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Music-making in a Northern Isle: Iceland and the “village” factor

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**A thesis submitted for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy**

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PhD thesis: Music-making in a Northern Isle: Iceland and the “village” factor

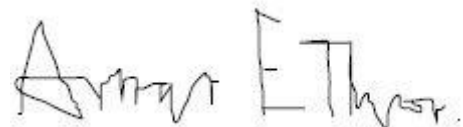
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10.08.2018

Arnar Eggert Thoroddsen

Abstract

The thesis delves into the social dynamics of music-making in Iceland. It builds on this researcher's twenty-year long career as a music journalist in his native country, making use of the knowledge, connections and insights accumulated therein. This research project has made use of participant observation, in-depth interviews, historical documents as well as ethnography. Thirty musicians from the current Icelandic pop/rock world were interviewed, focussing on how they manoeuvre themselves within a relatively small society. The thesis was inspired by Ruth Finnegan's book, *The Hidden Musicians – Music-Making in an English Town*, similarly looking at the structure of a tightly knit music community, and how place shapes and informs its residents. Iceland's small size (pop. 350,000) is a defining factor; its "village" feel feeds into the shaping of its music culture. My theoretical framework is built around classic socio-musicological theories (derived from Pierre Bourdieu and Howard Becker), more recent research carried out by Sara Cohen, Tia De Nora, and Nick Prior, as well as theories on the difference between professional and amateur music-making (based on the work of, among others, Canadian sociologist Robert A. Stebbins). A grounded theory arose from the interview data, confirming the impact of a "village" factor, which simultaneously liberates *and* restricts artistic work. The peculiarities of Iceland's pop/rock world manifests themselves in interrelated aspects, such as its status as a micro-nation and this shapes much of the dynamism of its popular music culture. Co-operation across different genres is high, and a lack of formal bureaucracy in terms of doing things was significant. Support from institutions like the radio, music competitions and music offices is effective and strong, making for a relative easy market access domestically and facilitating an optimistic outlook from the interviewees towards their chosen field. The musicians' inner need to make music, perform and release it was scrutinised and the small size of Iceland's population – and therefore, the Icelandic popular music world - gives rise to a fuzzy distinction between amateur and professional. This fact underscores the aforementioned prolific levels of activity in Iceland's musical community. Yet in spite of these positive elements, active Icelandic musicians also admitted to experiencing much precarity and unpredictability in terms of their creative work. All of these elements, detailed here, make for a vibrant and active music scene, with participants effectively "punching above their weight".

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Introduction

This thesis is informed by my career as a music journalist in my native Iceland. Working as a staff writer for Iceland's esteemed daily newspaper Morgunblaðið ("The Morning Paper") as part of its tiny "popular culture" department had me exposed to a wide array of Icelandic musicians working in the pop/rock sector. Iceland's small population (350.000)¹ made sure that in a record time I had interviewed almost every noteworthy musician of that ilk – be it a sixty year old ballad singer, a juvenile leader of a black metal band, or some garage rock upstarts.

Talking to these musicians, I quickly became interested in the drive that they had; I was especially interested in those who had no real hope for any financial or commercial gain from their activities. These people were making music because of some inner need that was seldom addressed in our interviews, as it was taken as a given in the minds of the musicians. We talked about production values, song-writing approaches and the *making* of the music, but the reasons *behind it* and the point *to it* were rarely discussed. What motivates the 60 year old plumber who finally realises his dream of putting out a record, a rock-band solely consisting of pensioners, practicing every Sunday, or a Shadows tribute band playing the occasional poorly paid gig in a remote, rural town?

These amateur/non-professional musicians - so-called hobbyists² - often had a certain lack of awareness regarding the professional music world. In their case, the music was being made for its own sake rather than for financial benefits, a stance that often conveyed a sense of purity and authenticity in the artist's outlook. This also constitutes a clear break from both professional musicians - be it hired hands at country dances, or chart-topping bestsellers - and young upstarts with their eyes on the prize. Such musicians often have an awareness of the rules and regulations of the music business, an awareness that the amateurs more than often lack. Their musical output is therefore at times unconventional, as if made in a void, and is often characterised by beautiful imperfection and a strangeness that is lost on the creator.³

¹ As of March, 2018. See The National Statistical Institute of Iceland: <http://www.statice.is/#Govt>.

² I'm indebted to the research of the Canadian sociologist Robert Stebbins and his writing on "serious leisure", an activity that will be addressed more fully in the literature chapter.

³ The term "outsider artist" is sometimes used in writings about these musicians. See for example Washburne, Christopher, and Derno, Maiken. 2004. *Bad music: The music we love to hate*. New York, NY: Routledge and Peterson, Richard A. 2005. "In Search of Authenticity*" in *Journal of Management Studies* 42, no. 5: 1083-098.

