the experience. The purpose is to “gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale 1983, cited in Grocke, 1999, p.54). The researcher may draft a list of questions to be addressed during the interview, leaving the precise wording open to suit the interviewee. This is known as a semi-structured life-world interview, which seeks to understand themes of the lived world from the participant’s own viewpoint (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.27). As the participants describe their experience, the interviewer seeks further detail and understanding about the experience by asking questions about their feelings at the time, or in greater detail about the event (p.27). The purpose of the interview is to gather the fullest description of the experience noting that the description is a reflection on the experience and can never truly represent the experience itself.

The phenomenological research approach has been used in a number of music therapy studies (Grocke, 1999, p.54). Kasayka adopted the phenomenological research paradigm for her study of transpersonal elements in Guided Imagery and Music Therapy – GIM (Kasayka, 1988, cited in Grocke, 1999, p.54). The transpersonal elements are considered significant experiences that transcend the ‘normal’ features of ordinary ego functioning. She commented that phenomenology when applied to the creative arts allows a more thorough understanding than using quantitative research (Kasayka, 1988, cited in Grocke, 1999, p.54).

In choosing a phenomenological research method for this study, I was conscious that the participants could verify their own descriptions of the experience. In describing any experience of performing Experimental Popular Music, participants naturally recount feelings, images and memories – existing rich descriptions of their experience. It is important, I feel, to retain those descriptions faithfully in the participants’ words.
3.2.1 Epoche/Bracketing

To utilise a phenomenological approach, the research must begin at the first level with bracketing or the *epoché* (Husserl, 1970). To facilitate the process of phenomenological ‘looking’, the epoché is a suspension or ‘stepping back’ from one’s presuppositions that arose as part of Husserl’s ‘transcendental reduction’ (Idhe, 2012, p. 17). Essential to bracketing is that ‘looking’ precedes ‘judgement’, and that the judgement needs to be suspended until sufficient evidence has been acquired (Idhe, 2012, p. 20). Merleau-Ponty (1962) interpreted Husserl’s later work in an existentialist way, and bracketing was considered the intention to set aside theories, research presuppositions and ready-made interpretations in order to reveal engaged, lived experience.

It is to be noted that the present, the ‘transcendental’ epoché is meant, of course, as a habitual attitude which we resolve to take up once and for all. Thus it is by no means a temporary act which remains incidental and isolated in its various repetitions (Husserl, 1970, p. 150).

In order for the researcher’s own biases to not influence the interview process, the researcher takes on a process of bracketing out assumptions about the experience being explored – known as the ‘epoché’. To bracket, the researcher must identify and suspend what they already know about the experience being studied in order to approach the data without preconceptions (Oiler 1982, cited in Baker et al. 1992, p.1357). Aspects of my epoché include the fact that performing EPM with *Space Project* has played a large part of my own transcendental experiences. This epoché is outlined in the introduction of this thesis, with specifics given through the findings chapters. Through improvisational exercises and starting *Space Project*, it was revealed to me that my previous musical practice and thoughts had been inadequate – it was imitation rather than innovation. I do not feel as though this study would have been possible without founding, and being a part of, *Space Project*. This process of epoché is tied into achieving validity through reflexive objectivity, where the researcher should aim to gain insight into these inevitable
prejudices and write about them whenever it appears necessary in relation to the research project (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.242).

The fundamental principles of epoché in the strictest sense of removing my presuppositions were difficult to uphold. Rather than a 'magic' thing that you can do, it becomes more of an overall attitude to research (van Manen, 1997). The aim in this research was to establish a “phenomenological attitude” as a permanent feature of my conceptual approach to transcendent experience in experimental popular music performance. This is where the epoché functions as the hermeneutic rules of the study, providing the shape and direction of the research (Idhe, 2012, p. 17).

The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xiv)... I can ‘bracket’ my opinions or the beliefs I have acquired, but, whatever I think or decide, it is always against the background of what I have previously believed or done (p.395).

Rather than a formal, personally applied phenomenological reduction, I engaged in a self-interview. In the participant interviews, there were a number of instances where dialogue regarding my own experience involved a catalyst for uncovering a participants’ experience. Where this has occurred I have made note of it in the interpretation of interview data.

Rather than dealing directly with participants’ experience, I acknowledge that this study is twice removed - the participants live the experiences, describe them to me and I write about them. Through the interview process they produce naive/common sense responses - some of the reticence in discussing accounts of transcendent experience is a result of the naive/common sense view of the experience that detracts from the wonder of the appearance of the transcendental subject. Without the use of phenomenology, the interview transcripts would not be considered in terms of naive expression or everyday understanding of participants' experience as grounded in relationships and grounded in the material world.
My own biases and background provide a framework, alongside which the experiences of performers can be placed, thereby expanding my own understanding of transcendental experiences. The epoché is developed from my own experiences in performing EPM and also watching and listening to the other musicians featured in this study.

This attitude is expressed through the contrast between my own role in the study, the interview method and the philosophical origins that inform the thinking of the whole research project. It is my intention to support the impressions and language used by the participants. In the naive expressions of the participants the body may or may not be entirely present. One of the results of the phenomenological orientation is the sensitivity of where the sense of embodied experience appears. Through the interviews and analysis I am on the lookout for where the body is present or absent in the discussions of experience.

In my thesis, this is undertaken deliberately in the process of examining the experiences of others. The purpose is to gain an epistemic orientation of my own perspective and reveal how my beliefs and thought processes may pose obstacles to discovering knowledge from others - and suspend these as necessary during the process of data collection and analysis. In order to do so, it is required of me to make explicit the assumptions or preconceptions I may have. In making explicit those beliefs, biases and assumptions, the researcher tries to come to terms with them, rather than to ignore them (Moustakas, 1994, cited in Grocke, 1999, p.55). The examination and suspension of bias is not, however, an implication for an absence of presuppositions, but rather a consciousness of one’s own presuppositions (Kvale 1983, cited in Grocke, 1999, p.58). Additionally, the examination of biases described from the perspective of band/solo performance facilitated the development and focus of the research in devising the research and interview questions.
3.2.2 Heuristic enquiry

The heuristic enquiry paradigm is adapted from phenomenological enquiry through the explicit acknowledgement of the involvement of the researcher, to the degree that the lived experience of the researcher becomes the central focus of the research (Hiles, 2001). The core elements of heuristic enquiry involve identifying with the focus of the enquiry on a personal level, self-dialogue, an engagement with tacit ‘knowing’ (knowledge that precedes intuition; a largely ineffable dimension of knowledge), intuition, indwelling and focusing to develop an internal frame of reference (Moustakas, 1990, cited in Hiles, 2001). There is more involved in heuristic enquiry than the researcher merely analysing one’s own experience, which is a basic variation of phenomenological enquiry. Heuristic enquiry seems to offer a broader context where the researcher engages with the research question, examines his/her own experience amongst other explorations and follows this through with an awareness of the transformative processes at work in the research undertaking (Hiles, 2001).

The explicit focus is the transformative effect of the enquiry on the researcher’s own experience. It is essentially a research process intentioned for the exploration and interpretation of experience, using the self as the researcher (Hiles, 2001). As stated previously, the first ‘participant’ in this study is myself and my own self-analysis. This aspect of the methodological design reflects on an underlying epistemological assumption regarding the relationship between a personal perspective and its influence on the knowledge obtained in an enquiry. On a practical level, this heuristic process also forms a core part of the interview preparation.

This assumption of the awareness of presence of the researcher in the text is articulated in Calvino’s prose concerning Marco Polo:

‘There is still one of which you never speak.’ Marco Polo bowed his head.

‘Venice’. The Khan said.
Marco smiled ‘What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?’ The emperor did not turn a hair.

‘And yet I have never heard you mention that name.’

And Polo said: ‘Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice.’

‘When I ask you about other cities, I want to hear about them. And about Venice, when I ask you about Venice.’

‘To distinguish the other cities’ qualities, I must speak of a first city that remains implicit. For me it is Venice.’

‘You should then begin each tale of your travels from the departure, describing Venice as it is, all of it, not omitting anything you remember of it.’ (Calvino, 1978 cited in Todres, 2007, p.15)

Calvino’s prose is referring to one’s own experience permeating any dialogue that is established with that person, and is particularly relevant for the interview process in this study.

The idea of an epistemological frame is explored by Morelos (2004). Morelos’ research into forms of trance experience observes that trance performances represent cultural and linguistic ‘feelings of truth’ that, unless activated through intellectual and emotional resonance, cannot be fully appreciated and believed (2004, p.68). Such observations are the reasoning behind limiting my focus of musicians to a relatively narrow sphere. The search for the feeling of truth and participating in a suspension of disbelief cannot be forced; “for a ‘spirit’ to be invoked or activated, it must be able to resonate” (Morelos, 2004, p.68). Therefore, in the first instance the concept or abstraction of the ‘spirit’ must occur in cultural memory; and secondly it requires sufficient internalisation by the potential receiver for the chance of resonance to manifest (Morelos, 2004, p.68). An example provided describes, where due to suspension of disbelief not being adequately achieved, efforts of North American anthropologists’ to access Balinese trance spirits were futile; “just as Stanislavski could never ‘successfully’ interpret Shakespeare, or a Balinese trance performer interpret Death of a Salesman – performance is always culturally specific” (Morelos, 2004, p.68). As stated
previously, experimental popular music is well established and internalised in myself as a musician and researcher.

3.2.3 Embodied enquiry

Embodied enquiry is a phenomenological approach to research that also comes with highly relevant epistemological assumptions. Embodied enquiry makes use of the lived body as a ‘place’ where intimate understanding of both experience and language happens. This gives rise to new meanings and allows the body to access what is lacking in the use of academic language (Todres, 2007). The main purpose of Todres’ embodied enquiry is to attempt to deepen understanding of the readers who engage with the research (p.8). Taking an embodied approach is seen to enable deeper philosophical appreciation of what it means to be human, but can also be applied as a practice that has tangible application for research (Borbasi, 2007, p. 1).

Todres argues for the necessity for embodied methodological practice in qualitative research – a practice that pays due regard to the aesthetic dimensions of producing interpretive descriptions that are “faithful to a meaningful human world” (Todres, 2007, p.13). He sees embodied enquiry as a way to overcome the limitations of academic language to make meaning of the life-world (Todres, 2007). Embodied enquiry makes use of the lived body as a ‘place’ where intimate understanding of both experience and language happens, giving rise to new meanings and allowing the body to access what is lacking in the use of academic language through a creative and aesthetic engagement with one’s audience (Todres, 2007).

When discussing an experience, there is a tension of retaining richness and texture of the lived experience that might apply both generally and typically (Todres, 2007, p.7). Todres speaks of a tension between literary ‘structure’ and ‘texture’. Structure is considered “a level of description in which context-related themes are expressed such that a variety of readers may further their psychological understanding of a
phenomenon in a way that is generally applicable” (2007, p.8) whereas texture is considered to be the individual, rich and nuanced description. Perhaps synergistically with a transcendent experience in itself, there is the challenge of staying close to the unique individuality of an experience while still keeping a social or perhaps universal significance (Todres, 2007, p.7).

One emphasis in this development is a debate about the styles of writing that engage both ‘head’ and ‘heart’. Feminist contributions to psychology (Gilligan, 1989 cited in Todres, 2007, p.44) and sociology (Oakley, 2000, cited in Todres 2007, p.44) have noted how scientific enquiry has been dominated by an emphasis that ‘knows about’ the ‘externals’ of things and happenings in an excessively distant manner. Scientific enquiry is seen to de-contextualise our participation in the world, obscuring the more intimate dimensions of our capacities ‘to know’ as aesthetic, inter-embodied beings (Todres, 2007, p.44). That is, the map has had a tendency to become the landscape.

Charmaz and Mitchell write about the necessity to pursue more evocative forms of writing that engage embodied experience (1997, p.195). Feminist writers such as Stanley and Wise insist that emotion is essential to systematic knowledge about the social world and that a feminist epistemology creatively draws on women’s everyday experiences as an aesthetically potent way to enhance enquiry and deepen understanding (1983, cited in Todres, 2007, p.45).

Todres chooses to express the tension between academic and more poetic writing styles as ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ (2007, p.45). To contextualise, he feels that Husserl was seen to champion academic forms of writing and was interested in general categories of knowing – that is, communication of experiences at their most shared levels. Heidegger, especially in his later years was more interested in poetic forms or writing that invoked more empathic forms of knowing. The continuities and discontinuities between these two thinkers reflect a creative tension that is still alive in contemporary hermeneutic phenomenology (Todres, 2007, p.45) and underlies the challenge in developing the methods selected for this research. The concern to
hold or harmonise the academic with the poetic is consistent with a view of human existence in which self and others are intimately connected (Todres, 2007, p.45).

To ‘share understanding’ through embodied enquiry, Todres draws on Gendlin’s notions of ‘authentic productive linguistic gatherings’, espousing the primacy of the body and its close relationship to language (cited in Todres, 2007, p.29). Gendlin “forges a continuity in which knowing is both an embodied and a languaged process” (1996 cited in Todres, 2007, p. 34). Todres sees that language and other ways of human meaning making cannot adequately surmise the life-world, in that there is always a ‘more than’ element to lived experience (Todres, 2007, p.29). Assuming an embodied approach to enquiry, making use of the lived body as a ‘place’ where intimate understanding of both experience and language happens, gives rise to new horizons and meanings. That is, the body can access ‘more than the words can say’. This depends on the supposition that the combination of brain and body know much more than what is consciously accessible (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.12).

Again, there lies a certain synergy between exploring the notion of ineffability and the use of embodied enquiry.

A teacher can describe to you as exactly and detailed as possible how you have to hold, touch, beat, or blow into your instrument etc., but you do not ‘know’ how it feels to be holding, touching, plucking or beating the instrument correctly until you have yourself 'felt' the respective gestures (Schmicking, 2006, p.14).

This isn’t to suggest that I believe this thesis will transport a reader to untold ecstasies, but if you do, please let me know! Here, it is suggested that people require this experience for understanding the phenomenon.

Musical performance thus takes on an additional significance – as well as being a source of data into the transcendent experience through performer interviews, it allows a closer experience of the performance event.
Expanding on the notion of embodiment is that of emplacement in the interview process through sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009). Sensory ethnography provides another important dimension for engaging with the interview participants through the interview itself and the resultant data.

Pink utilises the notion of ‘emplacement’, as an extension of embodiment, as a cornerstone to framing sensory ethnography practice. There have been revisions to the notion of embodiment itself that account for the situatedness of the knowing body as part of a total (material, sensorial and more) environment (Pink, 2009, p.25). This suggests attention beyond the limits of a body-mind relationship. Howes has suggests that “while the paradigm of embodiment implies an integration of mind and body, the emergent paradigm of emplacement suggests the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment” (2005b, cited in Pink, 2009, p.25); in this formulation, the notion of emplacement supersedes that of embodiment. These principles inform my analysis of the interview transcripts, particularly where there was a focus on sensory experience or aspects of the interview had an impact on the observations made by the participants.

Pink proposes an emplaced ethnography that engages with the question of experience by accounting for the relationships between bodies, minds and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment (Pink, 2009, p.25). It is now frequently recognised that we need to investigate the emplacement of the people who participate in our ethnographic research. It is equally important for researchers to acknowledge their own emplacement as individuals in and as part of specific research contexts (Pink, 2009, p.25).

The experiencing, knowing and emplaced body is central to the idea of sensory ethnography. Ethnographic practice necessitates multi-sensorial, embodied engagements with others, through participation in activities or verbal explorations of their understandings, in conjunction with their social, material, discursive and
sensory environments (Pink, 2009, p.36). It also requires one to reflect on these engagements, to conceptualise their meanings theoretically and to seek ways to communicate the relatedness of experiential and intellectual meanings to others.

The ethnographer who is hoping that the sensory knowing of others will be transmitted to them may ask at what point there is a departure from the enculturation of this knowledge to its appropriation by the researcher. How might such sensory knowledge, which is intimately related to the researchers’ perception of her or his environment, sense of self and embodiment, be extracted from these processes into academic knowledge (Pink, 2009, p.37)?

Ethnographers rely on both memory and imagination, of which the two practices may be blurred to some extent, to create what may be called ethnographic ‘places’ (Pink, 2009, p.38). In the case of this study, these places are where experiences of transcendence occur in music performance. The difference between imagination and fantasy is that “the imagination, especially when collective, can become the fuel for action” (Appadurai, 1996, cited in Pink, 2009, p.39). These elements of memory and imagination are another example of the synergy between the interview process and music performance – both are used to drive and inform the respective processes.

Imagination isn’t just about the future – it may concern imagining a past, another person’s experience of the past or even of the present as it merges with the immediate past (Pink, 2009, p.40). This is what ethnographers are involved in when they engage in research practices that aim at imagining other people’s immediate experiences and memories; ethnographies are dependent on practices of imagination (Pink, 2009, p.40). Likewise with phenomenological ‘bracketing’, it is equally important for the sensory ethnographer to attend to how others use their imagination, as it is up to the researcher to understand how one’s own practices of imagination are implicated in the ethnographic process (Pink, 2009, p.40).
This also extends to my own sense of place. If place is central to our way of being in the world and that we are thus always participating in places (Casey, 1996, cited in Pink, 2009), the task of the ‘reflectable’ ethnographer is to consider how one is emplaced, or entangled, and one’s role in the constitution of that place (Pink, 2009, p.40). By attending to the sensoriality and materiality of other people’s ways of being in the world, one cannot directly access or share another’s personal, shared or ‘collective’ memories, experiences or imaginations. The notion of a collective imagination is difficult, particularly if an ethnographer seeks to share it, for it is impossible to directly access the imagination of others, to know precisely if and how an imagined future is felt independently or shared by a collective, or to know if one has shared it oneself (Pink, 2009, p.40).

The use of sensory ethnography as a methodology provides a frame by which to account for extra-verbal and environmental factors in the interview process and reinforces the necessity of empathy through the interview process.

Grounded theory

The method of grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a response to the positivism that hitherto pervaded most social research (Suddaby, 2006). They disputed the premise that social and natural sciences dealt with the same issues and questions. Specifically, Glaser and Strauss challenged prevailing suppositions of ‘grand theory’ – the idea that social research is to uncover pre-existing and universal explanations of social behaviour (Suddaby, 2006, p.633).

Grounded theory was established as a practical approach to assist researchers in understanding complex social processes and as a method to inhabit a pragmatic middle ground between some ‘slippery epistemological boundaries’ that require researchers to develop a tacit knowledge for “when purist admonitions may not be appropriate to their research and may be ignored” (Suddaby, 2006, pp.638-639). Glaser and Strauss also rejected positivistic notions of falsification and hypothesis testing; rather they espoused an organic process of theory emergence derived from
how well data fit conceptual categories determined by an observer, by how well the
categories explain or forecast continuing interpretations, and by the relevancy of the
categories to the core issues being observed (Suddaby, 2006, p.634).

With grounded theory allowing a researcher to ‘discover what is going on’ (Glaser,
1978), the purpose in using such a method is to explain a certain social situation by
identifying the central and secondary processes operating within (Baker et al.,
1992, p.1357). The grounded theory method generates inductively based
theoretical explanations of social and psychosocial processes (Baker et al., 1992,
p.1357). Grounded theory is built upon two main foundations: “constant
comparison,” whereby data is simultaneously collected and analysed, and
‘theoretical sampling’, where decisions about which data should be collected are
determined by the theory that is being constructed (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, cited
in Suddaby, 2006, p.634). It is considered most suitable in efforts to understand the
processes by which people establish meaning out of inter-subjective experience
(Suddaby, 2006, p.634).

The purpose of a grounded theory study is to ascertain a conceptual framework
that explains the context under investigation. Data analysis and data collection are
conducted simultaneously and sampling is theoretical because the evolving analysis
drives the selection of units of data (Baker et al., 1992 p.1358). One of the appeals
of grounded theory is that it permits for a broad range of data, most commonly in-
depth interviews, observations, and memos that articulate situations, record events,
note feelings and monitor ideas (Goulding, 2005, p. 297). Such an approach has
been utilised while attending concerts through the process of my candidature.

It is less suitable to use grounded theory when one seeks to make claims of
knowledge concerning an objective reality, and more suitable when one wants to
make knowledge claims regarding how individuals interpret reality (Suddaby, 2006,
pp.634-636). However, one of the criticisms of grounded theory is that it can be
used as a ‘rhetorical sleight of hand’ by researchers who are unacquainted with
qualitative research and who wish to avoid close description and explication of their
methods (Suddaby, 2006, p.633). It is, of course, the intention of this chapter to elucidate the methods used in this study.

### 3.3.1 Process of grounded theory

Somewhat akin to the process of heuristic enquiry, grounded theory first requires researchers to account for their positions in the research process. That is, they must participate in ongoing self-reflection to ensure that personal biases and assumptions are considered while gathering, unravelling and analysing data (Suddaby, 2006, p.640). This contrasts with a common fallacy that grounded theory requires one to enter the research field without any knowledge of prior research (Suddaby, 2006, p.634). Furthermore, a slightly more moderate misconception of grounded theory suggests that the researcher must defer reading existing theory until the data are collected and analysed (Suddaby, 2006, p.634). Rather than contaminating a researcher’s perspective, the actual danger of prior knowledge in grounded theory lies in coercing the researcher into testing hypotheses, either directly or unconsciously, rather than directly observing (Suddaby, 2006, p.635). A basic way to inhabit this middle ground is to acknowledge existing theory but constantly remind oneself that the researcher is only human, and that what one observes is a product of both who you are and what you hope to see (Suddaby, 2006, p.635). As such, most high-quality grounded theory research is a result of an comprehensive and continuing dedication to a line of theoretical research and a direct relationship to an empirical site (Suddaby, 2006, p.640), in this case, experimental popular music. As such, this approach to grounded theory resonates with the use of heuristic enquiry.

Grounded theory is an interpretive process that relies on the sensitivity of the researcher to implicit elements of the data or meanings and inferences that may not be evident from a simple, cursory reading of relevant content (Suddaby, 2006, p.639). Many grounded theory researchers describe this interpretation as happening subconsciously, as a consequence of constant ‘immersion’ in the data
(Suddaby, 2006, p.639). Because grounded theory research uses repetition and sets no strict boundary between data collection and analysis, saturation – where ‘enough’ data has been acquired – is not always obvious, even to experienced researchers, despite every submitted manuscript containing a statement that saturation has indeed occurred as though it is criteria that must be ‘checked off’ before publication (Suddaby, 2006, p.639). The indicators of saturation, including repetition of information and confirmation of existing conceptual categories, are inherently pragmatic and rely on both the empirical context and the researcher’s experience and expertise (Suddaby, 2006, p.639).

Although grounded theory maintains some rapport for phenomenological assumptions and techniques, grounded theory researchers are less focused on subjective experiences of individual participants in themselves, and instead more concentrated on how such subjective experiences can be summarised into theoretical statements regarding causal relations between people (Suddaby, 2006, p.635).

In contrast, grounded theory interviews may begin with a phenomenological interest in subjective understandings, but the chief interest lies beyond the individual stories themselves. Instead, they are a method of deriving information from the social situation under examination (Suddaby, 2006, p.635). In the study, grounded theory functions in two main ways. Throughout this study, there was a process of ongoing self-reflection to ensure that my own personal biases and assumptions were considered while collecting, interpreting, and analysing data. In particular, my ongoing performance practice and the interview process discussed below, articulates this element of the study. Secondly, this study is interested in both individual stories of musicians and the corresponding situations of music-making, with grounded theory playing a supporting role to the phenomenological focus of the methodology.
Participants

The participants were selected through the process of heuristic enquiry. That is, this purposive sampling consists of artists who have informed my own experimental popular music practice. Purposive sampling contains strategic choices about with whom, where and how to do research (Palys, 2008, p. 689). The flavour of purposive sampling in this research is a combination of paradigmatic sampling – interviewing artists of international repute; typical case sampling – interviewing artists that are directly involved in the same music community as myself; and critical case sampling – that of specific experimental popular music practitioners. Other variations, such as extreme case sampling and criterion sampling (Palys, 2008, p.689) required too much assumed knowledge about the participants’ experiences.

In contrast, Vincs’ (2002) participant was largely himself and his practice regime, and Jeddeloh (2003) focused on stimulated recall method of an ensemble responding to videotaped performances of themselves. Penman and Becker’s (2009) participants were recruited from friends and colleagues of the authors at the school of music of their university – self identified as ‘deep listeners’, while Morelos (2004) undertook profiling of interviewees: professional performance experience, discipline, sex, formal training, occupation and familiarity with the theoretical models proposed in his paper. Gabrielsson’s Strong Experiences with Music project involved entirely voluntary participation with no effort to achieve strict representative sampling of a defined population, resulting in 400 participant reports (2001, pp. 433-434).

This study contrasts with these approaches by interviewing specific EPM musicians through purposive sampling, informed by heuristic enquiry, i.e. professional musicians with significant ties to my own musical practice. The total number of participants is twenty-two.
3.4.1 Background to performers

This section will provide a brief introduction to the artists who have given their time to participate in the interviews conducted for this research.

*The Necks* (Chris Abrahams, Tony Buck and Lloyd Swanton)

The initially Sydney-based trio *The Necks* features Chris Abrahams on piano, Tony Buck on drums and Lloyd Swanton on bass. The trio have been performing live since 1986 and have released fourteen albums since 1989, progressively building a loyal following, which since 2000 has begun to spread outside Australia into Europe and most recently into North America. Despite being commonly seen as ‘minimalist’, and refraining from the use of non-acoustically produced sounds during live performance (although sometimes the dense soundscapes have you convinced otherwise), their music has realises plenty of dynamic variety within apparently unassuming and limited parameters (Mitchell, 2005).

*Space Project* (Adrian Barr, Jed Maisey, Matthew Robertson)

Beginning as an improvisatory group in 2006, *Space Project* has been traversing between more deliberately structured and a less defined, improvisatorial approach to music making in its various incarnations. *Space Project* was born out of improvisation exercises with students at the University of Western Sydney, with their self-titled EP release in 2009, demonstrating the group’s most structured repertoire.

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Jon Hopkins

Jon Hopkins is a London-based electronic composer, producer and classical piano player. His emotive, instrumental music traverses genres from solo acoustic piano to explosive, bass-heavy electro (Hopkins, 2010). His live performances also span a multitude of contexts and venues, including Sydney Opera House with Brian Eno’s Pure Scenius in an ensemble with The Necks, Leo Abrahams, Karl Hyde and Brian Eno, supporting shows by Coldplay, to countless clubs, festivals and concert halls across the world (Hopkins, 2010). His most recent release is from an improvisatory collaboration with Brian Eno and Leo Abrahams entitled ‘Small Craft on a Milk Sea’ (Eno, 2010).

Leo Abrahams

Leo Abrahams is a guitarist, composer and producer based in London, UK. He has played worked with a multitude of artists including Imogen Heap, Ed Harcourt, Nick Cave, Roxy Music and David Holmes both in performance and in the studio. His solo records ‘Honeytrap’ (Abrahams, 2005), where all sounds were exclusively produced by electric guitar and ‘Scene Memory’ (Abrahams, 2006) were well received by the music public but seemingly unclassifiable – simultaneously a hindrance and satisfying outcome, as Abrahams states, he “could never see the point of creating something that has been heard before, in a more original form” (Abrahams, 2011). Abrahams has the approach of letting music evolve rather than be deliberately written and is stylistically quite varied, with no thought given to whether it might ‘fit in’.

Luis Rojas and Chantel Bann (Shanghai, The Red Room)

Primarily working together in bands Shanghai and The Red Room, Luis Rojas and Chantel Bann have been at the centre of Sydney’s underground music scene for a
number of years. *Shanghai* is also a member of *The Bird’s Robe Collective*. Chantel Bann is also a prevalent music photographer and writer, publishing to a number of online magazines including *FasterLouder* and *The Dwarf*.

Rojas is a guitarist and composer for a number of musical projects, in particular *Shanghai* and *Panda Diplomacy*. Rojas and Bann have also been participants in the ‘Violence in Action’ shows performing adaptations of John Zorn’s game pieces.

Examples of their music can be heard at the *Shanghai* website.\(^8\)

**Seth Olinsky (Akron/Family)**

Seth Olinsky is the guitarist for American experimental folk/rock band *Akron/Family* who formed in 2002. Musical examples can be heard at the *Akron/Family* website.\(^9\)

**Phil McCourt (Captain Kickarse and the Awesomes)**

*Captain Kickarse and the Awesomes (Captain Kickarse)* are a blues and psychedelic driven progressive rock band from Sydney, Australia in which Phil McCourt plays guitar.\(^10\)

**Cameron Brennan and Alison Kerjan (Meniscus)**

Cameron Brennan (drums, percussion) and Alison Kerjan (bass) play in Sydney ambient-rock trio *Meniscus*, who released their debut album in 2011 through Sydney-based *Bird’s Robe Records* and have recently embarked on their first

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\(^8\) *Shanghai* - http://www.theultraviolent.com/media

\(^9\) *Akron/Family* - http://akronfamily.com/sounds/

European tour in 2012. Examples of their music can be heard at the Bird’s Robe Records website.\textsuperscript{11}

Karen Heath (Ennïs Tola, The Grand Silent System)

Karen Heath is a multi-instrumentalist player (bass clarinet, clarinet, flute, saxophone, koto) from Melbourne, Australia. She has workshopped and performed with Karlheinz Stockhausen and currently plays for the progressive rock/folk band \textit{Ennïs Tola}.\textsuperscript{12}

Ryan McRobb (Ennïs Tola, mousetrapreplica)

Ryan McRobb is a guitarist, composer from Melbourne, Australia who founded his project \textit{mousetrapreplica}\textsuperscript{13} and is now currently playing with Melbourne band, \textit{Ennïs Tola}.

Justin Ashworth (Glasfroch)

Justin Ashworth is a multi instrumentalist from Melbourne, Australia who founded experimental pop group \textit{Glasfroch} in 2011 after playing under his own name for a number of years.\textsuperscript{14}

Mirabai Peart (Joanna Newsom, Doc Jones and The Lechery Orchestra)

Mirabai Peart is a violinist from Sydney, Australia. Initially coming from a classical background, she has played in a wide range of ensembles including rock groups,

\textsuperscript{11} Meniscus - http://birdrobe.bandcamp.com/album/absence-of-i; http://birdrobe.bandcamp.com/album/war-of-currents
\textsuperscript{12} Ennis Tola - http://ennistola.com/listen.html
\textsuperscript{13} mousetrapreplica - http://www.mousetrapreplica.com/bio.html
\textsuperscript{14} Glasfroch - http://soundcloud.com/glasfrosch_justin
improvisatory ensembles, classical and popular music ensembles. In particular she has played with Joanna Newsom and *The Splinter Orchestra*.

**Holly Harrison (Snip Snap Dragon, Space Project)**

Holly Harrison is a composer and multi-instrumentalist drummer from Sydney, Australia. She played trumpet as a member of *Space Project* between 2008, and 2010, also worked with other Sydney progressive rock bands *Solkyri* and *sleepmakeswaves* and is currently playing trumpet in experimental outfit, *Snip Snap Dragon*. Her compositions and academic work explore notions of control and freedom within various compositional parameters utilising both acoustic and electroacoustic ensembles.

**John Encarnacao**

John Encarnacao is a guitarist, singer-songwriter, author and academic from Sydney, Australia who plays in a number of popular music and improvisatory ensembles including *Warmer*, *Espadrille, Bird Cries Snow* and *Shaggin’ Wagon*.

**Brendan Smyly (Espadrille, The Monstrous Now)**

A saxophonist and electroacoustic musician, Brendan Smyly has performed as part of many rock, jazz and more recently improvisatory and electroacoustic ensembles such as *Espadrille* and is based in Sydney, Australia.16

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16 *Espadrille* - http://www.myspace.com/espadrillemusics
Jeff Martin (The Tea Party, The Armada)


**Data collection**

The interviews were preceded by a ‘self-interview’ as part of the heuristic enquiry process. Immersion in the musical language and materiality of performance was aided by concert attendance. Finally, main interviews were conducted. However, as stated previously, the heuristic reflection and grounding in practice was an ongoing process throughout the data collection process.

The interviews took place at times and locations convenient to the participants. A number took place in public places such as cafes, restaurants and a train journey. Others were more personal settings such as an artist’s house or workplace/studio.

**3.5.1 Main interview questions**

Although the form of the interviews was largely unstructured, a number of cornerstone topics was used when talking with the artists derived from the four research questions.

Describing oneself as a musician/describing musical practice.

The relationship with one’s instrument.

Whether one has experiences where your sense of time, self or place is lost?

The name of these experiences.

What can be shared about these experiences?
Does a particular musical approach facilitate a particular experience?

How one feels talking about these experiences.

The full list of interview questions can be found at Appendix 1. Although increasing the reliability of interview findings is desirable so as to offset haphazard subjectivity, a strong emphasis on reliability may detract from creative innovations and variability (Kvale & Flick, 2007, p. 243). As such, these cornerstone topics allowed me to develop my own interview style and improvise throughout the course of the interviews.

3.5.2 Interview technique

The interviews themselves are the practical and social manifestation of my methodological process. Drawing upon the aforementioned methodological approaches, I will describe my approach to the interviews, contrasting my method with other studies that are relevant.

As mentioned previously, the approach used is that of a semi-structured interview, where I endeavour to understand experiences of transcendence from my participant’s own perspectives. In style, it bears resemblance to an everyday conversation, but as a professional interview it has a specific purpose, involving a specific approach and technique – being semi-structured it is neither an open, everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27).

Kvale contrasts the two approaches to interview with the metaphor of the traveller and the miner (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 48; Kvale & Flick, 2007). The miner metaphor is based on knowledge “waiting in the subject’s interior to be unearthed, uncontaminated by the miner” where the interviewer “digs nuggets of knowledge out of a subject’s pure experiences, unpolluted by any leading questions” (2007, p.143 & 2009, p.48). The miner metaphor belongs not only to positivist and empirical data collection, but also to an extent Husserl’s search for phenomenological essences (2009, p.49).
As *traveller*, the interviewer is a traveller on a journey to a distant country that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home (Kvale, 2009, p.49). The interviewer-traveller wanders through the landscape and enters into conversations with the people that are encountered, exploring the many realms of the country, as unmapped territory with a guide, wandering freely around the research territory (Kvale, 2009). The interviewer-traveller, resonating with the Latin meaning of *conversation* as “wandering together with,” travels with the local inhabitants, asking questions and encouraging them to share own stories of their lived world (Kvale, 2009, p.48). Some researchers, such as the anthropologists, live for a longer time with their conversation partners (2009, p.48). That is, the interviewee’s statements are not merely collected or mined by the interview – they are co-authored (Kvale, 2007, p.192). My own position in the research would be that of a traveller who is also interested in doing some mining along the way.

Phenomenological methodology allows for a flexible approach in interviews, but demands that the analysis of data remains consistent (van Manen, 1997). Phenomenological interview technique is also spoken of in terms of the researcher being “a partner with the informant” as “they work together to produce the interview” (Annells, 2006, p. 56). This ‘working together’ resonates with notions of musical collaboration, demonstrating a synergy between musical process and that of conducting an interview. Brinner states:

Sense of self, a central concept in sociology and psychology, is a fundamental aspect of musical interchange [and] … is one of the most important yet neglected aspect of interaction not only among musicians but also between musician and researcher. Which persona does the musician project in an interview? Is he or she offering a straightforward assessment, exaggerating, or playing down capabilities and achievements? A researcher, whose own self can hardly be removed from the picture, must try to answer these questions by observing a musician in action, by matching deeds with words, and by eliciting different perspectives within a group of musicians (Brinner, 1995, p.289).

Here, Brinner is speaking of the complex interactions between musician and interviewer and the necessity for the researcher to not only verbally engage with participants, but familiarise oneself with their ‘actions’ – their live performances and
recordings – to establish an authenticity in the interview. Further, Brinner acknowledges that such familiarity goes hand-in-hand with the presence of the researcher in the interview. Although the concerts attended as part of the research are not explored in detail here, they did provide the material grounding necessary for an active ‘co-construction’ of the interviews.

Kvale (2007, p.164) outlines the six quality criteria for an interview to obtain the best possible result.

The extent of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers from the interviewee.

The shorter the interviewer’s questions and the longer the interviewee’s answers, the better.

The degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of the answers.

The ideal interview is to a large extent interpreted throughout the interview.

The interviewer attempts to verify his or her interpretations of the subject’s answers in the course of the interview.

The interview being ‘self-reported’ – it is a self-reliant story that barely requires extra explanations.

I feel to a large extent that these goals were indeed achieved; the interviews were full of rich, detailed descriptions and dialogue with strong elements of reflection and interpretation throughout the interview process.

In order to achieve this, it is essential to allow the interviewees a freedom of expression. An example of this is in a study by Sloboda (2000), where participants were allowed to produce responses of some complexity and length, free from undue experimental constraints, which was seen as an important feature in making
a meaningful contribution to the psychology of performance or composition (p. vii).
Expanding on the approach to facilitate participant self-expression, it has been found that it is notoriously problematic to draw out very strong emotions in listeners or interview participants when the musical examples have been researcher-selected (Rickard, 2004 cited in Penman and Becker, 2009, p.53). For Rickard, advantages of participant-selected versus experimenter-selected music were often found to outweigh the advantages of the more uniform approach of using only experimenter-selected music (Penman and Becker, 2009, p.53). Following this finding, categorisations and definitions of experience were left open to the interviewees, using their own musical practice as the focus in order to facilitate a dialogue and in-depth responses.

Empathy and sympathy were seen as important aspects of the interview process, particularly when speaking in circumstances where experiences of transcendence may be overlooked. For example, in the case of sport, Murphy and White state: “the conversation was a good lesson in talking to people about these things. Scepticism can distance you from someone who has had an experience as strange as hers. That’s why most reporters miss this element in their stories athletes will seldom make fools of themselves for the press [and] to understand these uncanny moments you must approach them sympathetically” (Murphy & White, 1995, p.2).

Careful preparations, openness and empathy were key aspects of the approach taken in these interviews. As a result, my approach was to engage participants empathetically, sympathetically and with sensitivity to establish rapport and dialogue.

3.5.3 Other sources of data

Other sources of data were drawn into the data collection including attending and reporting on live concerts and recordings of the participants. Part of the process of engaging with the participants was making sure I was familiar with their current musical practice, in particular live performance. As mentioned previously, these
observations assisted with engaging in a dialogue with my participants. Many aspects of musical performance skill are to a certain degree automated and thus not open to conscious introspection. Their nature must therefore be illuminated through observation and analysis of generative behaviour in addition to, verbal self-report (Sloboda, 2000, p. xiii).

Transcription of musical pieces is not directly part of this study. Some researchers rely on auditory transcription of the music itself into conventional or amended notation, and then perform formal or informal analyses on the transcripts. Whilst transcription produces a record that is easily understandable by literate musicians, it runs the risk of making the performance seem more coherent than it actually was (by the transcriber’s ‘intelligent’ cleaning up of inherently messy data). It is also necessarily selective, and cannot reliably record information about expressive parameters of the performance (Sloboda, 2000, p. viii).

Although recording performances in a precise quantitative fashion would allow for more statistical analysis of specific aspects of the music itself, this was not utilised in this study. Problems with this approach lie in information overload, making it difficult to apply informed musical intelligence to the interpretation of the data (Sloboda, 2000, p. viii). This is also echoed by Derek Bailey’s sentiments that an improvisation cannot be reduced to a transcription (1993, p.15).

An appendix CD (Appendix 2) has been provided to include some samples of music from the interviewees as a demonstration of particular musical features. Although not a primary focus for analysis in this study, when combined with audio recordings of the interviews the music is intended to provide readers of this thesis another element of contextualisation and another approach by which to engage this project and participants’ musical practice.
Validity of methodology and summary

There is an inherent limitation in researching human experiences using verbal accounts, as they are not the experiences themselves. The risk is that bringing my own experience to bear might only be a partial solution because it might only provide an interpretive lens to others’ experiences. Subjective experience, by definition, is directly available only to the subject. Someone can tell us about her or his experience but we cannot climb inside the person’s mind and examine it for ourselves (which, of course brings into question whether it would still indeed be their experience or our own). What is possible, however, is the observation of a person’s body and for them to be asked what they felt at a particular moment. Our external observations are then correlated with their subjective reports and conclusions drawn about the neural and bodily processes that feel like that (Benzon, 2001, p.79). I would refer to my own observations as informed yet detached, rather than objective in a quantitative, positivistic sense – akin to Kvale’s notion of establishing a dialogical intersubjectivity and reflexive objectivity (2009, p.243). This section outlines the relevant issues of validity for the methodology of this study and discusses the synthesis of qualitative research methods – that of phenomenology and grounded theory.

Reflexive knowledge provides insight into the workings of the social and experiential worlds as well as how the knowledge came into existence (Hertz, 1997; Myerhoff & Ruby, 1982, cited in Todres, 2007, p.44). This concern is evident in Van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology (1997). There is an increasing concern in qualitative research to pursue the epistemological, ethical and methodological implication for such reflexivity (Todres, 2007, p.44). This challenge includes a concern to care for the interviewees’ voices, and also to care for the readers of the text as part of this ongoing conversation, as all of these things are co-constitutive of human understanding (Todres, 2007, p.44). In this spirit, informants’ stories can be seen as ‘transitional phenomena’ that are part of an ongoing conversation between public and private worlds, interviewer and interviewee, and the discovery and co-creation
of meanings and subjectivities (Sclater, cited in Todres, 2007, p.45). In particular, reflexive objectivity involves striving for sensitivity about one’s prejudices; one’s subjectivity involves a reflexive objectivity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009p.242). That is, the sensitivity and discernment flows through from the interviews to the analysis and the final presentation of this data.

These approaches are in contrast to objections often raised regarding using writing to approach the ‘meaning of music’, for example:

The secret of all music perhaps, is to make you believe that it possesses some sayable secret. But writing can never be an entrance into the meaning of music, an entry by way of the nameable; that door is blocked. The meaning of music lies in the keeping-at-a-distance of writing, reading, interpreting… (Cobussen, 2008, p. 4).

This research defies Cobussen’s view by aiming to unlock and expose aspects of music experience and is trying not to keep it at a distance – writing has to be close to the experience. Just as the interview accounts are not the experiences themselves, the analysis presented here is not the music. However, it can provide insight into the structure of these experiences. The products of the interview process are rich, multi-faceted texts featuring colourful and insightful descriptions of the artists’ performance practice and how it pertains to transcendent experience. Such descriptive language is, however, equivocal by nature and predisposed to interpretation by anyone who studies it and generally at odds with the scientific community (Jeddeloh, 2003, p.28). However, Kvale asserts, “knowledge produced in interviews need not be subjective, but may, in principle, be an objective method with respect to meanings of objectivity” (2007, p.122).

Some of the objections to current interview research are as follows (Kvale, 2007, p.140):

Individualistic – it focuses on the individual and neglects a person’s embeddedness in social interactions.
Idealistic – it ignores the situatedness of human experience and behaviour in a social, historical and material world.

Credulous – it takes everything an interviewee says at face value, without maintaining a critical attitude.

Intellectualistic – it neglects the emotional aspects of knowledge, overlooks empathy as a way of knowing.

Cognitivist – it focuses on thoughts and experiences at the expense of action.

Immobile – the subjects sit and talk, they do not move or act in the world.

Verbalising – it makes a fetish of verbal interaction and transcripts, neglects the bodily interaction in the interview situation.

A-linguistic – although the medium is language, linguistic approaches to language are absent.

A-theoretical – it entails a cult of interview statements, and disregards theoretical analyses of the field studied.

A-rhetorical – published reports are boring collections of interview quotes, rather than convincing stories.

Insignificant – it produces trivialities and hardly any new knowledge worth mentioning.

The problems identified above may be summarised as subjectivity, isolation and superficiality. The solution to these problems is to make the methodological assumptions and process clearly visible in reporting the data and findings. This process of revealing the research mechanism is essential to establishing the quality, trustworthiness, or validity of the research (Laverty, 2003). Validity in this research is achieved in the following ways: through the heuristic method, reflexive objectivity through the époché process and how it informs the interview, interviews with
multiple participants – both Australian and international, reviewing interview questions and technique as the project progresses, and peer debriefing. Peer debriefing involved ongoing dialogue with my supervisors, particularly during the interview process and analysis. However, the intricacies of validating qualitative research is not necessarily due to an intrinsic flaw in qualitative methods, but rather depend on their remarkable ability to portray and question the complexity of the social reality under investigation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 253), that is of course, transcendent experience in experimental popular music performance.

The individualist criticism was compensated through familiarisation with the participants’ embedded social interaction – that is, in performance. Additionally, although it was only possible for one interview, there was one occasion of a three-way interview. Maintaining a critical attitude, rather than taking everything at face value was essential in establishing an inter-subjective dialogue – particularly with regard to theory, substantiating interpretations is an essential element in the generation of theory (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.252). Throughout the interviews it was essential to establish an inter-subjective understanding of transcendent experience. Kvale speaks of dialogical inter-subjectivity, an agreement through rational discourse and reciprocal criticism between researcher and interviewee (2009, p.243).

The emotional aspects of knowledge and use of empathy as a mode of knowing, were assisted by my own grounding and heuristic enquiry into transcendent experience and experimental popular music. Todres’ aim is to involve readers in forms of understanding that are connected with aesthetic participation (2007, p.9). In presenting my interview data, it has been a challenge to integrate the participants’ stories into the greater narrative of this thesis that is in dialogue with the theory presented earlier in this thesis and to encourage further dialogue on transcendent experience.

Further, to comprehend a human experience is to bring it into the realm of one’s own possibilities, therefore the aim is to draw out empathy and participation from
Heidegger states that mood is intimate to understanding; restoring emotional atmosphere or ‘heart’. That is, a pre-reflective relationship with the object functions as a background to colour readers’ perceptions and understanding with emotional texture, and that one should aim to use language in a way that conveys the mood of a situation of experience (Todres, 2007, pp.10-11).

Murphy and White (1995) were concerned with how transcendent experiences may be communicated on the part of their participants. They state that “accounts of spiritual awakening can be exaggerated through inflated memory after the fact, through sentimentality or through sheer bad writing” (1995, p.103) – conversely, they can also be suppressed. “How many of these accounts are like the fisherman’s tale where the fish grows larger with each telling” (Murphy & White, 1995, p.103)? This is an issue that comes to light through the interview process. I feel as though investigating and cross-referencing performer’s experiences is beyond the scope of this research, rather focusing on the responses themselves than the motives behind their words and actions. Further, despite a participant not ‘telling the truth’, it still may be expressing the truth with regards to that participant’s view of her or himself (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

In the light of these issues I have attempted to highlight the specific aesthetic and sensory dimensions in the participants’ accounts and to place these in the context of the broader themes emerging from transcripts.

Trustworthiness is obtained in this study through the aforementioned process of epoché, peer debriefing, participant verification, prolonged engagement with descriptions, synthesis, and ultimately establishing an ontological ‘knowing’ with the material. That is, an active indwelling of the acquired data until it is felt and understood. For Aldridge, “the basis for establishing trustworthiness... is to show that the work is well grounded, [and] to make transparent the premises that are being used” (1996, cited in (Grocke, 1999). These premises are made through heuristic enquiry. This is also deemed credible by accounts of powerful experiences
with music being described, bearing strong resemblance to those of the researcher, giving confidence that what the artists refer to is real (Benzon, 2001, p.15). Furthermore, this extends to Benzon, who asks the reader to judge the credibility of research on one’s own experiences and reading/conversations with others (2001, p.15). Grounded theory thus manifests itself through the aforementioned cornerstone topics that gently steer and inform the interview process.

3.6.1 Synthesis of qualitative approaches

This section describes the combination of phenomenology-based methodology with grounded theory. Annells asserts, “different research approaches can be creatively and successfully used in one study if there has been adequate consideration of vital factors that determine if there is a good ‘fit’ of the approaches not only with the research problem and question, but also with each other, while also maintaining the integrity of each approach” (2006, p.55). If using different qualitative research approaches, it is necessary to ensure that both were philosophically aligned with one another (Annells, 2006, p.57). Further, it is crucial that the chosen methods are congruous with the research questions being asked and that it is clearly defined in the research report (Baker, et al., 1992).

The approaches of phenomenologically-based methodology and grounded theory contain a number of common characteristics in that they both emphasise the richness of human experience and seek understanding from the subject’s own frame of reference and use adaptable data collection processes (Baker et al., 1992, p.1355). They are seen, however, to be based upon different intellectual assumptions, and therefore have distinct differences in purpose and methodological prescriptions - phenomenology has its intellectual roots in philosophy while grounded theory was developed in the 1960s by sociologists (Baker et al., 1992 pp.1355-1356). Strauss and Corbin anticipated that adaptation of the grounded theory approach would include combining it with other methodologies (1997, p. 283). Indeed, it is now recognised as valid to use
grounded theory in part, alongside other approaches, on the grounds that the objectives are made clear (Skodal-Wilson and Ambler-Hutchinson, 1996, cited in Goulding, 2005).

The basic principles of grounded theory state that once the area of research has been identified, the researcher should go into the field as soon as possible (Goulding, 2005, p.296). As such, rather than being exhausted prior to the research as in many studies, the literature “is consulted as part of an iterative, inductive and interactional process of data collection, simultaneous analysis, and emergent interpretation” (Goulding, 2005, p.296). This is supported by Annells (2006), who recommends that grounded theory be engaged for the first of the two phases of research. The first phase in this research project, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, is my grounding and immersion in the field of experimental popular music that has formed a number of previous theoretical and practical works both within and outside my university studies. This process resonates with an ethnographic process, a process that it is labour intensive and always involves prolonged direct contact with group members in an effort to look for rounded, holistic explanations (Goulding, 2005, p.299). My continued involvement performing with Space Project has afforded such use of an ethnographic approach. Therefore, the understandings developed from that phase will beneficially broaden the inquirer’s perspective about the phenomenon when undertaking the subsequent phenomenological phase of interviews (Annells, 2006, p.59).

Sometimes researchers may dither between choosing phenomenology or grounded theory; this conflict appears particularly when both the meaning of the lived experience and understanding of social elements are both of interest (Annells, 2006, p.55). It was observed that those who use grounded theory or phenomenology “share a commitment to a qualitative, naturalistic, contextual, historic, inter-subjective methodology to understand human responses and experiences from a variety of perspectives as they are transformed over time” (Wilson and Hutchinson 1991, cited in Annells 2006, p.56). Grounded theory can
inform practical intervention and subsequent research, while “the rich and insightful
detail of hermeneutics provides a depth of personal understanding that creates a
dialogue and a beginning for a conversation” (Wilson and Hutchinson 1991, cited in
Annells 2006, p.56). It is for these reasons I have chosen to utilise both a
phenomenological based approach in conjunction with grounded theory.

Moving on from the grounded theory aspect, van Manen (1997) observes that the
crux of phenomenological research is to borrow other people’s experiences so as
to understand the deeper meaning of the experience within the context of the
entirety of human experience. The dynamic psychosocial and social processes that
are the focus of grounded theory may be inferred from observing social
interactions, from listening to what informants say about themselves and others,
from other researcher literature and from considering one's past experiences – with
data collected through diverse methods such as participant observation, interviews
with informants, reading the relevant literature, and self-reflection (Baker et al.,
1992, pp.1357-1358). The heuristic phenomenological process calls for intense reflection as an integral part of the process, but above all, the primacy of the
subjective experience is considered crucial (Goulding, 2005, p.303).

As such, the combination of phenomenology and grounded theory can indeed be
combined successfully for this research and this provides the benefits of validity
through methodological synthesis.

3.6.2 Data analysis

The study’s findings result from a process of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1997)
of the nineteen open-ended interview transcripts that were developed and refined
through an application of the phenomenological processes of epoché (van Manen,
1997), indwelling (Moustakas, 1990), embodied enquiry (Todres, 2007), sensory
ethnography (Pink, 2009), and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), all
outlined earlier in this chapter. The coding process utilised the qualitative analysis
software, NVIVO 8. The coding tree is reflected in the structure of the findings
chapter. Qualitative software programs can be helpful in organising and coding data, but are considered no replacement for the interpretation of data (Suddaby, 2006, p.638). While uncovering what I felt to be the significant elements of the interviews, I have attempted to make sure that the stories of the musicians and findings speak for themselves to encourage a direct engagement and understanding. As a result, each key theme is supported by extracts from selected interviews. For direct quotes, I have included the initials of the speaker to assist with the reader’s orientation.

As playing EPM is an emergent process with unpredictable outcomes, there is room afforded in the diversity of EPM musical structures for creative exploration. As such, I acknowledge that a number of findings cross over and blend into different areas of questioning. For sake of clarity these significant connections will be addressed in the subsequent discussions chapter.

| Ethics |

The process of conducting the interviews began with obtaining ethics approval through University of Western Sydney. Ethics approval was sought to conduct audio-recorded interviews through the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Western Sydney. The ethics approval number is H6821. The participants agreed that their involvement was not confidential and that their names may be used in this thesis.

A brief outline of the research project was provided to the participants that also included details about the interview audio being recorded, transcribed and that their names were being used in the writing of the thesis with the provision that they may withdraw from the study at any time. Informed consent forms were signed at the time of the interview.
Summary

This chapter has provided an overview and details regarding the methods chosen and list of participants for this project. I have outlined the use of phenomenological and grounded research approaches and how they pertain to the interview situation. Further, the interview method itself has been explored, expanding on the strengths and weaknesses of this method as it applies to this project.

The following chapter is the first of my four interview findings chapters that follow the research questions. The first of which is: how does the transcendent experience manifest in experimental popular music performance?
Chapter 4: Findings Part 1

How transcendent experiences manifest in contemporary, experimental popular music

Speaking with participants about their transcendent experiences elicited a broad range of responses. This and the following chapters discuss these responses in relation to key themes emerging from the interviews, which in turn are grouped in response to each of the research questions. The current chapter begins with discussing the first research question, focusing on the participants’ experiences of the phenomenology of the transcendent experience. Subsequently Chapter 5 discusses the second research question regarding the musical factors facilitating these experiences, with Chapter 6 focusing on research question 3, exploring the extra-musical factors that were involved, including different environments such as recording studios and practising both solo and as a group. The final results chapter articulates how these ideas help to redefine transcendent experience in the context of EPM and facilitate reflective practice as ongoing research for performing musicians.

Rather than predefining the properties of transcendent experiences, this section presents a range of experiences reported in the context of interviews probing into this subject. These experiences are presented in all their subjectivity and diversity to allow for a richer understanding of transcendent experience to be explored in the subsequent analysis.

Of the interviews conducted, experiences of transcendence were mostly familiar and distinguishable by the musicians despite not occurring every time one plays. Justin Ashworth was very frank in saying, “you know, I mean it’d be a complete lie to say that every time I play, I’m transcended.” However, familiarity didn’t necessarily result in a lucid perspective being shared. When asked “would you say that you experience something akin to what transcendence may be in your performance practice?” Pianist Chris Abrahams entertainingly responded, “um…
I’m not sure really *chuckles*.” Such are the challenges of interviewing musicians about potentially ‘slippery’ subject matter, where the challenge of the interview process is to explore and bring out these experiences with the interviewee.

How transcendent experiences manifest in contemporary, experimental popular music

The interview participants’ reports on the manifestation of their transcendent experience come under five broad areas: the form and dynamics of the experience; the performer’s state of mind; the physicality; the general character of these experiences; any negative transcendent experiences; key detractors from transcendent experience; and finally the significance of transcendent experience.

4.1.1 Form and dynamics

The form and dynamics of transcendent experiences refer to the 'shape' of transcendent experiences. Participants describe how the transcendent experience may manifest and how it is experienced over time. The main elements found as the dynamics of transcendent experience are one’s sense of self; sense of time; communal experience; effortlessness; and sense of space and place. Regarding the form of the experiences, discussions pertain to the onset, the ‘being-in’, and exit of the transcendent experience, are drawn together.

Often the dynamics of transcendent experience are coupled together, such as an out-of-body experience where your sense of self is distorted that links to the effortlessness of playing one’s instrument and one’s sense of space and place. For pianist Chris Abrahams (CA), transcendence in The Necks is experienced on a number of levels. “Firstly, there is a transcendence that occurs between the instruments, where they kind of cease to sound like what people think they should sound like, melding together and forming another sort of sound world where who is doing what becomes somewhat ambiguous” (CA). Secondly, there’s transcendence in the sense of individual expression into more of a group kind of
dynamic, as Abrahams still feels very expressive, and not that he is relinquishing anything; “I’m adding to a bigger picture that I couldn’t paint myself” (CA). There also is transcendence of time passing, although “ironically, we kind of hit upon the kind of forty-five, fifty minute period, very early on, and it seems just so natural to us, none of us will have a watch on or a clock or anything like that, but invariably our pieces will come in at that time, and we’ll all know when the piece is over” (CA).

The form and dynamics of Jeff Martin’s (JM) performance practice and experience are described with colour and candour, particularly in relation to his style of music being a product of the music coming from ‘somewhere else’ – that it is being channelled. “Music is channelled, especially music that’s not contrived, so I don’t deal with pop music. Not to say that all pop music is contrived, but I’m dealing with something that’s a little different, and where this music comes from, for me. It’s basically when [the music is] created: it’s possession. Whether it’s demonic or angelic, it’s two sides of the same coin, I appreciate both, I let both come through me, and when it comes to the performance of those songs, that positive and that negative will come through as well. So it is transcendental, it has to be… I allow myself to be taken over by it, and it’s the throes of passion, that has to come through” (JM). Violinist Mirabai Peart also refers to her process of ‘channelling’ the music in performance.

Guitarist Leo Abrahams (LA) describes experiences of transcendence as “where you sort of lose track of yourself” and connects it to day-to-day experience: “I mean it’s little bit like the way that we, in modern society, think about happiness, like it should be some kind of permanent state.” For Abrahams and his peers, the experience of losing yourself is either momentary or short-lived. “There are… prolonged moments of happiness, purpose and freedom that might even last for a whole concert but ‘true moments’ of transcendence are considered quite rare… and that’s why they’re so beautiful when they happen” (LA). Such experiences occur in a number of circumstances, even when he is musically not participating but rather just listening. It hasn’t been Leo’s experience to be in such a state for
‘totally sustained periods’ but rather something that he goes in and out of, likening these experiences to sleep or meditation.

Abrahams recalls the Pure Scenius concerts conducted by Brian Eno (Brighton Dome, UK; 9th May, 2010) when his experiences of “happiness and purpose and freedom (LA)” went ‘in and out’, moving from a dreamy relaxation with a lack of concern where when he was playing, the ‘right gestures’ were automatically coming forth to more energised sections, especially if the focus of a piece was more on him at a certain point during the performance. “It’s very nice to be able to focus that calmness into something more exciting than just what I call transcendence, I suppose” (LA).

Speaking of his experience performing in Pure Scenius at the Brighton Dome, Jon Hopkins (JH) reflects similarly, sharing that there were a large number of passages “where we’re in a groove for ages and everyone’s just locked in and it’s sounding amazing and Karl [Hyde] would suddenly come in with some storming vocal and you know, it was brilliant”. Reflecting on the performance as a whole, Hopkins found “there were loads of times when I felt myself completely surrender to it and disappear into it and I would kind of like to think that we were all feeling that.”

Reflecting back to the first Pure Scenius show at the Sydney Opera House, Hopkins describes the very last piece of the last show in Sydney “…it was fucking incredible, at that point we couldn’t have been more warmed up I guess, and just that last burst of energy and the way… Tony [who] led it… [and] Leo [Abrahams] was just…. absolutely insane on the guitar…” (JH). Jon Hopkins describes different nuances of transcendent experience as a response to different musical material in these Pure Scenius shows – in particular the aforementioned louder, repetitive music versus very sparse and still music of ‘Two Pianos’:
I think they’re very different actually, they’re almost like opposite sides, yet possibly having something of a similar effect. There is a tension to the two pianos thing and a sort of pristine almost silent thing and not really repetition, well immediate repetition, but it was a progression always, whereas these other things are far more, far more like the tribal thing I was talking about, or far more like the organic experiences that we were talking about where it is actually one straight meter that just keeps on going and going... so I guess that... more specifically, I think maybe as a listener, this is, I’m just guessing... they could have found the piano thing transcendent in that way cause it was quite kind of beautiful... But I do think that’s a different kind of thing, it’s not so much that joyful drift, I mean I don’t even know what the fuck I’m saying, what effect... but they’re different sides of the same thing I think... (JH).

Here, Hopkins is provided a multi-layered response, contrasting two styles of music producing different nuances of transcendent experience.

Guitarist Seth Olinksy finds the wonderful thing about music performance is that it occurs with other people – the band and the audience. Powerful experiences in *Akron/Family* deepen the connection between the band members and “helps one grow as a human being and as a musician” (SO). As these connections deepened, these heightened experiences or ‘level of feeling’ (SO) can become common and regular, linking transcendent experiences to a broader scope of life experience. Likewise in the music itself, Olinksy finds such moments occur both on a micro and macro level within the course of a live performance, not a plateau but an ebb and flow - “little moments in little songs when it happens... and ... there are certain nights when it just has a magical feeling to it” (SO). Olinksy’s experience connects transcendence with meditational practice and he discusses the complexities involved in music performance experience. Olinksy has a range of experiences where “sometimes it’s really fun, sometimes time’s moving fast, sometimes time moves slowly and sometimes it feels good, and sometimes it feels bad... there are definitely certain nights that are spectacular, you’re smiling and everyone’s smiling and the whole thing just works” (SO).

These experiences, however, seem to be out of conscious control – “those kind of nights can’t be fabricated no matter how hard I try to prepare or whatever, it kind of happens at its own pace... sometimes I think like we’re ready on the night as a
band, and we’re really connected but the audience isn’t you know? So try as we might, we just don’t get anywhere, and then sometimes the audience is ready for it, and you can tell they’re ready for it, and we just can’t kick it into gear…” (SO). Olinsky describes further how his and the audience’s experiences does not correlate – “sometimes it feels awful and then someone comes up to you at the end of the show and they’re like ‘that was the most amazing thing’… or sometimes it feels blissful and then someone after the show says… ‘you know I liked the other night better’” (SO). Live performance is a complex encounter with fellow musicians and the audience, “there are so many different things that might come into play… the stars… and the whole thing, but there are definitely nights when it all just comes together and it’s wonderful, and magical and maybe you may call it transcendent” (SO).

John Encarnacao describes further this elusive character and the receptive state of mind of the transcendent experience, likening it to “falling in love, if you look for it you never find it, you can only put yourself in a position of openness to that experience, and allow it to occur… [and] allow it to happen to you” (JE). Matthew Robertson gives the analogy of a football match: “it’s the waiting for the goal, it might be the only goal in the game, or there might be no goals, but it’s the whole… anticipation when you finally… get that goal or something… it’s like euphoria, it’s something… almost indescribable how much joy you can get from that” (MR).

Jon Hopkins’ musical endeavours have been strongly shaped by powerful, transcendent experiences earlier in his life. So powerful these experiences were, Hopkins “just tried to recreate the experience in a piece of music so you can, cause… it was just the most, I mean it’s got to be the most powerful experience of my life, I’m almost embarrassed to admit [it]… I mean, fact is it did happen and I went to what I can only describe as a kind of heaven for about an hour, and I was drifting around on another plane completely.” This experience through hallucinogens has sustained him into later life. It was an experience that was shared with a friend where they both went to the same place, even communicating
there and “it was just the most extraordinary out of body thing to happen” (JH). It has since resulted in a number of pieces of music due to the impact and significance of the experience, “like being in heaven or like truly experiencing that there was another side, in fact even thought about there, even remotely contemplated there being a spirit world of some sort or, you know, there being a kind of soul that exists, and I don’t really believe that but it’s almost like I saw that” (JH). Perhaps of most relevance to this thesis, however is that the music playing through this event gave Hopkins’ experience a form and structure, where the music created a tangible landscape and alternate reality for Hopkins to exist within.

In a similar vein, Jeff Martin describes his experiences as a form of ecstasy. Martin relates his experiences to the Whirling Dervishes in Istanbul, where he too is “kind of climbing towards divinity, wherever it is... you always think that you’re going upwards, because you’re looking up and you’re feeling like it’s up.”

Sense of Self

Akin to John Coltrane’s dialogue with Miles Davis (1961) and research by Vincs (2002, 2007) and Bailey (1996), a sense of self is spoken of when it is being lost or dissolving, particularly into the music. A number of performers refer to experiences where they are ‘totally lost’ in performance, outside of themselves or being a ‘not-self’.

Primarily, dialogue was established around a sense of self that disappears. Brendan Smyly’s speaks of “some beautiful spaces that happened” where you disappear into the music and “you forget, that notion of forgetting that you’re actually making the music... you don’t see yourself as part of that, you don’t see yourself at all, you know the self disappears” (BS). Smyly describes other instances, such as being “immersed in cooking, or swimming, or something like that, some other activity

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17 Derek Bailey comments that improvisation, above all other music, absorbs the performer.
when the watcher goes away. It’s really lovely, a really lovely experience” (BS). It is this description of the watcher disappearing that was the only one to make sense to Smyly. He reflects “the experience of that transcendence or a changed sense of self has changed over time” (BS). In particular, he refers to experience when he was younger where such experiences were based on “the expansion of ego, the thinking you’re exceedingly important, and exceedingly good,” but he sees that as he has aged, these experiences have changed markedly. Although he “wouldn’t say, well maybe you do lose yourself” Smyly prefers to use the terminology of losing self awareness, he elaborates about “a Buddhist teacher who calls it the watcher; the mind that, the part of the mind that assesses everything that’s going on at every moment and talks to us about it …[with an] internal dialogue and definitely there’s a time in playing music for me when that watcher goes away, where that watcher becomes just a part of that… music experience, the music making experience” (BS).

Further, experiences that involve a loss of self are in fact not considered a transcendent state, but rather “it’s the actual, …natural state, which is almost the opposite of the transcendent state… the transcendent state says I will move from somewhere to somewhere, the natural state for me is, is just more your self, [being] more comfortable with yourself [and] less of that busy mind that focuses there and you definitely experience that… playing music” (BS).

This dissolution of self also manifests as a separation from one’s physical body. In performance the most “profoundly abandoned state (LS),” Lloyd Swanton has found himself is “almost to the point of out of body, where… the amount of physical effort… expend[ed] and the amount of sound reverberating around my whole body can actually carry me away to a point where, the other guys, [Chris Abrahams and Tony Buck], use this term too, where I feel like someone else is playing the instrument” (LS). This notion of being outside of oneself is furthered by guitarist Phil McCourt where “losing your sense of time and space… is really what it’s all
about... all the time, [but] not to a massive degree of... losing your shit... but still being more of a ‘not-self’” (PM).

Along similar lines, bassist Jed Maisey frivolously states that when playing live he gets ‘to be an actor’, suggesting a shift in self-perception. Chantel Bann, too, speaks of having her ‘performance face’ as “part of the whole protecting against the whole ‘opening up’ (CB)” and the vulnerability that comes with musical performance.

A sense of connection between musicians and the environment was frequently referred to. Particularly strong manifestations of connections were largely referred to as a sense of oneness. Drummer Cameron Brennan describes a sense of connection with other musicians. Ryan McRobb’s experiences involved a sense of achievement, where “just, things worked”, particularly in group situations “cause we all get in this really intense, thing together, where we all sort of, connect” (RM).

For John Encarnacao, transcendence is experienced as a feeling of oneness or communality that may be with the musicians you’re playing with, the musicians and with the audience, even going beyond that to a feeling “of oneness with being... a oneness with um... all things [laughs]” (JE). Drummer Tony Buck also echoes the experience of oneness with all things:
“when I was 12 or 13 [years old] I had an experience that was really strong and I remember thinking ‘I have to remember this, this is a really significant thing’. I was sitting on the roof of my parent’s house, this veranda thing, and I was listening to music, I don’t remember what it was, it was loud heavy sort of thing, and I was just staring into space and past the back gardens of all the neighbours and I really had this sense of dissolving into the universe and the trees that I was looking at were connected to me by this kind of sense of kind of molecular kind of structure that I was really… everything became really… and since then I’ve read about this sort of idea, after that experience. But I remember thinking and I was really aware of it, and I just became really, I would describe it as becoming one with everything. It’s really hard to describe it, it was like being in a pointillist painting (where small, distinct dots are combined to create a picture); this bit of space between me and the next physical object was just as dense in matter as we were, it was just broken down into this same kind of thing. And it was really extraordinary, and I kind of stayed in this state for a while, but I can be really reflective of it, I was aware I was experiencing it, it was like ‘fuck this is amazing… this is something I never thought I’d be exposed to before’… And I’ve never had anything like that since… Not anything nearly as close to that molecular breakdown [and] realisation of the oneness of the universe” (TB).

Despite the significance of this experience for Tony Buck, apart from consciously deciding to remember the event, there hasn’t been a conscious decision to try and recapture that or explore it any more through his musical practice.

A sense of strong connection is also linked to a sense of emptiness. Justin Ashworth describes, rather than uncontrollably going to a place where he would experience tears, he experiences transcendence as “the opposite direction, like not in terms of physical manifestation, but more of like an emptiness, that kind of... void-like feeling... it’s really hard for me to describe, though” (JA). The closest he has come to it outside of music was practicing Tai Chi, where the way he felt when I was getting that right, the way I became physically aware and, of myself and at the same time, just allowing what they call, I guess, ‘the Chi’ to flow” (JA). This ‘void’ or emptiness is also manifest through communal means. Brendan Smyly explores this notion of communality through the experience of ‘selflessness’ and ‘emptiness’. Smyly recalls William Benzon’s Beethoven’s Anvil (2001), “which talks about the way that we as humans... [with] our minds perceive each other, and the way that rhythm holds us together in a way that we start to... have shared
experiences because of this shared rhythm with each other” (BS). These shared musical experiences are sometimes attributed to “why that experience of selflessness, that… [feeling of] emptiness … has come up when I’ve been around others” (BS).

Sense of Time

One’s sense of time was frequently cited as a core element of the transcendent experience, with fifteen of the interviewees discussing a distortion of time in their experiences. These distortions involve both the elongation and shortening of time; being ‘outside’ of time; and that time ceases to exist, with each musician using different descriptions to convey such experiences.

The Necks’ music allows Chris Abrahams to “step outside of chronological time, the quotidian time of everyday life” (CA). John Encarnacao’s experiences of time are entwined with a sense of self and can include “almost… like a blackout of time, where it’s… not like you’ve been asleep but it’s, it’s like you’ve lost some time [and]… you come to [and] realise you are still standing on the stage holding your guitar… or you are still twiddling a knob on a small machine” (JE). Such an experience is also seen as a physical sensation, as a “taking leave of the body and/or the mind” (JE).

Losing one’s sense of time is also linked to one’s state of mind and the flow of a performance. For Holly Harrison, losing track of time is a big factor, indicating that when she’s not aware or conscious of time passing there is a sense of what she describes as “inhabiting the moment” and “not needing to care about what is coming next” (HH). As such, one’s experience of time is also linked into feelings of effortlessness.

Ryan McRobb experiences a definite loss of clock time during performance, often having to check the time to see how long things have gone for: “if I’m doing an improve[ised] set you know we might have, an allotted timeslot… [and] that’s a
problem “laughs*” (RM). Mostly, there is a sense that it has gone longer than it really has – this he attributes to his mental concentration. Such performance contexts, particularly when playing on a multiple band bill where things run to a tight schedule, there is that worry in the back of his mind because he doesn’t want to go over the allotted timeslot – unfortunately on one occasion he ended up playing too short a set, detracting somewhat from the musical journey being undertaken. There is a tension of being in a state outside of clock time, but still needing to remain within a clock time frame.

There is also a sense of time passing quickly. For bassist Jed Maisey, most performances feel as though time accelerates. In fact, Jed Maisey doesn’t recall having “far out experiences or spaced out… at all” and rather than losing time, “time just goes fast” (JM). When asked to describe it further, if Maisey were to call these experiences anything, it would be ‘lucky’. This suggests such experiences are out of his control and these experiences are a positive and a fortunate occurrence.

Luis Rojas goes as far to say that “during the actual process [of performing], …[time is] actually irrelevant – time ceases to exist in a way… and all of a sudden that’s the end of the gig. And that’s why even if we play for an hour or something, it goes like that *clicks fingers*” (LR). Although Phil McCourt hasn’t experienced “any big white light, ‘I get it’, understanding while performing”, he quickly attributes experiencing an hour long performance pass by so quickly as a form of transcendence, particularly when reflecting upon his performance directly afterwards. Chantel Bann, whose experience when performing finds “time just flies by, like you come off stage, ‘we were up there for five minutes, surely’, also reflects this. There isn’t much perception of how many minutes [you have played]; one hour will feel like five minutes, or if it’s not such a good performance it’ll feel like two hours…” (CB).

Matthew Robertson corroborates this experience of time slowing down, or ‘going on forever’. Towards the end of a 40-minute live take in the studio drummer Matthew Robertson experienced what he described as an unfortunate panic attack where “it felt as though the time was forever stretching out and going forever” (MR).
Lloyd Swanton’s awareness of time is not a direct conscious experience, but there is still a memory of what’s taken place so far, particularly in the case of aesthetic decisions that are being made, and the sense of proportion and structure.

Both Alison Kerjan and Cameron Brennan reflect that their jams with *Meniscus* feel timeless. Likewise with other accounts, there is a sense of immediacy and ‘shortness’, but upon reflection through listening to recordings are often surprised at the length of time they are playing. Likewise, Justin Ashworth’s perception of time distortion is also confirmed when listening back to live recordings of himself, where certain sections with “very little actual musical material would be stretched out for [much longer than I thought].” Justin’s perception of time is linked to the amorphous structure of the music, where it “just constantly morphed into, from one thing into another, it wasn’t really like we... I didn’t feel the time going on, like, we just played and... I don’t really know if it was like getting incredibly lost” (JA).

The recording studio is another environment mentioned where distortions of time occur. Akin to Csikszentmihalyi’s flow sensation, guitarist Leo Abrahams recalls losing his sense of time while mixing in the studio while Lloyd Swanton’s sense of time while recording is “even less so in the studio, [as] there’s just nothing to gauge it against, the whole set up of a recording studio is almost like a floatation tank.”

**Effortlessness**

Notions of effortlessness are a common feature in transcendent experiences. Effortlessness occurs as a technical/sonic efficiency, where ‘everything works’ or ‘flows’ and links into one’s connection with the music and sense of self through the experience of ‘channelling’.

Seth Olinsky phrases the notion of effortlessness simply and concisely – ‘it just feels good’ with such moments characterised by a sense of spontaneity. Olinsky recalls bassist William Parker’s notion of a ‘tone soup’, where “you’re immersed in this soup, and you can grab anything, and everything works” (SO). Olinsky describes in
terms of musical choices, “generally there’s a concept of a right thing to do and a
wrong thing to do at any time, and you’re trying to do the right thing. But when
things are really working there’s a sense of anything goes, and anything could work
at any time, and everything, like you can’t even do anything wrong... and... the
wonderful thing about music is that that occurs with other people. So what anyone
does at any time is [also] working” (SO). Drummer Matthew Robertson also speaks
of when things ‘gel’ in the ensemble; a sense of effortlessness and that the band
are ‘nailing’ accents that are above and beyond their normal capacity. He also
describes this sense as ‘flow’ and effortlessness in terms of the projection of sound
where there is a sense of efficiency in his sonic output.

An experience of effortlessness is also linked into the experience of channelling.
John Encarnacao observes that something transcendent experiences have in
common is the potentially clichéd notion of the music playing itself “or the feeling...
of not the music playing itself or you being a conduit for something... that you don’t
understand [and] a feeling of... an ease of facility with what you’re doing, [and] a
feeling of inevitability; a feeling that the musical moment, was always going to be
like this, that you are contributing... the only thing that you could possibly
contribute... [and] where things fall into place just the way they’re supposed to”
(JE). Jed Maisey draws on ideas common to Olinsky and Encarnacao, stating that
his favourite parts of the music as being “when everything flows, when everything
flows the right way and the right way it was intended... not necessarily the same
part every time, it’s just when everything works” (JM).

As an extension of this, Chris Abrahams feels coerced by the music itself, “I’m
forced to play things that are, forced in the sense that the music is making me
play.” Abrahams in particular is referring to his own self being subverted in the
music-making process, where the ‘effort’ involved in producing sonic material is
dispersed.

Feelings of effortlessness and connection to the music are also seen as the core to
one’s understanding of the transcendent experience. For violinist Mirabai Peart, “on
one level there is the transcendent experience of just feeling in complete flow with
the instrument physically, like there’s no effort and just pure joy of that
effortlessness” (MP). Effortlessness was key to Peart’s original experience of
“feeling really connected to the music… not having to thinking about it and feeling
effortless about it. So I guess the other transcendent experiences that I’ve had
have been variations of that, just different music” (MP).

Clarinettist Karen Heath considers effortlessness a goal. Heath experiences a
certain sense of embodiment, particularly when memorising a piece of music, such
as her work with Stockhausen. In this process she becomes a particular character,
practising all the physical movements and performs so it becomes effortless, where
the physical exertion of the choreography is not perceived and the piece seems to
play itself. Further, after performing the piece in such a manner, Heath finds it
difficult to remember the performance itself.

The experience of effortlessness is tightly linked into one’s sense of self in relation
to one’s instrument. Chantel Bann speaks of engaging with an instrument to the
extent where you “let the instrument play you… [where you] just let the melodies
come out… not try to play anything or come up with a quick spontaneous melody
[but rather] start pressing a few keys and its starts flowing out naturally” (CB). This is
part of an ongoing relationship with one’s instrument, echoed by Holly Harrison,
who feels the best performance experience for her comes when she feels “tense
but… physically loose, striking a balance between caring about it and also not
caring” (HH). Bann sees these experiences as being fostered by practice, for “if
you’re not proficient in your instrument, it’s harder to take a back seat and just let
your fingers do the work, or your voice do the work or something like that” (CB).
Such experiences occur more frequently when Chantel plays more consistently
throughout a piece of music, where it feels as though she’s “not even playing the
song, it’s just ‘happening’.” Her experience of effortlessness is also multi-faceted in
that she experiences awareness of what is happening, what she’s doing, but it’s
“almost like an out of body experience” (CB).
Transcendent experiences are often referred to as a zone or a special space or place to which someone goes to, mentioned specifically in eight of the interviews. There is a common use of space and place as a means to describe the different stages of the transcendent experience, such as ‘going off somewhere else’ and linking strongly to one’s sense of self.

The sense of space and place is also a collective place that can be participated in with other musicians. For guitarist Ryan McRobb the ‘special place’ is something that he and others go to both individually and collectively. Chantel Bann and Luis Rojas also refer to a special place, whereas Justin Ashworth and John Encarnacao refer to a ‘zone of transcendence’ and Tony Buck articulates a ‘transcendent space/place’.

Pianist Chris Abrahams speaks of the music performance taking him to a place distinct from day-to-day life, acknowledging transcendence in that regard, however he doesn’t “really want to colour it with words that might lead to other areas, but definitely it does take me outside my own…” (CA).

The sonic textures that are present in a performance by The Necks are also strong indicators of Lloyd Swanton’s sense of space and place. Auditory hallucinations for Lloyd Swanton are considered “kind of a reward, you realise you’ve gotten into a state where you can’t say anymore where a particular sound is coming from and that’s a state of abandon which is pretty exciting if you’re excited as we are by the elusive nature of sound” (LS). Swanton describes such a moment as “an ‘oh wow, I really thought that we had a handle on this, but there’s a sound that’s escaped and I’ve got no idea how, where it came from’, so yeah it is exciting” (LS).

One’s sense of space and place also takes on quasi-physical characteristics. Luis Rojas and Chantel Bann speak of being so absorbed in the music that their sense of space is altered to the extent that they are “existing in the song”. This feels like a
physical space that is being inhabited; “you can hear the song, you can smell the
song, you can feel the song…” (CB). For Rojas: “I just feel like I’m somewhere else,
I can’t describe where, it’s not even, like I said I can’t describe the place where I’m
at but I kind of feel that I am somewhere. It’s not necessarily a room either… it
feels like… I’m in a sphere… a contained space, but… not finite either.” Such a
place presents itself during the song-writing process and thus cannot be recalled
that well. It is a creative ‘world’ that he wants to invite people into and share. Rojas’
sense of landscape bears resemblance to the experiences of Jon Hopkins, whose
experiences take on very strong quasi-physical properties. Facilitated by his ability
of perfect-pitch perception Hopkins “could walk around within music, like it’s a
place… so tangible and it’s just a structure looking around it and you know, that’s
pretty amazing…” (JH).

When Phil McCourt is performing, he is “always going, so that timelessness and
space-lessness, it’s always there,” not to the extent of ‘seeing things’ but “more of
a euphoric feeling more than anything.” He doesn’t “transport to some other world
of aliens and stuff like that… but… it’s definitely in the same feeling… [but] more
conceptual, it’s like you were somewhere else [but] you always know that you were
there [physically], I don’t lose myself that much that I don’t know where I am” (PM).

The quasi-physical characteristics also extend to a sense of ‘remote viewing’.
Drummer Matthew Robertson’s sense of self-perception shifts between a first
person perspective and watching himself from the outside, as though he is a
member of the audience.

The embodied processes of singing are a pathway to an altered sense of space
and place. Chantel Bann goes to a ‘different place’ more often when she is singing,
“because it’s such a physical instrument, you’re using your whole body to sing. I
find that I go into a different place if I’m singing as opposed to when I’m playing
keys.” This implies a paradox whereby an embodied process/activity is taking
someone ‘somewhere else’. This is also something that I find when singing, where
holding a note might result in my awareness and perception of my body becomes removed from itself and the physical processes of creating the sound.

The Shape of Transcendent Experience

The shape of one’s transcendent experience relates to the onset, ‘being-in’ and exit of the experience. According to the participants, transcendent experiences have a distinctive path. Exiting the transcendent experience often involved a realisation of the experience that had just occurred. Matthew Robertson describes his special experiences as those that wax and wane through the progress of a piece of music, “like building to an anti-climax, but [where] you’re left kind of feeling all warm and fuzzy I suppose” (MR). Similarly, the shape of the transcendent experience is not necessarily something that becomes a permanent state in performance. For Leo Abrahams, “it hasn’t been my experience to be in that state for totally sustained periods like that, I go in and out of it, just like you can go in and out of sleep or in and out of a meditation” (LA).

Transcendent experiences are experienced as more direct and more physical when one is playing their instrument rather than listening during performance – “Just the energy moving through me, the music moving through my whole body” (MP). This energy, is sustained through the entirety of a piece despite not playing through all parts of the songs, there’s a lot of time when she is just sitting there listening “and it’s still moving through me, but it’s stronger when I’m actually play” (MP), with certain moments in the arrangements punctuated by physical shivers. Likewise, saxophonist Brendan Smyly, find his experiences “tend to be when I’ve actually got the saxophone in my mouth and I’m playing” (BS). Conversely, Holly Harrison’s experiences, although refraining from labelling them as transcendent, occur in larger brass ensembles more from other peoples’ playing than from her own.

Experiences of transcendence often begin with a sense of intense focus to establish a connection with others. Rojas finds the presence of an audience
attributes to how such a state may be entered “it may take... a while for me to sort of lose myself.” Additionally, Rojas mentions a complex array of issues such as “other musicians that you’re playing with, like how they gel with you.” When these elements work together, Rojas recalls “rocking into a groove, and it has felt like I was in a trance like state during the performance or during the music and it’s almost like I’m not playing anymore... I’m just sort of in this vessel, and the music’s just sort of going on, channelling through me, playing it on its own, just sort of ‘wow!’” (LR).

Once a performance had ended, the transition out of the performance state is gradual. After any kind of performance where Chantel Bann has her ‘performance face’ on, which contributes to a sense of self-protection “against the whole ‘opening up’ thing.” It’s something she realises more after coming off stage and not being able to talk with anyone as she realises that she has ‘just come back down to earth’, back in the ‘real world’ once off stage. It takes time to integrate back into ‘reality’.

4.1.2 States of mind

Key to an understanding of the transcendent experience is the musicians’ descriptions of their own states of mind during performance and how they may relate to transcendent experiences. The themes that emerged when discussing states of mind with the participants were the awareness of transcendent experience, thinking, distraction, surprise, focus, and confidence.

Awareness of the transcendent experience

One’s awareness of the transcendent experience is an important aspect to explore as the reflection takes place at different times during and after the experience. Experiences range from a sense of immediate awareness, reflection directly afterwards and to broader awareness over a music career.
Awareness during the performance itself moves from self-awareness to an awareness of others – in particular the audience. Tony Buck finds that “there’s always a sense of responsibility to the music and maybe it’s kind of my hang-up, but … I remember when The Necks really got on a roll after the first few years, and we’d be setting up this thing and I’d be quite aware that it’s creating kind of strong atmosphere that people in the audience were getting kind of taken with” (TB). Buck was indeed aware of what that element was, “but then it’s interesting cause you’re being part of the creative, you’re creating this thing that’s taking them there, but you’ve got to practically keep doing it. You’ve got to keep playing the drums and if you drift away you [can] stop the whole thing that’s keeping you there, so there’s a certain sort of mechanical necessity to keeping your mind alert [for the sake of the music]” (TB).

Awareness also occurs in the moment of the performance itself. Luis Rojas may find, “depending on how the show’s going and how we’re feeling and how intense it is”, that he is playing better and playing things that he’s never played before at an elevated skill level. Such an experience is a pleasant surprise, “and I’m like ‘wow!’, I’ll keep going.” Rather than getting lost in it and reflecting upon it later, he enjoys that the reflection occurs in the moment itself – “wow, this is odd…” (LR). Likewise Holly Harrison refrains from calling her experiences ‘transcendent’ - there is a sense of knowing about “when you are on and you know when you are off” (HH). For Holly Harrison, intensified or heightened musical experiences “really manifest through an extreme control…[and feeling] ultra-aware” and it is through this extreme control and ultra-awareness that gives her the sense of transcending her normative experience. Such experiences occur “probably only… 50% of the time, which I think is a really good percentage” (HH). In particular, she refers to where she has been “really sort of ultra aware, …attentive and really listening, and, just sort of stuff like that, I mean I don’t know whether you would describe it as transcendent but for me it transcends my own sense and own experience of normal playing or playing most of the time” (HH).
There is a tension between awareness of the transcendent experience interfering with the experience itself. Mirabai Peart states “when my mind doesn’t interfere with it too much, like I’m able to observe it, but it’s still kind of sustained as an experience… [it’s] funny [that] as soon as you start thinking about… [the experience], it disappears, or it can disappear [laughs]” (MP).

Non-verbal communication between band members also features in the awareness of these moments and is a large part of Phil McCourt verifying and adding to such an experience with his band mates. Phil describes the triangle shaped setup on stage and how “it’s usually me and [bass player] Hugh have this little [moment of] ‘yeah this is goin’, this is good’, [and] …it’s so, relaxed that it doesn’t make sense” (PM).

Awareness of transcendent experiences often occurs in retrospect or reflection of the performance. Ryan McRobb recalls musical situations where he and fellow musicians get to a ‘special place’ which is discovered “…after one stops playing and looks around with the reaction to the experience being stifled by the fact that you’re still responsible for still making the music if it is indeed still going” (RM). If the music has ceased, a sense of joy remains. Bassist Lloyd Swanton, too, finds awareness of his own states of mind is more through hindsight than in the moment itself. He considers it quite rare that he would stay in one state for a whole The Necks’ piece (usually between 30 minutes to an hour) as there is “plenty of space there for anything to happen” (LS). Furthermore, in terms of awareness, by definition Lloyd states “if you’re in a distracted state, you don’t notice, immediately by hindsight… when the reality comes back, or the relative space comes back, or whatever you want to call it…” Rather than focus on specifics, there is more of a macro sense of awareness that Swanton has of his state of mind. Swanton hasn’t spent too much time while performing thinking back what his state of mind previously during the piece, but rather may have a dim awareness that he was really distracted at the start and now he’s not, or that he was really focussed and now his mind is all over the place.
In terms of recalling his experiences, Jeff Martin says “every night that I deem beautiful, that the audience would deem beautiful, are the nights where I don’t recall so much…” (JM). Likewise, Luis Rojas finds it difficult to remember what happened, unless there’s like a technical failure or that sort of stuff, I won’t recall the experience that well. I kind of like that” (LR). Chantel Bann reflects on a good show with *Shanghai*: “it was very comfortable on stage, didn’t really overthink too much, got off stage and was like ‘what just happened’? It takes me a while to sit down and “kind of recount what just happened on stage, go through the songs and realise what I did… it’s more when I get off stage I realise I went somewhere else then the actual time that it’s happening” (CB).

Being informed by one’s spiritual practice also pertains to drummer Cameron Brennan. Experiences of vibrations and “being uplifted” are regular for Cameron, particularly as they are informed by his spiritual practice where he “notice[s]… energy and that side of things… I can feel when the vibrations and everything is uplifted” (CB). Saxophonist Brendan Smyly’s experiences of disappearing into the music were recognised due to his own meditative practice. The awareness comes back and you’re like ‘ooh! I was gone there for a while… there was nothing there for a while’” (BS).

For Chris Abrahams, the use of the term meditation is problematic to use in describing his state of mind in performance as he doesn’t see the performance process as entering his mind or trying to eliminate conscious thought. Abrahams observes thoughts are still present and he’s “definitely doing something… [and] there are similarities as well” but is mainly experienced as “kind of call to respond to certain things that start happening” (CA). That is, the music itself provides the impetus to enter into these states of mind.

Awareness also crosses between during the moment and reflection. For Phil McCourt, transcendent experiences are used to verify the success of a particular show both during the show and the fact and during the show and whether it is progressing well.
This contrast of reflecting-in-action and reflection-on-action also extends to a broader awareness of music practice. Seth Olinksy recalls a particular tour in Japan that stands out from the rest as a “benchmark for that kind of coalescing.” Such an experience was apparent both during the moment and also as a longer-term reflection.

Thinking

The process of thinking was a common thread through a significant number of the interviews – with it often being seen as detrimental to the performance experience and musical outcome.

For Chris Abrahams, *The Necks* is not a very intellectual process, “I think it’s a very simple [approach]... we don’t ever talk about how we play. We don’t ever say, ‘let’s do this and then this’, and in fact if I start thinking ahead too much, like fifteen minutes, if I start thinking you know ‘I’m here and I want to be up the top of the keyboard in ten minutes’, or ‘I want to develop this layer’, that’s really bad, I mean if I’m thinking that then I would say that I’m not having a good night” (CA).

This non-intellectual process also occurs with Matthew Robertson, who speaks of instances, particularly during an improvisation, where what he is playing goes beyond a sense of understanding. If he were to stop and think about what he was doing it was unlikely that he would be able to repeat the gesture. Likewise Mirabai Peart finds “it’s funny [that] as soon as you start thinking about [the experience], it disappears, or it can disappear *laughs*” (MP).

In live performance, when Lloyd Swanton analyses his own performance experiences he observes that they fall into three categories: the most profoundly abandoned state, where he has found himself almost to the point of out of body experience, where the amount of physical effort he is expending and the amount of sound reverberating around his whole body can actually carry him away to a point where he feels as though someone else is playing the instrument. Lloyd also
confirms that the others in the group have spoken of such an experience. The second, less profound state, “although not suggesting that the music is any less profound” (LS), is where he is consciously thinking through the nuts and bolts of the music, aesthetic decisions and being conscious of everything that he is doing: “I’m basically saying to myself ‘Tony’s doing that, I’m doing that, Chris is doing that, if this keeps going much longer maybe I’ll do… THIS’ and change to something” (LS). Even in this state, however, it is “really hard to separate out the conscious decisions from the instinctive decisions.” But yeah, there are times when I feel I’m very conscious of everything I’m doing. Thirdly, there are situations “that possibly just reflect the realities of touring and performing where I’m actually not even thinking about music… [where] I’m often thinking, ‘boy, I’m really tired!’ and I’m thinking I’ve got another 6 a.m. flight and I’m really stressed out that I’m not going to make the gig tomorrow night” (LS). Such a frame of mind, however, “doesn’t necessarily meant that the music isn’t being taken care of, cause there is the subconscious level, and I can’t identify specific instances, but I’m fairly confident that sometimes there’s some great music coming, even, possibly because I’m distracted, and that’s closer to the transcendent state even than the nuts and bolts one because that’s appears to be more careful of maintaining a pristine musical situation” (LS). Through his three states, Swanton is describing a creative process where he is working with his subconscious, with the boundaries between what is conscious and unconscious becoming elastic and blurred.

Ryan McRobb thrives on the ‘surprise’ and new experiences of the musical moment. He observes his personal journey of being aware of all his own little compositional devices, and so would rarely get to the point where I would surprise myself, with the band and solo as well.” However, his frequent improvisatory shows eventuated in him “pulling things out, that you were just like ‘woah! What was that?’ (RM)” Even listening back, he wouldn’t understand how he’d produced a particular sound – akin to drummer Matthew Robertson’s experience of his own playing going beyond his sense of understanding.
In terms of his frame of mind, Ryan McRobb follows a continuum of thinking becoming “sort of, cheeky, nervous but, like, crazy” with an “irreverent kind of energy… like the naughty kid at school gets from, from pissing off the teacher.” It’s a certain joyful confidence “like an excited child” where “you get something and you know, it’s good…” (RM).

Chantel Bann’s self-confidence and self-esteem “plays a big part in being able to get to that place where I can just play and I don’t have to think about… what I’m playing or how I’m playing it, I’m just playing” (CB). Getting to that point is where she feels it is the best she can play because she’s not ‘overthinking’ and not at the time critical of what she is doing. Likewise Jed Maisey’s state of mind is based around ‘feeling’: “if I can feel it, it’s good” (JM).

Focus

Two main themes of focus that emerge are the awareness of focus and that of deliberate focus. For Holly Harrison, the most enjoyable experiences where her experience of the moment and sort of performing in an ensemble context has been “heightened or intensified is probably when I feel like, like I have a really high level of concentration,” that is, “there is some sort of altered sense, of definitely a high level of concentration and focus that is unlike…, well sort of like a focus you have when you are sitting an exam, even though it’s not nearly as enjoyable or it’s this feeling of ‘yeah I really want to get this done’ and I really want to, it’s inhabiting the moment” (HH). Harrison contrasts being “in the zone” with “thinking about what is coming to your head, or some mistake that I let fly, [I] just [feel] very concentrated.”

The process of focus also assists in one being absorbed into the music. Luis Rojas describes the process focusing “makes me sort of disappear into the music. Like I focus just on the music, it’s almost like I’m so absorbed with the music that everything around me stops mattering as much.” This focusing is one of the first steps for Rojas into experiences where he loses himself.
Deliberate focus is an important aspect of the performance experience. For Ryan McRobb, a sense of focus facilitated the best *mousetrapreplica* shows: “it was just like, right here’s the music, and just um, it was just, I could really focus myself in, just that musical place and just, play it, play the music, here’s the music, I’m gonna have a fuckin’ great time” (RM).

For purely improvisational performances for Tony Buck it’s about being very focused, listening and being very alert. He describes a “certain zone you get into, [where] you’re not really making decisions, [and] that’s great when that happens. Tony sees it somewhat as “sort of transcending some conscious, rational kind of area, in a way you can’t play this music unless you get there because you’re thinking about this and that and that and it rushes by and it’s too late, so by the time you’re making a decision you’re doing something that, those circumstances have changed and you’re responding and reacting – you’ve got to be really reactive, very non-intellectual” (TB).

Focusing on the music has also been a catalyst for other experiences, such as mental flashbacks. Lloyd Swanton states: “One other thing I’d just mention, you might want to get a neurologist onto this one, it hasn’t happened much lately, but quite some years ago, when I was playing music, conventional jazz was what I was playing mostly, I would get snapshots in front of my eyes while I was playing that had nothing to do with the music; they might have been like a situation from last week, they might have been a particular corner of a school corridor from when I was nine years old... They didn’t follow any kind of pattern, it wasn’t like I thought about that and here’s another snapshot. They only came when I was totally focussed on the music. But it was really interesting, the finder was kind of scrolling through the memory banks going ‘is that it?’ And also, it might happen once a night, or it might have happened bang-bang-bang, all these images coming at me, and it would happen for weeks or months. It really was just snapshot images, really interesting. And they had nothing to do with the music” (LS).
Matthew Robertson experiences moments “almost like a heightened sense of your own… everything that’s sort of immediate with some of these… experiences… there is this… overwhelming sense of [being] aware of being in that particular moment and sort of letting the sounds wash over you… It’s definitely not mundane things, it’s usually like a… sound… is the focus and I'm not trying to understand it, I'm not trying to analyse it, but I'm just truly trying to listen, not just hearing [but] taking it in… that moment and I, you know, I want it to continue and I want to be just swept up in it and… listen, not because I necessarily want to find something but just because I am… I'm really enjoying that.”

Altered States of Mind

Altered states of mind refer to a ‘shift’ in one’s mind, or opening of the mind can each engender a conduit for the transcendent experience.

During his solo performances, Justin Ashworth speaks of achieving a refreshed, meditative and ‘new’ state of mind where he would “just let things happen” that is more akin to writing and composing at home rather than performing with his whole band.

Luis Rojas describes his experiences as “a shift in my brain somehow… that I’m almost perhaps not even in my body anymore, like I’m more inside my brain somehow” and can take the form of an aggressive reaction. In contrast, Phil McCourt describes his somewhat paradoxical experience of “that calm sense of peace I think, …which is weird …[and] unnatural to feel that calm and collected while you’re, literally like smashing the fuck out of the stage in front of like, anywhere between fifty and four hundred people.” For guitarist/songwriter John Encarnacao, there is the experience of being “shaken out of your mind” (JE).

Such experiences have influenced Jon Hopkins’ taste in music, directing him more to “this idea of something that repeats and repeats and repeats and gradually changes in that organic way, like the rhythm going on and on is actually causing the
development to happen alongside it” (JH). He also draws parallels with sex and trying to replicate those experiences, “because I think there’s a lot of similarity between mystical experiences, drug experiences and sex experiences” for the common thread is that “you really lose sight of where you are and what you’re doing and all that exists is a rhythm of a sort… and that rhythm very gradually causes something else to happen and then there’s ultimately some sort of result” (JH). Jon is “convinced that music can do that to the brain in the same way… [and it’s] the whole kind of goal that I’m more and more focussing in on” (JH).

Opening of one’s mind is a crucial element of transcendent experience. Phil McCourt reflects on how the states of mind and transcendent experiences in music performance can inform and facilitate one another: “when you… open your mind up… everything, it’s just exponential, it’s just gonna grow, straight away [and] if you start one thing, it could go for fuckin’ hours. I think definitely, it just goes both [ways]… ‘cause you might [be]… feeling a bit… transcendent, and so I went and picked up a guitar that’s the only reason I did it (PM)”, but conversely it may have been the case picking up one’s instrument and playing it was the trigger or gateway into the transcendent experience, “so (it) definitely works both ways” (PM). Phil McCourt finds a common element of transcendent experiences with regards to his “state of mind of being open to the infinite” (PM).

John Encarnacao also reflects this open-mindedness during improvised music particularly, where it “feels like you’re allowing the other musicians, and the audience potentially into quite an intimate state, and perhaps the sharing of that intimacy is something that helps to engender transcendence” (JE).

4.1.3 Physicality of transcendent experiences

Most of the artists reported a strong physical aspect to their experience or used physical metaphors to help explain their experience. For some, conscious physical actions result in or facilitate these experiences, for others, physical sensation (or lack thereof) is part of the defining character of transcendent experience.
Reports range from terms like shivers and goose bumps (that also include ‘skin orgasms’), which are used in literature on the effect of listening to music by Panksepp (1995) and Sloboda (2005), to more idiosyncratic experiences like a perceived loss of thermal regulation, hyperventilation, uncontrolled movement and even sleeping. Several participants reported variants of a type of physical dissociation, with only one musician not claiming to have any of the aforementioned responses.

The physicality of transcendence for me manifests in a sense of lightness, shivers from the base of my spine to the top of my head, goosebumps and butterflies. Alison Kerjan mentions ‘internal shivers’; Phil McCourt experience chills down his spine; Mirabai Peart experiences tingles; Chantel Bann and Luis Rojas goosebumps; John Encarnacao experiences “shivers and almost a blackout of time” (JE) and Tony Buck has also experienced shivers. These, however, are not direct indicators or correlates of transcendent experience. For instance, while Chris Abrahams feels very relaxed, excited and comfortable but “that’s not to say that I feel tired, I feel excited and relaxed, but I don’t experience shivers” (CA). Chris Abrahams’ interest and engagement with sound on a micro-level, dealing with some of the fundamental aspects of sound is linked strongly to his visceral experience at the piano that engages both mind and body. Abrahams also recalls bassist Lloyd Swanton falling asleep during one particular show.

In particular, Tony Buck describes a circumstance where “the combined sound will just create something that when you’re playing you just feel like ‘wow, that’s really beautiful’ (TB),” giving rise to experiencing shivers down your spine and occasionally feeling ‘high’. Jeff Martin’s describes his own physical sensations as “tantric and orgasmic” and are experienced as “making love to an audience” (JM). Even in his intimate acoustic shows in contrast to the larger rock shows of bands The Tea Party and The Armada, for Jeff Martin “the climaxes that happen in the show… you’d have to be kind of soulless to not experience the goose bumps and get the shivers in the audience when it’s really happening, and I experience the same
thing… when it’s really happening” (JM). Mirabai Peart also recalls similar experiences performing with a progressive rock band that occurred only “a couple of times” but there was a distinct and powerful response, “it was sort of like a whole body experience with them, it was like an orgasm actually, it was like I was just losing myself so much in playing that… I guess I just had my whole body felt like it was just full of this energy I think…” (MP).

There is also the sense of energy flowing through oneself, this is linked strongly to an openness of mind mentioned in the previous section. For Justin Ashworth, the closest sort of physical response to transcendent experiences is “that oneness, not like ‘oh I’m reaching this higher place and I’m shivering’ but [you can] definitely… feel the energy flow through you, like you’ve opened yourself up.”

Luis Rojas’ has experienced different intensities of goose bumps over a number of ensembles that is attributed to the “intensity of the performance and the playing and the locking in with the people in that band”, but “not at the level that it’s happened in Shanghai” as it depends on “how much the music means to you, …how much of you you’ve put into the music and who you’re doing it with” (LR). The physicality also manifests in a ‘fight’ response, rather than a “happy or these spiritually la di dah sort of things” (LR). Although not in a positive or negative way, Rojas speaks of a feeling of aggression where he feels as though he will “want to hit something hard, or play something in a certain way where it’s a very aggressive style of playing” (LR). Such an experience doesn’t occur every time, but a particular live performance may evoke such a response where he will “all of a sudden feel this, that the music is pushing me to become more aggressive, to the point where I’ll even want to start a fight…” (LR), “kick over an amp or crash into a drum kit or smash a guitar” (CB).

Drummer Matthew Robertson’s physical response was an arrhythmic movement that involved a “sloppy, moving side to side of the head and of the shoulders” with not much regard to playing technique. Guitarist Phil McCourt has a similar experience during the Captain Kickarse and the Awesomes piece ‘Little Whale’
(Self-titled EP, 2008) where he has an arrhythmic response that is separate from the rhythmic aspects of the music. The riff of the song “bounces around and the rhythm of that, and the way the drums and the bass line fits into the guitar... each time we play that I just find that sort of, I just have my eyes closed, and it’s just this rocking back and forth; that’s not even in time” (PM). Despite this separation of musical and physical movement, there is “a consistent experience for that piece of music where there is a distinct loss of time and space... it’s oneness” (PM), a sense of unification.