Soon enough I found out that the difference between a professional and an amateur musician is far from clear-cut, a discovery that would change the initial focus of the thesis somewhat. Having conducted preliminary interviews with active Icelandic musicians working in various aspects of the pop/rock sector, I understood that a widening of focus was necessary as my assumptions about the amateur “genre” were too simplistic. Some of them did music as a pure hobby, while others made music as a side-line to a full-time job. One of my interviewees split his time evenly, on alternate weeks working as a programmer, then enjoying quite a career as a well-known pop star. Many get little or no financial awards for their efforts but are proud “artists”, whilst some even work full time as musicians producing advertising jingles, making what they consider to be “proper” music in their spare time. I began to discover that the grey area between full professionalism and full amateurism was vast.

One thing that played a significant part in transforming this thesis into its current form was the environment that these musicians operate in, namely the Icelandic micro-society and the village-like character to relationships and communications. It played a much bigger part in their outlook and way of doing things than I initially suspected. At first, I was mostly interested in amateur music-making as such, and planned to use Icelandic musicians simply because they were available to me. I didn’t want to write about Iceland specifically, stemming from my exhaustion of writing about Icelandic music for most of my professional life. But it was crystal-clear that the nationality variable could not be isolated from my research, even if I wanted to. The musicians could not be extracted from their social contexts, if a meaningful incursion into their music-making endeavour was to be made.

Additionally, to exclude Iceland would also have carried a missed opportunity with it. Extensive research into the popular music sector of Iceland in the academic sphere has not been carried out to this day, so a more generalised approach is both appropriate and - simultaneously - makes good use of this author’s accumulated knowledge.

The muddled difference between professional and amateur musicians thus made for a more general approach in this thesis. It became a research project investigating how Icelandic musicians - of various types and ages, all operating in a broadly pop/rock milieu - manoeuvre their way through contemporary Icelandic culture. The research itself is partly modelled on Ruth Finnegan’s astounding work in her book *The Hidden Musicians – Music-Making in an*

*English town*⁴. Its description of music-making in a particular society, at a particular time, as well as its examination of the locally specific dynamics and structures of such activities, was an enormous influence on this thesis. I interviewed 30 musicians, all of them - with some small exceptions - working in the Icelandic pop/rock world. Some of them were very active, some semi-active, some retired. Their age span was between 35 and 55, and each one's reflections on their music-making contributes to a snapshot of a specific music community in a Scandinavian country at a given point in time.

The research questions that motivated the research were originally about the need to create and play music, be it an original composition or not. With the "Iceland" variable added, the questions became:

- a) *Why do you make music?*
- b) *Why do you have to make music?*
- c) *Why do you have to release it?*
- d) *Why do you have to play it live for an audience?*
- e) *How does Iceland affect the above?*

The data collected then managed to shed a light on two interlocked fields - "Iceland" and "music-making". Established concepts in music sociology, by the likes of Bourdieu, Becker and more - all introduced in the literature chapter - were used to illuminate what makes "popular music-making" different in Iceland from other countries. Turning this around, the case of Iceland or more specifically, the case studies utilised throughout, align with conventional popular music studies based assumptions about music-making - for example, the distinction between amateur and professional music, and, particularly, what constitutes music-making in small societies.

⁴ Finnegan, Ruth. 1989. *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Methodology

As touched upon in the introduction, the thesis builds on my twenty year long career as a music journalist in Iceland. That job started in 1999, when I wrote some record reviews for *The Morgunblaðið*, leading to full-time employment in the year 2000.⁵ The thesis makes use of the experience, knowledge, insights and connections I accumulated in that time. The backbone of the thesis - i.e. the research itself - are thirty interviews that were specifically carried out for this project, using the fivefold research question as a point of departure. Historical documents (mainly newspaper articles) and ethnographical approaches (concert attending and networking with musicians over the years) also informed a substantial part of the study. The picture derived from these methods was then viewed through an academic prism as introduced in the literature section.

I arrived to the thesis with a particular kind of expertise and knowledge derived from my journalistic role as a *participant* in the Icelandic music scene. Therefore, I had already engaged in ethnographic research, even if it was not carried out as an academic one. This fact explains my methodological choice of focused interviews⁶, dealing with the questions that arose from the aforementioned participant observation, rather than using ‘open’ interviews, designed to generate questions (as used by researchers entering a field for the first time). The insights into the music culture I garnered in the last decades, working in the “trenches”, were used - if it was appropriate or needed - to shed a clearer light on topics that my subjects were asked about.

As detailed in the introduction, this thesis was also an opportunity to sit down with the musicians I had been interviewing through the years, but this time with a clear, academic purpose that was absent in my relatively generic newspaper articles. As with my experience working in the field, historical documents (mainly newspaper articles) were used to strengthen the story told by the interviewees. Iceland has a good online newspaper repository (www.timarit.is), a digitized library that reaches back a century and longer, containing the “printed cultural heritage that is preserved in newspapers and periodicals of the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland”.⁷ This was put to good use in my fact checking as well as in my attempts to grasp the atmosphere of bygone decades; the thesis includes a historical overview

⁵ As an aside, I still write a weekly column for the paper.