Lloyd Swanton extends this notion further reflecting on the physicality of trance experiences, where a performer can only go so far whilst playing an instrument and not damaging your instrument: “yeah, I don’t, I guess I’m a little bit of a control freak in that I would never let myself get that abandoned because I’m just very mindful of how fragile and valuable my instrument is...” (LS). Mirabai Peart’s physical responses have resulted in her going “a bit out of whack with what I’ve wanted to do, I’ve kind of slipped out of place or something. I mean, that’s happened before, but not very often, cause ideally everything’s working so that it just takes care of itself physically while you’re experiencing it.” Also, because the violin is a rather fragile instrument, she wouldn’t want to get to the point of falling over for fear of damaging her instrument.

Likewise, due to the physical requirements of live performance, Jon Hopkins’ doesn’t consider his performance experiences to go as “deep” as during his compositions. Performance experiences can be considered “similarly amazing, but you can’t release yourself so much and be able to keep performing. You can touch upon going to another plane, you can feel euphoria starting to rise in you when you’re performing in that situation, but you can’t totally go there.” The reality of what Jon may be doing in such a situation “would’ve been rolling around on the floor... and that’s really not going to get anyone anywhere.”
In contrast, guitarist Phil McCourt has actually got to the point of falling over in the midst of a prog-rock opus – he has owned his guitar for a number of years, so can assume that it hasn’t suffered too much.

Luis Rojas experiences moments that overcome him at the expense of other physical faculties: “it’s kind of weird... I feel like I want to close my eyes, but my eyes won’t let me, the lids won’t shut, so my eyes are trying to roll back and I think it’s because, it’s almost like what’s happening in my brain at that moment, it’s so important and so intense, the other senses need to shut down a bit to sort of accommodate this intense feeling.” Ryan McRobb’s eyes widen and he becomes very expressive in his facial gestures. He also becomes very energetic, tenses up and has a shortness of breath. McRobb also finds the physicality of looking at other members of his ensemble is significant in these powerful experiences. John Encarnacao also draws on a similar connection with his ensemble to create a space for transcendence to occur – speaking of the drummer for Espadrille: “there’s kind of a physical fluidity about his approach, and I think it’s something that I do as well, where it’s almost like a slow, dance or a ritual or something… I think that sense of ritualised movement, I don’t think it’s anything that’s preconceived but I think that it adds to this feeling of a sacred or intimate space that invites transcendence” (JE).

Tears also feature strongly as a physical manifestation of transcendence. Karen Heath becomes very emotional – these emotions are tied in to the perceived beauty of something and can be moved to tears. “I get, listening to music or playing music [and]... I can get, very emotional... to the point where ... I find I’ll cry, so if I really think something is beautiful I’m just... I’m just, a blubbering mess.” Karen insists that it is not a sad experience, but rather one of privilege, “that I’m allowed to hear this... it’s so amazing” (KH). Chantel Bann can also be reduced to tears by the music at times in performance, or it can make her fall on the ground, “if it gets to the point where it’s that full on”, describing as where “the conscious self completely lets go and just lets the body kind of take over [and] more so if you’re with other people” (CB). Such experiences are also shared with the audience. The physicality
of Alison Kerjan’s experience is reflected in that “other people can actively see that you are in that moment” (AK).

There is also a loss of physical awareness. Lloyd Swanton has found that he loses physical awareness, after having his eyes closed in performance sometimes realises he has “rotated about ninety degrees, [and] I’m actually pointing at Tony or… you just do little shifts, you don’t realise that each one is taking you further. I’m not sure how we hit upon that. It certainly has the effect of making us fairly physically close” (LS). Further, Brendan Smyly loses his sense of physical awareness to the extent he questions whether it would be considered a physical response at all “because there’s nothing there to respond, there’s no response there, it’s all gone” (BS). His breathing with the saxophone becomes the “natural state… the non-assessed state where there is no physical response” (BS).

Bursts of adrenaline and energy are also indicators of transcendent experiences. John Encarnaciao describes a circumstance where transcendent experiences occur through physical exertion and exhaustion where “you cross a threshold… almost the threshold of pain… you know we’re, deep into the third set of playing seventies covers… [and] something happens with your body where… you just start… you’re in another zone…” (JE).

4.1.4 Negative experiences

Not all the experiences of ‘getting lost in the music’ and the stretching of time have been positive experiences – although these were relatively rare.

Matthew Robertson recalls a negative experience towards the end of a 40-minute live take with Space Project in the studio. Towards the conclusion of this piece is a polymetric section where he is on the verge of having a panic attack. He recalls shaking, thinking “don’t stuff it up man, don’t… just keep playing, just watching your (Adrian Barr’s) hands, internally pleading for the guitar phrase to meet up with my drum pattern so we could progress out from this section… ‘I’ve got to get out
of here...’ it was such an awkward feeling... I was shaking, it was just relief I thought I was just gonna you know still, I physically had the jitters and everything...” (MR).

Negative experiences from childhood were also raised. Chantel Bann’s unnamed experiences of giving “your whole physical self and emotional self when you’re singing that sometimes you don’t feel like baring that side of yourself to people, like showing that whole, you feel naked” (CB). These experiences then involve an openness and sense of vulnerability on Chantel’s part. As such, something that has affected her in being able to achieve that “kind of out of body experience (CB)” was when, as a 13-year old classical guitar performing “in front of a thousand people at my school one night. And I got through the pieces, I made a few little bung notes, whatever, but I walked off the stage and I was like ‘oh my God’, that was my biggest performance to date, and was one of my first times on stage and I was like ‘oh my God, I can actually do that!’ and walked off stage feeling like a rock star, even though it was just these little Spanish classical pieces- it was amazing, and then I got down to the green room and this girl came up to me and was like ‘oh, great way to ruin the night’ and so that like TOTALLY crashed me, and from that moment I’ve had a massive kind of reservation about putting so much emotional and physical investment into a performance in case I get criticised like that. It’s hard to break down that wall” (CB).

4.1.5 Detractors from Transcendent Experience

Structural complexity, boredom, worry, fear, ‘forcing’ something, questioning other ensemble members, one’s physical condition and losing control of one’s instrument arose as detractors from the transcendent experience.

Structurally complex music with sporadic playing can hinder one’s ability to enter into a transcendent experience. When playing the often structurally complex music of *Shanghai*, Chantel Bann finds it “a little bit harder to ‘lose herself’ in the music”. This is attributed to her not playing sporadically throughout the piece, with her
musical role not as ‘fluid’ but rather “coming in with a quick little sample or a few notes here and there, so… I’ve got to be focussed on actually what’s happening for my cues and I have to remember a lot of stuff so it’s a bit hard in an emotional sort of sense to get lost in the Shanghai music” (CB).

Leo Abrahams’ experiences of performance outside of improvised music have unfortunately been based around “ego-shit really, [and] boredom” because if you ever get bored of what you’re doing because it’s repetitive, not in a rhythmic cell way but in a night after night way, then you have to think of other things to think about. I mean I used to. When I was first starting out [as a performer], I used to do quite a lot of mime on TV, when there was still mime in the music industry. They used to send me out in this chauffeur driven thing at like six in the morning and I’d go up to breakfast TV and go and play guitar in some [unclear – sounds like ‘punk sonata’].” As soon as the actual performance element was removed, with Leo just miming, he found himself preoccupied with thoughts like “don’t fall over” or “what does my face look like?” I mean [I’d] fall over anyway [and] stumble around [laughter].”

In a full band situation, Justin Ashworth finds that he is all too often “worrying about each band members’ part, the strict sequencing of a piece,” not allowing himself to relax resulting in a post performance exhaustion as “hasn’t really allowed the moment” (JA).

For Brendan Smyly, “there’s a tension between control and lack of conscious control” that is coupled with a sense of responsibility to the ensemble particularly as electronics “you can get very crazy very quickly… [like] if you’re playing a very nice little feedback loop it can get out of control very quickly… and if you hit that switch, it can go… somewhere where you’re not, you’re not aware of what it’s going to do. I think that’s a real failing of electro-acoustic improvisers” (BS).

The experience of fear is a strong detractor from transcendent experience. Although she feels as though she might be stating the obvious, when Mirabai Peart
has “had transcendent experiences... it’s when there’s an absence of fear, there’s been so many instances when I’ve just been full of fear when I’ve been playing that... [I have] a complex feeling, like I can’t do pizzicato or something, or feeling I’m not secure in the high positions or something. You can’t have transcendent experiences when there’s any of that going on, or any of the feeling of inferiority or smallness or worry, like if I’m improvising and worried about playing the right notes at the right place then... it doesn’t happen” (MP). Likewise for Holly Harrison, “the time it does not happen with that heightened sense of experience” is when she is “worrying about all those things rather than just playing with a certain amount of control” as it is through a sense of “extreme control” that her sense of heightened experience manifests.

Further, what detracts from Holly Harrison’s performance experience when there isn’t a sense of communication within the ensemble, “as though you are fighting (musically) people or trying so hard, that you’ve got to listen, or [questioning whether] this person [is] going to follow me” (HH).

The physical condition of the body is integral to Jeff Martin’s transcendent experiences, with such experiences becoming blocked “only when I haven’t taken care of myself. I mean, well, the body’s a vessel, y’know? And you’re trying to channel something, and I still have my rock ‘n roll vices, but I’ve learned these days to be a bit more careful with myself, but sometimes I slip and when I do slip, that’s when it’s not coming through like it should. It happens seldom these days, but it does happen and when it does that’s the reason why. This is also reflected by Justin Ashworth, considering the significance given to transcendent experience is “it’s just about a reflection of, what you’re doing right in life, and what you’re doing wrong in life.” Likewise, drawing on his previous practice of yoga, Justin Ashworth finds music performance “a different way of achieving the same [experiences]... and I’d love to open myself up to feel that again... you know, [more] deeply.” However, Justin relates that his physical condition has a direct impact on his performance experiences in that he felt “blocked to a lot of experiences that [he]
could otherwise be having” due to not looking after himself with regards to diet and lifestyle.

Trying to ‘force’ an experience and trying to draw too strongly from a previous experience is also another detractor from transcendent experience. Justin Ashworth articulates that “you might play that song and you might be just hoping that, you played the riff (like) you played last, the lick you played last time, hoping that everyone like remembers that moment, and get in on it... but it’s not the same feeling but it, comes from that place that it, you [think] ‘hey remember when we fuckin’ nailed this song, you know? And everyone, and sometimes that can ruin them because you’re, you’re rather than letting new magic happen, you’re trying to re-route old magic…” (JA). John Encarnacao echoes a similar experience of “the other side of... improvisation is that sometimes you can feel like you’re, thrashing around looking for something and you never quite get there” (JE).

When performing Stockhausen’s ‘De Klein Harlequin’, for solo clarinet with movement (“really serious, full on dancing” - KH), Karen Heath relates the unfortunate experience of slipping over during the actual performance of the piece. Although “a lot of people thought that it was part of it, because the Harlequin character was a joking, clownish character” and slipping over “was probably hilarious,” despite being in character, as probably expected, it detracted greatly from the performance experience.

Overall, detractors to transcendent experience appear largely to be based upon non-fluid communication between ensemble members and relationship to one’s instrument.

4.1.6 Significance of Transcendent Experiences

The range of responses regarding the significance of transcendent experiences was broad – from not really being explored before, not seeking it at all, an implicit goal, to being an explicit goal in performance.
Ryan McRobb’s understanding of transcendence is not something that he has “explored in any realm myself, artistically, personally, spiritually” (RM). For Holly Harrison, a heightened experiences aren’t necessarily what she is looking for in music performance as “there’s so much gruelling effort that goes into becoming a musician and, to extending your skill set and because, because these experiences aren’t just for people who play well” (HH). Holly feels that “there is something else that drives you to keep practising...” that she speculates is a combination of self-fulfilment, satisfaction from playing and “feeling like you were really there, I can’t think of any other way to say it, not necessarily that you played the best that you could but that I don’t want to say that you gave it your best shot, but... that you were really there... like you were really involved... with it rather than having this detached feeling... but no, that’s not what I play for. That’s not what I am looking for” (HH).

In contrast, there were those who saw transcendent experience as integral to music-making. John Encarnacao would “almost be surprised if that [transcendence] wasn’t a goal for any musician in any context, I think that as much as people say making music is about communication, about ideas... or emotions, I think as much as that, any kind of music making and any kind of art more generally is about reaching out towards something that you don’t understand” (JE). Encarnacao feels that “it’s not like there’s a formula to get there it’s just that, you are putting yourself in a place where there is the potential to get beyond understanding, and I think that’s one way that you could define a transcendental experience” (JE). Agreeing with this is Mirabai Peart, in whose practice transcendent experiences are “in a way... sort of the goal... once you’ve experienced something transcendent in music, it’s sort of like everything you do is sort of preparing the ground for more of that to happen” (MP). As such, all the practice she does is part of the process of preparing herself to be able to reach that again. This preparation for the transcendent experience gives Mirabai the awareness when it occurs in performance “I feel that, then I know it’s happening and I know it’s right” (MP). John Encarnacao adds to this notion: “.... [maybe] the whole cliché of ... [transcendence]
being what you’re working towards, comes across, is that... you’re putting yourself in a position, perhaps even every time that you perform, even if you’re not thinking about it, it’s almost like... you know you like that position of a high, that condition of a ‘contact high’ (transfer of a psychological state) with music to occur” (JE). This ‘contact high’ is also exhibited through Chantel Bann’s ‘transcendent moments’ that evoke a sentimental attachment to a piece of music, with the memory of the experience being something pleasant to hold on to and conversely if the music is connected to a negative experience or “a place I don’t want to go back to” (CB).

While present, the goal of transcendent experience is more subtle implication into the music-making. Phil McCourt describes that, both on a personal level and sharing with his band, transcendent experiences are considered the goal, “but not in those terms (PM)”, rather being implicit in their music making practice. McCourt sees that “music is probably as transcendent in itself ... [and] on top of that is... sort of the, the more mind altering, spiritual side [that] is really for me…” (PM). Phil recalls a show at the Excelsior Hotel in Surry Hills, Sydney where Captain Kickarse had just completed playing their set, “it was closing time, and there was going to be no more music, we’d gone over time a bit, and then people were yelling for an encore, and because they were in that mode of yelling and screaming... for an encore.” Phil describes his experience of calm, almost bemused nonchalance when there is such an energy in the room: there is “an openness of mind” where “you’re aware of everything, and that just nice, but who cares? It’s fine. It’s interesting to have that many people screaming and just [saying to each other], ‘you want to go get something to eat?’ ‘yeah, nah, I’m just going to go home’” (PM).

The interview process also had the function of revealing the role of transcendent experience in music-making. Through the process of the interview Justin Ashworth seems to have rediscovered some more significance, with “this, ranting... has... [helped] me put into perspective things that... I’ve always felt I’ve known, but I don’t... like ‘cause I don’t often attach significance to it, I don’t actively... I’m not trying to reach anything other than my own understanding of myself in the world, in
a positive way, so I don’t, I haven’t really thought of it in [other] terms... I guess ‘cause transcendence has such an epic... translation to my mind so I don’t know how I set out to achieve that, and, on the basis well, yeah, yes, the answer to that question would be yes, but not in those words...” (JA). As such, Ashworth doesn’t have any solid significance to attach his experiences to, other than his life is progressing and how he thinks about the world at large. Ashworth hesitates, “this isn’t the right way to put it, but it’s the only way that comes to mind; I don’t think it’s right. And you know, and not to be disrespectful to anyone who has a belief structure or whatever, but I don’t think it’s right to tie yourself into something... I don’t believe in dogmatic thought... I don’t think that that’s the right way to achieve... a ‘greater-ness’ in life, but I also think that like blocking yourself off to like, the ideas of any dogmatic thought is also wrong as well, I think you need to be open and all that...” (JA).

Likewise for Luis Rojas, although they are significant experiences, he doesn’t consciously pursue transcendent experience, or feel as though he is searching for them but rather they manifest naturally through the music that occurs. Further, the understanding of musical experiences isn’t an important element for the enjoyment of these experiences. Matthew Robertson states, “I don’t understand why... [music] necessarily does it, but I know that it does and I am very comfortable with that, but it’s not like I am searching for it all of the time but it is just those little moments that you can sort of take” (MR).

Unlike the majority of other participants, John Encarnacao was direct is stating that transcendence as “something people look for, in general, and so music is just one of the ways in which that’s made available to us, and perhaps it’s just coming into contact with something we don’t understand, in a similar sense to jumping into the ocean, or going for a bushwalk, or standing in front of a painting at the art gallery... it’s a bit chicken and the egg. Because, when you talk about it in such a specific... relationship to music... you can almost make the assumption, not that transcendence is unique to music [and]... that it comes from music rather that it
comes from the human desire to transcend” (JE). Speaking of transcendence in specific relation to music John feels that “you can almost make the assumption, not that transcendence is unique to music and that it comes from music but rather comes from the human desire to transcend” (JE).

After playing with The Necks for over 24 years, Chris Abrahams describes the significance of his performance experiences has “become… the way I express myself musically. I’ve gone there, and I’ve experienced it and I want to keep going back there [and] I feel it’s a very exciting, safe place.” Abrahams echoes Encarnacao’s thought of there being an innate desire for such experiences, not only through music: “I guess it provides me with meaning. If it wasn’t there I guess I’d find another place to go, but I feel extremely lucky that I can play and it sort of happens” (CA).

Transcendent experiences are also connected to the quality of broader life experiences. For Brendan Smyly, his ‘natural state’ experiences have a calming effect on his life as a whole. When playing someone other people’s music, particularly “within a much more, prescribed song or tune or form,” Smyly has the tendency to become nervous. “So when these spaces when they happen [and] these experiences when they happen allow me to see that music making is just part of life, part of living, not anything to be worried about. No, there’s no concern for it to be…” (BS). Initially preoccupied whether the music being played “would be acceptable, to those listening” but “within the improvisational space… that’s completely taken away… it’s just that pure creativity, so acceptance and non-acceptance doesn’t enter” (BS). Connecting it to greater life significance Smyly finds it “a good sort of analogy for living in some ways… to live your life without this expectation of being accepted, or liked or dislike for certain actions, to me is a better way to… have a calm life, and a more peaceful life” (BS).

Sometimes, however, Brendan Smyly questions how “the feeling of emptiness is quite useless itself in some ways, what does it do?” For Smyly, it provides “a greater awareness of… our shared experience… and just experiencing that
calmness makes me calm around others when things get heated or there’s you know anger involved with certain people, just having a certain ability to understand that it can all be quite calm, and calmly dealt with is really helpful” (BS). It provides him the facility to “deal with phenomena in an even way, and that’s, that’s what I find in that experience is really wonderful… you have that full experience of that…” (BS).

Furthermore, musical experiences also permeate broader life experiences and inform how one relates to the world. Luis Rojas finds that he has a “strange relationship” with the world that’s related to music in that even in the everyday, music permeates everything he hears: “it’s always there, it’s always happening” (LR). He questions whether it would be considered a ‘normal thing’ to “hear the sound of a fridge and think…[of it as] music.” He relates that it is somewhat of a spiritual connection, a relationship with the world that is in itself a “transcending experience” (LR). It is these experiences that compel him “to achieve things or do stuff that I wouldn’t normally, that most normal people wouldn’t do” (LR). Rojas, however, doesn’t think it necessary “to have these kinds of experiences or to think of music in a sort of spiritual way, or any of that, I don’t think that necessarily effects the quality of the music” (LR). Sometimes Rojas doesn’t necessarily have any of these kinds of experiences, “I’ll feel quite normal” (LR). Despite this, the quality of the music he produces when composing is still considered of equal quality, although “in terms of live [performance] it’s a little bit different” (LR).

The long-term significance of transcendent experience is also discussed. Lloyd Swanton doesn’t “put too much stock in any one positive or negative experience, I’m a real long term kinda guy” (LS). There hasn’t been a single performance where he has thought “you know that’s it, I’m giving up, or this is it, we’re really onto something now, it’s just being in a continuum that is still satisfying after all these years” (LS). There is a synergy between the career of The Necks and the music they make: “there’s a notion I’m just trying to get my head around… I think what we are dealing with in The Necks is also that constant reassessing of whether we’re
looking at the big picture or the small picture, and the listener can do that too; they
can listen to one note, or they can listen to where we are in a piece that’s going to
be an hour or so long, and they can listen to that in the context of everything we’ve
done in twenty-three or however many years it is. So there’s the really, really big
picture, and I think twenty-three years is the big picture or there’s [snaps his
fingers], a single beat” (LS). Swanton describes The Necks as “a kind of music that
not only allows us and the listener to approach it at any point on the continuum, I
actually think it is kind of defined by that, so kind of a Mobius strip or an Escher
*laughter*. It’s a bit of a feedback loop, perpetual motion” (LS).

In a similar vein, transcendent experiences are seen as part of ‘normalcy’. Leo
Abrahams doesn’t feel as though he wants to ‘enshrine’ the transcendent
experience “anymore than I want to enshrine the idea of a spirit, it’s a function of
being a biological human being that you can do these things [and]… to me it’s very
important to keep it very grounded for some reason” (LA). Leo Abrahams relates
the significance of his transcendent experiences “I suppose the reason why I do
what I do. I mean I’ve been quite pigheaded and quite lucky to not have to sell out
too many times in terms of the music that I do, so to me, I feel very lucky to be able
to say that that kind of experience is fairly normal. And I need it, and I would
sooner give up music than start doing music that didn’t do that to me ever, but… I
mean it’s difficult to do this for a living, not just because it’s insecure, but because
it’s emotionally very draining and difficult and those are the moments that make it all
possible in a strange way. It has a lot of significance in a strange way, without it
there wouldn’t be much point in doing it” (LA).

Transcendent experiences are also somewhat at the core of one’s broader life
experiences. Jon Hopkins’ transcendent experience have been quite central to his
life, with “music [being] all about trying to create those moments, and like I said at
the beginning these are feelings that can be manipulated in various different ways,
and all the best things have that kind of conclusion, like that’s the kind of goal of it
for me. It’s about losing touch with everything apart from the exact moment you’re
in I think, and that’s what the brain can do if you really allow it that amount of freedom and form to do that, so… I think it’s the reason for all the stress that we go through actually trying to make music, that’s the goal of it for me anyway; creating those experiences is really fundamental I’d say” (JH).

Summary

The five broad areas regarding the manifestation of transcendent experiences: the form and dynamics of the experience; the performer’s state of mind; the physicality; the general character of these experiences; any negative transcendent experiences; key detractors from transcendent experience; and finally the significance of transcendent experience begin to paint a picture of the transcendent experience for these musicians. To further explore transcendent experiences, the following chapter will address the specific musical elements that have been raised and discussed by participants. The following table (Table 4) outlines the key themes of how transcendent experience manifests.
How Transcendent Experience is Manifest | Key Themes
--- | ---
Sense of time | ‘blackout of time’, ‘outside of chronological time’, ‘inhabiting the moment’
Effortlessness | ‘can’t do anything wrong’, ‘music playing itself’, ‘feeling of inevitability’, ‘letting the instrument play you’
Sense of space and place | ‘existing in the song’, transcendent ‘zone’,
Shape of transcendent experience | ‘waxing and waning’, ‘coming back down to earth’, moving in and out like sleep or meditation, negotiating one’s ‘performance face’.

States of Mind

| Awareness of transcendent experience | ‘sense of responsibility to the music’, elevated facility with one’s instrument, a detached observation of the experience, ‘no set formula’
| Thinking | Non-intellectual processes, going ‘beyond understanding’, absence of ‘thought’
| Focus | High levels of concentration that allow one to ‘inhabit the moment’.
| Changes of Mind | Being open to the infinite, mystical experiences, sex, a calm sense of peace during physical exertion, being ‘shaken out of your mind’
| Altered States of Mind | Hypnotic, recreating experiences of altered consciousness influencing musical practice
| Physicality of Transcendent Experience | Shivers; goose bumps; likened to sex; lack of physical response; physical engagement with sound itself
| Negative Experiences | Panic attack, stress
| Detractors | Stress, gig administration, ‘forcing it’, one’s ego, boredom, lack of control.
| Significant of Transcendent Experiences | Unexplored, an understated yet important element, essential to one’s musical practice, broader life significance

Table 5 – How Transcendent Experience Manifests

A philosophical stance often underlies one’s way of articulating the experience and is tied into the significance of the experiences that occur, whether that is a spiritual practice or significant life event. The process of thinking, or as the case may be not thinking, about performance experiences resonates with the tension of reflective practice – namely reflection in action (Schon, 1983).
Transcendent experiences can be perceived as communal events as well as private, internal events. Communal experiences and ‘oneness’ experiences appeared to feed back and forth into one another. Channelling is a term frequently used to identify and describe a number of experiences, tying into effortlessness, changes in self and awareness of the transcendent experience. Although largely positive, altered experiences of time can also be unpleasant.

Additionally, as articulated by Chris Abrahams, transcendence is also manifest through the musical elements themselves. The following chapter discusses these musical aspects of transcendent experience.
Chapter 5: Findings Part 2

How musical aspects facilitate the transcendent experience in experimental popular music performance.

Many of the interviews contained a great deal of specific detail on musical aspects of performance involved in transcendent experience. These details have been summarised under the following headings: structure; time; rhythm and metre; harmony and melody; and improvisation.

Structure

Structure was considered a significant musical feature that appeared in all of the interviews, often in connection with one’s approach to music making, musical dynamics and repetition.

Although much of the literature pertaining to structure and transcendent experience is based around repetition (Grocke, 2002; Luke, 2007; Maas & Strubelt, 2003; Marranca, 2002), Chris Abrahams’ speaks of ROIL, another of his improvisational ensembles, that has a “sort of frantic, very quickly changing, ephemeral sort of sound… [and], not having the same sort of emotional angle as The Necks, which is not a criticism” (CA). Despite the musical content and approach being in contrast to The Necks, Chris Abrahams feels that “after doing a short but intense tour… I thought we’d reached a very contemplative space… [or] a kind of meditational type… which was a new thing for us” (CA). This suggests that such quickly changing atonal musical elements would not ordinarily be associated with meditative experience. This contrasts with Lloyd Swanton’s previous discovery, that corralled him into The Necks, where he “just felt that jazz and a lot of improvised music was all too often just suffering a kind of data overload, [with] too much information for anyone to process, including me as a performer, I just wanted something simpler” (LS).

The structure of an improvisation by The Necks relies on the intuitive sense of Abrahams, Buck and Swanton both individually and collectively. Chris Abrahams
states that “it would basically be one thing leads to another, it’s kind of its own cool, there’s some relationship between me as a player, the instrument and a direction as it goes, which also has to do with the other musicians obviously, and the setting and the sound of the room. I don’t feel a hundred per cent… in control, it’s like being in control of driving a car and you’re not quite sure where you’re going to go but you’re in control of the vehicle. I feel like that’s a metaphor for [performing with The Necks]” (CA).

Despite experiencing a sense of transcendence with regards to a sense of time passing, Chris Abrahams found “ironically, we kind of hit upon the kind of forty-five, fifty minute period, very early on, and it seems just so natural to us, none of us will have a watch on or a clock or anything like that, but invariably our pieces will come in at that time, and we’ll all know when the piece is over” (CA).

Regarding the form that emerges from a Necks improvisation, there is no sense of being wrong, “you kind of know if the form is right, you kind of know. There’s no question that it could be wrong if what we do doesn’t really [work]; there’s no cup of gold that any of us can name, so therefore there’s no idea of failure, or, the only thing is like an approach. But it’s very exciting, when something starts to kind of take shape… it’s an excitement that I don’t really find in any other way I play music. It’s something that at this stage it needs to have its own way” (CA).

Structure is one of the defining elements to a Necks improvisation. Lloyd Swanton describes the intuitive nature of structure in The Necks describing his belief that “where you finish an improvisation is actually going to define everything that happened in that improvisation, you have a thing like at The Metro (19th February, 2010)\(^\text{18}\), with Chris keeping going… we will [often] just fade down to a little trickle and let it fall to bits. Occasionally we will stop on the dime, and that’s a case where it was a combination of those two, Chris kept going and we actually, sometimes we’ll end a piece where two of us will stop and one will keep going cause they didn’t pick up on the signals, which are very

\(^{18}\) A video of this show can be seen at Moshcam - http://www.moshcam.com/the-necks/metro-theatre-754.aspx
subliminal, sometimes you can just sort of hear; it’s just an educated guess ‘I
think we’re going to stop now’, but other times if you miss that, well you’re the
one that keeps going and generally… that person just keeps going for a bit
longer then brings it down. It’s often Tony actually, Chris and I will drop out and
Tony will keep going. But in that instance we came back in. So, that gave a
totally different identity to the piece” (LS).

In addition to The Necks’ improvisations, Swanton finds that even playing more
structured jazz, “just playing four to a bar, which can be quite a hypnotic thing in
its own right” where “you do let your fingers do the walking and the mind can
wander.”

Tony Buck gives the music its own independent identity: “I mean, sometimes we
slip into these, we’ve only done these two [Pure Scenius] concerts and that’s
like twelve hours of music, and we’ll slip into this ‘Necks mode’ and we sort of
play along as The Necks and then it’ll kind of cross with something else. But
whatever this was, it would’ve stopped, [and] it’d feel like turning the Queen
Mary around. Once the music has a momentum, sometimes it’s just really hard
to stop it, you can’t stop it, it wouldn’t be fair to the music” (TB). Buck describes
a reciprocal relationship between himself, The Necks and the music they play
that allows them to discern its form and structure: “we sort of have had enough
of the music when the music has run its course. I mean there is something
weird about The Necks and I think for me: the big responsibility we have is to
the music, like we set up this circumstance where the music can come about
and it’s not like the music is a living entity or anything, but in a way it is, like a
responsibility needs to be there to let the music be and grow and keep out of it
as far as conscious decisions as far as possible… That does seem to suggest
that the music is an entity, because it sort of is in a way, because… that sounds
a bit wishy washy and New Age but there is a responsibility to this thing that
you’re creating. I guess it is an entity, it is and has this sense that… and we
don’t push it around, so if you don’t want to hurry anything because it’s
constantly changing. And although I know that we make the decisions and that
we play something that we’ve decided, sometimes it doesn’t feel like you’ve
decided at all. It just seems like that is what’s sort of happening. And when
three of us are doing that, I don’t know what’s going to happen with the music because there are two other people who are going to be doing something as the music is dictating to them, so it’s quite a beautiful space to be in ‘cause it’s halfway between creator and listener and witness of this stuff and also you’re kind of protecting this music.”

Structural ambiguity is a strong feature in The Necks’ live performance and also espoused by Jon Hopkins. Tony Buck describes that the structure of a performance is discerned by how musical ideas will change over time rather than a strict contrast between sections and musical features. “I mean there are others things that are kind of tied in with that idea of change, it kind of implies that idea of time and I’m interested in time and how your perception of it changes and explore that in things that are very contrasting in The Necks such as things change very rapidly, different compositional aspects where things change very, very fast or improvisational aspects where… the area where things are really changing quickly, see that’s also an area of change, where that comes it’s like living change, …or where the activity becomes, rhythm becomes texture, ideas and motifs become texture because they’re coming so rapidly which is kind of the opposite of The Necks which is really slowly changing” (TB).

Such an approach creates structural ambiguity, where “if you have a recognisable A section or B section, how you get there, I’m very drawn to that ambiguity… I really like where there’s an ambiguity where you can see or hear different possibilities unfolding. I like that when you create the ambiguity it begins as like this, then it ends up being something else. And in the music of The Necks I think that’s very much a feature for me” (TB). Rather than focusing on the repetition of The Necks, “I think it’s very much about change, so much so that rather than one section having an identifiable quality, and then another section and then that transition, I kind of think the whole thing is just a transition. And there are many devices that can be used to do that in rock music or jazz music, whether they be sort of rhythmic additive or subtractive devices or timbral, cross fade or whatever, they’re things I’m really interested in… I guess that sums me up as a musician” (TB). Jon Hopkins responds strongly to imperceptible musical elements that somehow make their way to the foreground
– “moments of ‘oh where did that come from’; suddenly doing something where it seems to come from somewhere else, [creating] that… collapse of consciousness… aspect is truly amazing…” (JH).

This notion of ambiguity is also applied to interactions between performers. “The notion of having the music lead down contrasting paths, where musicians are communicating non-verbally in a very detailed way with certain people’s attention brains following one track and one leading another direction and suddenly you’re all together in one direction, “it’s when that’s happening that it’s probably getting a bit trance” (JH). Karen Heath responds to “what you’d expect, and from what we’ve also been a bit conditioned to expect with climactic points… and definitely points where there’s a sense of anticipation as well, like… on the cusp of some resolution I think” (KH).

Likewise, the way dynamics are structured is an essential element of entering the transcendent space that may or may not lead you to the transcendent space: “I don’t think it has to do with, loud passages or soft passages, it’s a matter of the way things progress, of the way things are arranged…” (JE). These experiences also thrives on unexpected structural elements: “I think there’s a number of elements. It’s like the capacity of the music to surprise you; there’s something about the physical nature of the sound, which can dazzle you… and the potential for something to put you into a meditative state, either through the slowness of movement or repetition” (JE).

Seth Olinksy describes the Akron/Family live show as structured so “everything kind of flows together” so it’s hard to single out. But I mean there’s little parts, there’s the song ‘River’ on our new record we played earlier in our new set, there’s one bar where the tempo goes and it’s just kind of this quiet, melodic, spacious part. It’s something I always like, it comes earlier in the show and I have this association of that part, whatever the show is feeling like whether it’s two or three songs in or four songs in. If it gets off to a great start or it’s feeling bumpy or whatever and then that part of the song comes… it’s like a breath for me, I feel like I can connect and I can kind of just be present with the audience there for a moment and feel kind of a space, you know and that’s just
something I associate with that moment, in that song. That moment happens and I associate those feelings with it.”

Justin Ashworth found that the sense of strict structure has an influence on one’s sense of time: “it was that whole time in the process, was just, the whole, the music just constantly morphed into, from one thing into another, it wasn’t really like we... I didn’t feel the time going on, like, we just played and but I don’t really know if it was getting incredibly lost” (JA). This also featured in Ryan McRobb’s mousetrapreplica, where “simple song structures usually only had one or two parts to the song; …I’d have one bit, …put everything into that bit, and then just, develop it. Make it big, make it small, loop layer, noise out, that’s how I would, make things flow, rather than ‘A’, ‘B’, bridge, which I quite admire... that sort of song writing, ‘cause it’s foreign, I’ve never done that.” This alternative use of structure in a nuanced fashion is also a strong part of Captain Kickarse and the Awesomes’ compositional process. Phil McCourt describes “adding extra beats to a particular bar to allow a phrase to finish or leave some space... really grabbed us, because as a musician that’s like bending time, and... that’s the shit, that’s awesome. It’s very alchemist ‘cause you just sort of go ‘oh we can change the structure of the actual music’ And that, then in, then in the end, that means you can do whatever you fuckin’ want to do... it’s way more creative that way, there’s so many more possibilities, because you can just go ‘Urup! Stop there, start here,’ like, you could just recreate something that no one’s done.”

5.1.1 Repetition

The use of repetition is a common feature across the interview participants. Specifically, repetition was espoused for the way musical gestures evolve and change. My own experience of repetition is part of my non-verbal communication with other band members; particularly when Space Project was a largely improvising ensemble, it establishes a mutual sense of what is being created and expressed. Each time a gesture repeats, slight variations can build in intensity, or recede and disintegrate. Musically, the powerful aspects of repetition appear largely in two ways. Firstly, it is the way a gesture changes
over time and secondly where repetition is displaced against other musical elements, whether they are rhythmic or arrhythmic – repetition affords a renewal, and is an act of reinforcement and indwelling that is shared among the ensemble.

The use of repetition also functions in terms of a ‘less-is-more’ principle. Lloyd Swanton’s use of repetition is tied into a desire to make the most of simplicity: “as a bass player, my kind of philosophy outside of The Necks, and what’s got more channelled and concentrated in The Necks, is what’s about creating a sense of movement and something happening with as little actual input as possible. I really like the idea that if I’m playing one pattern or one note over and over, that if I then change something it’ll be really dramatic, but if I play something that’s constantly changing, no one’s really going to notice if I change it once more [laughter]” (LS). As previously mentioned, such an approach was an important discovery for Swanton and was one of the things that corralled him into The Necks. Swanton’s intention when The Necks first formed “was to actually play repetitive rhythmic figures, usually in a sort of clearly articulated rhythm and metre and gradually evolve them” (LS). This was a product of Swanton’s finding satisfaction in the hypnotic effect of James Brown’s ‘It’s a New Day’, ‘Funky Drummer’ and also listening to dub-reggae. As for “crucial pieces” that influenced Swanton, he cites Steve Reich’s ‘Music for Eighteen Musicians’ (1976) and ‘My Favourite Things’ (1961) by John Coltrane in particular the rhythm section of Steve Davis (bass) and Elvin Jones (drums), demonstrating a consistent penchant for the evolving and hypnotic approaches to music-making.

Despite the ability to electronically loop certain phrases in the studio, Swanton still records his bass part for up to an hour. Although “sometimes it is just really, really boring, …that’s just the way that we make the music and the way that the records start to speak about where the music starts to want to go by giving it that sort of time” (LS). There is a presence of mind that is continuous through the whole process that is essential in having The Necks’ music work in the way it does. Swanton states: “if I go in and play a bass part for an hour, I’m really going to get a very different perspective of that piece by the end than if I just go
‘hey guys, how about this four bar riff, let’s just loop it’…. It’s about allowing the building of the piece to take place at a pace that we can stay on top of it” (LS).

For Chris Abrahams, repetition is “a very complex thing, what we’re all playing, and the context. I don’t think I can really unravel it to a great extent, but definitely there’s a feeling of being moving, being moved towards something, and it’s quite an emotional expression what I attempt to do, what seems to be being called for. And I guess a way of changing the meaning of something through revisiting it” (CA). Perhaps counter-intuitively to most listeners, Chris Abrahams doesn’t “think The Necks is necessarily about repetition, ‘cause even though it may sound that we can get into a situation where we’re playing similar notes over and over again, it’s always slightly different, it’s always evolving in the same sort of way, and in that sense… ironically I actually think that it’s anti-repetition, contrary to what a lot of people think” (CA). As for musical comparisons Abrahams has never really thought The Necks to be similar to Steve Reich, although “on the surface it might sound like it,” but the way the music is played and its context, “it’s not from that direction at all [and] the fact that it might sound a bit similar… is possibly one quite small dimension to it” (CA).

Ryan McRobb’s musical approach often involved “sort of long ostinatos that built, …peaked and troughed" that were facilitated by electronic looping pedals. McRobb has since moved away from such an approach, as he became increasingly aware of the “security blanket” it afforded and that “…in some way… [makes] it a bit too easy… when you’re playing by yourself” (RM).

In the Pure Scenius shows, Leo Abrahams found a compelling contrast between the physical repetition of The Necks and the electronic repetition by Jon Hopkins: “it’s just interesting to have that rub in the band between two quite different approaches, although as the piano pieces show ‘Two Pianos’, I mean Jon is more than able to stretch a thing out when he wants to” (LA). One of the best moments for Leo Abrahams was “when it came out of quite a heavy, beat-y jam between everybody and it went into just a ‘Necks section’ and they basically took the two chords that the previous jam was made out of and just
pulled them apart, like it was really, really amazing. And I think what that shows so well, well it’s a prolonging the moment, they took four seconds of music and made it last fourteen minutes” (LA).

Considering the role of structure, Hopkins thinks in terms of “‘hypnotic’ or ‘hypnosis’ or something like that… [for] things to be as repetitive as possible for quite a long time does completely do something to your brain, that’s what all my own music has always been about. I haven’t had the ability to realise it until kind of recently to kind of experience, to work out how to keep things listenable at the same time as doing basically the same thing for ages. But it, it’s that ability for music to act like a drug on the brain, and it’s, particularly right now, it’s the main hold of it but in a much more club sort of situation. It’s really apparent in that sort of situation anyway, keep on going around and around patterns until you do change something and then it’s like a much bigger event than it would have been, so that contrast just gives the music incredible power I think” (JH).

Previously in his life, ‘tripped-out’ experiences have informed and changed Hopkins’ musical taste and direction, guiding him more to “this idea of something that repeats and repeats and repeats and gradually changes in that organic way, like the rhythm going on and on is actually causing the development to happen alongside it” (JH). He also draws parallels with sex and trying to replicate those experiences, “because I think there’s a lot of similarity between mystical experiences, drug experiences and sex experiences” for the common thread is that “you really lose sight of where you are and what you’re doing and all that exists is a rhythm of a sort… and that rhythm very gradually causes something else to happen and then there’s ultimately some sort of result” (JH). Hopkins is “convinced that music can do that to the brain in the same way… [and it’s] the whole kind of goal that I’m more and more focussing in on” (JH).

This is demonstrated through his use of electronic instrumentation, including a Korg Kaoss Pad and Ableton Live, which aren’t used in the ‘standard’ looping fashion. Rather Hopkins describes that he uses “longer passages of audio and would have changes on faders and effects, having them on various automatable
Ableton effects so that things are always changing. So in a sense, a combination of all those things that you can do live along with the audio that keeps it human, stops it being too robotic." Such an approach to repetition is paralleled in musical experiences, with Hopkins referring to the ‘organic experience’ that comes from rhythmic repetition.

This is also evident in Chris Abrahams’ piano playing, “in some ways you try and do the same thing over and over again and it comes out differently each time…” (CA). Likewise repetition is an essential element of the creative process for bassist Alison Kerjan. Occasionally it is “as boring as hell, but the thing that has taught me is if you keep repeating things enough times you will find something new in it and even though I think that I think, come on, we’ve got to do this tune again and then ten minutes later we have found a whole different place” (AK).

5.1.2 Complexity/Simplicity

Finer details of a musical work’s form and structure often came to the fore when discussing transcendent experience. These finer details pertained to the sense of complexity and simplicity. For instance, Phil McCourt attributes these experiences of ‘transcendency’ to a sensory overload of his brain as he tries processing too many conflicting elements of the music simultaneously, but “with there still being a certain sense about it” (PM).

Lloyd Swanton likes to say “anyone can do what we (The Necks) do, I like to think that we do it better because we’ve got all our training, and I guess it all comes back to that classic quote from Charlie Parker… I don’t remember the exact words, but it’s ‘learn the music, learn the instrument, then just forget it all and play’. And so I think that simplicity and naivety are really wonderful when you know that behind is a reasonable working knowledge of the world of music” (LS). Swanton also loves “listening to really naïve music… [and] I’m probably more inspired by people who can barely play an instrument than I am by virtuosi… I’m not bagging it, they’ve spent many, many years working on it, but… virtuosity doesn’t really move me like, a kind of naïve simplicity does” (LS).
Complexity for Ryan McRobb’s music in *mousetrapreplica* is experienced as “this war between, the expression, this thing that’s just trying to get out and, anxiety... Pushing against it, and having an, having an impact. So there’s that kind of, certain war [between them]... which is really interlinked the anxieties really [and] it was a part of *mousetrap*... [and] integrally linked to the music... How I dealt with it, basically, was [that]... all the *mousetrap* songs that were ridiculously hard to play... technically it’s hard... [and] I usually will... make little clams (mistakes)... regularly... over a hundred gigs I didn’t, play a perfect one, because of... stress would be, it’s just freakin’ hard for anyone, like any, even, amazing guitarist will, struggle, with the stuff I write and I think that’s part of me [that] just wants to be different by using different guitar techniques, that’s trying to be individual, but... sometimes I think that’s being a bit superficial too, and cutting off other possibilities” (RM).

Simplicity and complexity are both seen to have their merits in providing access to transcendent states. Phil McCourt too contrasts approaches and styles to music making regarding transcendent experiences: “I’d say there’s as much ‘transcendency’ in grunge and stuff as [there is in] psychedelia, like some of our more complicated pieces of music.” But speaking in general terms, McCourt describes experiences of the ‘very close’ and ‘very distant’; the overwhelming complexity and detail vs. the bare simplicity of a single, soft note. Such considerations occur throughout McCourt’s composition process, where “you don’t want to overdo it...” (PM). Karen Heath’s experience of complexity and simplicity in music making are both avenues into transcendent experience. She describes: “the complexist, crazy, avant-garde music” of Stockhausen that conjures up a way of thinking where she must ‘absolutely transcend’ to be able to actually play it. This is contrasted to music that has more subtle changes, particularly through improvisation: “when it’s beautiful... you get lost in it, and, and you, you’re there in the moment, and that’s the difference [between] the Stockhausen stuff, the [more complex] music, makes it necessary to actually do work, prior to the performance, whereas improvisational music, that’s similar to The Necks, it just forces you to be present in the moment the entire time, and they’re both transcendental in their own way I think” (KH).
In terms of watching live music, John Encarnacao attempts to “hold cynicism at bay, ‘cause I don’t think it’s very useful… and it’s not like I need something to be complex to think it’s good.” In particular, he refers to watching USA band Animal Collective, describing an “experience [that] was… beyond my comprehension and beyond my reference points… [taking] me out of that analytical zone… into a mode of, sensual pleasure” (JE). Getting out of that ‘analytical zone’ is also articulated by Jon Hopkins’ affinity for “simplicity, or deceptive [simplicity], I mean things that sound simple aren’t that simple to make, end up sounding simple cause it’s easy to get swept away when your brain isn’t being forced to work out something really complicated” (JH).

The apparent shortcomings of structural complexity are articulated by Chantel Bann and her experiences of playing with Shanghai that separate her from a strong emotional engagement with the music. “The music that Shanghai plays I find it a little bit harder to lose myself in the music, mainly because I’m not playing all the time and it’s not, like some of the stuff I play isn’t as fluid as, like coming in with a quick little sample or a few notes here and there … I’ve got to be focussed on actually what’s happening for my cues and I have to remember a lot of stuff so it’s a bit hard in an emotional sort of sense to get lost in the Shanghai music.” The structural complexity and relative rigidity of Justin Ashworth’s music also brings with it certain concerns with regard to the rest of his ensemble that will be elaborated in the next chapter.

Time

Although there is inevitable crossover, this section focuses on the musical elements of time rather than one’s experience of time in performance – although the two appear to strongly inform each other. This section focuses upon the musical elements of time, in particular the use of rhythm, polymeter, odd time signatures.
5.2.1 Rhythm

My own approach to rhythm involves the use of pulse to structure our phrases rather than strict grouping, offsetting phrases against one another that may result in a sense of embodied floating and ambiguity. An example of this is presented through the *Space Project* piece ‘Translation’, where a 6/8 rhythm of the guitar in juxtaposed against a 5/8 repetitive pattern from the bass guitar and drums [Appendix 2 CD – Track 1].

In contrast to metric complexities, Lloyd Swanton’s engagement with rhythm is tied somewhat to his affinity with simplicity: “If you’re talking rhythm, you’re often talking sorts of complexity, and one little slip up… and you’re playing in some sort of complicated metre and you can come crashing back down to earth. As such Swanton’s focus is “definitely timbrally, that’s probably what I’m thinking of more than anything else. But, you know timbre and rhythm and those other elements you mentioned, all influence each other. They’re all interdependent” (LS).

The ambiguity espoused by Tony Buck and his approach to music-making was found to capture the imagination of Jon Hopkins during the *Pure Scenius* performances. In particular, “one of the things about Tony is that the way [his gestures] land in the groove in those shows is so slow, so imperceptible, like he’s just doing his customary organic swells and you SO gradually notice that he’s doing something on the bass drum that is actually regular and, without you knowing it, realise that you actually all are playing in time with something again after like ten minutes of free form timelessness…” (JH). Such an approach to rhythm relates in Hopkins’ mind to the whole idea of foreplay leading up to sex or the bit where you’re waiting for whatever you’ve taken to do something [to you]” (JH).

Leo Abrahams’ use of rhythm varies between matching a pulse and floating arrhythmically in contrast to it, however, the decision making process is “such an unconscious thing that it’s weird to try and put it into words. I think there’s always a conscious moment where I think well ‘what texture would fit here?’ and
once I’ve chosen a texture, cause you know I use a lot of different sounds, I sort of let the part just appear… and then sometimes it’s nice to, if you’re playing in a pattern of four, even just dropping things out occasionally, or deciding to turn it into five, see how that feels against someone else’s four, it’s just like playing around.” Such an approach, however, is “not strict in a kind of proggy way. I mean, one of the first people I really loved growing up was Frank Zappa, so when I hear about something like five-eight over twelve-eight, I kind of think of something quite strict, a bloke with a moustache waving a baton over me [laughter]… it’s interesting how long it’s taken me to let go of that right or wrong sort of feeling.”

However, “it doesn’t really have to be like that, there are rhythmic events that happen with The Necks that are so easy and natural to pick up that, as a co-player, I found myself synchronising really weirdly last night [at Pure Scenius, Brighton 2010], I had no idea what technically one would call those subdivisions, but it was happening and that’s great, it’s very liberating…. [because] if I have a little cell going, I just like to play around with the place of the timing, I don’t think it really matters if it falls out of step with, like if I decide it sounds good somewhere else then it’s just, again it’s very reactive, very free, putting in a bar of four-eight rather than five-eight” (LA).

Rhythmic activity is closely linked to a sense of confidence. Mirabai Peart finds “rhythm is something that happens really wonderfully for me when I’m feeling strong and confident and gutsy about what I’m doing. It’s actually the first thing to go when I’m not feeling strong in my playing, so I’m glad you brought that up, it’s something I need to work on. I think a lot of string players need to work on their rhythm” (MP). Peart shares some advice she received: “one of the first things a violinist needs to do when they learn improvising is work on the rhythm in their playing and I think I’ve actually been able to do that but I need to think about it more consciously” (MP).

Brendan Smyly echoes similar sentiments by describing listening to Bobby Sing where there is “emphasis and… waves of… rhythms, and there’s another rhythm overtaking that, another rhythm over the top of that, overarching that
combining the band and yeah, it’s a beautiful sense that, when you get all the musicians being rhythmic together, that pushing and pulling, it’s lovely” (BS).

Rhythm can provide a consistent vehicle for losing oneself. Luis Rojas refers to performing a *Shanghai* song ‘Trigger Happy’ – one of their longer pieces: “it builds up slowly, goes through all these movements and at the end it goes into this rhythm groove, I’m not even sure what time signature it is, but it’s not straight four/four, it’s in this weird sort of groove, and whenever we lock into that it all sort of builds, like I find that pretty much whenever we reach that part of that song and it’s working, like it’s all locked in, it becomes, the whole band, locked in together, we all become this one sort of entity, like the groove becomes this massive thing, and I sort of lose myself in it, I feel like I have to close my eyes and just sort of… I forget the crowd’s there, I forget that I’m in the band and everything and I just sort of get sucked into this groove and this melody. That’s probably one of the songs that does it to me pretty much every time” (LR).

For Alison Kerjan the quick, rhythmic focus of the *Meniscus* song ‘Pilot’ gets her excited and into the zone. She also responds to subtle rhythmic changes and manipulations of the grooves in *Meniscus*’ music, as it captures her attention and encourages a state of concentration.

Cameron Brennan recalls the *Meniscus* piece ‘Immersion’ where “[guitarist] Dan hits or they both kind of hit it… it’s just a really cool part that one, pretty much every time we play it. Yeah, a lot of my friends have all said that is their favourite part of all the songs” (CB).

5.2.2 Polyrhythm

Chris Abrahams describes the three dimensional rhythmic approach of *The Necks* in performance “it’s not like on the surface… there’s three totally disparate things, it’s just that in the old days we’d possibly, we’d play the same sort of field, the piece would evolve and sort of come into focus, whereas with this it kind of comes into focus and goes out of focus, and I physically play, it’s
not like I’m responding physically how they’re doing, it’s not like I decided to
play something totally different, it is related in some way, I’m not sure quite how.
But it’s a question of like, the cycle has three bits to it now, it’s kind of this three
dimensional thing rather than a two dimensional thing, so how do I respond to
that, I don’t know, it’s… I respond to it physically, I’m forced to play things that
are, forced in the sense that the music is making me play.”

As for metered and pulsed polymetric figures eventually meeting on a particular
accent, Abrahams says “I don’t know if we’re really into that, I mean sometimes
it does, I mean it’s not like it’s a goal to come together, but if it happens, it
happens…” (LA).

Jon Hopkins describes his use of rhythm to create a hypnotic effect: “the piece
that… most successfully does what I try to do is this piece I wrote where, as in
for me, not for the world… which is a piece I wrote where there’s a very simple
4/4 rhythm which is just based on like that with a snare on exactly the same
place, but the melody that goes over it is kind of in a meter of 18 beats, or 9
longer beats but isn’t really either, it’s more like four bars of four and one bar of
two, or yeah, so basically it’s an irregular thing moving over a regular thing, or a
regular thing moving over a regular thing cause they’re all on the same [pulse],
and that makes it far more hypnotic because, because first of all it’s harder to
predict what’s going to happen but at the same time it’s completely regular…”
(JH).

Karen Heath reflects that The Procession Of The Sage, from Stravinsky’s ‘The
Rite of Spring’, elicits a desire to share that joy with others: “just one where it
has poly-metric layers everywhere, that is, one of my, most favourite, passages
of music, ever. And, even when… I first got into that piece when I was about
fourteen or fifteen, and that was the part I would stop it to, pause and rewind… I
broke a tape, doing that […] I just loved it, so much… I still do” (KH). This
passage of music “can rise… [and] conjure up emotions… to the point where I
can’t believe, that nobody else just, just isn’t as excited… as I am about that. It’s
hilarious you know, to think that this piece of music, that only lasts for maybe
fifteen seconds I think, and you know, I’ve played it to students [saying] ‘hey,
hey?’ And they’re like ‘what?’ And I’m like, ‘what do you mean what?... it’s genius!...’ it’s so incredibly vibrant and lively, and on different occasions, for no particular trigger or reason, I might, listen to that section, and either feel like, crying, or [even] feel like, laughing out loud” (KH).

Karen Heath also recalls her love for polymetrics performing with band *The Grand Silent System* “where we might have, eleven-sixteen or twenty three-sixteen, there was one song that was twenty three-sixteen, I loved it. I just, I just love poly-metric rhythms, when things are layered on top of each other, and then they just, unfold… and… they can line up again and, there is something so amazingly… refreshing about that… because it’s, it’s got the same, climactic idea… ‘cause you know it’s coming up you know that there has got to be a moment when things join up again but in the meantime, you actually have this bifurcation… of these different parts that you can listen to and juggle it, at the same time, it really is such an important part of the whole musical spectrum of what I love” (KH). Mirabai Peart is also very engaged by polyrhythms, wanting to explore them further as she is aware of the effect they have on her. She relates that “a really good improvisation could only have one note in it, but have the most awesome rhythm, one or two or three notes…” (MP).

Polymetrics were a large part of Phil McCourt’s musical development through listening to bands such as *Radiohead* and *Tool* where “you play in six, I play in five, he plays in four, and we’ll see when we match up. And then you say a word… and you’ll all go mental… that’s the accent, and so we’re like holy shit, how the fuck’s that? And I didn’t even understand it…” (PM).

Phil McCourt describes a section of music where there is “a riff that goes in six-eight and then there’s a beat added, and it goes (table tapping in four-four). So there’s like my four in there, and then I think instead there’s only a bar of two and there’s these bits where that’s sort of what I would play, and the drums probably follow, the same, but, in the same way, Hugh’s got a bass line playing over a longer section, so he’s sort of only really, he doesn’t really drop beats, but it just kind of works out, like, I don’t know where it is technically… So, yeah, it’s bizarre ‘cause it, to me the dropping and adding of beats in rhythm is a
massive part of um, of achieving a bit of that sort of element and so then we sort
of, got into the idea of only playing things in weird time signatures on purpose
for a long time. And then we, oh and then I guess, just as a bit of an exercise,
guess we got bored of normal, sort of, funk/rock based sort of stuff" (PM).

Tony Buck’s approach of rhythmical ambiguity comes with an awareness of the
experiences such an approach can afford: “rhythms are also ambiguous enough
that… and I do find that if you get into the zone, and these things are applied
that it’s a really satisfying feeling of losing oneself in music. I think that from a lot
of trance music that I’ve listened to, most of it doesn’t go that abstract and
unsymmetrical, and sort of non-synchronous, although sometimes it does, like I
think a lot of North African music and Indian music, it’s very hard for us to
recognise patterns, West African drumming and stuff but, it does have that
repetitive thing in that the subdivisions that are kind of constantly there at
different pulses I think is something that is really powerful in losing oneself” (TB).

Further, Tony Buck describes how rhythm and harmony can also be integral to
one another: “this friend of mind Bianca plays bass in, sort of a punk band, quite
trance-y music and she’s very inspired by the Ethiopian stuff. I heard them play
once where they were playing and everyone was just playing this rhythm, very
loud, two guitars and bass and drums, and there was this little whistling on this
melody, like, it sounded like a cello played very high, and it was a very specific
melody and I really wondered who was doing it, it was a beautiful sound, really
clear and loud, and everyone was just playing their part, [...] and there was this
whistling and then they changed chord all together, and this thing turned into
another melodic pattern, straight away, it didn’t have to be built up at all. It was
just there in the harmonies that they were playing and the size and shape of the
room” (TB).

5.2.3 Polymetrics

My own experience of polymetrics is a consistent vehicle for transcendent
experience. A Space Project piece, ‘Translation’, contains two juxtaposing
rhythmic cycles. My experience while playing gives a sense of chaos and
elasticity, despite how precise the patterns need to be to fit together. The whole piece is based around a drone in ‘D’. When my 12/8 chord progression (of Bb, C, Dm) is juxtaposed with the rhythm section droning (D) in 5/8 that then coalesces into each player moving into 6/4 [Appendix CD – Track 1].

Karen Heath responds strongly to “the poly-metric stuff, and odd time signatures in general, and... the use of... quintuplets and septuplets and things like that, it’s just,... it’s amazing.”

An extension of polymetric rhythmic devices is that of polytempi featured in The Necks. Lloyd Swanton recalls an epiphany a number of years ago with The Necks, although he’s never confirmed this with the other members “but they certainly haven’t disagreed when I’ve mentioned this in interview... we did a thing at The Studio at the [Sydney] Opera House some years ago with Ross Gibson and Kate Richards, Life After Wartime Live, where they projected images and texts... from the NSW Police Archives; ... some of them were just incredibly evocative pictures of Sydney streets in the 1930s... This was the first time we’d ever played where there was something for the audience to look at other than the band and I distinctly recall that in those performances for the first time we broke away from the idea of all playing in time together. It was a real breakthrough that we could actually play in two or three separate tempos and we could move those tempos up and down against each other, or we could have one person playing a really clear tempo, and two others playing a really sort of shimmering texture that had no articulated tempo against it. That’s as I say, the other guys might’ve been like ‘I’ve been trying to do that for years, but you used to keep the riff” *laughter*”.

Polymetrics have become an integral part of Tony Buck’s musical approach, but in a very different way to strict groupings that are found in the more ‘rock’ approaches to experimental popular music. Buck states: “lately, in the last few years, I’ve been quite interested in playing in quite a polymetric sort of unsymmetrical, polymetric way of playing, just for myself, within myself, and also within the band, I think The Necks have slowly started incorporating that idea into our vocabulary. It’s something that I really like in [improvised music]
contexts such as this (a duo show in London with Magda Mayas), often this
music doesn’t really dwell on the grooves … these are kind of grooves that are
quite abstract and multi-dimensional so they don’t really pin anything down
which is one thing in abstract improvised music that one must avoid in a sense
of forcing an issue, or forcing a direction on the music, but still maintaining a
very strong individual voice.”

There is also a direct awareness on the impact that polymetrics have on
experiences of their music. Buck describes: “when I know that what we’re doing
is, and occasionally, especially when we’re doing this polymetric thing, I get the
sense of the whole thing opening up and you can tell that there’s a certain
space that’s existing, and I’m quite aware that it’s probably people who are into
it and listening to it can let themselves go into this. But at the same time I feel
like that’s our job, or my job, to create that musical space where people can do
that and to the best of my abilities. I have a certain, a certain vocabulary of
devices at my own disposal to create that situation as best as possible for
people listening to get that…” It is through the ambiguity of Tony Buck’s
rhythms that facilitate “get[ting] into the zone, and [gives] a really satisfying
feeling of losing oneself in music” (TB).

Another source of rhythmic interest is derived from the use of odd time
signatures. These have been an integral part to Phil McCourt’s playing and the
music of Captain Kickarse and the Awesomes, with their engagement with such
rhythms moving from an intellectual process to a more liberated, embodied
experience of playing. McCourt states “we don’t, count out riffs anymore, [but]
we used to have to sit there, our own riffs were so complicated, that we had to
sit there, and stare at the ground, and count along all the bars and stuff, and I’m
like ‘did you fuck it up?’ ‘I don’t know’, ‘did you fuck it up?’ ‘I don’t know, we’d
better go back and just start again’” (PM). An approach to writing the material
involved writing material in 4/4 or 8 then attempting to change it into something
else “to try and make it different,” with odd time signatures being the method to
further explore their own musical material, dropping or adding a beat. This
process has evolved in the band, becoming “totally natural” (PM), and a largely
intuitive and non-conscious process.
Dynamics

Dynamics were another musical feature that was prevalent in relation to transcendental experiences, with loud and quiet dynamics often contrasted in the experiences they afford.

Mirabai Peart recalls a number of years ago performing with a progressive rock band, where there was an experience that stood out that was a product of “some really intense part”. Although such music is no longer of prime concern to Peart, she feels as though it has informed her practice in a positive way.

Different levels of dynamics provide different nuances to the transcendental experience. Phil McCourt reflects on the challenges of quieter dynamics, rather than drawing solely from the ‘big’ moments for the transcendental experiences: “it’s almost, cheap, and hacked to just smack people over the face every time they go ‘can you feel that? ...I’m smashing you in the face.’ I think that’s why we’re writing quieter stuff, because... you can… [still] definitely achieve it. The whole point is… [to], keep that energy, and keep that intensity but just… shut the fuck up, and it’s, yeah it’s good. And I know how it works now… it’s harder to hold that energy in that silence… but you need the dynamics… it’s just the bottom end of the wave, I reckon…”(PM).

McCourt recalls seeing Buddy Guy at the Enmore Theatre: “his band left the stage and basically, turned all the pedals off, and he was just really quiet… just bending a couple of notes, and he’s like crying on the stage and shit, and he leans out, and he gets this kid in the front row to play a few notes on his guitar and all this stuff. But like, that was fuckin’ amazing, that’s that real quiet moment. Mogwai do the same thing as well; they did it so quietly, and like, they’re just, amazing. But that, it’s, like, you suddenly aware of where you are…” (PM).

Leo Abrahams also espouses the quieter dynamics in music performance: “I’ve never really felt the loud climax to be a very potent source of satisfaction *laughter*… in a musical sense. I think for me, the absolute pinnacle of exquisiteness for music is when you’re in a giant auditorium and there’s virtually
nothing happening but everyone is perfectly silent and listening and as a solo performance, that is really, it’s an immensely powerful feeling. But not in an egotistical sort of way, it’s just lovely…” (LA). Abrahams recalls the Pure Scenius show in Brighton (2010) “it’s a little bit like…[the] film ‘Man On Wire’, it’s about the guy who tightrope walked between the twin towers in the seventies, it’s really amazing. It was illegal, but he set up at the top of the twin towers, set up the rope, a tight rope walk act up there, it’s really incredible, there’s a book about it, has a really great description of that time and… it happened last night when Chris [Abrahams] got… to the top key on the piano and hundreds of people were all totally silent with that tiny sound. Now that’s just, that’s powerful” (LA). In contrast “every time you get into a kind of climax situation I kind of just go ‘oh yeah’, this is what musicians do, and it’s kind of a turn off *laughter*” (LA).

Likewise, Lloyd Swanton is a self-professed “old stick in the mud… I actually think that if you’re a musician you need your ears, so I’ve never really been inclined to play at really loud volume levels. What I was saying before about the rocking out thing… it’s not just that I don’t think the bass functions so well at that level, but I don’t want to hurt my ears. But I am more than aware that there is a really hallucinatory state that can be reached through volume, but the fact is your ears are incredibly fragile and I’m just not in to that, I want to be enjoying music when I’m 80, I don’t want to be a pain in the arse who plays too loud” (LS). In saying that, however, Swanton “can totally see how people [are] into, like ‘bugger that, I want to trip out RIGHT NOW’” (LS).

Jon Hopkins recalls the section of ‘Two Pianos’ as part of Pure Scenius concerts (in particular, Brighton Dome 2010). He describes it as “Amazing. I mean, Chris [Abrahams] is extraordinary, I think the third time was the best, it was one of the most amazing musical experiences I’ve ever had, because he chooses the notes and I play them back, that’s how it starts, and the way it got higher and higher and higher and quieter and quieter and quieter until he was just playing one note, it was SO tense in there, I was like ‘shit, I might laugh’ like I would do… it was just SUCH a moment, and then as it gradually grew into a piece, it’s when it starts evolving into a new piece is when you really feel that
sort of magic about it, almost a sort of relief, but at the same time a sadness I guess, amazing” (JH).

Jon Hopkins also contrasts the experience of ‘Two Pianos’ to the final piece of Pure Scenius a year earlier at the Sydney Opera House, where a large dynamic shift occurred and was a feature of the piece. Hopkins states, “I think they’re very different actually, they’re almost like opposite sides, yet possibly having something of a similar effect. There is a tension to the ‘Two Pianos’ thing and a sort of pristine almost silent thing and not really repetition, well immediate repetition (imitating phrases) but it was a progression always, whereas these other things are… far more like the tribal thing I was talking about… like the organic experiences that we were talking about where it is actually one straight meter that just keeps on going and going… so I guess that may, that more specifically… as a listener, this is, I’m just guessing but as a listener they could have found the piano thing transcendent in that way cause it was quite kind of beautiful” (JH).

It is these shifts in dynamics that also feature in Hopkins’ compositions. In particular, Hopkins describes his intentions behind his piece ‘Light Through the Veins’ from his album Insides (2009) that features “a nine note loop, or eighteen short note loop, and under that, I’ll just let it play for a bit. This is in my head, this was the closest attempt that I’ve had to making a piece that works like a drug. So it’s… a very basic 4, but the chords are in 9, and it kind of keeps things interesting enough to hypnotise, but at the same time it’s definitely repetitive enough to do that. And the idea for this all sounds really simple, but actually it’s about 107 tracks of audio within that, building up that complexity to make everything evolve really organically so the drums come from nowhere and they very, very gradually get heavier and heavier” (JH). To achieve this “was to record a real drummer hitting a snare progressively louder for five minutes – really, really difficult to do, but he did it amazingly and… there are no drum filters, no breakdowns, there’s no gap of any sort in anything. Everything is just this, and the waveform just looks like that, that’s all it is, that’s, I want to do more of that really. Who needs drum filters? And that’s basically, you can hear the, you can never really know how it got to the point of such loudness, but then… I think I
included a kind of post-coital section in this, that is just coming up, cause this one is very specifically about sex and stuff like that... so this is the sort of relaxing bit after[wards]... still round the same chords, that never changes...
You get the idea. When I’m playing [this track] live for fifteen minutes, [it’s] building, building, building…” (JH).

Seth Olinksy, too, has a penchant for quieter dynamics to facilitate an experience. The set for Akron/Family is structured so “everything kind of flows together, so it’s hard to single out a particular place. But I mean there’s little parts, there’s the song ‘River’ on our new record we played earlier in our new set, there’s one bar where the tempo goes and it’s just kind of this quiet, melodic, spacious part. It’s something I always like. It comes earlier in the show and I have this association of that part, whatever the show is feeling like, whether it’s two, three… or four songs in. If it gets off to a great start or it’s feeling bumpy or whatever and then that part of the song comes and I’m always, I don’t know, it’s like a breath for me, I feel like I can connect and I can kind of just be present with the audience there for a moment and feel kind of a space, you know and that’s just something I associate with that moment, in that song. That moment happens and I associate those feelings with it” (SO).

Quiet dynamics also facilitate a connection with the audience. Justin Ashworth also echoes this direct connection with the audience with a quieter dynamic, recalling playing a show in Sydney where there were a number of “quiet moments where... I wasn’t playing a note, it was, my synth was automated through, my whole laptop software, and there was, there was moments... the audience were just listening and it worked and Matt and I were finished playing and, and realised that the energy of what we’d, the loud moment was still there, and even the quiet moment... was still there, you could still feel it...” (JA).

“Sometimes... I get impatient of my own, sound-scapes or my own music, because the audience... is growing impatient with it and so you need that loud moment to pull yourself back into the vibe. I think it’s harder to make the softer stuff connect with the whole room, but it still, it doesn’t mean it... doesn’t do it, and I think it’s easier to make big riffs and loud drums and everything just grab people’s attention. You know, I mean it definitely grabs my attention...” (JA).
Despite the potential pitfalls of loud dynamics, when coupled with a feeling of effortlessness, louder volumes provide Lloyd Swanton a vehicle for him to “bliss out”. Swanton states, “to achieve the sort of densities of textures that I like to achieve at the business end of the piece, cause a lot of them do have a pretty obvious dynamic, small [to] big, and I think it’s the more physical big end where you’re more likely to experience this state. It really is like I happen to hit on a way of playing my particular pattern that is getting the sound out there and into the ensemble and into the room and isn’t causing me any great physical hardship, I will probably bliss out fairly quickly” (LS).

For Ryan McRobb, “it’s probably all about the big, like I look at a lot of people’s thoughts on mousetrapreplica, and probably a lot of my own in retrospect, is the big moments were better …and… I definitely look like, I’m having more fun when it’s heavy” (RM). John Encarnacao’s experience of “the physical impact of musical sounds is also something that can take you… the transcendence can be very much of the body as much as it can be of the mind, so if… the physical impact of the sound, particularly if it’s very loud … [and] amplified, that’s something that can shake you out of your mind” (JE). Alison Kerjan experiences the physicality that a loud dynamic affords when performing live, feeling the drums comes up through her legs: “the heavier it is, the more I feel” (AK).

Likewise, Karen Heath responds to “what you’d expect, and from what we’ve also been a bit, conditioned to expect with climactic points… and definitely points where there’s a sense of anticipation as well, like if, just, just, on the cusp of some resolution I think” (KH).

With loud dynamics also comes with a sense of losing control. Ryan McRobb describes a performance where he utilises repetition and “adding synth layers, to get to this ridiculously… fucking, huge, part, which is just the biggest sound on the guitar I could possibly conceive; all my different, synths, cranked, distortion’s on, delay’s on, it’s fucking, huge. But because I was stressed I played it wrong, but my notes were right, [and] what happened was awesome. I can’t remember how it went, something similar to what I played but I just did it wrong ‘cause I was stressed. But… there was still that force pushing me along, through it… and… what happened was cool! …I have this image of, you know,
just doing a, you know, ruffled forehead, staring at my toes, looking up and seeing the, bartender looking at me, just thinking ‘what the fuck?’” (RM).

Despite the contrasts in dynamics, they can both be applied for complementary purposes. Phil McCourt finds contrasts in dynamics “of things that polar opposites are exactly the same, and it’s all just one thing” (PM). That is, “you can show through, punching someone in the face exactly what you could show by giving them, a drink of water… It’s weird that you could do the same things through incredible volume, and through silence… I like it” (PM).

**Timbre**

Of the musical features discussed in interviews, timbre was a compelling point of interest for many of the participants. In a certain synergy with transcendent experiences, timbre was the musical feature that transcended the others at the height of the performance experiences.

Chris Abrahams speaks of timbre being the place where transcendence occurs (and as a useful definition) between the instruments in the ensemble: “when we play live for instance, there’s a transcendence that occurs with the instruments, in that they… hopefully… kind of cease to sound like what people think they should sound like. And they kind of meld together and form another sort of sound world, where who’s doing what becomes kind of ambiguous” (CA). Timbre is also at the centre of Lloyd Swanton’s approach to bass playing, but perhaps most importantly, “timbre and rhythm and those other elements you mentioned, all influence each other. They’re all interdependent” (LS).

Timbre and texture are the core of The Necks’ music-making. Swanton reflects that Chris [Abrahams’] ear for pitch is not his most spectacular asset, but his ear for texture is like nothing else … he’s just extraordinary, I’ve never played with a musician who is that kind of ear for texture. And I think they’re related, he doesn’t have a great ear for pitch, and I think that’s no surprise, because you wouldn’t be able to hear texture if you had a really, really strong sense of pitch.” Swanton extends this idea suggesting, “a preoccupation with pitch very quickly
can become a preoccupation with functional harmony, which is not necessarily very helpful for our goals. If anything we’re trying to break [that], I sometimes describe what we do as ‘finger painting’ [chuckles], because we are just, you know, taking colours and doing stuff with them” (LS). Tony Buck echoes Lloyd Swanton’s sentiments that timbre is presently at the core of The Necks’ music, that it’s “something we want to explore more and more with The Necks, and really the timbral relationships with the instruments and using timbre as a building block in its own right, or more rhythmic parts and riffs…” (TB).

Leo Abrahams speaks of a special timbre that is evoked that signifies those special moments. He gives the example of “a really great string quartet play together, like the Kronos Quartet… there’s something going on with the good players that isn’t just a repetition of the piece; there’s a sort of a glorious shimmering kind of strong harmony that comes out of the combination of those four players, and when that happens with a group of musicians, it’s very powerful and it’s very relaxing actually. And that, I found that that did sometimes happen last night and those were the good moments” (LA). John Encarnacao also speaks of an occasion where timbre comes to the fore of the musical experience. Describing his experience of watching USA band Animal Collective in concert, Encarnacao reflects that “it was like [something] I’d never heard... because I experienced this almost tribal, quasi-electronic, throbbing of noise, which, but which also had melodic elements and harmonic elements, but the melodic and harmonic elements which we’re used to being so much the point of pop and rock music, were almost incidental. It was this timbral, rhythmic, throbbing, that the song material and the melodic lines kind of rose up... like... flowers, bursting to push through the soil” (JE). Due to his “lack of experience of what they did, and perhaps just in whatever was going on in the room that night”, Encarnacao “…had this experience of absolute wonder, of absolute kind of feeling like I was on the threshold of something very, very... interesting, and, innovative, and… I don’t know why I think of that as transcendence, but I do, I feel like it was an experience where, it took me out of my reality…” (JE).
Transcendent experience is also a goal for composition and is approached by subtle changes and textures through a piece. Jon Hopkins’ intentions of his piece ‘Drifting Down’ is “all about tripping the mind out, really”, where the sounds are gradually mixed into various time based effects with the composition designed to help structure one’s experience. “It’s supposed to be, take you further away from reality into that kind of, imaginary vista. But what’s interesting, is the end of the transcendent experience, when you come back to reality, so I always try to put that in very clearly, in this it’s a little Dictaphone recording of a piano piece that I just played and improvised, just once after I’d written the rest of it, I just gotta put something in that actually has the sound of rain and puts you back in the earth…” (JH).

Harmony

The use of harmony is a significant feature of the structure in experimental popular music. The elements of harmony discussed include harmonic movement, the use of drone and the use of melody in informing performance experiences. In terms of harmonic elements facilitating transcendent experiences, John Encarnacao describes the contrasting features that have a significant effect on himself: “the capacity of the music to surprise you, there’s something about the, the physical nature of the sound, which… can dazzle you, and the potential for something to put you into a meditative state, either through, the slowness of movement or repetition” (JE).

Even as a drummer, harmony plays a significant role in which Tony Buck approaches the drumkit. This manifests through his often-ambiguous rhythmic patterns that can coalesce into the production of complex harmonies. Buck considers harmony as “the sort of meta-form of the inner workings of the rhythms are like that and the dynamically within the similar time frames it’s quite similar to that. There are waves that come through and break off and I kind of liken it to harmony where if you play an octave its basically the double of the vibrations per second and a fifth is like, whatever, and the more complex the intervals you get, the more interesting the wave beating, the complexity of the beating on that kind of molecular frequency level happens. And then when you
play rhythms like that, like if you play rhythms where everyone’s locked into like a “taps a beat on the table, crotchet, quaver, triplet”, it’s kind of like simple, root, fifth, triadic kind of movement, but when you get kind of more interesting, complex rhythms then it becomes … in a sense, harmonically much richer. It becomes more ambiguous and just rich. And there’s just much more reflections going on” (TB).

5.5.1 Harmonic movement

A sense of changing of the harmonic movement was a prevalent feature in facilitating transcendent experiences. In my own practice, harmonic movement, particularly in relation to drones as a source of tension and resolution is a powerful feature in my own transcendent experiences.

In a similar fashion, juxtaposition in harmonic movement is that basis for John Hopkins’ piece ‘Light Through the Veins’ from his album Insides (2009). To requote Hopkins, “a nine note loop, or eighteen short note loop, and under that, I’ll just let it play for a bit, this is in my head, this was the closest attempt that I’ve had to making a piece that works like a drug. So it’s in four, a very basic four, but the chords are in nine, and it… keeps things interesting enough to hypnotise, but at the same time it’s definitely repetitive enough to do that” (JH). Phil McCourt, too recalls parts of his bands’ music where “the bulk of the riff is the same, and then each time it goes through the last note on that changed rhythm it’ll be different” (PM). The effect of this gives the sense of the juxtaposition of harmonic movement, “forms a bit of a melody on its own… so maybe there’s something there as well… [with] two things moving at once” (PM).

The establishment of a tonal centre can be somewhat ambiguous in the music of The Necks. As for the responsibility for this centre, Lloyd Swanton states that, “if anything, I would say that [pianist] Chris [Abrahams] is the biggest factor clouding the issue of tonal centre. My musical relationship with him is very much about how much we’re going to be playing in the same tonal area [and] how much we’re not going to be, and the answer is different every night… I
don’t want to be too definitive about it, [but] I probably have a preference for a little more tonal security than he does. I played with Chris for quite some time before we formed The Necks and I knew that there was one convention of jazz piano playing which was keep your left hand away from the bass player’s frequencies, give them some space, [but]… he just loves to play “hammers the bottom notes of the piano”, [and] he doesn’t care if I’m in a completely different key to whatever that might imply…” (LS).

Through the Pure Scenius shows, Leo Abrahams was particularly amazed by The Necks’ ability to manipulate harmonic movement: “I think one of the best moments for me last night was I think in the third show when it came out of quite a heavy, ‘beat-y’ jam between everybody and it went into just a ‘Necks’ section and they basically took the two chords that the previous jam was made out of and just pulled them apart… it was really, really amazing. And I think what that shows so well… it’s a prolonging the moment, they took four seconds of music and made it last fourteen minutes, and that’s interesting, that’s an interesting idea, isn’t it? (LA)"

In contrast, Mirabai Peart responds to the relatively simple harmonic movement with the gypsy/jazz music of Doc Lechery and the Lechery Orchestra, “really simple like two or three chords per song, you know with like swing feel and stuff – I’ve had transcendent experiences with that as well, just more in the sense of flow and fun and feeling just completely free of fear, complete joy and once again the connection with the people you’re playing with, just feeling it all lock in” (MP).

5.5.2 Drone

The use of drone implies the sense of a harmonic stasis, and in my own musical practice drones are a powerful point of musical and mental departure and return.

Drones have become the catalyst for solo music experimentation. The reason saxophonist Brendan Smyly went to becoming an electronic player “was to
basically become my own backing band, basically to set up sound spaces that you could then colour in some way as a soloist” (BS). Redefining his musical role is an ongoing process for Smyly, who now sees his role “as more a drone maker… or a musical space maker in some way, that you colour that space in some way. I’m not very rhythmic as far as that stuff’s concerned, so I rarely play rhythms, although I’m realising now that rhythm is a really important part of it, though, yeah so I’m changing again, in the sense of that role” (BS).

For the reasons The Necks prefer to physically play their prolonged ostinatos in the studio rather than loop, the same concerns are pertinent for Jon Hopkins: “It’s funny because it’s something that sounds quite simple, but when you’re doing it electronically is really quite complex to achieve. But when it’s happening quite naturally it will sound really as though it’s happening organically, so it’s really just a matter of programming really, everything changing very, very gradually while one thing stays the same, and even that one thing could be evolving imperceptibly, to try and keep a human sound to it, it’s just machine like if it’s just one hundred per cent repetition, it doesn’t actually work, it has to evolve” (JH).

In a live performance situation this approach to repetition Hopkins recalls that “some of it was having that sort of effect on, certainly on us, I wasn’t really sure what was happening, I’m sure some of the audience were having that as well, I’m sure a lot of the fans are very in tune with those kind of experiences, and Brian [Eno] certainly is, the ability to just be off somewhere else. A lot of our group really, once we had landed on one we sort of stayed there for a very long time and followed the way it evolved” (JH). Of particular note regarding how the music would evolve, Hopkins observed the way Tony Buck “lands in the groove in those shows is so slow, so imperceptible, like he’s just doing his customary organic swells and you gradually notice that he’s doing something on the bass drum that is actually regular and without you knowing it realise that you actually all are playing in time with something again after ten minutes of free form timelessness.”
Phil McCourt describes a particular *Captain Kickarse and the Awesomes* song, ‘Little Whale’ that features a “rhythmic element, then there’s the bit of a droning, [with] the bottom half… it’s the same all the way through, then there’s this melody on the top and the rest of the bass line doing this weird thing, and then the drums are still holding all the rhythm together and, yeah I think it’s, it’s everything really… There’s also the idea, it’s just a complete loop that goes for ages, and each time we play it, on comes another level of distortion and it gets louder, and then it comes to fuzz bass, and then it drops back down, to the quiet, oh and there’s always an echo delay in the background, which is just instant psychedelia to me… I think that’s why that’s the… gem for me, because there are all those elements working at once melodically, rhythmically and… timbre of it, ‘cause it’s sort of repeating the same thing but it’s different every time just through pedals and sounds… The odd phrasing of the bass is just enough to really get your brain going, like it’s almost too much.” McCourt is describing the use of change and development as integrated into the repetitive phrase where the drone holds the different elements together.

5.5.3 Melody

Melody was mentioned infrequently throughout the interview process. My own experience concerning melody pertains again to the excerpt of the *Space Project* piece ‘Translation’, where the yearning quality of the trumpet melody moves my response from ‘floating’ to ‘soaring’, particularly when set against the polymetric rhythm and harmonic movement/resolution (Bb|C|D) against the drone bass note of D [Appendix CD – Track 1].

Likewise, Jon Hopkins’ response to melody was also based around a sense of climax. Hopkins recalls Chris Abrahams’ use of melody during the *Pure Scenius* shows, “…I love the way Chris… goes from playing only one note a hundred times into … really playing a lot more, in some passages doing this really major [key], melodic stuff I’d never heard them doing” (JH). Hopkins found that “because it’s rare, it’s particularly powerful. I thought, it was so melodic suddenly, it’s like this is the most euphoric, [because] it’s built up over these three shows until it’s reached a point where it’s like… that whole idea of pieces
relating to one another that, the influence of the previous shows on the last show, I dunno, I just think that something must be going on” (JH).

Apart from those instances, melody wasn’t directly addressed in relation to transcendent experience.

**Vocals**

The use of voice amongst the musicians interviewed was generally minimal, as most ensembles had a strong, if not an entire, instrumental focus.

The use of voice has often provided me with the sense of a more ‘inhabited’ experience in performance. There is a sense of being drawn into my own body before I can ‘come out’ of it. I have had a number of experiences where I would be singing a particular line, or holding a note I would lose the sense of breathing out, with my perception moving outside of myself, as though I am listening, rather than producing the note. Self-awareness returns when my body needs to continue breathing, stopping the transcendent experience.

The human voice has the capacity to transport oneself outside of themselves, as expressed by John Encarnacao, who feels that “there’s actual, there’s actual sounds that, can trigger a transcendent experience, and I think the most common one for people is the sounds of individual pieces, people’s voices. So, at the moment I’ve really been getting into Sam Cook, and his, his voice is amazing … for example you know at the beginning of his song *A Change Is Going To Come*, just the way he sings the first few words, …it’s completely arresting. I think the way that timbre affects us is perhaps even more significant than the way dynamics affects us” (JE). Likewise, Mirabai Peart recalls Joanna Newsom’s *Emily, Kingfisher* and *In California* as particularly powerful due to the content and delivery of the lyrics.

Singing for Chantel Bann is a vulnerable process where she describes giving “your whole physical self and emotional self” (CB). As such, “there are times when you’re singing that sometimes you don’t feel like baring that side of yourself to people, like showing that whole [self], …you feel naked and you don’t
feel comfortable pulling a weird face to get a note that you have to do, or it just comes out” (CB).

Improvisation

Improvisation is one of the core features of experimental popular music. Asking questions about improvisation elicited a range of responses regarding its role in performance, composition and the resulting experiences of participating in it.

My own experiences in music performance are heightened through the immediacy of improvisation. Even though the music of Space Project has become somewhat more structured, improvisation and spontaneity are at the core of the creative process and punctuate the performance process. Jed Maisey also thrives on the spontaneity of improvisation in performance: “I feel refreshed every time we do it because it puts me on my toes. I like being on my toes, only if... there’s room for it... [and] for some reason try new things I haven’t tried on stage that I haven’t in rehearsals” (JM).

For Leo Abrahams, improvisation affords an experience of self-integrity and honesty, allowing one to get to the core of oneself as a musician. This sense of honesty comes in the moment itself; “I don’t really think it’s a case of realising after you’ve done it, going ‘oh that’s me’... it’s when you’re actually doing it, feeling like you’re being honest” (LA). In addition to this, Leo Abrahams finds “there’s something about improvisation that requires such huge concentration” (LA). This concentration “can be liberating and all those other things. You know, that’s the key, I suppose that’s what certain, well there are different kinds of meditation aren’t there, but concentrating, that’s music” (LA).

Mirabai Peart contrasts difference characters of her transcendent experiences, when free improvising “there’s a really beautiful, pure, really intense transcendent experience that I can have... with the Splinter Orchestra, or the string quartet that I’ve been free improvising with and... you all know it’s happening when it’s happening, and you all know that you all know and it’s really beautiful [and] just everyone’s happy” (MP).
Phil McCourt describes the process of improvisation and links it directly to transcendence: “everything floats past and... neither accept or deny anything... just sort of, let it float through, so that’s why I think if you’re playing music, and you’re trying to, translate [your experience] musically, all your little melodies are just floating around and, it’s, ‘oh I’ll use that one, and I’ll use that one and stuff’... I think, yeah, improvisation is transcendency [itself] really” (PM). McCourt sees that transcendence is in itself embedded in the act of improvisation: “all improvisation, and even the writing that constitutes improvisation really, is all from some sort of transcendent idea...” (PM). Used with compositional intentions, Phil McCourt finds with improvisation “…the clicking of that moment of ‘transcendency’... that decides what’s a keeper, and what’s not” (PM). When such instances occur, “There’s this cheesy grin when we’re all jamming together, and we’re just suddenly [thinking] like ‘yeah, this is fuckin’ great’ and you can tell that... everyone’s just thinking ‘how the fuck is this actually working?’” (PM).

John Encarnacao recalls the first show he did with his improvising group Espadrille, facing the challenge that “…with any group playing, there’s a kind of a... an exploration into how you make several people make one sound. Of course you’re making individual sounds, but how do they, become cohesive? And with free improvised music, I think... when performances go really cohesively, there’s a very pure pleasure about that, because it’s so hard to engineer that on purpose” (JE). In particular “there was a real feeling of the three of us working towards a single purpose and... because it was not in any way planned, it feels like something that happens on the level of intuition. And when you have that feeling of something happening intuitively... I think that’s intuitive already... that’s a transcendent experience already... ‘cause it feels like you’re in tune with each other, that you’re feeding off each other, that you’re creating something out of your listening and your rapport and your personal facility with sound, and it’s almost, it’s beyond your understanding, that the end result is as cohesive as it is... so as soon as you get to that point of something big, beyond your understanding, I think you’re headed towards that, zone of transcendence” (JE).
Reflecting on improvisatory music making as a whole, Brendan Smyly states, “it can all be so selfish, music making I think, and particularly electro-acoustic improvisation.” For instance, he has had people say to him after a show, “It must be a lot more interesting to make, than it is to listen to *laughter*” (BS). Even for the musician, the improvising scenario isn’t always the most enjoyable and can be “painful and boring at times. Brendan reflects, “Sometimes when you’re in the middle of making it, you’re going ‘God, this is painful and boring!’ I said to someone that I didn’t like it sometimes, and they were really shocked – they said, “How can you make music that you don’t like? *laughs*” (BS). Despite this, more recently such transcendent (or non-transcendent as the case may be) experiences tend to occur and are more obvious to him during improvisation.

Although the music of Shanghai is tightly structured, Luis Rojas notes that there are certain sections that are purposefully “left open to improvisation, and usually they end up being my favourite parts” (LR). This improvisation allows Luis to “find this space where we can let loose a little bit, [which] is kind of cool” (LR). Luis Rojas echoes the sentiment that “it’s easy sometimes when you’re improvising that way to lose yourself in the music, or lose yourself in the moment, and to feel as though you’re having a sort of spiritual moment with the music and it makes you play better and it takes you to another level as a musician, when it’s working, when you’re on…” (LR). Juxtaposing it with the more structured aspects of the music, “It’s generally, probably more satisfying if you can pull off a good improvisation… especially if it’s live in front of an audience and it’s just for that one time. Like I said, I don’t even like revisiting recordings either. Like, that is special and, I can get something that goes beyond the music in a way” (LR).

The use of improvisation and its impact in performance is often built into pre-existing musical structures, utilising musical signposts. In a more structural sense, improvisation is often used to navigate through musical signposts. Jeff Martin describes how this approach is built into his compositions: “Basically there’s a path that’s been travelled many, many times so you know where the signposts are, but how do you get to those signposts? You can veer off the road, you can go into the bush, go bushwalking, gone fishing, outback,
whatever, but you’ve always got to get back to those signposts. And then you can deviate again, right? Those are those climaxes, those are those points in the performance of a piece that allows the musicians to reconnect to a certain extent, right? And then re-evaluate and then say ‘OK, we’re going off again, then come back, on again’ so yeah, again it’s breathing, its ebb and flow” (JM).

For Martin, improvisation is an essential part of performance, “All the time. It has to be, y’know? Because I mean… in music it’s just like the soul, you put parameters on the soul, like for instance, a religion like Christianity, it has its parameters, and you’re not allowed to go beyond those parameters. Well, that’s just suffocating the soul and it’s the same with music for me, like there’s a schematic, right, but it’s like being an inspired electrician … there’s a schematic there and I’ll follow it a little bit, but there’s no parameters … no boundaries. And that’s like what Jay (accompanist for Martin’s acoustic shows) and I are doing every night. We go to places, just look at each other and go ‘how was that?’” (JM).

Expanding on this, improvisation is linked to development of musical education. For Luis Rojas “improvisation is the conduit to understanding and learning an instrument… [and my] song-writing thing is rooted in that, and my playing is rooted in that, like from the moment I picked up a guitar, like I didn’t know what to do with it, like I saw you could do stuff but I didn’t really know what to do, so I taught myself how to play it, and that’s improvisation in a way and I straightaway started writing my own songs as well… [and] it didn’t matter to me if I wasn’t some shit hot guitarist…” (LR).

Improvisation has become such as essential element of live performance to that extent that Leo Abrahams has actually tried his best to avoid playing live except for improvisation. This was due to being more fulfilled in the studio but he “discovered a whole load of ego-related troubles to do with performing in a band … as a session musician, it was a very thorny area. I did all sorts of tests while I was on the road with Roxy Music one year, which I’ll tell you about in a minute… *laughter* and improvisation is a good way out of that” (LA). For a long time Leo Abrahams actually felt quite nervous about entering into any improvisation, because he thought that “there was a language that so-called
jazz musicians spoke that I just didn’t speak… of bebop and jazz harmony. But then I had a number of experiences, one of which was [Pure] Scenius where I realised that actually free improvisation was probably the best way to get to the core of what I was as a musician” (LA). For Abrahams, the best moments of improvisation are not necessarily “the moments where there’s a purpose and point, the best moments are where you just feel good, you’re not thinking about anything else, really” (LA).

Improvisation also encourages an ongoing reassessment of one’s role in an ensemble. Reflecting on the Pure Scenius shows, “it was a lot to do with finding what your places, what your role is in each place. It’s like a nice game really, sometimes you’re sort of supporting, you can pick on one person and support what they’re doing or you can find that there’s a gap and do something totally new there, which more relates to what I was saying about the juxtaposition idea I suppose” (LA). In particular, Abrahams addressed the apparent tension of what this thesis refers to as experimental popular music: “I think that my role in it seems to be quite hooky in a strange way, much of what I do is tiny rhythmic cells or tiny little hooks that sort of claw into larger expanses of sound, and I think that’s partly cause no matter what context I’m in, I’m always interested in the three minute pop song, *laughter* I can’t help it” (LA).

John Encarnacao also reflects on a sense of intimacy with others in music performance, “in improvised music particularly, it feels like you’re allowing the other musicians, and, the audience potentially into quite an intimate state, and perhaps the sharing of that intimacy is something that helps to engender transcendence” (JE). Coupled with this intimacy, Encarnacao speculates “perhaps all those sorts of things, meshing with performers, physical impact of sounds, seem more available to you when you’re improvising. Because… potentially the less predetermined the musical environment is, the more likely it is that you’re going to find yourself somewhere unexpected, and so experience something… like transcendence” (JE). This ties in strongly to the “capacity for surprise” that is linked to transcendent experiences.
Encarnacao also contrast between improvisatory music and non-improvisatory music: “Whereas, I mean this is quite a generalisation which couldn’t be absolutely supported, but I think that... when you’re working with music that’s predetermined, ...maybe there’s a trick through making it seem spontaneous, but I think that you could argue... the more predetermined a musical experience is, the less potential there is for that shared intimacy... [than] with [free] improvised music... [rather than] jazz based improvisation or folk based improvisation where it’s one or two people improvising over a preconceived chord progression and rhythmic structure... free improvisation ...[gives] the freedom for the different members of the group to be working as if they’re playing solo. Which you can’t do if you’re playing as a group playing pre-recorded material... There’s still a practice around making those individual performances mesh into something that’s greater than the sum of the parts, but... I think that that process that you can get into playing alone is... that [it] can actually bleed through to free improvised group music-making” (JE).

Echoing Encarnacao’s thoughts on playing pre-recorded material, Holly Harrison feels as though she performs better “when I have just not tried to recreate what’s on the record” (HH). Furthermore, much like Jeff Martin’s “signposts”, Harrison finds that she would play a couple of lines “to repeat [then] I can go off and do my own thing in a sense that there are guidelines that are created but, and yet I am free to move within those guidelines and the freedom comes from having freedom under restraint rather than having freedom without restraint and I think that is really a big difference” (HH).

Brendan Smyly describes the process of free improvisation as “that you’re... boundary-less” (BS). Free improvisation itself engenders a dissolving of self. Smyly states: “I suppose, if we were to consider ego a sense that assesses the self in a constant fashion, holding it up to judgement against certain criteria. When those criteria dissolve, and the sense of self dissolves, that’s what I think musically you’re doing when you’re improvising. In a free way, this is not with a chord progression or anything. When you’re improvising, totally... devoid of idiom” (BS). It for those reasons “that sense of self dissolves within improvisation easier, not that it hasn’t happened... at other times, but sometimes at other
times, I think you’re just concentrating on getting it right. Your focus is there on, you know, get that riff right, get that tone nice, coordinate with the other musicians, become part of that collective, be part of the music, not part of the band sort of thing. The music… becomes the main focus… [rather than] the personalities of the band” (BS).

Phil McCourt also finds that “when… [Captain Kickarse and the Awesomes] improvise live, I guess that’s… probably… even more so a transcendent experience than the tightly constructed bits” (PM). However, McCourt is somewhat unsure and speculates, “I don’t know, it’s weird, in theory you’d say that, but maybe not, but yeah, in terms of improvising… if you talk about [the]… Aldous Huxley’s *Doors of Perception*, and *Heaven and Hell* [approach to]… transcedency… his idea is just basically, that idea of infinite mind… the ‘mind at large’ concept… in a nutshell [but] you can’t put it in a nutshell, …you say every person’s capable of remembering everything that’s ever happened to them, and being aware of everything that happens in the universe at one moment, but, if you were to exist like that, you’d get hit by a bus in like two seconds, so your brain has to reduce down… all the perceptions and that kind of being, put down to… this idea, that of going ok, ‘you’re just a person here,’ and for survival we sort of, only perceive what we, perceive. So he has this idea that, taking this stuff would open your mind up to, the true, infinite capacity of the universe” (PM). That is, McCourt speculates there are ‘constructed bits’ by necessity of our experiences of transcendence.

An entertaining aside regarding *The Necks*’ improvisations, Lloyd Swanton recalls “a period when we were actually retrospectively entitling every piece, we’d come up with a name on the spot, and I’d often like ‘Crowded at Bored Night’, or Chris [Abrahams] would have to come up with something on the spot if I hadn’t come up with anything. But I actually found that was fine when we were doing three gigs a year, but it was actually getting to the point where I was thinking, ‘what am I going to call this piece’ when I should’ve been thinking about the music, so we dropped that. I do particularly remember one piece called ‘Gustav is Hungry’ *laughter*, I think that was the same night that we did ‘Send Gavin to Tonga’ *laughter*. And I also remember we did one night where
we did two pieces, one called ‘Bra’ and the other one called ‘Leg’, so we would often just pick random words like that.”

5.7.1 Versus composed music

As outlined previously the Pure Scenius concerts were of particular interest in that they contained both improvised and composed music within the one form. Leo Abrahams found that due to the way the Pure Scenius concerts were structured, “a few times I’ve been caught out by going slightly off on my own planet and realising that someone’s written something on one of the monitors that I should’ve been paying attention to and that the guy next to me has kind of had to point at the screen… it happened in rehearsal actually – I was really, really enjoying myself and then I realised I wasn’t meant to be doing that! So yeah, I think it’s quite different to scenarios where it’s been a true, free, thing. Scenius isn’t quite like that” (LA). This tension of Pure Scenius concerts providing a compelling relationship between improvised and preconceived musical ideas is also expressed by Chris Abrahams. For instance, Chris Abrahams is “not trying to invent a totally new thing each set – there are certain things like the piano duo with Jon [Hopkins], there’s… a certain kind of aesthetic thing that we kind of [do], we actually did it in Sydney… it’s a very flattering thing to do a duo with two grand pianos and Jon’s ears are incredible, they’re just amazing. […] A lot of people think, ‘is that a delay’ then they realise [it’s not]… I feel very flattered to be involved in that, it’s great” (CA).

Leo Abrahams also makes contrasts between compositions, recording music and improvisation. As stated previously he finds improvisation “one of the very good ways to be honest” whereas “a composition has a lot of cultural baggage attached to it, and recorded music which is what makes up a large part of my professional life, it has a start point and an end point, it has a point in terms of you’re making something to be ultimately sold or consumed” (LA). Although acknowledging “there’s a context to improvisation as well, that’s much less of a concern, it is much more in the moment. [and] it’s much more liberating because there doesn’t have to be a point. I mean, I’m not thinking ‘this is going
to be a record one day’, I’m just making a good contribution to the moment’ (LA).

Mirabai Peart finds that she has “definitely had more transcendent experiences improvising, just because it’s sort of more the thing that I really love to do. It’s so challenging and freeing” (MP). Contrasting it to playing precomposed music, however, “when you’re playing it’s similar enough, I guess when you’ve memorised a written piece and internalised it so much that it’s just emanating from you without you having to think about it, then that’s kind of how it’s like when you’re improvising, cause the notes are just rising out of your being without too much of any kind of channel from your mind, kind of a direct thing” (MP). So in terms of experiences for Peart “there are similarities, but I get more joy from improvising, because I’m not putting my energies into memorising lots of notes of classical pieces these days” (MP).

Contrasting improvisatory music practice to performing, John Encarnacao finds that he couldn’t “identify transcendent experiences encountered while improvising as being different in kind from those when performing pre-arranged material” (JE). Alison Kerjan articulates this contrast, where improvisation takes place as a compositional tool and provides an “excitement, but it’s the whole new kind of discovery and it’s a new excitement” whereas the playing through the satisfying parts of their pre-existing material it’s a combination of “‘yeah it’s good to be here right now… [and] it’s good to revisit this little chapter of enjoyment in life” (AK).

5.7.2 Notated Music

As an extension of the contrast between pre-composed and improvisatory musical experiences, a number of the interviews also discussed the role of musical notation in their performance practice and experiences.

Transcendent experiences appear to come somewhat by surprise for Mirabai Peart, where “even playing in string quartets for just gigs at weddings” (MP). Where “…everyone is listening to each other, you might just be sight reading
some Mozart and you know what the next note’s going to be… but you’re all so connected to each other’s sound and connected to giving it life that sometimes you hit a chord together and you’re like ‘my god’, like the surprise of it, but also the knowing, the intuition of it, you just knew how to play that… And it just gives you tingles up your spine and it, there’s a perfection in that” (MP).

In contrast, Holly Harrison’s experience of strictly notated music in large scale concert bands was that “the music sounded terrific but just as a performer, I felt that it wasn’t my niche because it had to abide so strictly by, by notation or by something that was there on the score” (HH). Such an approach, “even though those environments teach you to play as an ensemble and that is primarily why you play in those bands… Ironically I think it also made you not play like an ensemble because you become so consumed and immersed by what the score is trying to tell you…” (HH). Harrison’s experiences with “notated musics and not notated musics have been very similar but just in the reverse way, because they still emulate the same musical techniques” (HH). Regarding more experimental forms of notation, such as graphic notation, Harrison has found “graphic notation is far less successful than traditional notation, like the experiences I have had have where you are playing or traditional notated music is far more enjoyable than graphic notation, simply because… graphic notation can be quite ambiguous… and also with that ambiguity the prospect of what it visually means, [and] what sort of visual and aural interaction do they have? Sometimes it represents infinite choice… [and] I have come to learn… the prospect of infinite choice is paralysing to the musician and there needs to be a ratio between set ideas and performance liberties” (HH). This contrast and tension is seen throughout the experimental popular music form, whether it is the structure of a piece or the conceptual modus operandi of The Necks, there is a solid foundation for much experimental popular music.

**Summary**

This chapter has presented the participants’ responses with regards to the musical elements of their powerful performance experiences.
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<th>Main Themes</th>
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<td>Dynamics</td>
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Table 6 - Musical Features in Transcendent Experience

Complexity/simplicity can often become one and the same. Luis Rojas’ increased playing ability on guitar, to make the complex feel simple and The Necks’ sense of repetition, almost with a naïve wonder, unravels the initial simplicity into a colourful, complex sound world of coalescing overtones and evolving gestures. There is a sense of ‘transcendence’ between the musical elements that often accompany such experiences. A strong example of this is The Necks, where the aforementioned coalescing overtones and evolving gestures move from being perceived as rhythm, timbre, harmony and melody.
Rhythm in particular has a strong effect on the musicians featured here, but not necessarily in a strict pulsed sense of ‘locking in’. This is demonstrated in particular by The Necks’ live shows and as part of the Pure Scenius shows when combined with Jon Hopkins’ use of electronics.

Rhythmic complexities are found to be compelling for most of the performers interviewed. In particular, there is a strong theme of transcendence between the musical elements themselves as indicated by Tony Buck in how he approaches the drum-kit where rhythmic exploration expands to include harmonic exploration in his patterns.