⁶ An idea for a mixed method, combining interviews with descriptive, anthropological writing in the ethnographical mold came up, but space constraints and a belief in a more directed research focus put it off the table. In only one instance, I allowed my inner “author” to speak, and that is in a footnote, describing a particularly memorable meeting with one of the interviewees.

⁷ As stated in the about section.

of Icelandic music/popular music. In some cases, writing and general reference material on certain subjects is scant, and academic writing on Icelandic music - especially on popular music - is in many ways in its infancy. In a few instances, especially regarding the pure academic side of the thesis, I had to make a virtue of necessity, sometimes delving into B.A. and Master's theses that are by their nature not as dependable as peer-reviewed journal articles, PhDs or books by more experienced scholars.

With the odd exception, the musicians interviewed come from the popular music world and are still active today. Demographically speaking, they are comprised of 21 males and 9 females in all, most self-taught musicians from the Reykjavik area, working full-time jobs alongside their musical careers.⁸

The subjects were between circa 35 and 55 years old when the interviews were conducted. Two of the interviewees were relative newcomers to the scene (females, 22 and 17) and their perspective, naturally, stood out from the rest, lacking the capacity to retrospectively ponder their past experiences. As self-taught musicians, making their way through the pop/rock world of Iceland, were of most interest to the thesis, they were actively sought out. I also interviewed a couple of formally trained professional musicians to get some contrast, as well as speaking to some rural musicians for similar reasons. Nothing of substance came from that latter angle - not enough, at least, to justify lengthy exploration of the differences between music-making in the capital and in the country. Using my connections as a music journalist, I contacted musicians that I knew fairly well, or at least had an established, professional rapport with and suspected that would have a view on the matter at hand.

The interviews were carried out in four instalments. Nine of them were carried out in April, 2014, six of them out in the country in July that same year, three in a short stopover in Iceland in April, 2016 and the remainder - twelve in all - were carried out later that same month. The interviews took place in various settings: in my home, at coffee houses or at the interviewee's home (or in their barn!).⁹ I recorded all of the interviews on my smartphone, uploaded them to my "cloud" and stored them as an mp3 file in a folder for later use.¹⁰ After

⁸ Disclaimer/declaration: I started the thesis without making a mental note about a healthy division between males and females. Sure enough, ten interviews in, they were all male. A male journalist, reaching out to connections at the top of his mind and ... this was the sad, uninformed result. While gender is not a point of departure or a major concern in the thesis, an unhealthy balance simply felt out of touch. I turned the ship around and tried to rectify this to some extent, ending with the division accounted for in the main text.

⁹ My glossary/interview log started out quite detailed - in fact overly detailed - with the names of the cafes, exact starting point of the interviews etc. I discarded these miniatures as the interviews started to flood in.

¹⁰ As a brief commentary on the changing nature of communication, almost all of the interviews were set up through Facebook Messenger. I didn't dial up one phone number.

transcribing them, I sent a copy to each interviewee, containing their individual answers and invited them to amend any factual errors and withdraw comments if they were uncomfortable with anything. No major happenstance occurred and all communications were courteous and constructive in that procedure. I also offered anonymity to the interviewees, but everyone chose to contribute under their full name. I was satisfied with that result, as I believe that their stories are better for it. Having persons by their name, some relatively known, makes for a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the experiences they describe. No one approached declined to be interviewed.

I used a semi-structured interview technique,¹¹ with twelve points that I used to guide my questioning of my subjects. These points were:

- Have you thought about how the cultural environment in Iceland helps or hinders you?*
- How do you create your music?*
- Why do you make music?*
- How do you market it, get it into circulation?*
- What do you hope to gain from it? (Hobby/pleasure, hope to get some money out of it, a stepping stone to greater things?)*
- What is the difference between an amateur and a professional?*
- How was your musical education?*
- Describe your career.*
- How do you find the time to do the music?*
- Would you consider yourself an artist?*
- Importance of playing live to you?*
- Importance of releasing a record to you?*

Some pointers were discarded as I went along - I had one point about “idols/influences” that wasn’t used - and the points became more refined with every interview. The interviews also got shorter as they started to accumulate. Additional points were added; for instance, I asked about resentment towards not being able to sustain a living out of the music, and the importance to play with other people/friends, to name but two.