The following chapter presents the interview findings pertaining to the extra-musical features of transcendent experiences in music performance.
Chapter 6: Findings Part 3

How extra-musical aspects facilitate the transcendent experience in experimental popular music performance.

I acknowledge that it is difficult to draw a line between what is necessarily a musical or non-musical aspect of performance, particularly concerning the transcendent experience where the distinction between self and music becomes distorted, but is also considered the ‘natural state’. For instance, Brendan Smyly articulates these blurred distinctions by reflecting on the relationship between music and the mind, recalling teachings from a spiritual teacher: “that it’s nothing but your mind, that music is nothing but your mind, [and] if you’ve had an experience of meditation… music is nothing but the mind, and the mind is nothing but the music, that they’re inseparable” (BS).

With that in mind, the following themes are explored as the extra-musical aspects of transcendent experience: relationships within ensemble, states of mind, performance preparation, approach to music making, acoustics, relationship to instrument and musical contexts. For instance, rather than attribute specific musical elements to transcendent experience, when asked what music elements ‘do it’ for him, Jeff Martin responds: “truth does it for me. The music that I’ve written has always come from a very truthful place, whether I’ve liked it or not. So every single night I’m constantly telling the truth, so as long as that’s happening, the truth is backed up with integrity and integrity is backed up with passion. You really can’t go wrong if you’re going to perform in that manner” (JM).

Relationship within ensemble

Relationships between performers in an ensemble play an important role in shaping one’s experience. There were contrasting experiences shared ranging from multiple experiences being shared over time and almost spontaneous communion with others who you have barely met.
The collective nature of musical performance is a powerful catalyst for transcendent experience, even to the extent that it validates the experience. Justin Ashworth contrasts playing with his ensemble and by himself: “Yes and no ... I mean with an ensemble ... when it really works I think it’s.... it’s better? It’s more powerful because everyone’s feeling it, there’s a greater, like it’s amplified, it’s like when you, I mean, and I’m sure you know what I mean like when you play with a group of people, it’s something when that magic just happens. That really just happens. I don’t think when it’s just yourself, when you get into that zone I think it’s ah, like that magic still happens but it’s different... I don’t know if that’s a clear cut answer to it, but all I know is... when I play with other people, and it works, and it feels good, whereas you only have yourself to gauge it when you play solo. You don’t have anyone else to like, give you that look like, “what we just did was awesome,” you know? You don’t you, you don’t walk away going “that was, that was great, ” and your audience might come up to you and say “oh that was great man,” but it’s not the same as (like) when you all walk off stage knowing that as a group, as one greater mind, you were all connected with that moment, yeah…” (JA). Jed Maisey continues with this notion of connection in describing his collaborative process - “I wouldn’t call it writing, I’d call it …‘integrating’” and compared to working solo, “I don’t think I’ll get as much out of it as playing with other people.” This experience of connection is an essential element of the creative process.

The social aspect of music-making is an element that Ryan McRobb thrives on in going to that ‘special place’ in performance. McRobb describes, “for the group, it’s just a fun way to hang out with my mates “laughs”. I prefer that, because you look around … [and experience] that laughter and there’s a connection between people, which the audience picks up on as well. …I think it’d be difficult, to do that, to get to that place now, solo. I’d sort of want [or] need other people around.”

The solo creative process is also an environment that can facilitate transcendent experience. John Encarnacao describes his process as a songwriter: “I try and, as much as I can, at times in my life I really pursue that [feeling of oneness], and I try and document ideas and things like that.” Additional to these ideas is the
influence of the sonic environment – “sometimes you’ll have an idea for something, which would be based on a few guitar riffs or chord progressions, and you play it onto a tape recorder, and sometimes … the resonance of the acoustic guitar, or the sound of the electric guitar through a little amp in the room, just creates a situation where you just keep playing. And you almost hypnotise yourself through the repetition of it and through … playing around, you know improvising around, the basic ideas that you’re trying to document, and I think definitely that you can experience that feeling of transcendence playing alone” (JE).

Luis Rojas describes experiences of playing and composing music by himself as “an isolated experience… [where] I feel like I’m in my own little bubble.” When it’s a live performance or playing with a band, or playing in front of an audience, it’s quite the opposite feeling in a way, like I’m not isolated, I’m with people, so the experience that I feel is not necessarily like I’m going anywhere, but it’s like a euphoric feeling, where you lose your sense of time, you have some physical reactions in your body that you can’t control…” (LR). Chantel Bann’s transcendent experiences are more easily succumbed to when she is by herself, in safe surroundings as this “exposing of the soul” (CB) is an intimate, vulnerable and personal experience where you give “your whole physical self and emotional self when you’re singing that sometimes you don’t feel like baring that side of yourself to people.” Mirabai Peart also recalls some of her most powerful experiences of playing Bach on solo violin.

Improvisational musical experiences can provide spontaneous, deep connections with others, particularly within the ensemble. Despite not having spent a large amount of time with The Necks outside of the Pure Scenius shows, Jon Hopkins felt, “particularly in that third round of piano duets, that there was an incredibly deep kind of communication going on [with Chris Abrahams] that wasn’t about anything, apart from just the basic performance of music, but it must have been some kind of incredible communication going on… [and] even though we don’t know much about each other, there was some sort of extraordinary telepathy thing going on. I said to Leo [Abrahams] when we were walking down to take a bow after that last one, cause I really thought that
that was one of the most amazing experiences that particular duet, and I said to Leo "that was the closest I’m ever going to get to having with a man” *laughter*, cause that’s what it was like, it was such a strange kind of communion, you know… it was really incredible” (JH).

Transcendent experiences also foster a longer-term connection within an ensemble. Seth Olinsky describes his special musical experiences being shared as an ensemble as having a greater life significance and promotes a fellowship between those in the band, “the more we deepen our connection and have experiences and the more we grow as human beings and as musicians, more and more the level of that kind of feeling is more there, like nightly, and then there’s little moments in little songs. When it happens… it’s not a plateau, but an ebb and a flow, and as I said there are certain nights when it just has a magical feeling to it” (SO).

Both drummer Cameron Brennan and bassist Alison Kerjan of Meniscus describe transcendence as a sense of ‘locking in’ with the other band members. John Encarnacao also alludes to this ‘locking in’, drawing on connection with his ensemble to create a space for transcendence to occur – speaking of the drummer for Espadrille: “there’s kind of a physical fluidity about his approach, and I think it’s something that I do as well.”

Luis Rojas echoes this significance of relationships within his band Shanghai, “we have a pretty intense relationship with all the different people in the band and the music is very much driven by me, so there’s actually a higher level of intensity that goes into that relationship with that band and its music that I think causes certain, or triggers certain physical or mental reactions” (LR).

John Encarnacao’s connection with the musical gestures and activity of the others in Espadrille is the capacity for surprise.
Musical style

In the process of exploring transcendent experiences, I asked the participants about how musical style influenced their performance experiences. Fourteen of the interviewees mentioned the influence of a particular style on transcendent experiences.

The style of music played is deemed an important aspect of transcendent experience, suggesting experimental popular music itself largely has a tendency to be open to such experience. Cameron Brennan in particular mentions that his experiences occur “because the music is so interesting… and for me it… hits me on a certain level because [it’s] not sort of your standard pub rock kind of band.” Likewise, Phil McCourt finds that due to the music he plays is instrumental facilitates a particular kind of experience – particularly the “prog, psychedelic, other worldly sound that, you know, if you are serious about it, you are trying to make that transcendence in sound.”

Experiences pertaining to different styles are found to be quite distinct, yet difficult to articulate. Jon Hopkins recalls moments from the Pure Scenius concerts, “I think they’re very different actually, they’re almost like opposite sides, yet possibly having something of a similar effect.” One of the moments was the aforementioned Two Pianos section, “there is a tension to the two pianos thing and a sort of pristine almost silent thing and not really repetition, well immediate repetition but it was a progression always, whereas these other things are far more, far more like the tribal thing I was talking about, or far more like the organic experiences that we were talking about where it is actually one straight metre that just keeps on going and going… so I guess that… specifically… as a listener… they could have found the piano thing transcendent in that way cause it was quite kind of beautiful… But I do think that’s a different kind of thing, it’s not so much that ‘joyful drift’, I mean I don’t even know what the fuck I’m saying… but they’re different sides of the same thing I think.”

Jon Hopkins agrees with much of the literature on improvisation, where “the ultimate goal in improvisation is the thing itself, the process itself, you kind of
have to go beyond that in recording and make it listenable forever.” Relating it to his experience of the Pure Scenius concerts, “that’s the great thing about Scenius because you play it, and ignoring the recording aspect of it, you play it and it’s disappeared, there’s quite a lot of parts where we weren’t nearly as tight as we could’ve been… We can’t always hear everything if you’ve got electronic loops playing, Tony [Buck] can’t hear it well enough and we’ll all kind of go out, but it doesn’t matter, I very much doubt that anyone noticed or cared but if you record and hear it, as they did in Sydney, you begin to notice a lot of bits that we were out of time in, all sort of … little bits and pieces, but generally that’s the great thing about improvisation, you can have that freedom to do that a bit, and the second it’s out there, it’s out there and it’s not going to be heard again.”

The different character of music is often found in the immediacy of improvisation that engenders a sense of openness and honesty of expression. For Leo Abrahams, “It’s one of the very good ways to be honest. I mean a composition has a lot of ah, cultural baggage attached to it, and recorded music which is what makes up a large part of my professional life, it has a start point and an end point, it has a point in terms of you’re making something to be ultimately sold or consumed… Whereas, of course there’s a context to improvisation as well, [but] that’s much less of a concern; it is much more in the moment. It’s much more liberating because there doesn’t have to be a point. I mean, I’m not thinking ‘this is going to be a record one day’, I’m just making a good contribution to the moment.”

This contrast of style also applies on the level of the performance context producing different nuances in experience. Jeff Martin reflects on the difference between playing in a full rock band situation with The Armada to his acoustic shows: “When you start dealing with acoustic music like this, the beauty is more apparent – and so if that beauty is more apparent and like shimmering in front of you, it’s easier to grasp, y’know? So, I must say that I’m enjoying this more” (JM). Martin still loves “…to get my rock out… strap on the Les Paul and hurt people, [but] at the same time I think wisdom is an aspect of having hindsight… and I’m learning that this approach that I’ve taken on now as an older man… all that wisdom that’s accumulated since I began, I’m learning that
this [acoustic performance] is probably the medium allowing all of my potential and allowing the audience the most out of me, there are no barriers” (JM). The vulnerability of intimate performance goes hand-in-hand with the connection with the audience: “When you’re doing an acoustic show, there’s no barrier; I might as well go up there with no clothes on, y’know cause maybe some of the girls would like that *chuckles*, but honestly, it’s so naked, it’s so raw and I think that’s getting everyone off on it” (JM).

Mirabai Peart relates her transcendent experiences, juxtaposing how each style facilitates a particular experience: “there’s a really beautiful, pure, really intense transcendent experience that I can have when I’m free improvising… with the *Splinter Orchestra*, or the string quartet that I’ve been free improvising with. And it’s like you all know it’s happening when it’s happening, and you all know that you all know and it’s really beautiful - just everyone’s happy” (MP). As a contrasting example, she describes “playing with *Doc Lechery and the Lechery Orchestra* which is kind of gypsy/jazz, really simple like two or three chords per song, you know with like swing feel and stuff – I’ve had transcendent experiences with that as well, just more in the sense of flow and fun and feeling just completely free of fear, complete joy and once again the connection with the people you’re playing with, just feeling it all lock in” (MP). “It’s a very different sensation to the free improvising kind of transcendent feeling I think, it’s just a very different character of music” (MP).

Transcendence can also be embedded in the musical score. Relating style to experience, Karen Heath finds the Stockhausen music she has workshopped and performed, “which is the complexist [sic], crazy, avant-garde music, definitely conjures up a way of thinking for me… where I must absolutely transcend… to be able to do it” (KH).

**States of mind**

Discussion of a performer’s state of mind revealed elements of decision-making in the performance and creative process of these musicians.
Lloyd Swanton finds “It’s really hard to separate out the conscious decisions from the instinctive decisions” (LS). There are times Lloyd feels “very conscious of everything I’m doing” and there are also situations “that possibly just reflect the realities of touring and performing where I’m actually not even thinking about music. I mean I’m often thinking, ‘boy, I’m really tired!’, and I’m thinking I’ve got another 6 a.m. flight and ‘I’m really stressed out that I’m not going to make the gig tomorrow night, blah blah blah!’” (LS). Such a state of mind, however, “doesn’t necessarily mean that the music isn’t being taken care of, ‘cause there is the subconscious level, and I can’t identify specific instances, but I’m fairly confident that sometimes there’s some great music coming, even possibly because I’m distracted, and that’s closer to the transcendent state even than the nuts and bolts [state of mind] because that appears to be more careful of maintaining a pristine musical situation” (LS).

Decision-making, or a lack thereof, is core to how music of The Necks is produced. “I guess… [our music] is an entity, it is and has this sense that… and we don’t push it around, so if you don’t want to hurry anything because it’s constantly changing. And although I know that we make the decisions and that we play something that we’ve decided, sometimes it doesn’t feel like you’ve decided at all. It just seems like that is what’s sort of happening. And when three of us are doing that, I don’t know what’s going to happen with the music because there are two other people who are going to be doing something as the music is dictating to them, so it’s quite a beautiful space to be in ‘cause it’s halfway between creator and listener and witness of this stuff and also you’re kind of protecting this music.”

Tony Buck also recalls playing music for dancing, which “is an interesting thing because that’s actually a lot… to do with creating that vibration and way for people to share that experience” (TB). Simultaneously, Tony states simply “I’m really often just playing because it feels really nice to play drums, y’know? I love playing drums” (TB). Of particular note is that element of something new, or even surprise: “so often, nearly every, every time I play I find myself doing something I’ve never done before… obviously sometimes it can be more or less
successful, or more or less enjoyable, or whatever but it’s a great way to [play]” (TB).

When playing the ‘usual’ band material, Justin Ashworth finds himself “quite conscious during that… [and] I don’t find any of that stuff really happens… I find that… I’m quite focused on what everyone’s playing, and because it’s very organised music… [and] I’m relying on the laptop… running all these quite ambient… almost a lot of the times, arrhythmic, or like tempo-less sounding themes. There’s a click track running to the drummer’s headphones, so I’ve kind of got to follow her a lot of the time, so I have to be a lot more involved consciously in the music which kind of, I think makes it more exhausting…” (JA).

The state of mind leading into a performance is also a prevalent feature in performance. Jon Hopkins recalls rehearsals and performances for the Pure Scenius concerts, where he’d recently arrived from Los Angeles “but really the worst of it was happening on the rehearsal day. But show day as well, I didn’t have very much energy and I wasn’t being hugely social, but I think it might have helped the music a bit cause it kind of, kind of have to sum up everything just to keep on and you end up thinking of stranger things I think, feeling quite dreamy already really helped. I think it made me more like to push the more droney side of it.” In contrast to the slightly dissociated tiredness of Hopkins, Mirabai Peart thrives off “feeling really well and happy – really connected,” to be more conducive of transcendent experiences.

6.3.1 Stress

Due to the complexity of his live guitar setup and use of technology in Ryan McRobb’s music, “there’s that sort of, performance stress, and technological stress, which seeps into my overall experience” (RM). For Ryan, “stress means I’m thinking in an intellectual way” and as such having a detrimental impact on his performance. Ryan, however, recalls an instance where he “kind of pushed through it. I dealt with it, basically” (RM). Much like Lloyd Swanton being distracted from the music he is making, McRobb found that he “didn’t have as much fun but, the music was there to be made and I made it. Because I was
stressed I played it wrong … but my notes were [actually] right, but what happened was awesome. I can’t remember how it went… something similar to what I played but I just did it wrong ‘cause I was stressed… But there was still that force pushing me along, through it, and… what happened was cool! I [just] have this image of… just having a ruffled forehead, [thinking] ‘err’, staring at my toes, looking up and seeing the bartender just looking at me, just thinking ‘what the fuck?’” (RM).

Jed Maisey often finds himself preoccupied with the extra-curricular elements of playing a show “it’s not 100% like… it’s a 50% like because the other half is for stress and pleasing and making sure there’s enough crowd there, door sales… so the only 50% is like, the other 50% is stress. When I hear the word music the word stress comes up in my head straight away.” Things are much less enjoyable when it’s “about pleasing someone else” (JM).

6.3.2 Comfort

Issues of comfort on stage were also raised during the interviews, particularly as one’s comfort often depended on a learned response. For instance, Justin Ashworth began “not wearing shoes on stage and so I find that’s, when I realised that… [made me] more comfortable and made me play better, I started doing it, I’d take my shoes off at the start of the set, and put ‘em right up the back, we’d play a gig, I’d put them right on again” (JA). Through this, Ashworth learnt that this was an important element of “get[ting] to the root of what, what caused… [an experience], I guess it’s just a matter of keeping on doing it, but I don’t attach any, like deeper significance to feelings I get, other than I’m just getting to know myself, and that I’m getting to, that I’m bettering myself as a person… and creating a… significant, well creating just a… an honest place for myself in the world, and amongst my peers” (JA). Particularly when Space Project was in its infancy, I too would perform without footwear. This gesture facilitated a sense of intimacy, at least on my own part, with the music and the performance location.
Karen Heath specifically mentioned the importance of “self-esteem to... be able to create... and feel that it’s a convincing creation that you, are ready to show, other people” (KH).

**Approach to music making**

Throughout the interview process, there was a significant amount of time given to the musicians’ approach to music making, in part, what informs their music-making practice.

Lloyd Swanton is careful not to specifically pin down the musical approach of The Necks – the intention is to be open to, and facilitate the best musical outcome for the evening: “apart from that thing of really getting the room singing, and we even have to be careful with that, because it’s not like, like we’re not going on stage going ‘let’s get this room singing’, because that might be blocking off what’s a much better outcome for the evening. But that is one that we do enjoy getting into, because I think that as you’re playing and things are building in density... you basically just find a frequency floating past and you realise that you can actually influence it. So it’s always a very gratifying way of developing the music, but it’s by no means the only way” (LS).

In addition to being somewhat elusive, Chris Abrahams doesn’t find the performance process of The Necks to be “a very intellectual process”, rather that “it’s... very simple... we don’t ever talk about how we play. We don’t ever say, ‘let’s do this and then this’” (CA). Such an approach is also instilled into his performance approach: “in fact if I start thinking ahead too much, like fifteen minutes, if I start thinking you know ‘I’m here and I want to be up the top of the keyboard in ten minutes’, or ‘I want to develop this layer’, that’s really bad – I mean if I’m thinking that then I would say that I’m not having a good night. It is really about letting something unfold and being unfolded by something. And the closer those two things are, there’s not necessarily one that happens after the other, and I’m not sure if there is an order, or what order there is, but it’s the closeness of those experiences... that to me signifies a group” (CA).
Echoing Chris Abrahams’ sentiments, Swanton states “what makes for a good performance, is I feel incredibly open, that I feel the others were incredibly open and that what came out was a consequence of that openness and it was all about us sparking the music and then getting out of the way and letting it tell us where it wants to go and only stepping in when it needed a bit of guidance or corralling. Yeah, you walk off stage and go ‘man, that was an amazing piece’, and you often don’t analyse it much more than that, but I would say that if we did analyse it, it would be, it would come down to those things, that there was a freshness about it, that we got into areas that we let ourselves get into by being free enough to give it that possibility of happening” (LS). Chris Abrahams shares this sense of responsibility to the music itself: “it’s quite an emotional expression what I attempt to do, what seems to be being called for. And I guess a way of changing the meaning of something through revisiting it.”

An engagement with technology has also informed the music making process for Chris Abrahams. Over the course of his career with The Necks, Abrahams found that he became more enthusiastic about samplers and synthesisers “particularly in the 90s, I really got into sampling and programmed… and I think that’s really informed how I think about how I play the piano” (CA). Rather than just think about only the notes that are produced by the piano, Abrahams took an interest in “trying to analyse what happens when a string is hit by a piano hammer, the physics involved in that, and the envelope that comes about through using different techniques in playing the piano and using the sustain pedal, all of these things I think are kind of informed by electronic music that when we started out I wasn’t really interested in. But again, I’m probably doing exactly what I was doing at the start, using a different way of thinking about it in a different context” (CA). Here, Abrahams is describing his interest and engagement with sound on a micro-level, dealing with some of the fundamental aspects of sound.

As a musician, Tony Buck finds he is “drawn to really contrasting ways of making music… contrasting in ways that maybe people would see as different genres or styles in a way. There are things that interest me that I feel that I apply across different genres, even though these genres do satisfy different things
aesthetically to me” (TB). That is, “extremes of playing, very delicate forms of playing, dealing with my instrument with very delicate fine forms of playing as well as power and volume and simplicity” (TB). Testament to the diversity in The Necks’ musical output, Tony Buck states “I guess I’m kind of drawn to music as a process of self-discovery and betterment, betterment as a musician then anything else as far as like other things I’ve been drawn to music for, whatever they are. I’m really interested in areas where things become something else, like that point of transition, and I think different areas, different aesthetic things in rock music or in jazz music or in improvised music or in composition, I really like those points of transition” (TB). Likewise, Justin Ashworth describes his intention behind music-making is for “self-betterment and self-understanding” (JA).

Chris Abrahams has an understanding of the goal of a Necks improvisation, “but I can’t really verbalise it, I’m not quite sure what it in fact is, but it’s got to do with action and a formal structure of a piece that feels satisfactory, it’s a difficult thing to… but I think more formally about how things sort of develop, and the ebb and flow of a piece and how I’m not thinking a long time ahead, but things can somehow feel right. I think it has a lot to do with frame of mind at the time of playing. I’ve never really, I don’t not enjoy The Necks ever, cause it’s quite an indulgent way to play really and it’s... I think it’s very therapeutic, I feel very kind of satisfied if I, if the gig... well, I don’t want to sound smart, but I feel satisfied most of the time.”

There is an overall ethos of changing and developing material within set pieces. Seth Olinksy describes how with Akron/Family “Over time things grow and we learn at it I mean I don’t know. I mean there’s parts of songs that are maybe more open, and that kind of ebbs and flows, like one song has energy for a few nights for a few tours, and then there’s a section where it’s really ripe with an exciting energy, and then at some point you do it a lot and all of a sudden it starts to box in and box in and then we either like break it open, or we put it to the side for a while or whatever, so we’re always kind of chasing things down and mixing it up.”
A core element of Jon Hopkins’ music is for the electronic elements to behave in a deceptively simple, organic way. Hopkins describes, “Something that sounds quite simple, but when you’re doing it electronically is really quite complex to achieve. But when it’s happening quite naturally it will sound really as though it’s happening organically, so it’s really just a matter of programming really, everything changing very, very gradually while one thing stays the same, and even that one thing could be evolving imperceptibly, to try and keep a human sound to it, it’s just machine like if it’s just one hundred per cent repetition, it doesn’t actually work, it has to evolve.” It is these subtle elements that provide “a gradual escalation of tension and speed and excitement from the beginning point which is more anticipation and tension, it’s just bringing everyone on a journey of some sort, and it’s a journey where I always try and have moments of real darkness and moments of real euphoria and moments of sadness, but all the time keeping something propulsive under it.”

Jon Hopkins reflects on the role of The Necks in the Pure Scenius ensemble – “they were amazing, I can see why Brian invited them. I actually think that the third show where they did a particularly incredible piece. ...I love the way Chris, ...goes from playing only one note a hundred times into ... playing a lot more, in some passages doing this really major, melodic stuff I’d never heard them doing. And because it’s rare, it’s particularly powerful I thought, it’s so melodic suddenly, it’s like this is the most euphoric, it’s built up over these three shows until it’s reached a point where it’s like... that whole idea of pieces relating to one another that, the influence of the previous shows on the last show, I dunno, I just think that something must be going on.”

To requote Hopkins, he describes the piece Light Through the Veins, with its “nine note loop, or eighteen short note loop, and under that, I’ll just let it play for a bit, this is in my head, this was the closest attempt that I’ve had to making a piece that works like a drug.”

As mentioned previously, Lloyd Swanton’s approach that features in The Necks is “about creating a sense of movement and something happening with as little actual input as possible. I really like the idea that if I’m playing one pattern or
one note over and over, that if I then change something it’ll really dramatic, but if
I play something that’s constantly changing, no one’s really going to notice if I
change it once more “laughter”. So that was a bit of a kind of discovery for me,
and it was one of the things that sort of corralled me into The Necks, was that I
just felt that jazz and a lot of improvised music was all too often just suffering a
kind of data overload, too much information for anyone to process, including me
as a performer. I just wanted something simpler.”

The approach to music making of The Necks has evolved over time. Lloyd
Swanton describes, “my intention when we first formed the band was to actually
play repetitive rhythmic figures, usually in a sort of clearly articulated rhythm and
metre and gradually evolve them.” Amongst artists such as James Brown and
other funk artists, in terms of influential pieces of music, Swanton cites Steve
Reich’s ‘Music for Eighteen Musicians’, and the first recording of ‘My Favourite
Things’ by John Coltrane, “more what Steve Davis and Elvin Jones are doing in
terms of the rhythm section,” as strong influences.

Ryan McRobb thrives on “the response of “what the hell is that?” I love having
that new experience, which is what I was always trying to push in mousetrap, as
a composer and performer, that new experience for the listener, it was a new
experience for me, ‘cause my ears hadn’t connected with it and it was different,
you know? Something new and it’s something you can grow from, you know it’s
something that, listeners [and] everyone can grow from as a performer…” (RM).

The beginning of mousetrapreplica came from Ryan McRobb setting himself the
challenge as a solo artist “how can I create the widest, humanly possible sound
palette using a guitar. And that’s my technological basis, but also my artistic one
as well, because I have all these different things, I don’t wanna, sell myself
short.” With such an integration of technology comes the challenges of “you
know, settin’ up your gear in the right amount of time, and tremendous
technological hassles,” but the key facet of this is that “most of what I do, my
set up is unexplored still. I’ve only got one lifetime, you know” (RM).
Technology also plays a role in Leo Abrahams’ guitar playing. In relation to creative output Abrahams describes, “I think you would find everybody finds their own level of how complicated the technology is versus how their creativity works. And I’ve been above the threshold, like found that I worry more about what the technology’s doing than what I’m playing then it begins to suffocate my ideas,” Abrahams also has “been below it, in fact the interesting thing is that the lower you go the more ideas you have. Like doing it, trying to do a gig with just a guitar into an amp is like insane for me, because basically my thing is sounds, but you finds ways to get around it so… I think a lot about Lloyd [Swanton], actually, he’s on double bass but he comes up with the most incredible sounds from it and yeah, that’s interesting.”

This desire to discover new sounds is also at the core of Tony Buck’s drumming: “I’m really often just playing because it feels really nice to play drums, y’know? I love playing drums. And so often, nearly every time I play, I find myself doing something I’ve never done before … obviously sometimes it can be more or less successful, or more or less enjoyable, or whatever but it’s a great way to [play].”

As for the intention behind playing music, Tony Buck states: “Cause I’m interested in lots of different things, and different ways of playing, I like the idea that I’m playing for lots of different purposes. Sometimes in abstract improvised music there’s a certain aesthetic thing or like conceptual level of sound, juxtaposition can be a conceptual art, like you’re playing art music. And sometimes I mean other sorts of music there’s the idea of creating that momentum and movement in sound and filling a space with sound so the whole room can throb in that kind of way. Maybe that’s a unifying kind of a sort of a simple human way of achieving that oneness where everyone’s moving around and responding to this kind of vibration of sound. And The Necks, I mean we get into that over and over. I’ve got very interested in that with this rock project that I’m playing guitar in. Most musics I’m playing, I’m only ever involved with projects if they’re playing music for entertainment. And playing music for dancing is an interesting thing because that’s actually a lot sometimes to do with creating that vibration and way for people to share that experience. And
then at the same time I’m really often just playing because it feels really nice to play drums, y’know? I love playing drums. And so often, nearly every, every time I play I find myself doing something I’ve never done before or just really enjoying the… obviously sometimes it can be more or less successful, or more or less enjoyable, or whatever but it’s a great way to [inaudible].”

6.4.1 Group ethos

Regarding a group ethos, Lloyd Swanton reveals that “The basic sort of modus operandi which we hit upon before we ever considered ever playing in public, it’s always worth stressing that the band was formed with the intention that we weren’t going to play in public, that’s actually a decision that we came to six months down the track, we thought we could actually do this, it was purely for our own investigation and satisfaction” (LS). When The Necks came to that method of performance, it was simply decided as “The way to do it, that we basically wait in silence until someone starts, and regardless of what we think of that idea, that’s what we work with” (LS). Perhaps due to the openness and comfort of over 25 years of playing with The Necks, Lloyd finds that “it’s amazing more people haven’t come up with it, people come up and say it’s so predictable, you always know one person’s going to start… but beyond that you have no idea where the piece is going to go… “ (LS). Entertainingly, Swanton recalls he and Chris Abrahams playing over one another at a show in Brisbane some years ago, “it was amazing… Chris and I both went ‘BANG’ just like that, and miraculously we were in a reasonably proximate tonal centre” (LS).

Reflecting on the music-making process with The Necks, Lloyd says “we actually don’t talk about the music too much because we don’t want to get prescriptive with it. We like to leave it all unsaid” (LS). Likewise for John Encarnacao, whose experience really thrives on “the sense of the group working towards a single purpose, yet it not being planned” (JE).

Lloyd Swanton sums up an overall ethos for The Necks: “it’s about I guess just revelling in the beauty of sound and… those pitch relationships that have confounded the human race since Pythagoras and before haven’t changed, and
they’re still just as intriguing and... they’re still as elusive as ever. I think that’s what gives music it’s magic that there is just this unknowable thing, it’s around us all the time; any sound is on the verge of becoming music. It’s that elusive quality that keeps us all going and I guess is what we do with The Necks, we’re just trying to welcome it with open arms and just saying ‘I’m not sure what we’re doing here, but we hope you enjoy the ride’” (LS).

Phil McCourt speculates, “I guess your goal as a musician is to write music that pushes some boundaries, and, that does the things that those records and bands did that you can’t put into words, I suppose” (PM). But in terms of consciously making a point of aiming for a transcendent experience “do we all sit down and hold hands in a circle and go ‘let’s, feel the chi, and make sure everybody, sees Nirvana while we do this?’ no, but that’s still there in the background” (PM). It is, however, something that the group talks more recently, but “maybe it’s even that we still feel a bit lame talking about it that way” (PM).

6.4.2 Role in ensemble

The complexities of experimental popular music are often demonstrated in the makeup of the musical ensemble and the role of the members therein.

The aforementioned Pure Scenius concerts were occasions to bring multiple ensembles and approaches to music making under the creative umbrella and guidance of Brian Eno. The two concerts amounted to approximately twelve hours of music. Whereas a Necks concert would evolve as a single piece up to an hour, Pure Scenius showcased only provided relatively brief glimpses of their three-part musical evolutions throughout each set as they intertwined with the other structural elements of the set.

As such, Chris Abrahams reflects that “in some ways ... [Pure Scenius is] not really The Necks... in each set we got a bit of a go, ... [particularly] the last two sets, ... we definitely got somewhere in that time, so I was kind of happy with that...” Regarding his role in the ensemble as a whole, Abrahams’ role is more subtle, “I guess there are a whole lot of other musicians who’re on stage and I
tend to want to be kind of necessary but… I don’t really want to stand out so much, and I don’t. I feel like a piano can bring a sound and that’s what I’m after, actually, whether it’s a subtle thing that you would only hear if you listen for it, I’m very happy to do that, in fact a lot of the time I prefer to… contribute in terms of something that you’d miss if it wasn’t being done, something that wasn’t actually that obvious at the start.”

Tony Buck also reflects on the role of *The Necks* in the *Pure Scenius* ensemble, “we’ll slip into this *Necks* mode and we sort of play along as *The Necks* and then it’ll kind of cross with something else. But whatever this was, it would’ve stopped; it’d feel like turning the Queen Mary around. Once the music has a momentum, sometimes it’s just really hard to stop it, you can’t stop it, it wouldn’t be fair to the music.” In a sense, Buck is supporting Abrahams’ notion that experimental popular music often blurs the boundaries of roles between ensemble members, in particular, where drummers or percussionists have a more timbral role rather than keeping a beat. In addition to the approach Tony Buck uses, John Encarnacao speaks about his improvisatory band, *Espadrille*: “[the drummer] Josh … has a very timbral way of playing the drums, … where he sought of felt released from the role of timekeeper… so he extends the palette of the drums, with *Espadrille* by playing with lengths of chain and bits of plastic…”

Alison Kerjean enjoys the relationship of the bass with the textural focus of the guitar playing in *Meniscus*, “where volume swelling … and the kind of layering is just so piled on, it’s quite interesting for me to be able to find little melodies and stuff to go along with him without even realising it sometimes I’ll go with him and find this little melody within one of his little in these little loops and make, kind of make that into the main feature, grooving and it wasn’t even a conscious kind of thought it was just something that you know [emerges].”

6.4.3 Intra-band dynamics

Intra-band dynamics pertain to how the interactions between performers on stage affect one’s experience of performance, such as body language and a
sense of connection and relationship. It is these dynamics that can often catalyse transcendent experience.

During John Encarnacao’s first show with improvisation band Espadrille he describes the challenge of “how you make several people make one sound” and become cohesive as an ensemble. When it does occur, Encarnacao finds a “very pure pleasure about that, because it’s so hard to engineer that on purpose” (JE). He describes a “tangible sense that the whole ensemble was working towards a single purpose, and since the music was in no way planned, it feels like something that happens on the level of intuition.” Encarnacao considers this “a transcendent experience already, ‘cause it feels like you’re in tune with each other, that you’re feeding off each other, that you’re… creating something out of your listening and your rapport and your personal facility with sound, and it’s almost, it’s beyond your understanding, that the, the end result is as cohesive as it is” (JE). It is this notion of getting to the point of “something big, beyond your understanding… [where] you’re headed towards that zone of transcendence” (JE).

Body language of fellow performers can also have a strong impact on the performer’s state of mind. Justin Ashworth finds that he is quite conscious of the body language of other performers in his ensemble: “and if I don’t start, if I don’t hear them then I usually don’t think about it either, and so I’m there with them, and so we all feel that when… Whereas sometimes I can tell it’s not working for, someone … [where] I can see … the drummer’s head off, sort of like she’s not really listening, she’s just waiting for her cue or, the cellist doesn’t play in that, that song you know, so she’s just kicking back up the back you know… Sometimes they’re really absorbed in what they’re doing, and sometimes they’re not…” (JA). These responses whether in fact real or imagined, have a strong effect on a performer and may prevent them from accessing a particular state of mind. Holly Harrison also speaks of the response from watching your fellow musicians play, recalling a connection with a fellow musician “that’s not just musical but it’s physical in a sense that I know [he’s] really feeling it when he starts grooving in a particular way or, and because you see someone grooving like that it is like positive feedback and you think like a
feedback circle and you think ‘yeah man I am really feeling it too’, so whether you were or weren’t at the beginning and then you start playing better because someone is grooving.”

When there is a sense of worry about the ensemble, transcendent experiences rarely manifest. The focus of Justin Ashworth, when playing “the usual band stuff, like the songs and whatever, I’m usually quite conscious during that… [and] I don’t find any of that [transcendent] stuff really happens. I find that … I’m quite focused on what everyone’s playing, and because it’s very organised music… I have to be a lot more involved consciously in the music, which kind of, I think, makes it more exhausting…”

Justin Ashworth also espouses the sense of connection through touring with his band. “You… and your… band are really good mates, you’ve known each other for years. But when you go to another city, and you have to spend that time in a band together… stinking the place out, and talking shit and boring each other to tears, not that that’s what happened on our trip … regardless of what you’re going through too … it deepens your understanding of each other, I mean, it could go the other way, and a lot of bands break up because they give each other the shits on tour, but I haven’t had that happen yet” (JA).

The relationships inherent in a band situation often catalyse transcendent experiences. For Holly Harrison, “these sort of transcendental experiences, or whatever, altered states of concentration for me, are highly dependent on who you are playing with, as it doesn’t just happen with … any old somebody, they have got to be good musicians. It comes from, I think that it has got to be mutual in the sense that good sounds come from when people feel good about playing together but more than that, good sounds occur when people feel comfortable playing together” (HH).

In Lloyd Swanton’s own band, The Catholics, the stage is always set up with the drums on the right, with Swanton enjoying being close to the high hat so as to ‘give’ his sound to the drummer ‘fairly immediately’.
As an improvising trio that has played together for over twenty years, The Necks have developed an innate understanding of an approach that works well for them. Lloyd Swanton articulates, “as one third of The Necks, if I’m the person who comes up with the first motif, I’m generally looking for something that is sufficiently stimulating for the other guys, but also sufficiently non-specific that it doesn’t tell them, ‘let’s do THAT, and let’s go over there now!’ So it’s a question of getting the balance right between ambiguity and purpose. So that’s kind of what I’ll be looking for... And none of that is particularly transcendent, that’s... functionalistic...” (LS).

Expanding on these strategies leads into what Swanton describes as the ‘rituals’ that occur. “There’s two rituals... well there’s probably more than that, one is that we don’t particularly dress up, we just wear what we like to wear; we set up in a very specific physical kind of arrangement, quite different to what a lot of piano trios do; we do that thing of waiting for someone to start, which has a subsidiary sort of effect of basically silencing in the room, and that’s a sort of Gandhian sort of philosophy that I’ve sort of picked up over the years, which is that in front of a noisy audience the best way to shut them up is to just stand there, do nothing, someone turns the lights down, gives signals, it’s quite obvious that something’s about to happen that you’re not going to do anything ‘til it’s quiet. But we’re not waiting for the room to go silent, we do appreciate the silence, but that standing still at the start is totally about us waiting for someone to start” (LS). Additionally, Swanton likes to play with his eyes closed but “I assume the other guys have their eyes open...”

John Encarnacao’s performance strategies are geared towards eliciting the unexpected. Such strategies involve tuning his guitar in a “non-standard way so that when my hands fall on things, they’re not what I expect to hear... and I use effects in such a way that... I don’t know exactly what the sound is that’s going to emerge” (JE). The purpose behind it is “sort of setting up... simple systems, that I understand enough to be partially in control of, but which are guaranteed to give me results that will surprise me.” Such an approach has had a positive
effect as it “engenders exploration and wonder, and I think it’s so much harder to do that with, with the pop song form” (JE). In contrast, Leo Abrahams finds that when he plays in an alternate guitar tuning he is “playing by shape, and that doesn’t feel as musical to me, just ‘cause I’ve never taken the time to learn those tunings” (LA).

6.4.5 Relationship to one’s instrument

A performer’s relationship to their instrument of choice provides scope for investigation into transcendent experience, as it is through their instruments by which they create the sound. As detailed below, some musicians thrive off the unfamiliar whereas others espouse the familiar.

Although obviously owning his own drum-kit, Tony Buck, is mostly travelling around Europe and “playing really improvised music, really open improvised music, so... the drum kit that you get, it’s some sort of framework, some sort of parameter that you play within, so it’s kind of nice, it gives the music some sort of framework in which to play. So you deal with those limitations and [they] just get opened up to you, the instrument’s limitations and possibilities. So it’s kind of a good thing to inform the music, [particularly] when you’re playing a music that’s not really informed by anything. And then when you’re playing rock kind of things, usually it doesn’t really matter about the kit, there’s a bottom line kind of kit that you use...” (TB). Contrasting with many drummers’ equipment needs, Tony’s open approach to music making is also reflected in the instrument itself Tony doesn’t even bring his own cymbals, rather “I bring sticks and little bits and pieces, but I kind of like the idea of being able to get music out of anything. It’s really a philosophical kind of thing I have, not really a mantra ‘I will make music out of anything’ but, that something I like the idea of that it’s possible, and that informs the music, I like that” (TB). Holly Harrison also finds that changes in drum-kit setup “encourages you to play a whole lot better with new creativity.”

For drummer Matthew Robertson, the relationship to his drum-kit is based around that of familiarity and comfort – getting behind another kit may feel like it is “not your place (MR),” whereas returning to his own drum-kit it “feels
comfortable and everything sounds so familiar and… sounds the way… you wanted to sound and you’re comfortable with that… I don’t know it’s just something about playing, it’s the energy of playing it just you know…” (MR).

Ryan McRobb revealed issues of engaging with one’s instrument, where he sees that the problem he had with his earlier *mousetrapreplica* material is that he “had to think, so much about it. And it’s hard when… improvising, on the guitar, as well ‘cause I’m, doing, this crazy stuff with my feet, as well... so I had to get to the point where I had to think less about that and get to the point where I could be more sporadic, I wouldn’t need to stop, [and] pre-plan something in my head” (RM).

Also with an extensive use of technology with his guitar rig, Leo Abrahams discusses how it impacts on your relationship to your instrument: “I think you would find, everybody finds their own level of how complicated the technology is versus how their creativity works. And I’ve been above the threshold, like found that I worry more about what the technology’s doing than what I’m playing then it begins to suffocate my ideas. And I’ve been below it; in fact the interesting thing is that the lower you go the more ideas you have. Like doing it, trying to do a gig with just a guitar into an amp is like insane for me, because basically my thing is sounds, but you finds ways to get around it so… I think a lot about Lloyd [Swanton] actually, he’s on double bass but he comes up with the most incredible sounds from it and yeah, that’s interesting” (LA).

Jon Hopkins’ engagement with his live instrument “is just more like a vessel for playing back things that I’ve already made, but different orders and different combinations,” and his use of instruments has evolved with his musical expression through his life, although he “wrote my first album when I was nineteen and I’ve been using the same synth, and most of the same software since then and it’s been, cause it’s such great software it’s helped me to keep changing, evolving and getting more complex over those years. But I felt it’s time for a change, so I got, I’m forcing myself into the new programming world, just learning Logic and also I’m doing more film scores now so, I mean the old system just couldn’t handle running a screen with it…” But overall in terms of a
relationship with his instruments, perhaps akin to Matthew Robertson’s sense of home, comfort and familiarity of his own drum-kit, Jon Hopkins states “I’ve definitely got a relationship with that particular Trinity [synthesiser], it just comes from so many years of, …I’ve just got hundreds of my homemade sounds in there that I still love…” (JH).

Adrian: Do you feel as though you have a particular relationship, to those instruments?

Justin Ashworth: Oohaaah, I mean is it wrong for a man to love a guitar?

Adrian: Of course not.

Justin Ashworth: Ok, it is when he puts his balls in it and strums himself to ecstasy.

Justin Ashworth recalls his bass playing days, where he was playing regularly, but “couldn’t have done those gigs on… someone else’s instrument, or if it was someone else’s amp even… The tone, like if it doesn’t respond the way that you play… Then you, you can’t do it you know?” (JA). He also reflects how “a drummer is an obvious example of that, because… it’s like asking a dancer to dance in someone else’s body” (JA).

Karen Heath feels that she has the closest relationship with the clarinet and bass clarinet, “just because I’ve been playing it the longest and… studied tertiary education on, on the clarinet and, when I did my masters, and, my biggest performances, that have been the most memorable, have been on the clarinet” (KH). Even though she is a fluent multi-instrumentalist, “I absolutely adore, everything else that I’m playing… [but] if I want to have a good practice, I won’t sit down and do three hours of scales on the flute, because… I don’t know, it doesn’t appeal to me for some reason” (KH). That is, the clarinet provides Heath with a sense of ‘home’.

Leo Abrahams’ relationship with his instrument, “it’s something I know the answer to but I’ve never tried to put it into words. Like I’ve got a lot of guitars, and I think really carefully about what I’d bring. The thing with that one, I’ve had it a long time, it’s got a bit of a story attached to it, I’ve been through a lot with it, and it’s sort of it’s got quite a round, full tone whereas most of the guitars that
I play are sort of twangy and beaten up, quite regressive and wiry. I find that I can be very ambiguous with its sound or I can be very direct with its sound within a band that has lots of thick instruments going on, I need that. If I had one of the guitars that I’d need to play most of the rest of my life, it would be too wiry, so that guitar could be quite a thing really. It’s got great sustain! [laughter]” (LA).

Intimate relationships are established between performer and their instrument. There is a sense of responsibility over the sound that one plays. Mirabai Peart recalls a teacher telling her she “needed a better violin, and he gave me a complex about it, but I didn’t have the money and it hasn’t been a priority for me, ’cause I feel like the limitations that I’m dealing with now, are my limitations, not the violin’s limitations. And if that changes, then I’ll deal with it.”

Such an approach also facilitates a sense of humility regarding one’s instrument. Peart continues, “three years ago I completely changed how I hold my violin, so I had to sort of start from the beginning again…. It was really humbling and as a result I have to keep going back to the basics and then I can be free, as long as I’m kind of keeping things moving then I can be free with it.” This freedom comes from discipline and work – “Basically my relationship with the instrument is that I need to be disciplined with it, cause if I’m going to be at my best, my most free, then I need to be constantly playing, maintaining that level. And then when I’m free, it’s beautiful, it responds, and we’re sort of one I guess.”

Mirabai Peart also espouses that using one’s instrument as a tool of sonic exploration affords the development of an intimate relationship with an instrument. This intimacy with one’s instrument is supported by Phil McCourt, who has “been playing the same guitar for about… maybe eight years? And all the little ways in which I’ve bent it and fucked it up are all very nice, very pleasurable experiences.” There is a sense of comfort engendered in the relationship with one’s instrument – “I play better on my own guitar… but I also play better with my own band and stuff so it’s just that, being in your spot I think. Playing your own guitar through your own stuff, but yeah that’s interesting,
I would, I do have a bit of a, favour for my own guitar. Not just a six string piece of wood, yeah.”

Cameron Brennan’s relationship with his drum kit thrives on a sense of comfort and a sense of embodiment with the instrument that doesn’t occur with other drum kits. Likewise for Matthew Robertson, who thrives in the ‘home’ environment constructed by his own drum kit sitting on his own carpet.

When asked about relationships with particular pianos when performing with The Necks, Chris Abrahams replied “yes, particularly... well, I mean in the sense of, I think I experience myself when I play music... hopefully there’s a uniqueness to the way I play as a piano player, what’s developed in a... so, yes, yes that’s my relationship as a piano player.” Here, Abrahams is implying that each instrument brings forth a unique relationship with him as a player.

Holly Harrison has named her trumpet ‘Vincent’; in particular it is the visceral aspect that forms the strong relationship in addition to being her longest standing instrument. Harrison states: “I do consider playing wind instruments to be a more personal experience than playing drums, funnily enough not just because of the physicality of it, I don’t know it is just something to do with the sound coming from literally within you, like blowing air rather than hitting something. Although of course I enjoy playing drums but I just think that it is extremely different and I think I don’t know, for me it shapes the relationship between them... sometimes the instrument feels really close, like not physically, but like you never put it down and sometimes in feels really foreign regardless of how much playing you’ve been doing ... it just feels really strange.” Chantel Bann also remarks on the sound coming from within, as transcendent experiences occur more when she is singing: “because it’s such a physical instrument, you’re using your whole body to sing. I find that I go into a different place if I’m singing as opposed to when I’m playing keys.”

The relationship with one’s instrument is embedded in how one considers one’s own musical practice and the potential transcendent experiences that occur. Jeff Martin has the strongest relationships with the “most exotic, esoteric
aspects of my collection, things like the oud from the Middle East. I’ve got a few, [and] ...you develop a language with these instruments. I’ve very fortunate that when I was in my adolescence and forming my ideas and ideals about music, I had saturated my psyche with music from that part of the world so that when it came time to start writing music, and the only instrument at my disposal as an 18 year old from Windsor, Ontario, was a guitar, but what I did was make my guitar sound like instruments from that part of the world." In particular tying it into the spiritual approach to music making, Martin “spent my entire fortune on travelling to those parts of the world and finding those instruments that I had been in love with for many, many lives.” Martin describes an affinity for a particular instrument:

...definitely the sarod from India, I seem to have a penchant for that. And like I said, the oud, it’s just one of these things, whether you believe in past lives or not, there’s something to be said for an eighteen year old boy picking up these instruments and being able to play them with accuracy, knowing the tunings when there’s no theory involved, there’s no gurus, no teachers, so how did I know? There’s something to be said for that.

For Martin, his instruments are not just a tool, but an engagement with the physical and spiritual self of the musician. This also resonates with Tony Buck, who “was always really drawn to doing it [drumming] without question, it was really sort of, I felt as though I had no say in it, I was just really drawn to doing it” (TB).

Larger instruments facilitate a strong physical relationship with a musician. In describing his relationship, Lloyd Swanton “can make some very easy similes that it’s really like embracing a human being. It’s such a big instrument, and you do wrap your arms around it, that it’s kind of easy psychology, but I also think that it has some significance, it’s a very fundamental, embrace is a very fundamental human action... I just have a very physical relationship with the instrument. I try to draw out a depth of sound that is, y’know, ever increasing...” In contrast to his electric upright bass, Swanton is “not as romantically attached to it... it’s physically much lighter, it’s centre of balance is much higher so I actually have to kind of be mindful that I’m holding it, where I barely notice that I’m holding the double bass, it just moves into me, it really is
like someone moving against you. I mean I’m very happy with that instrument in many ways, it’s made my life so much easier for touring, and it does give a very articulate sound, it sings really nicely with the bow, and you know I’m in a better psychological state when I get on stage during a tough tour cause I haven’t been dealing the psychological trauma of touring with a full size double bass! But it’s not a full size bass, there’s some things that it does better, it amplifies better which is a real key consideration, *The Necks* can get quite loud. But I don’t think I’ll ever really fall in love with it, just as I play electric bass guitar, and I really love the instrument and a lot of my influences in music are electric bass players, but I’ve never felt any kind of romance towards the instrument, it’s just a plank of wood with strings on it [laughter]. Like Swanton, Alison Kerjan also feels her bass to be somewhat “like a person… I just didn’t get along with it much and… then just recently I watched a mate’s band play. And he also plays a Spector [bass] and he kind of ignited something inside of me” (AK).

Luis Rojas recalls spontaneous moments of creativity: “I have been in situations too where like some dodgy old piano in the corner at someone’s house or at the store or something and I’ve never played it before and I’ll be like see what this sounds like and be playing it and something about the sound grabs me, and like on the spot I’ll write something. Like the sound of the instrument or the feel of it and straightaway it evokes a melody in me or something? Or a rhythm or something and I’ll instinctively just start writing.” Chantel Bann adds, “It’s like the instrument plays you.” Rojas attributes it to having “so much music in my head that is just sort of there and hasn’t had a chance to come out yet,” where “it needs to find its voice to come out. You get an instrument and it comes out…” (CB)

For Luis Rojas, “from the moment when I first started playing music, it was like you form a bond with your instrument. And obviously that’s referring to instruments that I own that are mine. Like, for instance I now own two guitars, my Rickenbacker and a Telecaster and whilst I think I feel a bond with the Tele, like it plays its role in my music, it’s nothing like the relationship I have with my Rickenbacker, it’s almost like the Telecaster is my friend and the Rickenbacker is my lover. I’ve always said that when I finally pass away, when someone finally
murders me, I don’t want a burial, but I want to be cremated with my guitar. My guitar is part of my soul. Like, even just to look at it, even having it in my presence, I don’t know how else to say it except there’s this weird connection with the guitar and it makes me feel something, in terms of the moments I’ve shared with that guitar… for fifteen years now? My Theremin is another one, like I built that, I built that with my own hands… The Theremin I built with my own hands is kind of the Theremin for me. Just the, the image thing, aesthetic thing or something like that. My ugly, beat up Theremin is my little baby. So when I perform on those instruments, there’s a definite connection and intense relationship with those instruments. If I just pick up your guitar or something, I think that in order for me to feel comfortable playing it, or get anything out of that experience, I’d have to feel something in relationship to the instrument.”

Both Rojas and Bann benefit from the familiarity of their instruments in a very embodied fashion.

While Seth Olinsky had become familiar with his guitar at the time of the interview, there isn’t a strong sense of attachment: “I’m accustomed to what I can do with this instrument, but if it went away I’d keep making music on other instruments.”

Leo Abrahams, too, thrives off using different equipment at each show: “one of the nice things about going and playing in different places is that you get different amps every time, and I really, really like having different amps. I think if anything, like I was saying earlier about the thing about going below your threshold, one of the things that’s good about going below that technology threshold is, stripping away, stripping away, relating that to your question is, and this has happened to me, if I get to a gig and something has gone wrong with the amp or it doesn’t work anymore, then for about a second I’m like pissed off and then I’m like ‘oh that’s good cause it’ll make me find a way around it’… [and] I mean, the guitar of course is very important to me, but it wouldn’t be the end of the world if I had to borrow someone’s guitar and do the gig.”
Lloyd Swanton speaks of the necessary physical limitations of playing the bass and how that in part determined his choice in musical gesture. Lloyd’s ‘limitation’ is in itself an informant of the creative process. Swanton in particular refers to bassist Charlie Haden, “you know, the penny dropped for me listening to Charlie Hayden, he’s basically trying to make every note a thing of beauty. He doesn’t actually play very fast, possibly because he feels he can’t take sufficient care of those notes, I guess his precious offspring. So that was a huge revelation for me, the notion that every note should be beautiful. And there is something about the bass being so deep and woody that I think you can really highlight that side of that, you can dig down deep into the instrument to bring out those deep sounds, and wallow in them and revel in them.”

This tension of maintaining facility on one’s instrument versus letting oneself go into an experience is also found by Holly Harrison: “I really enjoy thrashing about the stage … but then it really annoys me that I have to stand so still when I play trumpet, but I have to, otherwise the sounds, [and] the tone can’t be produced in the same way.”

The relationship with one’s instrument can also take on a counter-cultural element. Ryan McRobb enjoys “the fact that it’s an unusual guitar to play the sort of music I play” (an Ibanez 335 semi-hollow electric guitar). Intertextually, McRobb enjoys “the sort of association with jazz; the high culture, wanky bullshit. I’m from Melbourne man, I can’t help it” (laughs) (RM).

Justin Ashworth draws on an expression used by dancers describing a piece as “it being in their body.” This was a perceptible sense, with Ashworth describing where “the piece, you could tell that it was new, and it wasn’t in the dancer’s body the way the first piece was, they danced it like they’d been dancing it for twenty five years, and it was there, and it was visceral, … it came across in such a way that it was like you felt the movement and experienced the whole piece, whereas the other one it definitely looked like a bunch of skilled dancers doing some, doing some movement but it didn’t come across like they like they really
felt, felt it the same way and I guess it’s the same sort of thing.” Relating it to his musical practice, “the stuff I’ve been doing for a much longer period of time, the more you do it, the more doing it just becomes part of what you’re expressing and you can just, you know, allow that nothingness, like that sort of Zen idea of meditating and, and reaching enlightenment when your brain just completely shuts off and becomes one, yourself becomes one with the world or whatever you know, that... that with ah, the more you do something, the more you practised at it, the more easily you can fall into that state, whereas the stuff that’s the newer material, it’s not in my body so to speak... It’s like it’s something that I’m still, I know it, and it’s like ‘here I am, I’m, I’m a musician playing this song, regardless of how well I play it, I’m still ... not in my body’.” Ashworth is suggesting that the embodied experience or transcendent experience can indeed be cultivated.

6.4.6 Playing technique

Despite Chris Abrahams’ ability to play dense, repetitive phrases, he has “never had a problem with stamina and I’ve never had a problem with anything to do with RSI or any kind of physical problem with techniques that I’ve used, and I think it’s very similar with Tony [Buck], I don’t think he ever suffers from any repetitive strain injury so to speak. I think I’ve developed muscle memory because I’ve been doing it for so long, I naturally do it, I’ve just naturally fallen into playing the piano, so I just find it very easy to... and also, the more mature you get you realise that to get certain sounds doesn’t require you to play very hard... I don’t like to play the piano if it’s uncomfortable.” Further Abrahams likes to feel in control of his instrument and his state of mind, “personally I just don’t like playing if I don’t feel like I’m in control. I like the feel of the keyboard, I like it to feel comfortable and relaxed under my fingers rather than getting over excited. Once you get over excited, which happens, I mean, I’m not suggesting that it’s great all the time, that’s when I feel disappointed in my playing... I cease to be kind of in control of the situation of playing the piano.”

Luis Rojas doesn’t consider himself to be “the greatest guitarist in the world, like there’s a lot of stuff that I can’t do, that other guys can and that’s great. But
sometimes I feel my playing ability goes up all of a sudden, especially improvising…” Likewise, the instrument of choice largely influences Holly Harrison’s experiences. While playing trumpet, she finds that her instrument “probably blocks any sort of those [intense] physical experiences happening precisely because you need such minute control and movement [of the instrument], to be in control and ensure that the sound comes out” and “if [she] was feeling anything else like these other things… I don’t think that the sound would come out properly.” Whereas playing drums, “times my arms and legs feel really light, I don’t mean like that I am having an out of body experience or anything, like just, my arms or legs feel abnormally light and I can do an amazing fill or do something” (HH).

Different approaches to music-making facilitate different relationships with one’s instrument. For Chris Abrahams, there is a distinct difference in the way he approaches the piano for *The Necks* and *ROIL*. “There’s a different feeling of comfort in playing the piano. I’m not saying that one is more comfortable than the other, but the way I feel the piano in *ROIL* is different to the way I feel it with *The Necks*. *ROIL* is very much to do with my finger and hand movement; playing the piano kind of conventionally, whereas *The Necks* is a much more a total body sort of relationship with the instrument. I mean both have aspects of each other but in terms of tendencies I think *The Necks* is a much more, I mean I use a lot more of my arm muscles and a lot more of my stomach muscles, whereas *ROIL* is much more, maybe a ‘pianistic’ approach than *The Necks*. Certainly there’s a lot more right foot in *The Necks*, I don’t think I even use the sustain pedal in *ROIL*, and that might sound like a kind of facile thing, but it actually makes a huge difference, I don’t really want to go with the sustain pedal…”

The awareness of what experiences the music is evoking is held strongly by Tony Buck. Buck describes “there’s always a sense of responsibility to the music and maybe it’s kind of my hangup, but … I remember when *The Necks* really got on a roll after the first few years, and we’d be setting up this thing and I’d be quite aware that it’s creating kind of strong atmosphere that people in the audience were getting kind of taken with. And I was always aware of what that
kind of element was, but then it’s interesting ‘cause you’re being part of the creative, you’re creating this thing that’s taking them there, but you’ve got to practically keep doing it. You’ve got to keep playing the drums and if you drift away you sort of like stop the whole thing that’s keeping you there, so there’s a certain sort of mechanical necessity to keeping your mind alert.” Buck is describing the tension between being an active and passive participant in the transcendent experience.

The physicality of performing is also something John Encarnacao considers “even though it seems like it might be easier for that to happen in the setting of improvised music, I think it’s very much something that happens within pop and rock styles as well, and there are a number of different triggers. It can be that you’re playing music that you know so well… [where] motor memory takes over and you can forget about what you’re doing physically and experience the music on another level” (JE).

Physical limitations and the comfort of playing an instrument are also an influencing factor. Lloyd Swanton in particular refers to the strain of playing the double bass and accepting the natural fatigue that comes with performance: “Breaking through the pain barrier is too dramatic a term, but I guess it’s the absence of pain, because it’s often pain that dictates what I can play on the instrument, or what I can’t play….” The physicality of playing his instrument influences the musical direction of The Necks improvisations: “I came to a point of accepting that I don’t have the physical stamina that Chris and Tony have, I don’t know if it’s my instrument or my metabolism … I’m now perfectly OK with the idea that I may be playing a particular pattern for ten minutes and I’ll be going ‘I can’t play this anymore, my hand is just hurting too much’, and I’ll change to something else, and I think that’s totally natural, there’s no reason why you should force yourself beyond that point, and it’s basically, again it’s the natural world telling the music to do something, and so I’m sure you’d find points … where I might’ve changed quite abruptly, not always cause sometimes I’m going ‘mmmm, this is going to really hurt in a couple of minutes, I better start morphing into something else’, but there’s definitely times when I’ve had to just
change, bang now.” The ethos of accepting how the music naturally develops and progresses extends into the physicality of playing one’s instrument.

Fatigue is also a contributing factor is Holly Harrison’s performance. Harrison finds “you have always got to play with a certain amount of control and I think in thinking about … intensified or heightened musical experiences really manifest through in extreme control. I have felt ultra aware but for me it transcends my experience through this extreme control that I have over things… I feel like it really affects me at … gigs of late, because I have to worry about saving my lip… and I have really got to worry about… having enough endurance [and] enough stamina to go towards the end.”

Likewise for Alison Kerjan, who is “always really conscious [of] … trying to either play well, but the more I think about it the more I stuff up and so am always in this inner turmoil, of ‘just forget it, just play how it comes’…” This tension is linked with playing technique, which “is what ruins the experiences half the time. That’s actually a big issue like I can be there … really, enjoying it and due to my fingers then [I’d have] … lost it, and I have got to try and get back and the more I think about it the more I stuff up due to my clumsiness.” Once the technique or playing slips, trying to recover that previous moment, unfortunately, can often be fruitless.

For Ryan McRobb, “the actual, small physical action of playing a guitar... it, does, it really counts, in what I do? I guess I’m a fairly tense person, physically, just always have been, …I like to be able to sort of, dig my body into something physical while I play. It’s something I’m quite conscious of… the physical reaction of it… the guitar is the release. As well as the actual music that’s um, I just have… always done this, I’m not sure if I can explain it easily but, there’s always this sort of (percussive guitar noises), um, squashing it, that sort of tension release here I’m really tense, like it’s really full on… you can probably hear *guitar plucking*… it’s often quite, tense music I guess, on guitar.”

Chantel Bann finds the analytical frame of mind for playing technique is detrimental: “as soon as I think about what I’m doing it usually turns out shit.
The less I can actually think about it, or TRY to do something ... [the better].” Mainly talking about vocals, if I think about getting a note then I probably won’t get it. If I just do it, it’ll just come out naturally and I won’t be tight and reserved and uncomfortable sounding.”

Although there is a romantic ideal of losing oneself in performance, Jon Hopkins finds “I’d like to think that, but it’s actually far too much to actually DO to keep it going to have time actually think about that. You can get into a zone where you’re forgetting what you were doing, but there’s so much to actually practically do to keep playing the music that you don’t.” The multifaceted aspects of Hopkins setup require regular awareness of the different components, “I always have one or two shots of vodka before going on, it has the effect of just stopping me thinking that there are people looking at me, just completely vanishes that thought and it makes me get into the zone of what I’m doing with my hands and the equipment and how I’m manipulating it and then you can come out the other side of that and look out between tracks, you can look out and see smiling faces and you can smile back and really relax into it and engage... generally it’s just I’ve got a lot to do…”

6.4.7 The spiritual

The connection between people is seen to occur on a spiritual level. Mirabai Peart describes that as “certain parts of songs that kind of hit the spot or something [laughs].” Peart also draws parallels to sex as “music is energetic, so is sex, so I guess there are similarities... and you play music with other people, it’s a very incredible, sort of spiritual interplay of character…” (MP).

Despite Karen Heath identifying herself an atheist, there is still a sense of the spiritual: “the Tao Te Ching is just a way of life, just that philosophy, and everything makes sense, and everything has its roots in nature and logic, and... beauty as well. So thinking about music and higher planes of existence and connecting to some sort of spiritual energy, I think that, although I’m an atheist, I do think... science... and energy and the ability to transcend bodily constricts are completely related” (KH). This ties in strongly to Leo Abrahams’ notion that...
transcendent experiences are a natural function of normal, biological human processes.

Karen Heath’s compositional interests have dwelled in aspects of the spiritual, “stories about, Greek gods because, I was interested, in how people were perceiving, I, like it was my spiritual journey, you know? And different religions and how people were trying to explain away... life, basically.” Heath’s engagement with the spiritual, both personally and as part of a community has led her to compose a piece “that was played on an inter-faith festival in Melbourne, so it was, a piece that I called ‘Temple’, and um, and I used, sounds that were more ... of Sufi music, and things like that, ... and I threw in a bunch of different stuff there that was, that was meant to implicate, the, sounds that you would associate with ... Rabbis singing and things of that nature. So, I just think that music can really sort of speak so much about bringing people together. So, everything that I write, I tend to sort of ... try and box them into the same category, ‘cause we really bloody are, the same, you know, and that’s what, I’m always trying to do. So I don’t know if it’s good or bad, and I haven’t thought about it, to be honest, about why I do it, but now I’m thinking about it, and that’s cool” (KH).

Phil McCourt feels that “boundaries drop in relation to other people and... your environment and the world that you live in, at that time, may be different... and on top of that is then there’s sort of... the more mind altering, spiritual side [of music-making that] is really for me...” (PM). Likewise Alison Kerjan doesn’t have a specific spiritual practice, but there is still a sense of the spiritual – it’s the reason why she is still playing.

The counterpart to the spiritual aspects of life and music-making is maintaining a grounded and balanced sense of the practical. Tony Buck describes, “I’ve thought about it and I’ve been interested in lots of different ideas at different times in my life, but I feel there’s a certain practicality, a middle road [approach]”. Because experiences are “so multi-dimensional that I don’t know, I like the idea that they are... spiritual practices, being an open minded human being that experiences the different things the world has to offer and in kind of a moderate
[way]… not being extreme at any level at all. Which doesn’t mean I don’t take a position on anything, but maybe that’s why I play lots of different musics, or maybe that’s why I’m just … some sort of professional cat and never make one kind of decision, I don’t really have a or never make political, social position one way or the other.” Perhaps this is indicative of modern day experimental popular music?

Cameron Brennan’s spiritual practice directly informs his performance experiences. Brennan’s approach to the spiritual is a “combination of Wicca and Native American spirituality, [I’m] technically a Reiki practitioner as well but I don’t do it much but from, probably from learning Reiki was when I really understood what energy was and could feel it properly.” Regarding the connection between music and the spiritual, “I don’t actively think of the combination of the two because, but at the same time when I get these things in rehearsals and playing live it is a spiritual thing for me because it’s when I am doing that sort of stuff, I know that I am on the right path … it’s really like I am on my proper spiritual path, we’re not meant to be sitting in offices, you know working on computers and stuff like that, for me, it really feels like I am back on the right path doing something that really speaks to me.” This connection with the spiritual affords a broader connection with a greater life satisfaction. Brendan Smyly, too, comments on how the spiritual impacts his musical practice, “ah, I don’t know. It certainly doesn’t change the type of music I make. In the way that I regard music making, and the way that I continue to make music for … little remuneration. Definitely, it influences in those ways. It doesn’t influence what notes you play, or what sort of sound you make. I don’t think it would have an effect. But it must, it must influence everything, I would imagine” (BS).

Luis Rojas finds that “music in a way is a really, for lack of a better word, spiritual sort of experience, I mean I’m not a religious man and I wouldn’t describe myself as a spiritual person, but the existence of music in my life and the level to which it affects me and how involved I am in it, is kind of like a spiritual thing – energy that exists, I can’t even explain, it’s just there, it’s a, like an answer in itself.”
Phil McCourt also finds one’s spiritual persuasion has an inevitable influence on his musical practice and experience, “even though it’s just sub-conscious” (PM). McCourt, however, was less direct when describing his own persuasion: “I’m just, for want of a better word... confused about it, but I mean in a good way, and definitely not ... any sort of organised religion, but then, I just think, atheism is [also] very brick wall.” As such, McCourt doesn’t attribute a particular spiritual schema onto the music of *Captain Kickarse and the Awesomes*:

I think... Christian people like our music, and there’s Christian people who probably hate it, and so do a lot of atheists and agnostics, so there’s nothing, sorta going, you know, ‘oh you went from a G-flat to an A-minor seven... fuckin’, I don’t think he exists either!’ ... it’s not as direct as that *laughing*.

The spiritual, too, isn’t necessarily an association musicians are comfortable with. Ryan McRobb, however, “wish[es] that wasn’t the case... honestly, that’s, it’s not something I’d really think about, or strive towards, or anything like that. I haven’t thought about it, but um, you know music and spirituality ... there’s a deep connection, a very deep connection, I think” (RM). It is something that he is aware of, but not something he has pursued.

Justin Ashworth refers to himself as “so agnostic that I’m practically an atheist.” Justin Ashworth’s Tai Chi practice informed his music-making and greater life. Jon Hopkins’ practice of kundalini yoga has informed his approach to music and life: “it’s the most amazing thing of all that this all exists, that there’s life and the fact that humans can have these amazing experiences... that’s just the most incredible power of the brain, which if there’s one sacred thing it’s got to be that, the human brain ... to comprehend things and experience things, it’s almost the peak of everything really... so yeah, I guess it’s a hard question to answer, but if I believe in anything it’s just the life-force itself is, that’s a spiritual thing.”

The spiritual has played a large part of Jeff Martin’s musical endeavours “since, certainly the inception of *The Tea Party*. I was lucky enough to meet one of my heroes at a relatively young age, I met Jimmy Page in 1995, when I was twenty-four years old, but he took me under his wing. I had an interest in [Aleister] Crowley before that, but then it really took a deeper meaning. I was allowed into
aspects of that esoteric world that has given me a lot of confidence in my music and the ability to push the envelope further.” Martin’s spiritual practice “has a lot to do with Thelema, which are aspects of what Aleister Crowley taught. The Golden Dawn, things like that. If I had a practice, that’s kind of where I’m coming from” (JM). Specifically connecting to his current life path and musical practice, “there’s a very strong part of me in my belief system that I do believe that we keep coming back again… and so what I’m learning this time around, I’m learning through these experiences, through music and these performances… I think my heart is getting bigger, my capacity for compassion is becoming stronger and my desire for unconditional love with things is also becoming stronger so that’s all coming through the music. It’s exponential.” Concerning specific elements of his musical practice, improvisation takes cues from the journey of the soul; past lives inform his technical facility on particular instruments.

Leo Abrahams, too, has tried many things but doesn’t ascribe to something in particular, “it’s more a sort of a, being aware of that attitude to life is beneficial” (LA). Likewise Chris Abrahams has no spiritual practice.

Self-professed atheists still espouse a sense of the spiritual from music. Lloyd Swanton elaborates, “I’d probably describe myself as an atheist… and yet having said that I feel that music is by definition, or can be, very, very spiritual. I guess I would say that if there is an inherent human need for spiritual nourishment, I get it through music… maybe it’s more profound than what I was just saying about the elusive quality of the basic physics of the universe, and music is one way of gaining some knowledge of how our universe works. But, I found it profoundly satisfying, very calming, [and] very focussing. To make music the centre of your life is really a pretty good way of leading your life, I find” (LS).

Mirabai Peart is drawn to “the mystical side of any religion where you’re connecting with the divine inside yourself… [where] you’re connecting with the whole universe, the whole flow – you know what I mean? … I forget this so much, when I’m getting caught up with life, and musically getting caught up in playing the right notes and the practical side of things I do to play music, what I
try and remind myself is just to follow that, that spark or that feeling, like the
energy, follow that … sort of really beautiful, pure kind of spark that you can feel
even in a conversation, or when you’re dancing to music, or when you’re just
watching kids at play …”

Elements of the spiritual also permeate other music-making contexts. On the
spiritual aspect of practicing: “Only in the sense that it’s, like the process is
considered to be a sacred one, a devotion to your craft and to your guru, to
your teacher. It’s sort of like meditation practice, your music practice and the
hours that you put into it. The devotion involved in the very act of sacrificing
yourself to your practice” (MP).

Although Seth Olinsky had a background of Transcendental Meditation practice
(TM), these experiences do not necessarily directly correlate with his music-
making practice. Olinsky states, “it led to having more openness and activity in
my life which has informed the music, but I don’t think it directly relates per se to
the music.” Meditative experience is seen with the capacity to “deepen one’s
own creativity, in the same way that if I was an athlete doing TM or whatever
relates to the person who’s doing it can just deepen your own connection to
that thing inside yourself, it can kind of increase your focus and awareness and
creativity or stillness or whatever that can inform your basketball playing or your
writing or any sort of action you do in the world.”

6.4.8 Connection to sound

John Encarnacao describes his approach to music making and sound
production in Espadrille, “rather than the playing of individual notes, rhythms, or
melodies, it’s like… the idea that you’re playing with… every aspect of the
sound in a tactile, sensual way, and Brendan [Smyly] can do that, with his
electronics, [and] … his saxophone, the way he treats the saxophone with the
electronics, and [drummer] Josh does it very much with his… very timbral way
of playing the drums, and from what I understand that was something that he
first did with the earlier group that Brendan had called The Monstrous Now.”
Encarnacao expands on Smyly’s approach to music-making in *Espadrille*, “I think Brendan has… a poise about the way he approaches the music, he... rather than being an agent who is sort of, imposing their will upon the sound, which of course he is, and of course, we all are... he has something of the attitude of, attention. Of being attentive to what the moment will invite, which is a different way of, being disposed to the performance of music than, you know, a virtuoso classical musician who perhaps has a formidable task in front of them and, has to be match fit, or various types of rock music, where it’s a feeling of, making a decisive impact and acting” (JE).

6.4.9 Composition

As the members of Captain Kickarse and the Awesomes have developed interpersonally and musically over the years, guitarist Phil McCourt finds that “we don’t count stuff out anymore” and despite the often-complex rhythms “those kind of pieces write themselves... and yeah, [we] listen... to the void” (PM). McCourt is describing a process of his ensemble moving from an intellectual, conscious approach to composition to ‘listening to the void’ that engenders the transcendent experience. The influence of the setting also inevitably influences the creative process. McCourt describes “a weekend up in Blackheath in the Blue Mountains, where the three of us... and we just sat, in this big room and played music, overlooking the, overlooking the valley and stuff, and just the environment that you’re in, and the, you know ... we just made a real point of dim lights, [with] everything in a nice arrangement in the room, everybody’s in a triangle, and there’s a little lamp between us, and just the little touches to make it a real spin out of a thing.” That is, there is an inherent desire to access the unconscious or transcendent experience throughout the creative process.

During the interview with Jon Hopkins, I had the privilege of a guided tour of some of his music and compositional processes: “I’m going to play you a piece of music... that... has the effects of transcendence. I would find myself when I was writing it, I would keep trying to work on it, just listening to it, because it’s taking me so far down that route and I would be looping certain passages and just jamming over it myself and just enjoying it, so you can have that but it
always gets ruined by the need to finish something and the need to detail and I’m trying to do less of that, keep that joy alive within it, but it’s hard because ultimately you’ve got to finish something so it always has, particularly when you’re doing your first bit of writing, it happens loads at first, because you have to loop something and jam over it to find a way through it, that’s often how I work” (JH).

Hopkins’ sensitivity to the transcendent experience in his compositions isn’t just entering into such a state, but also how that state finishes. To requote Hopkins, “what’s interesting, is the end of the transcendent experience, when you come back to reality, so I always try to put that in very clearly, in this it’s a little dictaphone recording of a piano piece that I just… improvised, just once after I’d written the rest of it, I just gotta put something in that actually has the sound of rain and puts you back in the earth and, [with the] totally dry dictaphone piano recording… [you] can kind of hear the rain starting to come in… And that’s supposed to be the waking up bit, kind of eased back into reality” (JH).

Jon Hopkins’ doesn’t consider his performance experiences to go as “deep” as during his compositions. Performance experiences can be considered “similarly amazing, but you can’t release yourself so much and be able to keep performing. You can touch upon going to another plane, you can feel euphoria starting to rise in you when you’re performing in that situation, but you can’t totally go there.” The reality of what Jon may be doing in such a situation “would’ve been rolling around on the floor… and that’s really not going to get anyone anywhere.” Such experiences outside of music performance, however, resulted in a piece of music. These experiences are a focal point of Hopkins’ compositional intentions: “I thought that for once I managed to capture exactly how an experience felt. In fact I did end up making two pieces out of it, one is called ‘Drifting Up’ and one is called ‘Drifting Down’, and they are the same piece of music, but one has kind of got the beats and one hasn’t.”

Improvisation is also at the core of Luis Rojas’ compositional process – there is no set agenda. “…straight from the word go [for me], music is an improvisation, it’s an organic sort of flowing thing and the whole, that’s why I love recording so
Phil McCourt speaks of the transition from a calculated approach to composition – learning to speak with the musical elements that resonated with them earlier in the “time bending days... they don’t flow... counting everything out...” McCourt’s compositional processes has since evolved: “I think it just sort of got to the point where we’re letting those kind of pieces write themselves and, and yeah, listen to the, to the void” (PM). McCourt is describing a process of his ensemble moving from an intellectual, conscious approach to composition to ‘listening to the void’ that engender a predisposition to transcendent experience.

Highlights of the compositional process for Karen Heath are band rehearsals. “I would say that when we’re in the moment of writing, and we’re jamming on certain riffs, I love that, and I do have moments where I feel a little bit outside of myself and, but still fully present and fully aware” (KH).

John Encarnacao embraces the idea that “the melody exists as a guide... which, the song is something that occurs when it’s performed. It’s, it’s, it’s analogous to the idea that the music is in the score... [where] the music is not really in the score, the music is in the air when it’s performed.”

6.4.10 Humour

I wasn’t thinkin’ about the taste. Just thinking about, ‘I’m eating a sandwich!’ (RM).

The presence of mind established in improvisation and the energy that comes forthwith can also bring forth a sense of playfulness, irreverence and humour.

Ryan McRobb recalls a free improvisation with mousetrapreplica, “before we’d been playing together, officially. And we were just doing a thing and, I turned on his washing machine.... it’s the sound thing, but it’s also, ‘ha ha!’ , like your mind’s going, ‘I’m being very creative’ and that’s just where it kinda, came to? Even if it didn’t matter, it wasn’t turned on, so I ended up turning on this tap and
filling a bucket with water… and just making… a sound thing, but it was also just a straight, creative thing as well… Creativity wasn’t… just restricted to music… it was just, it could have come out, [in] what you might call a theatre form… I don’t know (chuckles)” (RM).

McRobb also recalls an improvisation workshop performance in his tertiary music studies based in experimental, or free music. In these classes “you just get dudes, who just, don’t click [or] connect with that at all. That’s why, with a lot of them, it’s just, you know, ‘oh yeah, whatever,’ (plays guitar randomly), you know that sort of thing… so I stopped playing and, ate a sandwich. And he was freakin’ out, I just kinda stared at him a bit, you know… and just… he was very afraid… It’s a little bit of ego too [on my part], because I felt really comfortable doing that stuff, [and] he didn’t. And I think he was just… some jazz wanker, or something, it was just like, ‘you’re in my world now boy!’ *chuckles*” (RM). “That sort of absurdity, I’m right into it. It’s a very free, form of expression… [with] very few limits, and may not have a lot of value a lot of the time but, it’s a very limitless form of expression…” (RM). This embodied act was also enriched with the act of improvisation, focused on the joy of the activity itself: “[I] wasn’t thinkin’ about the taste. Just thinking about, ‘I’m eating a sandwich!’ At the time, you know, I was in this sort of musical, … flow, and just, ‘I’m gonna eat a sandwich,’ And, I was probably trying to make music with it… it’s just fuckin’ nuts…” (RM).

6.4.11 Making mistakes

The notion of making mistakes lends itself to a number of areas of discussion. Firstly, it ties into the creative process and dealing with an ‘ideal form’ and secondly it prompted reflection on one’s own music-making prowess.

Concerning different forms of popular music, in particular that of a singer-songwriter, John Encamacoa finds “…it feels hard to break away from this idea of… reaching towards an ideal form, rather than the form being something that you create as you go along.” One of Encamacoa’s strategies with his band Warmer, however, is to alter the vocal line each time it is performed rather than
striving towards the perfect way to do it: “It’s the exact opposite. Because I feel like for many years that’s what I would do as a singer. I would have an idea of ‘this is the melody, and I’m gonna try the best I can to sing the melody’.” Encarnacão found that approach meant that he “was doomed to failure” as he “would never be able to sing the melody perfectly, so I would always be frustrated with what I was doing” (JE). So rather then there being any idea of an ideal realisation of the melody, Encarnacão found that “it’s an embrace of the idea that the melody exists as a guide... and the song is something that occurs when it’s performed” (JE).

Regarding an ethos for the sounds that are produced, Swanton finds that “the lovely thing about The Necks is that to a point there’s really no such thing as a bad sound - any room has characteristics, and we can just say well ‘let’s investigate those, let’s bring those to the fore’” (LS). Chris Abrahams echoes this sentiment, stating “there’s no cup of gold that any of us can name, so therefore there’s no idea of failure, or, the only thing is like an approach.”

Justin Ashworth recalls one of his band mates commenting on his guitar playing: “I wasn’t offended when he said it, but he said ‘oh, look the thing… I don’t like about your guitar playing is when you solo... if you fuck up you draw attention to it... and you fall back on like an easy lick, and it’s really obvious to me that you’ve fucked up because you’ve fallen back on this easy lick’.” Ashworth concedes, “that’s totally what I do, if I’m doing something and it doesn’t work and I get trapped... I drop into to these kind of blues licks that are tried and true... It’s just because I don’t want people to hear me fuck up, so I’ll play something easy” (JA). and he’s like “you should just, if you fuck up, you should just keep, keep going, and, and just let that like, you know just forget it even happened and just keep going, but instead my (new) solos are always shit from then on, and so then the next night at (Sydney), it was the best I’d ever played guitar in my life, so I just went on, and did the solo, and fucked it up, and I just kept going you know, got to the end of it and it was the best guitar solo I’ve ever played. I find that I still go back to that when I’m playing, I still sort of ‘err’, and I’ll just do these things that I’ve practiced and you know and it’s, it’s really hard for me to get past. It pulls me out of the moment, it, it always pulls me out of the
moment like I, I think, almost to the point now where like the two songs that we do where I do a guitar solo, I... when that part of the song happens it’s, no matter where I am, I come out of it and I’m suddenly ‘oh, I’ve gotta do this now, oh errer’ you know, and (I think Alice was telling me) ‘you should, you should practice your guitar more,’ and I’m like ‘oh (sighs), I know (laughs), leave me alone,’ she’s like ‘yeah you just, yeah your solo didn’t work tonight or something’ and I’ll be like ‘grrr, if you could hear that, then there’s something definitely wrong with my playing you know?’ But I know it going in like I’m, I’m quite afraid sometimes to even play that part of the song you know?”

This element of risk is an important aspect of performance for Holly Harrison. “I know it does, but I think that risk taking does have something to do with it, that there is more satisfaction from taking a risk and even if it doesn’t pull off completely, then there is no satisfaction from not taking any risk and even if it doesn’t come off completely... there is no satisfaction from not taking any risks cause, then you feel really bad if it was easy and you still stuffed up (laughs)” (HH).

Chance ‘mistakes’ can also facilitate a positive outcome in performance. Phil McCourt recalls his bass player “accidentally step[ping]... on his mute pedal, on his tuner, which bypassed [the signal] ... and then he quickly took it off, but it came through the playing, and we tracked it, and we listened back and we were like ‘that’s fuckin’ awesome,’ and like ... it just makes no sense, it doesn’t make any ... and obviously it makes sense somewhere, in someone’s theory but like, it’s better off that we don’t really [understand] ... my brain’s still going, ‘how’s this working?’.” This surprise proved to be the essential part of such a powerful experience and gave McCourt a sense of naivety and wonderment about what was occurring.

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The live performance environment

This section presents interview data concerning the live performance environment and its impact on performance experience.
Issues of performance preparation pertain to moments directly prior to the performance event – as opposed to practice or rehearsal, which is discussed later in this chapter. Each performer appears to have their own approach to playing a show – whether it is a case of warming up on their instrument or drinking a bit, the common theme is that the performers like to relax before a show.

My own performance preparations are muscle stretches, vocal warm ups and breathing exercises. There is an effort to clear my mind to tackle the task at hand – to give life to Space Project’s music.

Lloyd Swanton finds “The more successful approach usually comes from starting very sparsely and I don’t tend to relate transcendence to sparseness, in that I mean you could possibly… envisage a scenario where we achieve a transcendent state before we come on stage, and every note we play is adding to that [but] we’re not usually inclined to take that approach. In fact we usually tend to buggerise around in the band room doing anything but talking about music, I mean, again it’s that sort of distraction thing, I think just by keeping it right out of our minds, and being content with the fact that the other twenty-two hours of the day we’re just eating, drinking, sleeping, music, we’ll be able to go on stage and something will come out” (LS).

Likewise preparation for Jed Maisey and Alison Kerjan is minimal, consisting of “one beer, [and] … I don’t think much about it, it’s pretty [much] autopilot” (JM) and “I don’t actually think much about playing at all [and]… keeping calm, making light of the situation” (AK), respectively.

In contrast, creating a familiar space is essential to Cameron Brennan, where “I always want to be there way early, as early as I can get into the place, I have all my stuff set up and then I can sort of relax and… I can do my practice on the pad sort of thing and stuff like that and if I don’t do that, I can feel that I won’t be playing at my best because I might be tense and also just not relaxed in general
because I haven’t had the time to sort of relax and do little adjustments that can sometimes really help” (CB). Cameron Brennan’s preparation also involves trying to play a game with himself, trying to convince himself that he is merely going to rehearsals or a ‘day at the office’ to avoid allowing nerves to “take too much hold, you know you can sort of stiffen up a bit and not play at your best I think. But, having said that, like the last gig for example, even though it’s physically hard, it’s a fairly small place as you know trying to get stuff on and off, just a day at the office” (CB).

Luis Rojas finds “The lead up to the gig, it’s like, I get pretty anxious and nervous and that kind of stuff, I don’t generally like the lead up to gigs, I dread it a bit, and then we’ll play and it is what it is” (LR).

One can establish a sense of comfort through the physicality of playing one’s instrument and mechanical preparation in the case of a trumpet or a drum kit. Holly Harrison’s preparation involves warming up of her embouchure and mechanical adjustment of her instruments (mouthpiece, etc.). The importance of this is “if it’s just not in the right position it’s just that the tone is not there and when the tone’s not there the sounds don’t come out properly, and I think, I’ve got to stand straight and just take a few seconds to just to get into a position where it feels relatively comfortable” (HH).

External lifestyle factors also play a significant part for some musicians. In particular, Justin Ashworth speaks of his previous Tai Chi practice that “definitely translated everywhere, my stamina in terms of like, a gig, was different you know, and I think... the times when I’ve, mm, like sometimes you’ve had a really good day, and you’ve eaten well, and you got a show to do, and you haven’t sat down and tried, alright I’ve got a show, I’m gonna get up and eat breakfast... it all just happens to fall into place when you get to the gig, and you just feel good, and play well, and that, and all that... everything that should happen, happens, and you connect and it’s good” (JA).

Guitarist Seth Olinsky goes through vocal and guitar warm-ups. As a group, Akron/Family “usually talk before a show or talk over what we’re going to do, not
really a terrible amount of preparation I guess per se, but it’s not really like a
team meeting or a ceremony thing we do… I think when you’re on tour it’s just
kind of like, it ends up being its own pace you know. You get to some place,
you sound check, you do this thing and you have like a few hours to have dinner
and call your girlfriend, or catch up. I try and do a little guitar warm up and vocal
warm up, you know maybe fifteen minutes before we go on, and just kind of sit
and talk through, or maybe we’ll sing over something” (SO).

6.5.2 Live performance

Overcoming extraneous distractions of live performance or the studio
environment are part of the transcendent experience itself, Phil McCourt
describes “Yeah, [there are] always a couple of distractions [playing] live, and
the, the transcendency of it is when you do get up on stage, or when you put
the headphones on, ready to cut the track, the music will outweigh that, and
most of the distractions will go away, but never all of them, you know... ” (PM).
These extra-curricular elements of playing a show undoubtedly influence the
performance experience. In live performance for Phil McCourt, there is “just
enough distraction for it not to be … the blinding white light, I reckon, not that
that ever happens anyway.” This ‘blinding white light’ is referring to the all-
encompassing, at-the-expense-of-everything experience that, while probably an
ideal a practical realisation is perhaps not possible, again demonstrating the
tension between states of mind as one approaches transcendent experience.

The logistics of live performances on a smaller, local scale require relatively strict
adherence to time limits, Chantel Bann elaborates “That’s when the organising
of the set list comes in and you predetermine how long you’re going to play for,
so that once you’re up on stage and time goes out the window, you’ve at least
got that start and that finish line” (CB).

6.5.3 Acoustics

The timbral elements of a Necks improvisation often bring forth the acoustic
properties of the performance space – that is, the acoustic properties of the
room begins to reinforce or subtract certain harmonics in a pronounced fashion. In my own experience, I have thought of them as auditory hallucinations, whereas Chris Abrahams is more existential about it: “they don’t come from nowhere, they’re not part of my mind, they’re actually... you know the phenomenon that’s making me hear things, actually does sound like what I think I’m hearing, the fact that they’re not there, I don’t think necessarily makes them hallucinations. But... I’ve had experiences, there was one night in Bern many years ago, in Switzerland, it sounded like... I can’t remember what sentence the piano was saying, it appeared to be kind of saying like words, I mean it sounds kind of crazy but I was playing a phrase kind of similarly, over and over again and there was something in the harmonics that sounded like a sentence... I’ve only just thought about it then, I remember mentioning it to Lloyd, but you know the thing of hearing like strings and voices, like sometimes I hear a big crowd, I can hear a big crowd of people kind of singing. And a lot of times there’s another thing where I don’t know who’s doing what... it’s very exciting." These elements are often what Abrahams and The Necks can thrive on, “We try to find something that sounds strange, absurd, some aspect of the PA and the instrument, the space we’re playing in, the combination, the crashing of the different things that are coming out of each instrument, that sympathetic resonation...once we actually start to hear, or personally, if I actually start to hear something out of the ordinary, I keep it there and try and make it do something, and play music with that. The process of arriving at this point of what I like to call ‘timbral painting’ Once I get to that. I mean, sometimes you can’t get there through the sound, you have to get there through context and form and there’s no hallucinatory sound world, but you can still kind of get there in terms of one thing after another.”

Lloyd Swanton describes, “One of the big things we go for [is] ‘getting the room singing’ is kind of a phrase we’ve used. I also liken it to the so called ‘sweet spot’ that people say is on a tennis racket or cricket bat or something, it’s very gratifying when you kind of get to this point where with fairly little effort you’re able to get a significant sound which is relating to the rest of the ensemble and relating to the sound of the room. That’s such a great feeling when you achieve
that. I guess you’d call that kind of a sweet spot, and you can just kind of sit there and everything’s kind of perfection, for as long as you want” (LS). “We even have to be careful with that, because it’s not like, like we’re not going on stage going ‘let’s get this room singing’, because that might be blocking off what’s a much better outcome for the evening. But that is one that we do enjoy getting into, because I think that as you’re playing and things are building in density, you’re just sometimes, you basically just find a frequency floating past and you realise that you can actually influence it. So it’s always a very gratifying way of developing the music, but it’s by no means the only way. And I think, for me, what makes for a good performance, is I feel incredibly open, that I feel the others were incredibly open and that what came out was a consequence of that openness and it was all about us sparking the music and then getting out of the way and letting it tell us where it wants to go and only stepping in when it needed a bit of guidance or corralling.” As for reflecting on the performances themselves, “you walk off stage and go ‘man, that was an amazing piece’, and you often don’t analyse it much more than that, but I would say that if we did analyse it, it would be, it would come down to those things, that there was a freshness about it, that we got into areas that we let ourselves get into by being free enough to give it that possibility of happening” (LS).

Tony Buck occasionally experiences auditory illusions when performing with The Necks: “yeah, I mean every once three or four times with the group. But sometimes people in the room will hear it, especially if it’s like kind of feedback movements happening in the corner of the room, acoustically, but occasionally you hear that back on stage, often between the cymbals and the top end of the piano I hear things where certain frequencies are amplified and occasionally they’ll shape into another melodic, another whistling harmonic. And sometimes it’s lower, more percussive things from the low end. Knowing what they are, analytically, I don’t think it was hallucinations. It’s just fundamental properties of the acoustics of the room. But I think it’s a beautiful area when it gets into it and it again opens out the whole acoustic space, outside of the three instruments, the room starts vibrating in a way that’s really beautiful.” Buck continues, reflecting on his experience as an audience member: “this friend of mine plays
bass in... sort of a punk band, [and play] quite trancey music and she’s very
inspired by the Ethiopian stuff. I heard them play once where they were playing
and everyone was just playing this rhythm, very loud, two guitars and bass and
drums, and there was this little whistling on this melody [that] sounded like a
cello played very high, and it was a very specific melody and I really wondered
who was doing it. It was a beautiful sound, really clear and loud, and everyone
was just playing their part, like ‘dugg a dugg dugg dugga’ and there was this
whistling and then they changed chord... and this thing turned into another
melodic pattern straight away, it didn’t have to be built up at all. It was just there
in the harmonies that they were playing and the size and shape of the room. It
was really amazing. It was very special” (TB). There is a very grounded
approach to when these events occur, “it’s just fundamental properties of the
acoustics of the room. But I think it’s a beautiful area when it gets into it and it
again opens out the whole acoustic space, outside of the three instruments, the
room starts vibrating in a way that’s really beautiful.

Conversely, Swanton describes, “if I was really having a rotten time with the
sound, well there’d be very little transcendence to be had that night,” despite
that potential shortcoming of live performance, “the lovely thing about The
Necks is that to a point there’s really no such thing as a bad sound. Any room
has characteristics, and we can just say well ‘let’s investigate those, let’s bring
those to the fore’.” It is testament to the flexibility in the form of improvisatory
and experimental music, and Swanton contrasts it to jazz: “it’s one of my
frustrations in playing jazz, it’s a very acoustically specific kind of music, and a
lot of times if you play in like a church or a noisy kind of beer barn, it’s just
diabolical, yet it sounds so good when you can hear a really nicely balanced
ensemble, but it’s just all too rare. And there’s not much you can do about it on
the gig. Like if a drummer has spent twenty years studying a certain style, you
can’t just go ‘hey, the acoustics don’t suit that, can you play like a totally
different human being?’” (LS).
6.5.4 Live sound reinforcement

Live sound reinforcement provides an additional layer of variables in live performance that inevitably influences the performance experience.

Karen Heath finds it “rare to have a band performance where, depending on the music I guess, when you’re not concerned with what the sound engineer’s doing.” In particular, the peculiarities of reinforcing wind instruments causes concern for “feeding back because you’re using the [clip-on] bug mic.” Such experiences feed into other aspects of performance – becoming concerned about “is my timing right? … Why can’t I hear myself? You know, and there’s all these like, technical things that can sometimes really just get in the way so, I guess like, the better benchmark would be like band rehearsals.”

Alison Kerjan espouses the familiarity with a particular venue, the (now defunct) Excelsior Hotel in Surry Hills, Sydney, where *Meniscus* have played regularly. Having a familiar sound engineer helps Kerjan feel confident that the sound is of the highest quality and “helps you, you know get into your rock out kind of outfit (laughs).”

Jed Maisey also espouses the benefits of when things run smoothly: “Playing music live is all about the quality of what the stage is and the lights and sound and then you… I did a better performance because I had a good feedback and I knew everything was going to run smooth… the music itself I’m not too worried about, we can do that pretty well. The music itself… I can’t remember the setlist when I get on stage, it just comes to me.” Both Maisey and Matthew Robertson find “There’s these moments where there’s like I guess this level of … the joy of playing and being involved and everything sounds good and everything is going well all the sort of external things seem to be going well also” (MR).
6.5.5 The audience

The role of the audience in a musician’s performance experience bears a prominent influence on their experience. Mirabai Peart finds “that if you know that you’re having transcendent experiences when you’re playing, there’s going to be something of that being communicated through the music to the people listening to it. So there’s a significance to that, ‘cause you know that that energy that’s being created by the music is just flowing, spilling out through you, the music, hopefully into other people’s feelings as well. I mean that’s what music is all about, about communication, so there’s something really potent being communicated through that is really cool… in the most basic sense, it just feels good as well, it’s kind of addictive like in a really nice way” (MP).

In terms of Leo Abrahams’ frame of mind, the role of the audience is very important: “I think the only thing that occurs to me to distract me from the purity of what’s going on is whether or not people are bored, and when I think that… [what it] means is I’m getting bored. I relate to Brian [Eno] a lot on that, like I know that his great horror is that people should be bored by what’s going on, in a way that’s what distinguishes his governing of our improvisations from… just a free thing. He’s got a very good sense of his audience, like attention spans if you like” (LA).

The presence of an audience problematises the process of accessing the transcendent state. In terms of the process of performance, Lloyd Swanton describes “There’s an audience there, there’s expectations, you don’t want those expectations to overtly influence you but you can’t be completely immune to them. And for me, that doesn’t make for a very transcendent state of being, it’s more like problem solving, ‘what am I going to do, what’s something that is…” (LS).

Phil McCourt describes his transcendent experiences through the music itself and through the response of the crowd “…like to be able to just stand there with your eyes closed and possibly fall on the ground not playing guitar and it doesn’t matter, whereas like in a smaller gathering you know, it’d be like ‘oh, you know,
I’m not going to fall on the ground there’ but, yeah it’s weird, there’s sort of a comfort when it would not be natural. Which is definitely, another form of transcendence as well I think.” McCourt recalls a number of performances at the (now defunct) Excelsior Hotel in Surry Hills, Australia: “the transcendency in live performance … just in that energy that’s in the room especially the last few times we’ve played at the Excelsior, the amount of people that were there and the energy that’s going, and, you can [think] ‘it’s just this amazing flow of energy’, you can say all of that shit, or you can just say, that there’s a hundred and eighty people packed into a small room and it’s fucking loud, and now we’re all excited and then just like the band, and it’s just what happens.”

McCourt recalls specifically a member of the crowd heckling, yelling out ‘E-Flat!’ as he was playing the chord – “he was having the best time... See that’s one of those examples, see … he was into the moment, and his head just exploded and he started yelling, which was good, but it’s one of those moments, it’s good. He was great, I hope he realises we loved him.”

Luis Rojas finds that the audience has a strong impact on his performance experience: “If I’m in a crowded room or whatever and I’m on stage and there’s a hundred people all staring at me, it may take you a while to, for me to sort of lose myself, and on top of that there’s all these factors to worry about, other musicians that you’re playing with, like how they gel with you, people will, like you’ll be rocking into a groove.”

When engaging with the audience, Swanton is the sole spokesperson for The Necks on stage: “Well I just know that the other guys don’t want to say anything, I think it’s nice for the audience to at least hear someone’s voice, we don’t want to be so unreachable that they don’t even know anything about how we speak, I guess it’s only me, but there’s not much to say “laughter”” (LS).

Chantel Bann also finds “when you see other people losing themselves in the music you’re playing, it almost gives ‘permission’ for you to do the same – and vice versa. You see a musician, or you are a musician that is able to go to that special place or whatever, then the audience feels like they can do the same and just be totally absorbed in the sound and feelings of it.” Likewise Alison
Kerjan refers to benefitting from the dialogue between performer and audience, where “people can visually see that you’re in that moment” (AK). Luis Rojas too finds “The more people that are sort of connecting to what you’re doing allows you to not pay attention to the fact that there are people there anymore, you can just be comfortable in the space with them, and that lets you listen to the music and the potential for having these euphoric or transcendental moments, it’s more likely that that will happen” (LR).

Justin Ashworth has often found that “you need that loud moment to pull yourself back into the vibe. So I guess it really depends on the context, … if you have … a good audience, and you have a good moment where like... like when we do the, the medley from ‘New Music To Fall Asleep To’, and that, the drum part in (that song), it’s where we just... the, the end of like the, the loud section, we’re all taking solos and it ends, it cross fades with this textural bit that Adam (then) just does this little melodica solo to, and that’s really quiet and soft...

Yeah, nine times out of ten the crowd are along for the ride in that you know, and everyone’s still like been, they’ve been bopping along, and then it just slowly morphs into this other thing that’s, for a couple of minutes, it’s just a light on, Adam and it’s (makes drum noise), these little glitchy sounds and Matt cranks the reverb and delay up on the melodica mic and it’s just, Matt (would be) engulfing the room, and it’s slow, and it’s a bit sorta, you know, French café, accordion sounding melodies just....and I just loved to listen to it, and listen to the fact that no-one else was talking over it. You know, just feel it, and, hopefully the audience gets that same sensation as what, what I’m getting when those moments really work, and I, I just assume if they’re not, they haven’t lost interest and started talking, then maybe, you know, maybe the whole thing has connected.”

As for the experience of letting oneself go into the music, it is something Tony Buck is conscious of during performance. As an extension of a responsibility to the music itself, Buck feels a responsibility towards the listening experience of the audience. “I’m quite aware that it’s probably people who are into it and listening to it, can let themselves go into this. But at the same time I feel like that’s our job, or my job, to create that musical space where people can do that
and to the best of my abilities. I have a certain, a certain vocabulary of devices at my own disposal to create that situation as best as possible for people listening to get that…” (TB). Jon Hopkins shares Tony Buck’s sense of responsibility to the audience “you’ve got to be gentle on the listener, like if you take them somewhere… this is assuming that they’re gonna, just a fraction of people are going to feel it, anything like as deeply as I felt it, I feel that you kind of have a responsibility if you’re going to take them really far to treat them that gently, with some sort of care almost” (JH). This has culminated at some shows – Hopkins recalls, “I’ve done some shows where I don’t know what’s happened, but something has just gone really, really well with it and I’ve looked out and seen people hugging and seen people sort of like snog each other and stuff like that and it’s like yeah, this is the goal, something’s really happening, the soundwaves are causing something to happen to these people and that’s got to be the whole point of it” (JH).

In contrast to loud dynamics and large gestures with the audience facilitating transcendent experience, quiet dynamics, even to the extent of silence are also espoused for the experiences they afford in live performance. Leo Abrahams describes, “I think for me, the absolute pinnacle of exquisiteness for music is when you’re in a giant auditorium and there’s virtually nothing happening but everyone is perfectly silent and listening and as a solo performance, that is really, it’s an immensely powerful feeling.” Jon Hopkins recalls the Pure Scenius shows in Sydney and Brighton, where during the ‘Two Pianos’ sections “it was silent, not a word was said in that hall, which is amazing…”

The presence of an audience adds extra complications in performance and by extension, transcendent experience. Luis Rojas finds, “if I’m in a crowded room or whatever and I’m on stage and there’s a hundred people all staring at me, it may take you a while to, for me to sort of lose myself…” (LR).

The correlation between sound and physical gesture has become more important for Ryan McRobb in establishing a rapport with the audience, “I just like the fact that they can sort of connect with… the correlation between sound and, and movement which wasn’t very apparent, a lot of the time in mousetrap
we had these massive walls of sound, and we’d play a couple of notes on the guitar, or that’s what it’d look like.”

One of the complexities of performer/audience interaction is that experiences don’t always correlate between them. Seth Olinsky describes it as “…multi layered. There are some nights where I feel like I feel really connected and I’m feeling like things are effortless, musically and technically but it doesn’t totally connect with the audience, so there’s levels that I can kind of be feeling musically connected or connected to the other musicians, the band or whatever” (SO). Despite the connection with the band, the pinnacle is when this is established with the audience. Olinsky describes, “The best is when it feels like an open experience with the audience and there’s a sharing and a feedback, that’s when it feels the most uplifting, you know? Less musical, I think more when it’s individual, I think it’s more about yourself expressing or just musical. But I think it’s really, when that thing has gone on with the audience it becomes an uplifting spontaneous kind of experience” (SO).

6.5.6 Watching live music

In addition to their own practice, there were instances where discussions lead to being on the audience side of music performance and the experience it affords.

Luis Rojas describes his experiences watching live music “there’s been… heaps of concerts where I feel, you forget that you’re you, you don’t forget that you’re you, but you bond with everybody into like one time. You feel like what you’re feeling and what you’re witnessing with the band, you feel that everybody else in that room is feeling pretty much the same thing, and so you kind of feel that you’re melting together” (LR), “It’s like a collective consciousness…” (CB), “Yeah exactly, and you feel like you know that they know… you know how I feel!” (LR). “Yeah, like you make eye contact with someone in the audience and it’s like, just a smile or a look, and it’s just like ‘Yes!’” (CB).

Like those who performed in the Pure Scenius concerts, in my own experience, I recall the ‘Two Pianos’ section of the Pure Scenius concerts where an entire
concert hall was silent, except for the slightest touch on the piano. Matthew Robertson recalls watching The Necks at the Sydney Opera House (January, 2009) “I remember just having one of those experiences, like an inhale, [then] exhale peak experience, this wash of sound and just closed my eyes and just sat back and I thought take me wherever you know you want to go and it lasted a little while and it eventually changed” (MR). The inhale/exhale experience Robertson refers to pertains to conversations he and I shared in passing about transcendent experiences and responses to music and the ‘hypnotic rhythm’ or independent ‘breathing’ feel of The Necks’ arrhythmic gestures.

John Encarnacao recalls watching the band Animal Collective, “I don’t know why I think of that as transcendence, but I do, [and] I feel like it was an experience where, it took me out of my... reality... Because I’ve been to so many gigs, and I’ve been making rock music myself for so long it’s very easy for me to get analytical, and even cynical” (JE).

Other musical contexts

Musical contexts were also discussed that were not necessarily based directly on performance, but nonetheless related to transcendent experience in one’s musical practice. These include listening to music, teaching, the studio environment, practising and other group and solo situations.

6.6.1 Listening to music

Matthew Robertson responds strongly to Pachelbel’s ‘Canon in D’, where the “whole thing is in major but it just has this sort of yearning, this longing the whole time.” The guitar solo in Tool’s ‘Eulogy’ (Tool, 1996)), “it’s got all those rhythmic and timbral things that I find kind of interesting, and it gets to this point... and it’s there’s something about it, every time I get the same physical response” (MR).

Mirabai Peart has “moments through the whole of [Joanna Newsom’s] ‘Emily’. And then ‘Kingfisher’ I get moments through the whole thing. And then ‘In California’, especially bits through towards the middle and the end. I mean, that song really affects me because of the lyrics as well.”
Phil McCourt responds well to a number of pieces by UK band *Radiohead*, where the juxtaposing layers of rhythms, melody, timbre and sense of space coalesce and give McCourt powerful experiences. He also recalls, “…‘Great Gig in the Sky,’ off *Pink Floyd*’s ‘Dark Side of the Moon’ with the girl wailing and screaming and all that, the piano and stuff, and all the just, and that’s that wordless, language-less, fuckin’ animal screaming, that’s when that really peaks and it’s all like ‘raaah, raaah’, that’s just massive, yeah.”

Listening to music can also bring about unexpected moments of joy and transcendence. John Encarnacao recalls, “I was doing a certain kind of work where I could actually have some music on, but I just had to, turn it up and get out of the chair and dance… it happens all the time, and yet there is something elusive about it too, because if a piece of music has done it for you before, it doesn’t mean that it’s going to do it to you every time. Because, there are always so many variables, I’m much less likely to have that experience when I’m listening to music in a car, ‘cause there’s so much extraneous noise. You might be listening to a piece of music and someone that you live with comes into the room, and that can completely.. shatter it… or you might just simply be thinking about something that distracts you from the emotion that’s necessary.”

Luis Rojas responded strongly to music from the film ‘Contempt’, where “one melody, then these other melodies come in and they start intertwining and playing off each other. And as soon as it starts doing that, as soon as the opposing melodies come in, I just stop and I can’t think of anything but the music and I can imagine, like if this were performed I could see it spiralling in and out of each other and stuff, I picture that until the songs over and then it’s like I’m a bit out of breath or exhausted from listening to it, and it only goes for ten minutes  *laughter*.”

*Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring* is a work both Ryan McRobb and Karen Heath respond strongly to. For McRobb, the composition as a whole, “it’s not individual bits, it’s, where [section] A leads to [section] B, leads to C… you know, it’s, the structure of it, where it’s going, so there’s always, I’m always listening actively for, movement… I’ll certainly enjoy individual bits like the
'Augurs of Spring’ part where (they call) (taps rhythmically). [and] the parts that, on their own, which I don’t enjoy, I still, am connecting with, because they’re part of the flow of the whole composition” (RM). Key to the enjoyment of the work is that “I’ll see new things that I like all the time. All the time” (RM). 

Ryan McRobb also recalls “Lebanese AM community radio… [while], eating a kebab the other day. I… couldn’t believe what I was hearing, just this amazing, traditional Lebanese music… while eating a kebab… it was a Greek kebab… so, wasn’t quite the trifecta. But [there were] some really interesting chord progressions, really powerful and brought the response of ‘what the hell is that?’ I love having that new experience” (RM).

Violinist Mirabai Peart has been moved to tears from her listening experiencing, particularly when there is a connection to the composer: “it just connected me with the still part of myself and there were things about the sound in it that made me feel really at home, like it was so familiar to me and the language was so familiar... I think I almost cried ‘cause there were parts of it that were so touching. That was probably the most profound listening experience I’ve had in a long time.” Also, Mirabai’s profound musical experiences aren’t limited to a contained performance environment, citing either when she is driving or in transit listening through headphones, “which are similar to how I was feeling when I was listening to that solo album” (MP). Such experiences bear resemblance to Sloboda’s research where familiarity with musical material helped accentuate the sensations of shivers and tingles.

6.6.2 Teaching

The teaching environment only arose in one instance. Ryan McRobb has moments of connection with his students: “I get a big kick out of … explain[ing] a concept and then [they] just get that moment of realisation... they get … the connection, it’s enjoyable and rewarding to see as a teacher. How they deal with that concept, ‘cause they’ve got their own... they’re their own artist. So I started to see, who they are, in that musical sense, and that’s a very rare and special thing that a music teacher will get to see a lot of, but very few other
people will. It’s the development, musical development, which is also, which is, personal development.”

6.6.3 In the studio

The recording studio environment is another significant location for these musicians, whose music practice includes the recording of musical artefacts.

Transcendent listening experiences are used as a way to validate and ascertain the success of a recording endeavour. Phil McCourt describes the end of the recording process, “When we’re getting close to finishing mixes we’ll sit there with headphones on and eyes closed and shit … that’s the check.” Further, transcendent experiences can even be (at least for the performer) be embedded into the recording itself. John Encarnacao describes “recordings I’ve made, where I was trying to document ideas for songs, where I’ve actually gone into that zone, that transcendent zone, and I can kind of sense it, I can kind of... I feel like I can hear it, but it’s probably only me that could hear it, because it probably takes me back to that space, but I think it’s interesting, even if it’s just for yourself, that that… transcendent experience could almost be documented” (JE).

*The Necks* recording in the studio environment is a much different beast to when they perform live. In live performance, “we’re improvising, we’re not talking to each other about the music we go on stage to play. We’re dealing with a known quantity in that it’s piano, bass, drums and that’s what we’re going to make something out of, and filling up a room and whatever happens” (TB). In contrast, “In the studio we are really composing, kind of in a sense like committee of the three of us and we do have lots of discussions and we record a lot of material and we discuss at that level, we discuss when we’re editing it, what we’re going to use and I think it’s guided by the same aesthetic and the same principle of how we deal with things like how we deal with the duration of a piece and, but the way we get there is different” (TB).
Likewise for Lloyd Swanton, the studio is “less conducive. Well, I know the two bopper boys in the band, their very physical approach to their instruments can really work up a sweat in the studio and come in after doing a one hour take and go, ‘man, I was tripping out there!’, because you have no sense of time, even less so in the studio, there’s just nothing to gauge it against, the whole set up of a recording studio is almost like a flotation tank” (LS). Lloyd Swanton describes this approach further, “In the studio the process is basically nuts and bolts, I don’t think transcendence – is that the word? – is ever going to come into it” (LS).

The loss of time, or ‘flotation tank’ of the studio, while powerful and enjoyable, for Leo Abrahams distinguishes it from improvisation and performance, “…recorded music having more of a fixed purpose, y’know?” Abrahams recalls times when he has completely lost track of time passing in the studio, but it is “…more like having a job you really enjoy, it’s not the same kind of thing really [as performance experiences].”

The other side of the recording environment is when it crosses over with the inspiration of improvisation. Alison Kerjan, in particular, relishes when “you’re on a jam, and everyone is locked in and you just think ‘Damn! Thank God this is getting recorded right now!’”

Further to these moments of recording inspired moments, the recording goes beyond documenting the sounds themselves into becoming an artefact of experience itself. John Encarnacao recalls such occurrences, where there is an identifiable ‘imprint’ of being in the ‘transcendent zone’: “There are recordings I’ve made, where I was trying to document ideas for songs, where I’ve actually gone into that zone, that transcendent zone, and I can kind of sense it, I can kind of... I feel like I can hear it, but it’s probably only me that could hear it, because it probably takes me back to that space, but I think it’s interesting, even if it’s just for yourself, that … transcendent experience could almost be documented” (JE).
As an extension of being documented through the recording process, transcendent listening experiences are considered one of the final ‘checks’ in the recording process. Phil McCourt recalls the process for *Captain Kickarse*, “when we’re getting close to finishing mixes we’ll sit there with headphones on, and eyes closed and shit, and either just go ‘yeah’, or ‘nah’, and I guess … that’s the check … because you’re not partaking [in the performance] you can just take it in" (PM).

### 6.6.4 Practising

The context of practising is a facet of a musician’s practice that can bear upon potential experiences of transcendence. Rehearsal and practice with one’s instrument and ensemble are strong features of transcendent experience. Mirabai Peart finds rehearsal and practice to be essential in fostering these experiences, “I have to keep going back to the basics a lot… and then I can be free, as long as I’m kind of keeping things moving then I can be free with it… Basically my relationship with the instrument is that I need to be disciplined with it, cause if I’m going to be at my best, my most free, then I need to be constantly playing, maintaining that level” (MP).

Practice is a way to establish a more embodied approach to music-making. Karen Heath is “always astonished, even when I’m teaching, at how effective, that practice is… when you… stop being logical about it [and] just kind of let the body organise it, it’s so much more effective” (KH). This effectiveness is demonstrated in Heath’s powerful experiences of performing for Stockhausen where she cannot totally remember the experience, with the piece was playing itself, to the work that had happened in the subconscious from her intense preparation for the music. In particular Heath reflects that “The Stockhausen moments were a sense of… arriving at a conclusion that certain ways of practising, [that are] correct, it was these things that I was working on, and that I thought should work, actually turned out to work… and it’s definitely, a moment where you … [are] feeling really quite secure as a player and that’s good, and when improvising, feeling like everything is coming out that I wanted to, it’s great, that’s even better, because it removed a barrier of being a technician…”
Elements of the spiritual also connect into one’s practice. There is a spiritual aspect of practicing one’s instrument “in the sense that… the process is considered to be a sacred one, a devotion to your craft and to your guru, your teacher. It’s sort of like meditation practice, your music practice and the hours that you put into it. The devotion involved in the very act of sacrificing yourself to your practice” (MP).

Practice can also be a separate endeavour from performance. In particular, for Chris Abrahams “the kind of music that I play with The Necks, playing the piano by myself, I mean I can’t really verbalise it, I don’t really practise what I play. I play the piano a lot, but I would never play in that intensive, repetitive way when I’m by myself. You’ve got to have the engine of the audience, the context with other musicians there allows the music to have a context that I need, that when I’m by myself it doesn’t have… I don’t really practise, the sort of techniques I use I don’t practise by myself. If I did it would drive me mad, to play very repetitively.” Likewise with Brendan Smyly, who hasn’t performed as a solo artist, but does “play by myself, yeah I perform by myself, [but] I don’t think I’ve had an experience like that ... I sort of consider playing by myself [as] practice, so I’m looking to find new ways around the electronic set up, or new ways, or new skills, or new fluidity with the saxophone, or an interaction of both, so yeah, I don’t, I don’t think that’s open to me, maybe it is, maybe I am in that space where I’m making music.”

Mirabai Peart’s transcendent experiences aren’t limited to performance. Reflecting that she would “like to regularly just let loose on my own,” her practice consists mainly of technical exercises, but there have been “a couple of amazing experiences where I just play anything that comes and just get sort of swept away by it, where I was sort of my own audience and just was so completely entranced by myself. And, not really having any sort of sense at all… just kind of a feeling of electricity and inspiration for the act of playing” (MP). Likewise, Holly Harrison experiences occasions of ultra-awareness and timelessness in practice sessions.
Justin Ashworth finds that rehearsal is a key relationship builder for his ensembles, facilitating transcendent experiences. It is particularly felt when “we write all the material together, and I get on stage and I [can] just let myself go… and it’s much more organic, and I think that kind of situation, especially the free improvisation side of things” (JA).

Detractors from transcendent experiences

The business and financial aspects of music performance and maintaining an ensemble were found to be detractors from performance experiences. Both Jed Maisey and Karen Heath mention how such stresses detract from the performance process. Maisey states “you… kick half of the enjoyment out of it when you try and sell your music.”

Summary

Transcendence is engendered when things stop making sense and when these things are engaged with fascination. There is a thrill of things ‘not making sense’ through surprise or the unexpected is a strong feature in providing transcendent experiences. The naivety of both performer and listener is a strong influence of one being ‘shaken out of oneself’. Where Ryan McRobb “wasn’t thinkin’ about the taste [and] just thinking about, ‘I’m eating a sandwich!’” demonstrated that experiences aren’t necessarily ‘serious’.

There is an undercurrent of the spiritual for a few of the artists that manifests through a sense of community or develops from a particular belief system such as Buddhism or Reiki. Most of all, however, there is a permeating theme of responsibility towards the music itself. There is an awareness of the presence of the music and its impact on listeners.

Jon Hopkins and The Necks share the desire for a similar outcome through the use of repetition, or organic change. The contrast lies in where they approach this through electronic driven instruments and acoustic instruments, respectively.
Further, transcendent experiences in non-performance contexts, such as practising, also occur and provide a sense of inspiration and purpose.

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Table 7 - Extramusical Elements of Transcendent Experience
Chapter 7: Findings Part 4

How a musician/researcher discusses their transcendent experience within their practice of music making

This chapter explores the interview data that concerns how a musician/researcher discusses their performance experience. This includes how the experiences are articulated, reflections on the interview process, the interview location, establishing a dialogue on transcendent experience and the role of transcendent experiences within one’s broader life.

Articulating transcendent experiences

Articulating transcendent experiences is not something that many participants regularly engage in or that they reflect upon. When prompted, a variety of responses were forthcoming which indicate the difficulties and the potential of the interview process.

For instance, Lloyd Swanton hasn’t analysed powerful performance experience too much. Despite this, for Swanton, there are two important elements that facilitate these experiences: “You walk off stage and go ‘man, that was an amazing piece’, and you often don’t analyse it much more than that, but I would say that if we did analyse it, it would be, it would come down to those things, that there was a freshness about it, that we got into areas that we let ourselves get into by being free enough to give it that possibility of happening” (LS).

Overall, Swanton reflects on the synergy between The Necks themselves and the focus of this thesis:

*laughter* “It’s challenging actually because a lot of what you’re talking about is what the band is about, and yet I’m not usually having to find words to describe it and I am very fond of saying that we play music to express things that we can’t express verbally, which is why there’ll always be some dissatisfaction with attempting to use verbal structures to describe sound. But actually it’s quite stimulating, and yeah, I’m only too happy to talk about it” (LS).
Experiences of transcendence aren’t always something that are consciously explored by the musicians in this study. They are characterised by more of an intuitive, non-verbal understanding. Ryan McRobb reflects: “It’s not something that I’ve explored in any realm myself, artistically, personally, spiritually… but… I guess I probably, to some extent… when we say the word [transcendence] and talk about music, there’s a few situations that… pop up in my head.” In particular, McRobb refers to “Where I’ll get in this thing… usually, either playing by myself, or playing with a whole bunch of other musicians, we get to this, special place, you know? [We] look around and usually you only find out when you stop doin’ it… ‘ah’, exhale, just like ‘wow… what? What?’” This non-verbal element is essential to the experience. Continuing, McRobb describes “The sort of… reaction that’s only stifled by the fact that you’re still responsible for still making the music, if it’s still going… or if it’s not still going it’s quite joyful, you know? … Whether it’s with the band, by yourself or with other people.” McRobb is describing a ‘place’ that the ensemble goes to as a group, rather than as something specifically happening to himself but rather something larger than himself of which he is jointly responsible for maintaining but that does not require or allow verbal articulation.

Leo Abrahams found the interview process as an occasion where “It’s something I know the answer to but I’ve never tried to put it into words…” (LA). Linking into the understated approach to these experiences, Leo Abrahams related that he is “always a bit suspicious of people who very much play up this idea of themselves as an artist or this idea of themselves as a frequently transcending human being, I kind of think they’re trying to talk it into reality sometimes. And it’s almost I suppose, how I feel talking about it, it’s not something I want to talk about very often cause it’s kind of like it becomes, talking about your sex life or talking about religion in a very purple way, you know it’s just not the done thing *laughter” (LA).

Likewise Chantel Bann, states that she doesn’t “really have a name for it.” At the time of the interview, such experiences hadn’t happened “for a long time because I find singing, because it is, you have to give your whole physical self and emotional self when you’re singing that sometimes you don’t feel like baring
that side of yourself to people, like showing that whole, you feel naked and you
don’t feel comfortable pulling a weird face to get a note that you have to do, or it
just comes out” (CB).

Jon Hopkins is “not sure what the word [for transcendent experience] is, … [but]
for me, it’s always trance inducing or hypnotic or for me it’s almost like trying to
recreate… drug experiences I’ve had in the past, and I’m not like a drug head or
anything, but had some experiences on certain things that were so incredible.
But I became convinced, luckily, that the answer… does not lie in experimenting
more and more with that, but… trying to recreate those experiences without
having to take anything” (JH). Hopkins also considers whether such
experiences were necessary precursors for the brain to learn “how to trip out like
that” (JH).

In contrast, Brendan Smyly seems to have considered and attempted to
articulate the topic previously. His understanding of transcendent experience is
of “the descriptions of that ‘watcher dissolving’, that seems to be what’s being
described as what I think, when people say a transcendent experience. That
[transcendence] actually means transcending ego, the sense of self” (BS).

An understanding of transcendent experience is also linked with the musical
style in performance. Holly Harrison feels as though she “can… understand
what transcendence means in a very broad sense, but I don’t know that I would
use it to explain anything that I have experienced… I think this word
transcendent is really affected by what style of music you are playing to begin
with” (HH).

Chris Abrahams is hesitant in defining his performance experiences: “I don’t
really want to colour it with words that might lead to other areas…” (CA).
Abrahams, however, discusses the multiple facets of transcendent experience
that occur during the music of The Necks – that of the sonic potential of the
instruments, transcendence of achieving a group dynamic and that of time
passing.
“I’m trying to find a definition of transcendence that ah… I mean when we play live for instance, there’s a transcendence that occurs with the instruments, in that they cease, well hopefully, they kind of cease to sound like what people think they should sound like. And they kind of meld together and form another sort of sound world where who’s doing what becomes kind of ambiguous, in the sense of like individual expression… there’s possibly a transcendence there into more of a group kind of dynamic. But I still feel very expressive, like I don’t feel like I’m relinquishing anything, I’m adding to a bigger picture that I couldn’t paint myself. I feel in terms of time passing, yeah there’s a transcendence there. And ironically, we kind of hit upon the kind of forty-five, fifty minute period, very early on, and it seems just so natural to us, none of us will have a watch on or a clock or anything like that, but invariably our pieces will come in at that time, and we’ll all know when the piece is over” (Chris Abrahams).

In contrast to other interviewees, Jed Maisiey wasn’t forthcoming with a definition of transcendence and preferred to be the one asking questions about what it meant.

Articulating the transcendent experience was a collaborative effort between the interviewee and myself as interviewer. In particular, the interview itself was acknowledged as a creative space where Phil McCourt found the process of discussing transcendent experience “interesting, and it’s good to talk away and figure out your way.” McCourt also espoused the benefits of sharing ideas with me as the interviewer; “it’s just cool to get it out in the open. It’s like jamming, you’ve got all these ideas, and you didn’t know they were there until you, you started playin’ ‘em… so it’s good, I like it.” In particular, McCourt is describing the process of our articulations of transcendent experience meeting in a dialogue.

The difficulty of putting experiences into words was a common feature in the interviews. Through the process of describing his experiences, Chris Abrahams describes a ‘call’ or sense of compulsion during the improvisatory process: “just the combination of… I mean, it’s a very complex thing, what we’re all playing, and the context. I don’t think I can really unravel it to a great extent, but definitely there’s a feeling of being moving, being moved towards something, and it’s quite an emotional expression what I attempt to do, what seems to be being called for.” Abrahams reports that the process isn’t readily available to disseminate and verbally communicate.
Likewise, Luis Rojas and Chantel Bann both find it difficult to put their experiences into words. Bann explains: “It’s always hard putting emotions or feelings into words, like actual English language’s words and not just a sound. Like if someone says ‘how’re you feeling’ and I just scream, that would be, that would quite clearly let them know how I was feeling without me having to explain in words...” (CB). Phil McCourt believes “everyone has a transcendental experience with music, that they don’t [or] can’t put it into words...”

When Jon Hopkins describes different nuances of transcendent experience as a response to different musical material – in this instance of louder, repetitive music versus very sparse and still music, there is still a difficulty in articulating the difference and an acknowledgment of a certain amount of speculation.

[The audience] could have found the piano thing transcendent in that way cause it was quite kind of beautiful... But I do think that’s a different kind of thing, it’s not so much that joyful drift, I mean I don’t even know what the fuck I’m saying, what effect... but they’re different sides of the same thing I think... (Jon Hopkins)

There was also reflection upon the content of the interview as it was taking place. Jon Hopkins reflects, “I mean it’s just I’m not always good... [at] verbalising the things that I’m trying to explain."

Interview process and recalling transcendent experiences

There was a general consensus that discussing transcendent experiences and their various facets is challenging and difficult but that speaking about such things has been a positive and significant experience, engaging musicians on topics that they wouldn’t normally consider or have the opportunity to speak about. A defining aspect of this EPM is that the goal of communicating or creating transcendent experience is infrequently stated overtly, and is often underplayed. That is, it is an underlying, unstated yet still defining characteristic. Furthermore, it is in the nature of the art of EPM that it is understood that musical sound will always be capable of articulating experiences that are out of reach of other modes of expression.
Discussing transcendent experience was generally found to be a positive experience. Karen Heath contrasts the interview to discussing music with her peers “it’s very good to talk about musical experience… in a positive way, and actually talking about it, rather than all the other stuff around it like the business [side of things]…it’s stressful, you know?” (KH). The significance of studying transcendent experience was also described through the interview. Karen Heath finds “Transcendental experience in music is… studying this is extremely important, because it will help people to understand, their own music practice better, how to better teach music, how to better connect students to music, how to better explore music therapy and, and what it, really can do for people in, in all walks of life, for any condition” (KH). Chantel Bann finds that “It’s weird… I always find it difficult talking about playing music or just the experience I have when I play cause it can be quite, like I said, I’ll walk off stage and not have any recollection of what just happened. Like, it’s just ‘oh, I need fifteen minutes to compose myself!’ or come back down or kind of recall what happened, so to talk about it really pushes you to remember. You know, what DOES really happen when you’re up there or when you play a song?!”

The significance of discussing transcendent experience also has a foreseeable impact on an artist’s creative output. Luis Rojas was initially apprehensive when presented with talking about transcendent experience. “When you first brought up the subject I was a bit apprehensive about it, but yeah it’s been good, cause it’s made me think about stuff that… I wouldn’t normally overthink the whole process of music making, the whole thing… I don’t really understand the purpose behind analysing music too much, and I don’t think it’s necessarily beneficial, definitely not to me. But having done this, I’d say it’s been beneficial to a certain degree” (LR). Rojas reflects, “I think that if I have that experience with my music, then I can use that to project that onto other people. So it’s definitely a useful tool to have I guess. And I’ve never actually thought about it that way before, so thank you! You’ve made me think a lot about it with this stuff…” (LR). Likewise for Karen Heath, the interview process revealed aspects of her creative process that were hitherto unexplored: “I haven’t thought about
it, to be honest, about why I do it, but now I’m thinking about it, and that’s cool” (KH).

Although the notion of transcendent experience often resonated with the interviewees, it was often difficult to engage with this aspect of music making in such a direct manner. Justin Ashworth found that “maybe more so now, I think this is kind of, this ranting has… [been] helping me put into perspective things that… I guess I’ve always felt I’ve known, but I don’t… like ‘cause I don’t often attach significance to it, I don’t actively… I’m not trying to reach anything other than my own understanding of myself in the world… in a positive way, so I don’t… [and] haven’t really thought of it in terms of another, like a… I guess ‘cause transcendence has such a… like it has such an epic… translation to my mind, so I don’t know how I… set out to achieve that, and, on the basis well, yeah, yes, the answer to that question would be yes, but not in those words…” (JA).

Ashworth also reflects that the interview process has potential to be a catalyst for further performance experiences. “I’d think that the music itself is just a part of my being… I mean if you came and asked me this like in a year from now. And we did this again… I’d be interested to see how I would respond. Because I think this kind of opens my thoughts, I’m not one that sits and thinks about stuff… I do what I do, and… I am constantly trying to define it for myself. “

Mirabai Peart was generous in offering “I just think it’s really great that you’re doing it, that you’re choosing to write about something that’s so… something that is so abstract almost. I mean, it’s not really, to us [musicians] it’s not, but to write about it might be really challenging I think” (MP).

The significance of discussing transcendent experience came to the fore in a number of interviews. In particular, the benefits of such discussions were espoused, “Yeah, well, it might be an aspect of music that isn’t talked about enough, or not acknowledged enough. I guess in some ways, for some people it doesn’t need to be talked about, but it is such an incredibly vital part of music,
because music is very mystical isn’t it... just the way it affects people so subconsciously and on so many levels... you know what I’m saying?” (MP).

On a personal level, too, the interview process discussing transcendent experience was also seen as a significant event, “To follow that in your life and in your music, that’s just the most single beautiful thing, and I need to be reminded of that, so that’s really cool that this conversation allowed me to remind myself of that. There are some things I needed to remember” (MP).

The interview process also reawakened a creative drive or awareness in a number of participants – but in relation to transcendent experience and musical proficiency. Even discussing the musical elements of transcendent experience leads down a path of beneficial self-reflection.

The interview process for Mirabai Peart came with realisations: “I was wondering how I would feel in this conversation, and I’m just really enjoying it, because it’s kind of like, cause at first I was kind of wondering whether I would really remember much about my experiences, but I don’t seem to be having too much trouble. ‘Cause I guess I kind of, cause it’s so clearly my life path in music, so I do really think about it a lot. I guess I haven’t realised how much I really do think about it, even if not directly in regards this subject, more experientially, just you know” (MP). As a specific example, Peart reflects on the use of rhythm in her violin playing - “I’m evolving slowly in my playing. Generally as a musician I need to think more about rhythm, so, but I think that rhythm is something that happens really wonderfully for me when I’m feeling strong and confident and gutsy about what I’m doing. It’s actually the first thing to go when I’m not feeling strong in my playing, so I’m glad you brought that up, it’s something I need to work on” (MP).

Peart’s experiences link with the triggers for Phil McCourt in the interview to recall and articulate his experiences that were hitherto dormant in his memory – despite feeling somewhat self-conscious. “Half the things that... I’ve said as a response to this, I would never have thought of until you actually posed the question to it, or would not have thought of in... sentences and phrases...
they’re all shit in the back of your head, but it’s interesting to try and put it, into language, because you know, that it doesn’t work and so it’s just interesting, and it’s good to talk away” (PM). In addition to these triggers, the exchange of dialogue in the interview was likened to a musical process: “it’s like jamming, you got all these ideas, and you didn’t know they were there until you, you started playin’ ‘em. So, it’s good, I like it... I really like it, yeah. Feel like a bit of a wanker, but it was fun” (PM).

McRobb, too, enjoyed the interview experience and happy to share his experiences. “That’s good, that’s interesting to talk about. Like I always enjoy interviews... in this setting or, press, radio, or print media. ‘Cause it’s something I put so much time and effort into, but you really just can’t talk about it, like even if you’re going down the street. I feel if I’m talking with my friends about it, I feel like... they’re doing me a favour, just by letting me rant about the band... If someone’s asking about it, it’s kind of a flag that it’s ok? It’s just, ‘here’s what I do’, ‘bleh’. It all just comes out... I did a big interview [at] seven pm on a Sunday night on PBS [Melbourne community radio]... , they were featuring mousetrap, played half an hour of stuff, did an extensive interview with me, about new music and I came across this super-confident dude *laughs*, which I’m not generally... it was good to be able to just, ‘bleh’ [and] blurt it all out, so I’m very happy that you asked, very touched that you asked” (RM).

Karen Heath found the interview process and subject matter “great, [and] refreshing because... I don’t talk about it enough in this context” (KH). Alison Kerjan too found transcendent experiences enjoyable to talk about and is not worried about spoiling any magic. “If anything, you’re bringing yourself more aware of the situation and being open to that, being open to feeling... I don’t think that I would be worried at all.”

Holly Harrison hadn’t really thought about transcendent experiences before the interview. Further, she didn’t considered it to be an intimate topic at all, “because I am not the only person that feels like this, obviously not, otherwise why would everyone else be still playing? People do it cause they find it enjoyable but I think that it’s more than that. Having said that it’s not like I can’t
wait to tell you, it’s not like that either” (HH). Harrison’s somewhat circular response emphasises the potential paradox of transcendent experience – they’re important, but not necessarily something that needs to be shared.

In contrast to the positive comments on the interview process, some participants had reservations. Jed Maisey sees that there is a risk of music becoming ‘lame’ when discussed: “Music is very important to me so I don’t want to make it a really lame thing, blabbing onto someone who doesn’t care about what song I heard and where I was, because I hate that. I’d rather talk about something else.” When discussing transcendent experiences, “I’ve never thought about it. I’m not trying to be belligerent here, it’s just I’ve never thought about it. I do like going to gigs because I like seeing the songs played that I’ve seen before “laugh”” (JM).

Brendan Smyly’s response to the interview process was positive, but coupled with a feeling of being “self-conscious… because you’re asking me and there’s got to be some ego [present] there that’s now discussing [it]… When really it’s a universal experience and it’s not really different from what people have experienced for centuries [and] this experience has been described for centuries…”

The interview process was often found to be a source of realisation and reflection upon one’s music practice. Justin Ashworth found the interview process “…helped me put into perspective things that… I guess I’ve always felt I’ve known… it’s been really, really interesting to delve inside and sort of think about where you come from and where you’re going, and how what you’re doing is, and isn’t taking you there… I think they’re the situations where I feel more transcended than what I actually feel is my honest expression, that I find I’m stuck in performance, which is a real shame… it’s actually painful to admit because I never really think, I don’t think I have admitted that until now to myself, but it’s true.”

Such revelations are examples of the strength of the interview process. These unique recollections and reflections extended also to Tony Buck, where “The
Tony Buck also had a positive and beneficial experience from the interviews: “In some ways it’s like it’s what I’ve gained from my life doing. It’s interesting to be talking about them, [and] gives a bit of clarity in my head. Talking about myself, it’s my favourite subject “laughs”… Yeah. I mean sometimes I get a bit self-conscious, [and] if you try and stand on the outside and check what you’re saying you can end up expressing yourself really badly [and] it gets really stilted…” (TB). Further, the interview process with Tony Buck compares favourably to other interviews he has done: “Things like The Necks, people want to talk about how we play together and it’s like, really, really broad questions like that. So well, how long have you got? “laughs” It’s ridiculous. Like, ‘what do you want to talk about? The building blocks of music, rhythm and counterpoint and harmony and this and that? Or you could just be like ‘we play enough’. So at least this is like quite focussed, so it’s good” (TB).

Several participants compared this focused research interview favourably with the less stimulating experience of press interviews. Jon Hopkins also found the interview “really good, actually. I haven’t really had much of a chance [to discuss this] in interviews, [as] often they veer towards the creation of it a bit more, I’m not actually interested in the technology of it at all, I just use ridiculously out-dated software cause I know it really well. I’m interested in the effect it has on people, it’s not music for musicians I want to make, I want to make these sorts of experiences, this is very, very specifically the exact area that I’m spending my whole time trying to do. So I’d say it’s very useful and very interesting… because it’s very much the area I’m trying to get into more, really focus on it with this next record that I’m making now, so it could be good to put some thoughts across…”

Discussing transcendent experience was met with some trepidation for some artists, for the willingness to discuss “depends a lot on what frame you put around it, the conversation” (LA). There was a desire to remain down-to-earth
when discussing such things. Leo Abrahams found during the interview “the way we’re talking about it is quite objective and quite sensible, but I was slightly worried when I first thought about what it would be like talking about it, whether it was going to be framed in a sort of ‘spiritual,’ in a populist sense way.” The other potential shortcoming was concerned with engaging with transcendent experience in “an aspirational way, like people who do not do that specific thing for a living, looking at people who have these sorts of experiences as a thing to aspire to when in fact you can have exactly the same sort of experience doing absolutely anything. You know, it’s just that this happens to be music, it happens to be the way that I do it. And I wish I could find some other way to do it, but that is the main way that I do it. So long as we’re talking about shared human experience that everybody has doing all different things then I’m fine with it…” When asked whether such fears had been averted, Abrahams responds “Yeah, averted them altogether I think *laughter*.

In terms of sharing my own experience as part of the interview process, Luis Rojas found “I liked hearing what you had to say, the little bits that you’ve chimed in, that’s definitely interesting to me. It’s more what I think of as my analysing, anything to do with my approach is sort of, oddly unsettling, I’ll be a bit, I’m not sure if it’s necessarily… like I’ll feel comfortable doing it, but just in the overall way I feel about music and the way it fits into my life, I don’t know if I’m comfortable upsetting that…” (LR).

Such reflection indicates that the interview process is a powerful tool to analyse one’s experience, with the lens of the transcendent experience a way to navigate to core truths about one’s musical practice.

Like any journey that starts with a single step, each interview began in a unique fashion. The interview with Jon Hopkins occurred at his studio in London over a cup of tea and interestingly, the way an interview begins can become blurred following a more general conversation. It was interesting to observe how the location and context made the subject matter more natural:

Adrian: I guess now you’re kind of touching on what I’m going to be interviewing you about really.
Jon Hopkins: Cunningly steered into the territory… *laughter*

Adrian: Wow, I didn’t even realise that we were going there!

**Interview location**

Each interview occurred at a different time, a different place and with different people. The significance of interview location has been observed in Pink (2009) in the field of sensory ethnography. The interview location was also reflected upon with regard to discussing transcendent experiences.

Phil McCourt suggests “I guess it depends on where you are,” with the context of his interview, “Sitting here, talking to you in front of that [the audio recorder], is fine, it’s interesting, it’s cool. I don’t know if I was talkin’ ‘bout it elsewhere I’d probably be worried… but they’re my boundaries of self I suppose, so yeah, it’s all that kind of shit. I don’t know, but I think a lot of bands that, you know they don’t wanna talk about it, ‘cause it’s a bit ‘airy-fairy’, and out there… and then other bands talk about it too much” (PM).

Access to musical equipment was facilitated by the choice of location. Ryan McRobb’s interview was punctuated by a rendition of a solo guitar piece that was the product of having a guitar in the interview space. This piece has been included in the Appendix CD [Track 3] with permission. This had the benefit of sharing the music itself in a direct fashion – we weren’t talking about the piece, we were sharing in the piece itself.

**7.2.1 Establishing a dialogue on transcendence**

Essential to the interview process was establishing a common ground by which to discuss transcendent experience. A number of phrases were used to define the transcendent experience. For some, the word ‘transcendent’ or ‘transcendence’ was appropriate to use in discussion, whereas for others, such words carried unhelpful connotations. Additionally, some participants preferred to provide analogies of experience. One of the challenges of the interview process was to establish and proceed with a common understanding of
Essentially, interviewees benefited from reassurance that there is an understanding of what they are communicating with me. In describing her experiences, Mirabai Peart acknowledges, “transcendence is a good word” for her to describe the experiences she has had, “but there’s certainly many different kinds of characters of that experience [and]… different levels of it” (MP). Likewise, John Encarnacao and Karen Heath responded favourably to the use of the word ‘transcendence’ in defining the experience. Whereas Phil McCourt was happy with the use of the word transcendence, he referred to it as ‘oneness’. Alison Kerjan found transcendence to be synonymous with terms such as “uplifting, spiritual, like they all kind of… come from the same meaning.”

With the intention of defining transcendence as it pertains to his musical practice, Chris Abrahams gives a multi-layered definition of how it occurs in performance with The Necks: “Well, I’m trying to find a definition of transcendence that ah… I mean when we play live for instance, there’s a transcendence that occurs with the instruments, in that they cease, well hopefully, they kind of cease to sound like what people think they should sound like. And they kind of meld together and form another sort of sound world where who’s doing what becomes kind of ambiguous.” Abrahams elaborates further on transcendence of individual expression, “in the sense of individual expression, yeah there is possibly a transcendence there into more of a group kind of dynamic. But I still feel very expressive, like I don’t feel like I’m relinquishing anything, I’m adding to a bigger picture that I couldn’t paint myself.” The third element of transcendence is “in terms of time passing… there’s a transcendence there. And ironically, we kind of hit upon the kind of forty-five, fifty minute period very early on, and it seems just so natural to us, none of us will have a watch on or a clock or anything like that, but invariably our pieces will come in at that time, and we’ll all know when the piece is over” (CA).

Others didn’t directly address the definition of their experiences. Matthew Robertson provides the analogy of enjoying a great meal: “the meal is not just
about the food… it’s all the other things… the food has to be fantastic but you
know, you need to be comfortable, you need to be with people that make the
mood, you need to be surrounded by a certain group, or there just needs to be
all these external factors that you need to just sort of tick the box and you don’t
just go out there trying to do it, but it just coincidentally sort of happens and
[on]… the whole the food was only just one little bit of it, and live performance is
probably similar…” (MR).

Conversely, there are other artists who do not refer to their own experience as
transcendent at all. Brendan Smyly’s perception of what constitutes a
transcendent experience is seen as different to others. After initially approaching
Smyly for the interview, he has contemplated the nature of his experience: “I’ve
contemplated that since you asked me to be interviewed, and I’ve got a feeling
that it’s, probably what other people would describe as a transcendent
experience, but because I’ve been musicking for as long as I can remember…
this experience is now quite second nature… [and] not something that is
separated from other experiences.” Holly Harrison also feels as though she
hasn’t experienced something to the extent of what transcendent experience
implies.

Difficulty with using the term ‘transcendent experience’ was apparent in the
interview with Seth Olinsky. Olinsky’s parents both practiced transcendental
meditation practice. Olinsky shares “I don’t know, I mean the word I’ve come to
feel ok with is joy. I mean when it really works I feel that there’s an expression of
joy.” This experience of joy is particular in that “it’s not about us having joy or
other people witnessing us expressing joy, it’s like a communal experience of
joy, I don’t know, maybe you could even call it love. I don’t know. I mean when
you get into talking about this stuff it’s so loaded” (SO). The notion of
‘transcendence’ being a ‘loaded’ phrase was quite apparent, demonstrating the
tension in discussing such experiences: “On one hand it can sound either pushy
or religious and on the other hand it can sound like new aged or touchy feely to
the sense that it somehow feels washed out, and you know it’s something I take
seriously but then also, it’s something I don’t necessarily feel cautious about, but
as I said it can be loaded” (SO). Despite being a significant element of his
musical practice, ‘joy’ is the cornerstone for Olinsky’s experience – “Joy is something I feel pretty connected to and confident in wanting to express and share and be a part of and the concept of a transcendent experience is kind of loaded for me as well, so I don’t know, it’s difficult to say…” (SO). Likewise, the initially perceived ‘spiritual element’ of discussing transcendent experience made Ryan McRobb slightly nervous.

Defining the transcendent experience during the interview process is perhaps one of the main challenges in these discussions. Jon Hopkins states, “I don’t know, I’m not sure what the word is. I mean for me, it’s always trance inducing or hypnotic…”

In contrast to an experience of joy or happiness, Leo Abrahams draws on Morton Feldman’s concept of ‘abstract experience’: “…basically it’s the feeling that art gives you, which is not exactly melancholy, but not exactly happy, it’s just a potent feeling, he called it the abstract experience” (LA).

The shape of the transcendent experience is not necessarily something that becomes a permanent state in performance. For Leo Abrahams, “it hasn’t been my experience to be in that state for totally sustained periods like that” and likens it to where “you can go in and out of sleep or in and out of a meditation” (LA). This link to other biological and mental processes informs the significance of the experiences as a whole: With Abrahams linking it to other biological processes, there is a certain ‘ordinary-ness’ about these experiences: “…I think it’s different for everybody, I don’t feel like I want to enshrine that experience, any more than I want to enshrine the idea of a spirit, it’s a function of being a biological human being that you can do these things. That is, to me it’s very important to keep it very grounded for some reason” (LA). In a similar fashion, despite the potential highs and peak experiences that music affords, Justin Ashworth states that he doesn’t “think that music makes you achieve any higher state of existence other than what your body and your mind allow…” (JA).

The unwillingness to attribute a specific name to the transcendent experience is a feature of a number of artists’ engagement with such events. Justin Ashworth
states, “Without giving [transcendent experiences] a name, yeah definitely, because like as I was saying, you know when things are right... [it] helps you along that path. So whatever it is you’re trying to achieve, and that’s such an abstract concept to me that I’d rather just go with it.” Ashworth recalls “a Zen expression that I forget, that... it’s about like, you know... it refers to not giving things a name... Sort of like when you give something a name... it ceases to, to hold any significance, ah... I can’t really remember how that works because I don’t really follow any of that thought, I like to read about it, and, and take what I like, and, and just kind of move on, I think it’s that’s just how I kind of work “laughs” (JA).

Justin Ashworth agrees with Leo Abrahams in that transcendent experiences are not limited to music performance. “Whether you’re a theatre director... a painter... a plumber... a doctor or whatever, that’s your art... and that’s what creates that sense of self in your relationship to the world, so I guess it’s not just about music, you can get it from anywhere you know? ...I love watching basketball, I used to play, play basketball as a teenager, and collect basketball cards” (JA).

Despite the positive experience in my tertiary education, there was still a prevailing sense amongst some of my peers that analysis of music spoilt the ‘magic’. By association, at least unconsciously, I felt that such discussions about transcendent (or the ‘magic’) experiences in music ran the risk of spoiling things and that the discussion might not be enjoyable to participate in.

These reflections on transcendent experiences, relating them to greater life experiences also led in some instances to discussing their musical careers.

### 7.2.2 Reflecting on musical career

Examining transcendent experience reveals that it is not only about singular experiences on any particular day or not but rather that they are tied into a greater perspective on a musician’s career. Lloyd Swanton reflects, “I don’t consider it possible to have a total state of abandon in a performance, but I do
think there is also, if not transcendence, then a profundity that is gained over the months and years.” As for individual performances “there is no one performance where I feel OK that was the most incredible mind-blowing experience, but I look back over the last twenty-three years and go, OK that’s been twenty-three mind-blowing years in sum. There’s been some ups and some downs, but overall it’s been a twenty-three year trip rather than a forty-five minute one, and I think that is something that as a musician that I’m really impressed with. You know passion to me is the sort of thing… most people’s version of passion is someone being stabbed in a knife fight over a girl [laughter]. My idea of passion is like doing what you love doing for twenty, thirty, forty years and still coming up with something fresh…” (LS). Drawing a parallel, Swanton recalls alto saxophonist “Bernie McGann, who is pushing seventy now, plays in a style of music that I’ve had a lot to do with over the years but is not my primary sort of focus anymore, and doesn’t strike you as a particularly passionate sort of person, and yet I think you couldn’t describe his approach as anything but passionate in terms of the years he spent with so little reward and with so little detriment to the quality of the music he was making” (LS).

Chris Abrahams also reflects on how the music of The Necks “has kind of happened and that kind of mirrors the way the band has progressed. There are a number of things that we decide outside of the music that when I think about it, within the music there appears to be similarities; just in the long form of the band’s career, and in the democracy of the way we actually make decisions. It’s almost like the music is a reflection of the way we relate to each other, or vice versa, I can’t say which influences the other. And that’s kind of astounding; I wouldn’t have thought that when we first started the band. And I think also the way possibly, I mean we have changed, there’s certainly a change in the way we approach the whole polyrhythmic, triple dimension way of playing our music which took us a long time to get to, but… contrary to that, the large sound of the group to a certain extent came about very quickly after we started playing. I think within a couple of months we sort of started to play in a way that I think, there’s things we worked out within three months of starting the band. But the meaning we have fixed in the music has changed, and what we conceive or
what we hear even in doing the same things, their meaning seems to be changing. Or there’s so many dimensions to it that the more you do it you realise other things, other aspects and maybe focus more on those. And different ways of thinking about it, I think that in some ways the music doesn’t change but the way you think about it does. I think definitely that’s a part of my experience.”

Transcendent experiences also have slightly less long-term implications, yet are still considered broad chapters of an artist’s life. Seth Olinsky recalls an Akron/Family tour to Japan as “really just a wonderful trip I think, it just was a real... peak for us, the energy for every show was just really unbounded, and the audience was really connecting, and we played with some musicians there and it was just really a kind of I don’t know for whatever reason there was a kind of commitment and a fearless quality to these performances that these Japanese bands were playing with, were giving. It was just really inspiring on a lot of levels, and I think our music felt more alive to us than it had felt in a long time. And I think it just really fuelled like the last half of the year. I think our creativity and our ideas for our new music was really inspired I think by that trip” (SO).

Jon Hopkins’ musical endeavours have been strongly shaped by powerful, transcendent experiences earlier in his life. So powerful these experiences were, Hopkins “…just tried to recreate the experience in a piece of music so you can, cause... it was just the most, I mean it’s got to be the most powerful experience of my life, I’m almost embarrassed to admit [it]... I mean, fact is it did happen and I went to what I can only describe as a kind of heaven for about an hour, and I was drifting around on another plane completely.” This experience through hallucinogens has sustained him into later life. It was an experience that was shared with a friend where they both went to the same place, even communicating there and “it was just the most extraordinary out of body thing to happen (JH).” It has since been the result of a number of pieces of music due to the impact and significance of the experience, “like being in heaven or like truly experiencing that there was another side, in fact even thought about there, even remotely contemplated there being a spirit world of some sort or, you know, there being a kind of soul that exists, and I don’t really believe that but it’s
almost like I saw that (JH).” Perhaps of most relevance to this thesis, however is that the music playing through this event gave Hopkins’ experience a form and structure, where the music created a tangible landscape and alternate reality for Hopkins to exist within.

Without giving it a name, transcendent experiences are something that Justin Ashworth aspires to, equating it to a sense of the music being ‘right’. Ashworth elaborates, “each time you play, each time you get something right and you feel it in your body, and you feel it in your, you know, or you just hear it. It could be a moment when like, when I’m just sitting back and the stuff I’ve composed is being played by the rest of the band, and you know whether that was right, so when you attempt it again, or when you, yeah I think definitely, but without, I don’t think I’ve ever thought of it in those words before.” It is this sense of knowing that is characteristic of the transcendent experience.

Summary

This chapter has presented findings on how the interview participants examine and share their transcendent experiences. Discussing transcendent experience is a largely positive experience, despite some trepidation about discussing the subject matter of transcendent experience in such a direct fashion. In particular, the interview process invited honest and often frank self-assessment of one’s creative process and musical practice.

Transcendent experience isn’t necessarily at the forefront of what these musicians are consciously striving for. There is a general consensus that transcendent experiences are integrated into a broader life picture, with transcendent experiences seen as a natural function of human life. Despite this, spiritual practice or other significant experiences form a platform for examining and reflecting upon one’s transcendent experiences. Transcendent experiences are also integrated into a greater life-world experience.

The interview location played an important role in the interview process, in particular where musical equipment was available to the participant to directly
share music or recordings during the interview. The sensory elements of the interview played an important role in establishing an understanding in dialogue about transcendent experience. The form of the research interview produced effective rapport and rich dialogue focused on transcendent experience.

Table 8 below summarises the issues and benefits indicated in the interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues or Responses in Discussing TE</th>
<th>Benefits of Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Music expresses the unspeakable, but stimulating to discuss (LS)</td>
<td>Easier to discuss in interview than with peers (KH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No name for the experience, usually unwilling to reveal (CB)</td>
<td>Research interview more focused than press interviews (JH, TB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem of perspective as the experience is assimilated into the everyday (BS)</td>
<td>Interview encourages reflection on otherwise neglected experience (JA, AK, LR, KH &amp; CB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can only discuss in terms of musical stylistic features (JH, HH &amp; CA)</td>
<td>Interview reveals the previously neglected significance of the experience (JA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept emerges in interview; co-constructed (PM)</td>
<td>Potential to influence future music making (JA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An experience that cannot be abstracted into words (LR, CB &amp; CA)</td>
<td>Broader life significance of reflecting on the value of the experiences (MP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern with being inarticulate (JH)</td>
<td>Interview is objective and grounded (LA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspicious of talking it into existence, not appropriate topic of conversation (LA)</td>
<td>Interview “like jamming on ideas” (PM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of spoiling the experience (LR)</td>
<td>Grounded-ness of interview (LA)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 – Issues and benefits of interviewing
Chapter 8: Discussion

In contrast to previous studies, this thesis picks out the specific context of what I have called Experimental Popular Music in relation to the transcendent experience. The thesis has attempted to re-frame the experiences and language of transcendent experience in experimental popular music performance and in doing so, add to pre-existing frames, thereby generating new understandings through which musicians may continue to explore notions and experiences of transcendence and therefore their own music-making.

Preceding this chapter I have discussed representations of transcendent experiences both in the existing literature and in the interviews that I conducted with musicians. This research was guided by the principles of heuristic enquiry, for it is my own equivocal experiences of transcendence in music performance that motivate this study. As demonstrated in both the literature and interviews, my story and experiences are not unusual but rather shared by others and catalysed the interview process.

The previous findings chapters have detailed the content of the interviews in relation to the research questions. This study is conducted within the conceptual frame of phenomenology. Specifically, heuristic enquiry was used in selecting participants and driving the literature review and musical scope of the study. Describing and interpreting the texts in the literature review and interviews is a central process in this study. Nineteen participants were interviewed for this study into transcendent experience in experimental popular music. These conversational interviews were recorded, transcribed and studied for common themes, contrasts, key phrases and core meanings. Most importantly, stories came forth that elucidated the phenomenon of transcendent experience in experimental popular music performance, establishing its significance and the value of describing it and discussing it in a systematic manner. This chapter provides an exposition of the findings as a whole and discusses them in relation to the research questions.

The framework of transcendent experience that is developed throughout this thesis does not, cannot, and should not capture all aspects of the phenomenon – the richness is too great and varied. Therefore it becomes necessarily individual in
perspective, personified and focused on a particular stylistic inclination. The particular concreteness of one’s own body and mind gives immediacy to the relationship and brings music-making into a form which can be a model for one’s behaviour. As is inevitable through a PhD candidature, how I engage with the notions and experiences of transcendence has changed throughout the realisation of this thesis. In particular this was reflected through the interview process that took place over twenty months of my candidature.

Each section of this final chapter draws together and makes conclusions about what I take to be the most significant discoveries related to each of the four research questions.

The first section of this final chapter draws together the foundations for transcendent experience revealed in the literature review, methodology and my findings chapters and shows how these foundations can be synthesised into an approach to transcendent experience. In turn, this shapes a model for the transcendent experience in music informed by the punctuation and clarification of intimate and intricate details of theories of transcendent experience. These characteristics of transcendent experience reflect a multitude of musicians and the multifaceted experiences within experimental popular music.

How does transcendent experience manifest itself in contemporary, experimental popular music performance?

This study has shown how transcendent experience is indeed a multi-faceted, complex and significant phenomenon in the practice of the musicians featured. Roy’s observations suggest that transcendent experience encompasses a sequence of six elements – the preparation, the immediate occasion, the discovery, the interpretation and the fruit (2001, pp.5-7). This section discusses the aforementioned models of transcendent experience presented by Morelos (2004), Vincs (2002, 2007), Benzon (2001) and Jeddeloh (2003). Specifically, I discuss how Roy’s model fits into the main research questions of this study and then how other models of transcendent experience, presented by Vincs, Jeddeloh, Benzon, and Morelos’ induction to trance states, can then punctuate or contrast with these frames. Morelos’ model of methods
of induction into trance states can be mapped into models of transcendent experience in experimental popular music performance. Morelos’ method of induction provides nuanced detail on these stages and how they might be applied. I have reordered Roy’s stages of transcendent experiences to align with my research questions.

The interview participants’ reports on the manifestation of their transcendent experience come under seven broad areas: the form and dynamics of the experience; the performer’s state of mind; physicality; the general character of these experiences; any negative transcendent experiences; key detractors from transcendent experience; and finally the significance of transcendent experience. The form and dynamics included common themes such as ‘oneness’, alterations in time perception, effortlessness, sense of space and place. Discussions of one’s state of mind included comments on awareness of the transcendent experience, thinking, focus and altered states of mind. Transcendent experiences also manifest physically through goose bumps and shivers, a general ‘energy’ and heightened technical facility on one’s instrument. These findings will be compared and contrasted to the models presented in the literature review – Roy’s transcendent experience, Morelos’ trance induction, Benzon’s aspects of transcendent experience.

Principal concepts of the transcendent experience were entrainment, flow, dispossession of self and relaxation. Transcendent experiences largely occurred in two ways: a dispossession or ‘abandonment’ of the self, where one no longer feels separate from the music or those performing with them; secondly, a union with an external force, or channelling. This concept of force, for this subsection of musicians wasn’t imbued with religious or supernatural meaning but still affords a sense of the spiritual. Discussions supported the phenomenological approach, where transcendent experience isn’t just of the mind, but also largely an embodied and emplaced experience. It occurs on a number of levels – Chris Abrahams described the transcendence of the instruments, transcendence of individual expression into more of a group kind of dynamic and transcendence of time passing. Transcendent experiences manifest through a sense of channelling, losing track of oneself, connection with fellow band members and a connection with the audience. In particular, the connection with others was something that could be cultivated, to enable
these experiences to be more commonplace. Despite this cultivation, transcendent experiences were largely out of one’s conscious control but rather elusive moments.

In addition to the multiple layers of transcendent experience, clear definitions in the interviews were few and far between. Each participant has their own special character, musical strength and trove of experiences. They experience transcendence in a way peculiar to them; the transcendent is unique. However, there was a general sense that there is somewhat of a common ‘pool’ of transcendent experience that can be approached through a number of means in music performance, as Phil McCourt eloquently states: “you can show through, punching someone in the face exactly what you could show by giving them, a drink of water… it’s weird that you could do the same things through incredible volume, and through silence… I like it” (PM).

Transcendent experiences were also described in terms of what detracts from them, which include a preoccupation with the ‘business’ of music; ego; not maintaining oneself physically; self-consciousness; over-thinking; and technical mishaps.

Through the synthesis of relevant parts of the literature review and interview texts, there are a number of significant themes that are validated by both sources of data. In particular, transcendent experiences in performance are considered worth seeking and inherently valuable. Transcendent experiences seem to be one of the highest means for participants to unify feelings and emotions, both in the moment of performance but greater life experience around music. During these experiences, the performer often becomes more acutely aware of the whole, putting aside one’s individual self. Characterised by interconnectedness, these experiences are a connection imbued with meaning exceeding the personal self and one’s physical gestures. Although there is some conjecture about there being a natural, inherent drive for transcendence in us all, even outside of music performance – experiences were presented as intricate, organic systems that often have a life of their own and where the experiences can only be experienced, not controlled. Only a small number of participants referred to a specific spiritual practice that underpins their life. Further, language pertaining to God was not mentioned at all.

Although there were a number of common pieces of music, such as Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* or musical features such as repetition, that facilitated transcendent
experience, they were most frequently independent from form or circumstance – that is, experiences of transcendent performance often appear to be non-linear and not derived from a direct cause-and-effect relationship. In relation to this point, the question that of what comes first, the music or the transcendent experience, arises. For an inclination towards transcendent experience to be acted upon, musicians must apply themselves in an immediate, tangible way where one’s body is embedded. It is important that there is an intense orientation and contact with the music that is occurring. A musician may experience this transcendence if there is a reaching out to identify with the musical landscape that surrounds them. A real ‘feel’ for this landscape is vital. The musician for whom this offers a path towards transcendent experience may experience through his body and mind the sights, sounds, touches and tastes of this landscape: the rhythms, the movements and resonances of the physical surroundings. The experience is embodied and emplaced. Perhaps most interesting is not that one becomes ‘one’ with the music, but that the music is itself an active partner in the performance process – adopting the performer and making the performer one with itself in an open collaboration. Even from the multitude of backgrounds in the performers, by deliberate choice and active consciousness this collaborative relationship towards the music in performance can be fostered.

8.1.1 Models of transcendence

This first research question, how transcendent experience is manifest in experimental popular music performance, is considered by Roy as ‘the predominant feeling’ – an aesthetic feeling that penetrates into the intimacy and depth of the object at hand; aesthetic participants let themselves be reached by the object of art and respond to it with their whole being resulting in a mutual gift between subject and object (2001, p.6). Morelos’ (2004) model of trance punctuates this notion of engaging with one’s ‘whole being’ with the processes of ‘Identification’ and ‘Initiation’, where a primary objective of a trance induction process is the reframing of one’s sense of self within a closed system. The identity structure is of an individual or a group nature, representing a particular set of characteristics and values that are internalised and invoked by the individual (Morelos, 2004). The initiation process provides one with a sense of initiation into a ‘closed system’ of beliefs and values, with the essential element of the
experience being the sense of being initiated – that is, the sense that one is qualified and prepared to participate in a specific practice (Morelos, 2004). The interviews demonstrate that music performance can indeed create a ‘closed system’ through the performance environment and the musical material, but importantly this system is not static in the way it is closed. In fact, it appears that a ‘closed system’ may indeed become ‘open’ as connections with the music, the audience and even a sense of the spiritual start to emerge.

Vincs (2002) observes that transcendent experience takes place on two levels – firstly, in the moment of dispossessing of one’s ‘relative’ self, where one no longer feels separate to other people or objects; with the second tenet of transcendent experience being where one experiences a fusion with an external force outside of oneself, the ‘Absolute’ self. This second tenet resonates with Jeddeloh’s frame of transcendence based on ‘passivity’, where “once the mystic state is achieved, it feels as if the subject’s own will is lessened”; indicated by musicians describing a sense of the music flowing through them rather than playing the music (2003, p.11). As a nuance of this, Benzon, supports this, suggesting an essential feature is that ‘thinking’ ceases in order for the music to play itself (2001).

As mentioned previously, the liner notes of saxophonist John Coltrane’s album, Transcendence (Coltrane, 1961), presents a tension between ways improvisatory music comes into being and the experiences that are afforded through its performance. Vincs (2002) observes Miles Davis’ comments in these notes as the ‘modernist’ perspective, suggesting “the self constructs each artistic act and that each note or musical phrase uttered by a jazz improviser is a direct representation of that player’s ‘will’, thus defining the ‘self’ of the player” (Vincs, 2002, p. 1). In contrast, Coltrane was suggesting a method to improvisatory music performance that is interested in transcending this self. In the transcendent experience, a player is no longer preoccupied with “identifying self as the author of an artistic product; rather, ‘forces’ at work outside the ‘self control the creation of the music when the player dissolves the concept of ‘I’” (Vincs, 2002, p.1). I have moved to extend this notion of transcendence to include Davis’ ‘modernist’ view of the self – that is, a transcendent experience through the integration of one’s identity with the music or one’s instrument rather than a ‘dissolution’. Through my own experience and those shared through the interviews,
while elements of dissolution certainly do appear there is still an innate sense of ‘control’ that is necessary for the experiences to occur, there is an ebb and flow; push and pull of ‘loss’ and ‘gain’, to the extent that such control actually furthers the experience.

This can be expressed through the Jungian notion of Individuation. Individuation is the unification of the psyche, and developing from the persona and the shadow-self, between the thinking, rationalising self, and the feeling, intuitive self; the animus and the anima – progressing to the fully developed or integrated personality (Tucker, 1996, p. 67). To discuss such a state is to speak of the psyche’s experience of a transformative sense of wholeness, instead of seeing life through the lens of familiar and often estranging Western dualisms as (phenomenal) existence and (conceptual) essence; body and soul; mind and spirit (Tucker, 1996, pp.67-68).

A sense of self is suggested largely as the ‘thinking, self-aware’ state of mind, or as Brendan Smyly shares in his interview, ‘the watcher’, that often detracts from the musical experience that leads into ‘nothingness’, the goal of meditation practice. Roy speaks of ‘the discovery’ – a disclosure, an insight or discernment of something that has unrestricted significance; an awareness of something declaring confronting, challenging and engaging itself to us; not just emotional or subjective therefore has an objective reference (Ramsey, 1966, cited in Roy, 2001, p.7). There is a contrast presented here, where the external force is considered an ‘absolute’ and conversely that of a ‘nothingness’. The other question that arises from this contrast in ideas – what is this source of ‘discovery’ for Roy, is it a role for the watcher to play? Or is it a case of becoming aware of when the watcher is removed? This awareness ties in with the transiency of transcendent experience, where mystic states are short lived and cannot be maintained for long periods; the moment itself is short lived and easily lost if the conscious self notices it and dwells upon it (Jeddeloh, 2003).

Expanding Penman and Becker’s model of meditation and trance (see page 51), it was revealed through the interviews and my own experience that transcendent experiences in this study included elements of both meditation and trance, often within the one performance event. Significant music moments of stillness, fragility and (arguably) sensual deprivation were simultaneously public and communal. This was shown in the
‘Two Pianos’ section of the *Pure Scenius* concerts (particularly by Jon Hopkins, Chris Abrahams, Leo Abrahams). Rather than each characteristic being mutually exclusive, or dualistic, these experiences manifest in a complementary manner. Hopkins, even if only jokingly, went to the extent of saying that the ‘Two Pianos’ piece was the closest he has come to making love with a man, suggests a strong sensual element to such an experience.

The following table (Table 5) outlines the main thinkers in this thesis and offers a model derived from the research. This model of musical transcendence adopts, as its structure, the issues of the research questions. The table below presents: manifestation, the musical, the extra-musical, expression.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manifestation</strong></td>
<td>The predominant feeling</td>
<td>Dispossession of ‘relative’ self and ego</td>
<td>Involvement – intensified focus, engagement</td>
<td>Passivity – lessening of one’s will</td>
<td>Sense of responsibility to the music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The discernment of something with unrestricted significance</td>
<td>Union with a ‘greater self’</td>
<td>Identification – redefining identity</td>
<td>Intensity is a continuum (deep sleep &gt; wide awake)</td>
<td>The music being performed is embodied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opening to the infinite</td>
<td>Engaging with forces outside the self</td>
<td>Initiation – into a ‘closed system’</td>
<td>Transiency</td>
<td>Musical/extra-musical become inter-related aspects of transcendent experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Feelings of loss (loss of time, place, sense, self)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mode of existence is in constant renewal</td>
<td>Loss of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Feelings of gain (release, satisfaction, joy, salvation, perfection, and new knowledge)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Musical</strong></td>
<td>The immediate occasion – the trigger of the experience, or ‘precipitation factor’</td>
<td>Improvisation</td>
<td>The closed system – a cycle to establish a reality</td>
<td>Improvisation – an unfolding story</td>
<td>The performer experiences their own body as musical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Integration into practice routine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Complexity/simplicity dissolves</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Effortlessness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Musical elements combine and transform</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dissonance and interference move the improvisation forward</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Improvisation – an unfolding story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of acoustics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Playing the room’ – extra-musical/music al combines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To use Jeff Martin’s phrase of ‘climbing towards divinity’, experiences of experimental popular music artists can reflect traditions of past ages.

Despite there not being much emphasis on explicit concerns of the spiritual (in fact, a number were satisfied that discussion transcendence didn’t have such baggage), spiritual disciplines featured somewhat in the interviews and informed the transcendent experiences. Further, despite a number of the interviewees being self-professed atheists, a sense of the spiritual still permeated their musical practice and experience.
8.1.3 States of mind

The states of mind that are conducive to transcendent experience for me and the interviewees are: relaxation; letting go; emptiness; vulnerability; openness; acceptance; spontaneity; and sharing.

Harking back to Jung’s notions of artistic creation, there are two modes of artistic creation, but only one will produce a ‘true work of art’ (1928). The first mode involves a high degree of conscious participation and personal identification with the creative process, where the artist deliberately chooses how to express what he or she wishes to express. Material for these works is generally a result of the artist’s personal experience which “is raised from the commonplace... and expressed with a power of conviction that gives us a greater depth of human insight” into everyday life (Jung, 1971, p. 71, par. 139). The true work of art however belongs to:

…the other class of works which flow more or less complete and perfect from the author’s pen .... These works positively force themselves upon the author; his hand is seized, his pen writes things that his mind contemplates with amazement. The work brings with it its own form; anything he wants to add is rejected, and what he himself would like to reject is thrust back at him. While his conscious mind stands amazed and empty before this phenomenon, he is overwhelmed by a flood of thoughts and images which he never intended to create and which his own will could never have brought into being. Yet in spite of himself he is forced to admit that it is his own self speaking, his own inner nature revealing itself and uttering things which he would never have entrusted to his tongue. He can only obey the apparently alien impulse within him and follow where it leads, sensing that his work is greater than himself, and wields a power which is not his and which he cannot command. Here the artist is not identical with the process of creation; he is aware that he is subordinate to his work or stands outside it (Jung, 1971, p. 58, par. 110).

Through the interview process, it is evident that experimental popular music practitioners are familiar with an engagement with the unconscious, with its contents not always assailable into consciousness yet remain an embodied process as demonstrated by performers who can’t consciously think about the complex activity they are undertaking without things falling apart – as though the preconscious awareness is the glue that sticks things together. In particular, music of The Necks could fit into this. The channelling of music that Lloyd Swanton describes is akin to what Morelos, Benzon and Jeddeloh speak of, but rather than a specific riff or motif
that triggers the experience of channelling, it is more of a conceptual guide to Swanton's improvisations.

As previously mentioned, a major part of understanding transcendent experiences comes from Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) observation of the flow state, which is typically characterised by a state of deep attention coupled with an effortless sense of awareness. The interviewees shared experiences where one’s mind is simultaneously relaxed, active, and alert. This manifest through focused concentration that involved a merging of action and awareness, where ‘everyday’ preoccupations would no longer impose themselves. However, this was juxtaposed with the notion of trusting the music to ‘take care of itself’, where the capabilities of the musicians are matched to the challenges of the task. One’s sense of time stretches and contracts; hours can feel like minutes and conversely seconds can stretch out endlessly. There is a transient loss of self-consciousness, or perception of self as separate. In flow experience the self is wholly operational, but not as a matter of course cognizant of itself as separate, so all attention can be committed to the immediate task. A significant number of participants reported experiencing a transcendence of self. Like the transcendent experiences discussed in this study, the flow state is regarded as autotelic – essentially beneficial and significant for itself beyond any specific element of the experience, and beyond external outcomes or rewards (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

The music can coerce the performer into playing in a particular way – moving beyond a response to a sense of compulsion and inevitability to a particular gesture that just ‘falls into place’ and the experience it facilitates.

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**How do musical aspects facilitate the transcendent experience in performing experimental popular music?**

Transcendence appears not only to be something occurring within, but rather it is coupled with activity occurring without. That is, in the external sonic activity. These distinctions and correlations often become blurred in moments of transcendence. The literature shows the key musical factors of repetition, improvisation, timbre, rhythm and drones as listed above. This research into EPM also supports these factors.
The second research question focused upon the salient musical features that pertained to the transcendent experience. The relevant musical features discussed were musical structure, repetition, harmony, time, dynamics, timbre and the role of improvisation. Melody, while important for some, featured less in the interviews. Although repetition featured heavily in the music of the participants, it was more focused upon how these musical ideas change and evolve rather than merely repeat.

8.2.1 Transcendence of sonic parameters

Clear divisions between these musical categories are sometimes subverted and this too can be a key device. This is demonstrated most strongly through *The Necks*, where reverberating timbres may become harmony and become melody or rhythm. Such a perspective resonates and expands Alberici’s notion of the transcendent experience being a quantum system (Roederer, 1975, cited in Alberici, 2004, p.13). Like the transcendent experience, the musical elements which emerge from a performance by *The Necks* often cannot be observed independently – the relationship between performers and the musical features is continually reframed throughout the performance. This sense of flux continually renews and directs the music in unexpected yet a familiar and organic fashion.

8.2.2 Rhythm/Time/Repetition

To expand on the use of rhythm, much of the literature and interviews concerning rhythm espouse a sense of ‘locking in’, even to the extent of where the tempo might be ‘wrong’ or fluctuates too often so as to become distracting (Jeddeloh, 2003). A strong attraction of *The Necks* and a core element of Tony Buck’s approach to music-making, is where the subversion of a strict pulse or locking in is celebrated. The push-and-pull of gestures and multi-tempi approach where a pulse isn’t locked down is still very much a vehicle into transcendent experience.
8.2.3 Dynamics

While loud dynamics were espoused as a relatively consistent gateway to being ‘shaken out of oneself’, it was often seen that achieving such experiences at much quieter dynamics were more challenging, thus more powerful and rewarding. This was particularly manifest in the ‘Two Pianos’ sections of the Pure Scenius concerts at the Sydney Opera House (2009) and Brighton Dome (2010).

Repetition is also noted as a strong feature underpinning transcendent experience – but not in the sense of how things repeat, but rather how things change. While participants commented on the impact of repetition, it is in fact through change and morphing of these gestures that these experiences come about. This approach is also shared by Jon Hopkins, who works hard to achieve a sense of organic growth and change in his electronic work through his rhythmic gestures.

8.2.4 Improvisation

Improvisation was discussed at length and proved to be an essential ingredient to many of the powerful experiences afforded by music-making and experimental popular music as a whole. Transcendence is engendered through the fluidity and blurred boundaries of the music features in their improvisations. Rhythm becomes melody becomes harmony becomes timbre becomes rhythm, where each performer’s musical cycles ebb and flow, like a flamenco dancer whose flowing dress undulates slightly differently with each turn.

Approaching The Necks from the broader lineage of avant-garde and minimalist composers, Terry Riley points out the fascination the composers shared with environmental sound or ‘noise’ (Schwartz, 2008). There is an emphasis on organic growth of the musical material using additive time and stasis. I argue that The Necks also have such a tendency and would go as far to say that their approach could be seen as an improvised Raga with double bass, piano and percussion. The tambour harmonic drone is replaced by the often-singing harmonics that evolve to permeate a Necks improvisation.
Over the course of writing this thesis, there have been a number of analogies or metaphors emerge by which to describe the music of *The Necks*. Despite their concerts being completely improvised, there is a sense of familiarity as gestures unravel and morph. Follow a trickle for some time and you’ll often find yourself in a torrent, unaware of how you have arrived. Despite complex musical relationships, there is an ease of engagement with the evolving musical material.

The definition of one’s genre or style wasn’t necessarily given much importance or weight by the interviewees, who largely felt they didn’t subscribe to a particular approach or style in a strict fashion. There was, however, much dialogue concerning how the often multi-faceted approaches to music-making are stretched over an existing frame. For instance, some of the artists in this study base their performances on long form improvisations with evolving gestures and it is this form that allows the music to be pushed and pulled over another frame, while others still have an affinity for the 3-minute pop song while still participating in these undulating structured improvisations. Overall, it is demonstrated that there is a tension inside the experimental popular music frame, perhaps akin to the resonating soundboard of an acoustic guitar under tension from its structure and bracing. Rather than representing an amorphous approach to music-making, this selection of experimental popular music artists demonstrated that transcendent experience is a largely unexamined but defining aspect in their approaches to music-making.

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**How do extra-musical aspects facilitate the transcendent experience in experimental popular music performance?**

Extra-musical features pertinent in transcendent experiences featured an emphasis on the emplaced experience of the phenomena, and how one’s environment impacts on such an experiences. Musical and extra-musical features weren’t necessarily always distinct, particularly where the unique acoustic properties of various performance venues transition from being part of the general environment to playing an important, conscious role in *The Necks*’ live performances. Extra-musical aspects in transcendent experience often overlapped with the music itself and often added to the experience. In particular, the physicality of playing, acoustics and the general approach to music-
making inevitably become part of the musical material and performance experience. This section also reflects on some detractors of transcendent experience.

Roy speaks of ‘the immediate occasion’ – the precipitating factor that which triggers the experience, bringing about a release of tension and emergence of a novel feeling. This resonates with Morelos’ methods of induction into the ‘closed system’ of a trance state (2004). Elements function within a system of processes that can attain a condition of being ‘closed’ as a cycle. While the cycle is maintained, the sense of the ‘reality’ of the experience continues, at different times undulates according to the “intensity” or momentum within the closed system. This system is activated by training, preparation, interaction, as well as by events or conventions (Morelos, 2004). Further, the musical piece as a whole may be considered a ‘closed system’ where the musical elements may become tangible, that you are part of the same ‘reality’ and that the sound and music have established and formed the world of the performance.

Somewhat akin to the ‘preparation’ phase, ‘the immediate occasion’ isn’t a single point in time that acts like a gate leading to a garden of transcendent experience, but rather an ongoing occasion of immediacy that stretches out and follows the performer. As such, Roy’s use of the phrase ‘immediate’ is indeed apt.

The performance environment itself provides a platform for transcendent experience, including the acoustic properties, the physicality of performance, the ‘performance’ of the inter-personal relationships and the overall approach to music-making.

8.3.1 Performance environment

The first stage of Roy’s model of transcendent experience is that of ‘the preparation’, which refers to the cognitive and affective setting that condition the experience, both short term and long term. Morelos (2004) punctuates this through two elements in his trance induction methods – the ‘invocation’ and ‘isolation’, where the individual utilises an invocation process in the course of an induction procedure. The invocation is the act of mental preparation to bring about a certain mental state. This involves the imagination in the process of initiating particular psychological and physical processes. The invocation process produces the necessary suspension of the “normal” sense of
self, in order to be replaced by the state of consciousness that was learnt or discovered in the course of induction (Morelos, 2004).

Developing from this ‘isolation’ process, and crossing musical and extra-musical threads is the process of ‘imagination’. One’s imagination must be engaged and activated by the induction procedure. The imagination symbolises one’s ability to concentrate on a sense or an image so as to cultivate the appropriate state of consciousness and the required social-psychological process. The individual might imagine a predetermined set of internal actions – as in the case of an induction procedure in an established practice – or an undetermined flow of internal actions and images – as in the case of performances that utilise improvised interactions (Morelos, 2004). The social-psychological process is demonstrated by *The Necks* articulated specifically by Lloyd Swanton and Tony Buck, where their musical gestures are intended to contribute but not ‘control’ their improvisations. Also Chris Abrahams specifically states that he doesn’t ‘plan’ his musical direction and goes as far as saying that such an approach is detrimental to his musical process. The ‘preparation’ phase is not always clear-cut, where one state of mind ends and another begins.

Participants found the process of induction into a trance state requires the concentrated involvement in order to manifest (Morelos, 2004). This concentrated engagement can take the shape of an act of focusing one’s attention upon an object, or an act of limitation involving the limiting of attention to specific objects (Morelos, 2004). Intensified engagement is a crucial part of the preparing oneself for the sense of ‘heightening’ of subjective experience, as well as for the bringing about states of receptivity to relevant stimuli (Morelos, 2004). This manifests in a number of performers, who intentionally use silence before they commence playing, with the use of unravelling, repetitive phrases as their focus or ‘limitation’.

8.3.2 Physicality of performance

Expanding on the notion of limitation, the physicality of performance bears strongly on the experiences that manifest. Lloyd Swanton speaks of the necessary physical limitations of playing the bass and how that in part determined his choice in musical
gesture. Swanton’s ‘limitation’ is in itself an informant of the creative process. Through the lens of analytical psychology, Jung writes:

Every limitation has its value, but a limitation that requires persistent effort entails a cost of too much energy. When, however, the limitation is a natural one, it necessarily leads to success, for then it means a saving of energy. The energy that otherwise would be consumed in a vain struggle with the object, is applied wholly to the benefit of the matter in hand, and success is assured (Jung, 1967 p.233).

Due to the nature of a Necks improvisation, Jung’s notion of limitation is indeed applicable to the physicality of playing a musical instrument and is necessarily linked to the experience of effortlessness espoused by a number of interviewees during the transcendent experience. Particularly in The Necks, such an approach resonates strongly with Boon’s ethos regarding the use of drone as a way to avoid hiding “behind Cage’s culture of chance… [and] become conscious of what music can be, [and to] dive deeper in that vast field of sonic relationships” (Boon, 2002, p.69) through the deceptive simplicity of double bass, piano and drums.

8.3.3 Approach to music-making

Emerging from this study has been a synergy between methodological process and musical practice. The elements of memory and imagination in both instances are used to drive and inform the respective processes. As well as being part of the interview process, this view on imagination is also insightful with regard to the creative process of the interviewees in live performance. The style of deep, interpersonal connection that can manifest through producing improvised music “is about ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ together” (Burrows, 2004, p.14), much like one participants’ experience of “unfolding and being unfolded.”

Transcendence is engendered when things stop making sense and when these things are engaged with fascination. There is a thrill of things ‘not making sense’ through surprise or the unexpected is a strong feature in providing transcendent experiences.

There is an undercurrent of the spiritual for a few of the artists that manifests through a sense of community or develops from a particular belief system such as Buddhism or Reiki. Most of all, however, there is a permeating theme of responsibility towards the music itself. There is an awareness of the presence of the music and its impact on
listeners. Every sacred framework results in a way of relating and in a way of behaving. It expresses itself both in an ethos, a way of life that will be expressed in a person’s everyday activities and ethical standards, and in ritual, a way of celebrating music, and the beliefs and experiences of themselves and others. There is also a common theme of subverting oneself in the musical ensemble. In particular, each participant’s approach of subtlety and support and not necessarily being the primary focus of the music being played articulates the unique nature of many of these ensembles and artists. Common across through all interviewees was that the musicians did not focus on their own ‘big’ moments, like a showy guitar or drum solo, and receiving accolades – the shared ethos was one of adding to a bigger picture and texture of the ensemble.

*The Necks’* use of acoustics and ‘getting the room singing’ is a prime example of how extra-musical elements can become important musical features, resonating with an all-encompassing, emplaced transcendence of the music, performers and audience. Pasternak articulates this through the metaphor of love:

> They loved each other, not driven by necessity, by the blaze of passion often falsely ascribed to love. They loved each other because everything around them willed it, the trees and the clouds and the sky over their heads and the earth under their feet. Perhaps their surrounding world… took more delight in their love than they themselves did (Pasternak, 1958 Doctor Zhivago cited in Roy, 2001, pp.22-23).

Such phenomena are indicative of a number of levels of transcendence previously articulated by Chris Abrahams – that of identification of instruments, moving from individual expression to group expression, and expansion of individual creativity to group creativity.

8.3.4 Detractors from transcendent experience

Issues of self-confidence that were brought up are spoken about by Vincs (2007, pp.68-70) and Alberici (2003). Further, making ‘mistakes’ and being fearful of risk were also found to be detractors from the creative and transcendent experience. In particular, Justin Ashworth referred to the ‘safety’ of particular guitar licks when improvising a guitar solo. Rzewski (2006) compares the art of an improviser to that of a magician, where the improviser operates temporally, and the magician operates spatially (p.492):
The magician does something with the right hand that distracts the attention of the spectator from the action of the left hand. The improviser follows an unintended action (a) with a purposeful action (b), whose function is to make (a) appear purposeful also. This is a process known to theologians as the ‘redemption of accident’. The improviser tries to save the situation. When the ball is dropped, one picks it up, in such a way as to make it seem that it was dropped on purpose. But everyone knows that a real catastrophe did take place. Improvisation is interesting because it resembles real life, more than a written or carefully rehearsed performance does (Rzewski, 2006, p.492).

There was indeed an awareness shared by both performer and fellow band member of these ‘mistakes’. As discussed earlier, whereas with The Necks, there is an overall ethos that there is no such thing as a ‘bad sound’.

Morton Feldman maintained beliefs about failure, in particular the ways in which failure is intrinsically tied to the creative act and the desire for expression. Feldman often invoked painter Philip Guston’s remark that, “for a work of art to succeed its creator must fail” (Feldman, 1968, cited in Paccione & Paccione, 1990, p. 10). Regarding the form that emerges from a Necks improvisation, “you kind of know if the form is right, you kind of know. There’s no question that it could be wrong if what we do doesn’t really [work]; there’s no cup of gold that any of us can name, so therefore there’s no idea of failure, or, the only thing is like an approach. But it’s very exciting, when something starts to kind of take shape… it’s an excitement that I don’t really find in any other way I play music. It’s something that at this stage it needs to have its own way” (CA). Both Chris Abrahams and Feldman are referring to a process where the musical event is out of one’s control. Whereas Feldman may be suggesting that it is the creator’s self that fails for the music to succeed, for Abrahams the concept of failure doesn’t even exist. These contrasting notions of failure, and its role in a successful musical outcome can also provide another perspective on the aforementioned dialogue between John Coltrane and Miles Davis. Coltrane’s experience of ‘just getting into this thing’ and being ‘unable to stop!’ is that his controlling ‘self’ is essentially failing, whereas from Davis’ perspective the self doesn’t, or indeed shouldn’t fail.
How can a musician/researcher discuss their own transcendent experience within their practice of music making?

The main themes pertaining to this research question relate to how the experiences are articulated, reflecting on the content and location of the interview process itself and the broader life significance of transcendent experience.

Transcendent experiences were often difficult to articulate, with interviewees often at a loss to put their experiences into words but also wary of ‘colouring’ the experience too much. However, phrases used were: oneness; timelessness; interconnectedness; nothingness; energy; effortlessness; joy; listening to the void; and channelling. Establishing a common dialect through the interview process was essential in discussing transcendent experience. Discussing and reflecting upon transcendent experience wasn’t something of a regular occurrence for the musicians concerned in this study, however, they were generally very open in discussing their experiences over the span of their musical career. Additionally, there was occasionally a sense of trepidation in discussing these experiences. As well as reflecting on individual moments and performances, reflecting on transcendent experiences also concerns broader periods of time that focus on longer-term relationships with fellow band members and the music that can facilitate transcendence in performance as well as a broader sense of connection with others in a greater life perspective.

The significance of transcendent experience in music performance ranges from being an essential underpinning and broader life aspirations and goals to not being overly important. Either way, the desire for such experiences was generally non-conscious processes, but more of an intuitive, non-verbal approach that it built into the process of music-making itself. Transcendent experiences are strongly linked to a sense of satisfaction in music-making that would also be a goal in other activities outside of music.

Understated attitudes towards transcendence are characteristic of this group of musicians. Surveying participants on the potential benefits and outcomes of reflecting on one’s transcendent experiences, the interview process invited honest and often frank assessments on the participants’ musical practice. Such an approach obviously
still needs to remain sensitive to the nuances of definition and description of experiences to elicit the most thorough outcome.

This links into other models of transcendent experience, specifically Roy’s stage of ‘the interpretation’, a reflective act of awareness, initially elementary mirroring but moves into greater life significance; interpretations change over time; conditioned by mental framework prior to experience. This develops into the final stage of Roy’s model of transcendent experience, that of ‘the fruit’ – the benefit one obtains from the experience; perhaps a personal transformation that may occur both in short-term and long-term. Outcomes of transcendent experience are shared by Panzarella as ‘renewal ecstasy’, which produces an altered perception of the world in a more positive light. This also resonates with Morelos’ process of ‘instruction’, where one may learn certain information and techniques throughout the trance induction process. The individual may be led along a particular trajectory of development, where heightened skills can manifest in performance (Morelos, 2004).

Examining my own experience in isolation became next to impossible. However, I did not see this as a shortcoming, as I now have a multi-faceted understanding of transcendent experience that has added to my capacity as a reflective practitioner and researcher. Each individual’s experience is necessarily unique but a number of common themes emerge. While we might want to assign a set of criteria to transcendent experience, from the interviews we get 19 individual accounts of the transcendent experience but with some overlapping of these individual experiences and some unique experiences.

Throughout the conversational interviews, central characteristics of the transcendent experience in performance came to light as common themes through a number of phrases. Most of the participants agreed that transcendent experiences in music performance are worth seeking, that they are intrinsically valuable. There were differences of opinion, however, on whether these experiences are considered essential. There was a general consensus that transcendent experience is at the core of music performance where satisfaction is derived. However, they are not the be-all and end-all for music-making. All of the participants shared that during the transcendent experience itself, there is a propensity for one to forget their own specific
roles, while becoming more thoroughly immersed in, and conscious of the greater experience – both ensemble and at times audience. All participants mentioned in some capacity that transcendent experiences with music are what led them towards a musical vocation and that it informs this ongoing process. In terms of interconnectedness, there was a general consensus about transcendent experience in music performance as facilitating a connection with significance beyond the personal self. Pertaining to their sources of inspiration, nine participants felt that musicians have an innate desire for transcendence, and felt they come naturally to some people – even in an innate spiritual sense.

The spiritual elements of the transcendent experience were generally discussed in broad, conceptual terms – with only a couple of participants linking this to a specific spiritual practice. Rather than seen as engagement with God, it was more seen as an experience of ‘oneness’, or in terms of one’s personal consciousness such as “when the watcher goes away” (BS). Although all agreed some level of musical competence may be required, seven participants considered that transcendent experience in performance seem to be separate of form, technique, or context. These seven participants emphasised that they espoused the focus on transcendent experience to be beneficial to the greater music community and broader life experience. Nearly all participants mentioned during their interview that they found it worthwhile to explore and discuss their music-making and the transcendent experience. Further, discussing transcendent experience was something seen to be done more often. These moments of creativity and spontaneity and connection also occur in the teaching context.

8.4.1 Heuristic enquiry

Maintaining full phenomenological “authenticity” through the bracketing process (Heidegger, 1999) was an unresolved challenge and not conducive to the progress of this study. Despite the self-interview and the process of listing my ideas and assumptions, complete bracketing was not possible in this study because of my practice and presence in the interview process. In particular, my experience provides key triggers that have informed the interview process. In this instance, the idea of
bracketing is an ideal rather than something done in practical situations. The interview couldn’t take place if I realised this approach to its full conclusion.

Throughout this study, there has emerged a realisation about the defining characteristics being indicative of myself – the trial and error process based on my own worldview, or that makes me aware of my own worldview. Even with a strict approach to epoché, the orientation of the research is drawn from my own worldview and how things that “show up or appear” (Polt & Fried, 2001) are of significance both individually and collectively.

One of the outcomes of this project is that heuristic enquiry clarifies aspects of how my worldview is constructed but is also generalisable in that it shows the possibility of this kind of manifestation of transcendence and describes in detail these experiences.

8.4.2 The challenges and creativity of the interview process

In terms of discussing such personal experiences with a wide range of people – from very close friends and band mates to relative strangers, I feel very fortunate that such positive dialogue emerged from these interviews.

The Zen proverb paraphrased by Murphy & White of “if you experience illumination chopping wood, keep chopping wood. If there is something in the act that invites the ecstasy, it doesn’t need extra hype or solemn benediction” (Murphy & White, 1995) does indeed ring true, particularly for the musicians interviewed who have been playing for longer periods of time. In particular Lloyd Swanton, who considers such experiences over the course of his life and musical career, and Leo Abrahams who finds it necessary to keep the experiences grounded with an awareness of them being a natural function of a biological process.

Further to the synergy between transcendent experience and phenomenological enquiry, the interview itself was acknowledged as a creative space. Meaning-making in interviews was developed through establishing a dialogue and rapport with the participants. Dialogical inter-subjectivity was achieved, and was particularly noted by Leo Abrahams, who despite his initial concerns discussing transcendent experience
was happy to establish a grounded dialogue on the topic. Further, discussion of transcendent experience can be used as a catalyst in the creative process.

The role of the interview space, as espoused in sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009), particularly came to the fore in a number of occasions. A studio afforded one interviewee the opportunity to share some of his music collection; the guitar in another’s studio allowed the sharing of a piece of music significant to his practice [Appendix CD – Track 3]; Lloyd Swanton demonstrated the harmonic ambiguity with the piano. Even in a simple verbal sense, ideas were shared through the lens of musical interaction – Phil McCourt found the process of discussing transcendent experience “interesting, and it’s good to talk away and figure out your way.” McCourt also espoused the benefits of sharing ideas with me as the interviewer; “It’s just cool to get it out in the open. It’s like jamming, you’ve got all these ideas, and you didn’t know they were there until you, you started playin’ ‘em... so it’s good, I like it” (PM). Even verbally, musicians often demonstrate their ideas and interact with the context through a musical lens.

For a number of participants, it appears discussing transcendent experience has reawakened something inside of them. Three explicitly mentioned the benefits of discussing transcendent experience. McCourt also makes specific reference to ‘jamming’ on ideas in the interview process. Many of the core techniques of grounded theory research are developmental in that the quality of their application improves with experience (Suddaby, 2006, p.638). Like a group of musicians that develop a creative relationship over time, so too the creative space of the interview may grow and foster a greater depth of engagement with the fellow participants.

Throughout the interview process, participants demonstrated elements of problem solving, changing their minds and evolving their thoughts. As such, I feel this is testament to the sensitivity of interview technique in capturing multiple nuances and the fluidity of thought pertaining to the transcendent experience.

Jung believed questions regarding the mode of creation of any work of art could be answered through analytical psychology, but not necessarily through artistic testimony (1971, p.59). This is due to the difficulty in knowing the degree to which conscious or
unconscious elements of the psyche are facilitating the source for the act of creation. To illustrate, an artist who feels inspired to create may unwittingly be directing the composition consciously, while another may feel entirely in control when in fact the source of creation is unconscious - the complication in determining the method of creation is exacerbated due to the potential for an artist to simultaneously create through both methods (Marshman, 2003, p.21). Jung believed that he could confidently determine through which mode of creation a work was produced, only by knowing the relationship of the artist to the work itself (p. 21).

The validity of the methodology pertains to the amount that a method fulfils its intentions, to “the extent to which our observations indeed reflect the phenomena or variables of interest to us” (Pervin, 1984, cited in Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 238). As transcendent experiences, for many of the performers, had hitherto been rarely spoken about, the approach of heuristic enquiry and interview indeed investigated what I intended to investigate.

Results in the social sciences should be reliable, generalizable and verifiable throughout – with issues of verification being addressed throughout the entire research process, rather than be a separate state of the investigation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). ‘Validity’ is not merely a stringent scientific principle but can be seen as quality of skill of the researcher (p.248). Communicative validity is obtained by validating knowledge claims in the dialogue of the interview, where pragmatic validity is when the results of the research lead to the desired effect or action (p.248).

One of the criteria appears to be that experiences of transcendence should be meaningful and open to being readily understood by those who wish to pursue them. Based on the special regard for such a unique musical landscape, my proposed experiences might be easily understood by those who feel and exhibit a natural affinity with the special character and worth of what has been described as experimental popular music. This notion of transcendence builds on that experience. It also draws on the experience of other musicians, particularly those who have shaped musical culture both personally and globally.
Final thoughts

Discussing transcendent experience is a largely positive experience, despite the trepidation of discussing the subject matter of transcendent experience in such a direct fashion. When one talks about sound and experiences with sound, it is not always clear what is being spoken about. Delving into the mystery of it all is indeed a highly motivating factor.

Having collected and presented the research results, I now more clearly understand, yet am still enthralled by, transcendent experience in experimental popular music performance. I have a greater understanding of the transcendent experience and its operation and significance.

There is a vast body of cross-disciplinary literature pertaining to transcendent experience, with this thesis providing a glimpse into this world. The combination of self-insight linking to the limited generality of my peers and key practitioners shows that the approach to transcendent experience demonstrated in this study is a valuable mode of enquiry. There is however, a realisation that the defining characteristics of the object of study are indicative of myself and my concerns – the trial and error process based on my own worldview has made me aware of and able to articulate not only my own worldview but the world in which it is situated.

In each particular instance of music-making, the performer experiences their own body as musical, as the music being performed is being embodied, where also the instruments, audience and performance space are musical as the music is embodied with them. Thus, the findings reflect the inter-related aspects of this embodiment of transcendent experience.

8.5.1 Significance of research

This research builds upon the research of others in relation to transcendence and in doing so draws together hitherto disparate theories that will further the enquiry into the notion of transcendence in music performance. The project focuses on a cross-section of primarily Australian music makers and thereby expands the field of knowledge of Australian music from the perspective of an Australian male in the early 21st century.
This project has discovered language to describe the synthesis between pre-existing and experimental musical and cross-cultural forms and has illustrated connections among practitioners who currently fit under many stylistic labels.

Some of the concepts in this research articulate beneficial, key stages in the process and dynamics of music-making in the increasingly significant musical arena of experimental popular music. This significance is demonstrated by the recent growth and success of Sydney’s The Bird’s Robe Collective, an organisation dedicated to the promotion and continuation of Sydney’s progressive and experimental music scene. One of the outcomes of this project is to present an artefact that clarifies aspects of how my worldview is constructed, but is also generalisable in that it shows the possibility of this kind of manifestation of transcendence and describes in detail these experiences.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on practice as research by combining phenomenology and creative outcomes. The project demonstrates a mode of enquiry that reveals the links between practice, self and the response of others to their practice and themselves.

The consequence and importance of this study to my own music-making practice is that through the uncovering, recognition and comprehension of the contextual boundaries of the participating artists that influence the process of my music-making and an understanding of transcendent experience, I anticipate greater access and articulation of this altered state of consciousness. This research presents and interprets stories of transcendent experience, not only for intrinsic gains when this document may elicit an empathetic, vicarious response in the reader, but also to stimulate the further application of phenomenology in music practice and research. I hope the information I uncover will be of interest to other music and art practitioners and also musicologists as I investigate the ethos of this cross-section of 21st century music-making.

This knowledge will form the basis of my continued practice-based and pedagogical research endeavours.

8.5.2 Implications and further research

Following the thread of how my own improvisatory music practice exposed limitations in my previous knowledge of music-making and what was hitherto experienced, lead me into my own experimental popular music practice. As is seemingly inevitable through a PhD candidature, how I engaged with the notions and experiences of transcendence has changed throughout the realisation of this thesis. In particular this was reflected through the interview process that took place over 20 months within my candidature where my skills as an interviewer were refined and tested. The general response was that speaking about such things has been a positive experience, engaging musicians on topics that they wouldn’t normally consider or have the opportunity to speak about.

The focus on individual instruments and approaches to performances for each instrument could add to the existing body of literature, particularly the area of Vincs’ (2002, 2007) research into practice schedules and approaches to improvisation on the saxophone through the lens of transcendent experience. It would be a useful endeavour to pursue research across a number of instruments within the experimental popular music frame.

Examining transcendent experience isn’t limited to singular moments or performances but can stretch over entire careers, tying in strongly to one’s greater life experience. The transcendent experiences that I have described and experienced through a heuristic sample of musicians, suggest there is an opportunity to further refine and specialise this research into smaller groups or communities. Brinner (1995) proposes that it is the short-term self that is most apparent during performance and is largely at the mercy of the circumstance. However in the interview process, we moved between short term and long term selves as demonstrated, in particular, by Lloyd Swanton who derives greater satisfaction from the longer-term self. These subjects of social interaction facilitate a window into collaborative transcendent experiences. Descriptions used by individuals may be expanded upon in a group context, paving the way for the evolution of the cache of experiences that may otherwise be left unexplored or taken
for granted. Conducting multiple interviews over a period of time will afford more than
the single snapshot of performers’ experience in this project, giving greater access to
both the short term and long term selves and understanding how they relate. Contrasts
between individual and group interviews may also further investigate the conscious
state of a group and its impact on the individual. I look forward to seeing further
research and dialogue between scientific and phenomenological disciplines regarding
transcendent experiences.

There are strong implications of this research into transcendent experience for higher
education, particularly in music performance. Teaching methodologies that engage with
transformative learning experiences that are complex and non-linear should encourage
one to engage with a broader range of possible experience. Relational approaches
such as portfolio assessment and other process-oriented models may be integrated
more strongly into current grading systems (Alberici, 2004; Blom & Encarnacao, 2012).
The sense of knowing that comes from transcendent experience isn’t focused upon
‘thinking’, but rather co-operative behaviour and relationships. These relationships and
behaviour feature as ‘soft skills’ in rehearsal process, in particular: participation,
personal attributes, and the team or group (Blom & Encarnacao, 2012). Blom and
Encarnacao’s research into tertiary music education of popular music groups revealed
criteria that emphasised ‘creativity’ and ‘communication’ in the rehearsal process, and
‘communication’, ‘creativity’ and issues of dynamic ‘balance’ in the performance
outcome (2012, p.39). If this ‘knowing’ is concerned with collaboration, balance,
cooperation and communicative experiences, educators and students may be at the
mercy of the current competitive system that may not actually be fulfilling its intentions.
I hope the information uncovered in this study will be of interest to other music and art
practitioners, educators and musicologists to further investigate the ethos of this cross-
section of 21st century music-making. I have already been able to put into practice
these frames in teaching tertiary music performance, particularly regarding
improvisation and drone based exercises.

Such an approach engages with the epistemology of embodied experience, where
there will be different shades in understanding one’s experience. Just as the
participants showed a range of understandings, one’s experiences colours the
interpretation. The reader of the thesis can only be expected to obtain a particular
understanding or perspective influenced by his or her own experiences. The findings and their analysis can help to introduce the topics but can only provide a limited understanding of the transcendental experience. Accepting this implies an approach to the objectivity of knowledge, ‘allowing the object to object’ (Latour, 2000, cited in Kvale, 2007, p.121). This would give the most opportunity for the artists and creative processes being researched to protest and dialogue with what is being discovered about them. As such, this would further research in how transcendent experience is discussed, expanding Schön’s notions of reflective practice – emphasising the reflection after action (1983).

The experimental popular music scene in Sydney, Australia has been thriving over the past few years, largely due to the growth and success of the aforementioned Bird’s Robe Collective, which has developed into a record label (Bird’s Robe Records) and is stretching its wings across Australia and the world. This development suggests the integration of a practice-led research approach to developing this area of enquiry.

One potentially fruitful approach is to establish a small number of collaborative projects with a select cross section of artists within the scope of experimental popular music. This would involve documenting and reflecting on the creative process and performance experiences. Currently, I am involved in a recording-based collaboration with artists Luis Rojas and Lachlan Kerr (of Sydney band Godswounds), with a forthcoming CD release on Bird’s Robe Records and live performances based on this material. This opportunity will allow further first-hand experience of performing with these artists and greater depth of understanding of experimental popular music. By integrating aspects of action research methodology, it should be possible to overcome the lack of social integration exhibited in the interview method that concentrates on thoughts and experiences at the expense of creative action that might otherwise provide sources of data in addition to verbal interaction and transcripts (Kvale, 2007, p.140). Such an approach would also expand on the use of embodied enquiry and sensory ethnography into a music-making process with creative and other research outcomes. Further, this approach would develop the research paradigm in which the creative work is viewed as one amongst several research outcomes in a more cohesive nexus of research-practice activity (Smith & Dean, 2009).
8.5.3 Reflections

One of the defining characteristics of the ensembles selected for this study is that the ‘goal’ of transcendent experience is implicit in the musical approach and the stylistic aspects of their music as a defining feature. It’s implicit that they’re aiming for these experiences, but is never overtly stated and is a generally underplayed aspect of the performance experience. This implicitness is characterised by participants being occasionally reticent to talk about transcendent experience, and outside such interviews they would generally not talk about these experiences. A contrasting, example was provided by Jeff Martin, in the Whirling Dervishes of Istanbul who are explicit in their approach to transcendence, whereas the artists interviewed in this research are somewhat more understated and less overt about planning to place themselves into a transcendent state. Although it may be present in the music, it’s often not present in their attitude – perhaps this is a defining characteristic, where they would just prefer to be getting on with the music-making. As well as being afraid of spoiling the experience, it may be a strategy to keep it only in the playing and not in the talking and planning of the music. This is a way in which transcendent experience can manifest in music making in a contemporary context - it doesn’t have to be about overt spirituality, it can be achieved through an understated and restrained approach.

Just before the submission of this thesis, I came across an interview with Lloyd Swanton (Curran, 2012) discussing the role of emotion in music of The Necks that I feel resonates with this thesis:

We’re not real big on emotion in music. Some might fall to the floor in shock at that revelation, because for many people music and emotion are synonymous. In a lot of music that is the case but our music is very free of sentiment and not dependent on our personal lives. People might say you can’t have anything bigger than human emotion; well, there is the universe [laughs]. Without wanting to sound like a hippy, there is that line [by William Blake] that you can find eternity in a grain of sand. We’ve all had that experience, of focusing on something really small that is giving us an insight into something enormous, namely the universe or infinity. The fundamentals of physics as applied to music are endlessly inspiring and I don’t think any musician who is swept up by that can be accused of being unemotional (Swanton, in Curran, 2012).
Here, Swanton discusses the understated, yet supremely significant approach to music performance where it is simultaneously grounded and linked to something greater, and going beyond the whims of emotion.

As music-making continues to evolve, so will musicians’ engagement with experiences that are ‘beyond themselves’. Music will undoubtedly continue to provide transcendent experiences for many. Throughout the ebb and flow of every musician’s life, there are scintillating moments of beauty, lucidity and goodness that are creatively inspiring and sustaining, or conversely out of some erroneous motive of self-preservation downplay their significance and imagine they don’t often occur. As a musician and educator, I hope that this research into transcendent experiences through music performance, the form of experimental popular music, and the reflections and implications that have become apparent will facilitate a revitalised dedication to music performance as an essential and inherently valuable presence in 21st century music-making.
Appendix 1 – Interview questions

How would you describe your own music?

Are there artists that you consider to be similar to your own practice?

What is your relationship to your instrument?

Are there any particular strategies in your or your group’s performance?

Does music provide a particular function in your life?

Do your favourite parts of the music change from night to night?

Does a particular musical style/approach facilitate a particular type of experience for you?

The Transcendent Experience

Do you experience anything that could be called ‘transcendent’ in your music performance practice?

How do you experience a moment that could be called transcendental in music performance? Are you able to describe this experience in detail?

What do you call this experience?

What is it about the experience that stands out?

In what ways did you feel as though it was a ‘heightened’ (or term chosen by interviewee) experience?

Are there any recurring features of this experience across your performance history?

Are there any particular noticeable features of the music that underpin the transcendental moments?
Are there similarities in the structure and/or elements of the music when these moments occur?

Are there any particular moments that are particularly powerful? Are these moments consistent?

How do the performances where you experience transcendence differ from other performances where this experience isn’t apparent?

What role does improvisation play in this experience for you? Are these experiences different from those places in the music that are composed?

Do you consider the transcendental experience as being central to your musical practice?

Is there a consideration of your playing technique whilst playing?

Do these moments differ when playing solo versus playing in a group? How so?

Do you experience the transcendental experience when listening to others play within and outside your group?

Is there any preparation required to access this ‘heightened’ state? What is the mindset behind the preparation? (Both solo and group performance and listener)

Do these experiences hold a broader significance or impact on your life? How so?
References