The interviews almost always shaped into a quite open discourse which showed the benefits of having the trust of the interviewees. The interviews turned out to be as different as the subjects themselves. Some strayed towards a particular thematic tangent, whilst some kept quite strictly to the pointers; others used the opportunity to vent hitherto suppressed feelings,

¹¹ See e.g. Bernard, H. Russell. 2018. *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Plymouth: AltaMira Press.

the meeting starting to resemble a psychiatrist's appointment. Most were quite attuned to the academic nature of the meetings, while other misunderstood the "deep" aim of the talks, describing their career in music quite superficially and perhaps, "romanticising and telling half-truths."¹² I also had to keep myself from talking too much, but sometimes I referenced other interviews to help the subject entering the right frame of mind. I tried to make sure that none of the interviews would run more than 30 minutes or so; despite this intention, some lasted a full hour. This "30 minute" rule – which I also dispense to my students – is born out of my experience as a journalist, having conducted hundreds of interviews of differing lengths and difficulties. Although it seems short on paper, you generally have what you need after c.a. 20 minutes (the main "hard" stuff), but the last seven minutes or so often prove effective in winding the talk down, and by that, you often get heartfelt, interesting stuff (made possible by the relaxed state of the subject). As I knew almost all of the interviewees beforehand, and they sometimes at least knew who I was, I could afford to have the interviews more compact. By announcing the "short" time beforehand, this also makes the participant more willing to do the interview. In my experience, clean and compact interviews gather up more substantial content than longer ones. An hour-long talk inevitably starts to drift towards things unrelated, as people are simply getting tired and unfocused. It could be argued that by conducting longer interviews (and perhaps more than one interview per person) would extract deeper information but in the instance of this one thesis, it was unnecessary and also unpractical, given the relatively short time period for data-extraction.

One of the inevitable problems with this research – and one that is also found in my antecedents like Ruth Finnegan - is the "I" in the midst of it. My investment, connections and friendships in the Icelandic music scene come with both an advantage and a disadvantage. Positives include a certain amount of insight and easy routes to the musicians, as well as geographical and psychological proximity; at the same time, the "outsider looking in" aspect is naturally lost.¹³ As in Finnegan's case, her values, upbringing, gender and emotional attachment to the place (to name but a few things) rendered a complete objective scientific approach impossible, much like in this thesis. My journalistic status enabled me to cajole people quite easily to partake but the danger was that the inherent friendliness in these interactions could derail the scientific aim, resulting in subjects giving a "friend" something

¹² Ibid., p. 152.

¹³ An approach that, on the other hand, characterised my Master's thesis on Scottish music life.

he wants to hear. At the same time, that same friendliness made it possible to extract things that the interviewees would possibly not have told a “stranger”.

Trevor Herbert talks about differing views concerning the role of the historian, referencing a debate between E.H. Carr and Sir Geoffrey Elton.¹⁴ The latter represents the old, facts based school while Carr’s proclamation is that “the barrier that stands between historians and their subjects is made from their own cultural and ideological baggage”. This is true of Finnegan’s research and this one as well. The “problem” is integrated in the method, we could say, but can also benefit the research, as Finnegan points out in her appendix.¹⁵

It goes without saying that the results and the realities described in the thesis are limited to the sample - i.e. experiences described by the individuals presented - at this point in time. A different set of individuals would have led to different results, but had they fulfilled similar qualities (age, stature etc.) the results wouldn’t have been *that* different. The size of the sample suffices to make it possible to map some recurrent themes and with that, making some assumptions about the social dynamics of the Icelandic pop/rock world and how it functions at the current time.

¹⁴ Herbert, Trevor. 2003. “Social History and Music History” in Clayton, Martin, Herbert, Trevor and Middleton, Richard (eds.). *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge, p. 147.

¹⁵ Finnegan, Ruth. 1989. *The Hidden Musicians...*, p. 344.

Thesis structure

The first chapter of the thesis is devoted to Icelandic music, setting the scene for the research that follows, detailing the environment that our music-makers grew up in and how it shapes and informs their activities. It contains a brief historical overview of Icelandic music history, leading up to recent developments in popular music when Iceland has achieved a high profile; this is also the period in which most of my interviewees have been musically active. There will also be details of the research that has been done on Icelandic popular music to date, both domestically and from abroad.

In chapter 2, I look at the available literature on music-making in small communities, and writings on the difference between amateur and professional music-making. The chapter is divided into two sections: in the first, established and widely attested socio-musical theories are examined, alongside recent ethnographical researches into small music communities. In the second, I review some of the available literature on the amateur/professional dichotomy.

In chapter 3, the aforementioned range between full amateur and full professional music-making is analysed, alongside questioning of how it feeds into the music culture of Iceland. The small size of Icelandic society generates a large grey area in this respect, and opportunities to live solely off music, either as a working musician or a rock star, are quite slim. Six parameters along a pro/amateur scale are introduced here - a useful tool to situate the exact nature of the musicians which are represented in the thesis. Thereafter, short biographies for each of the 30 interviewees are also included.

Chapter 4 - which makes up the bulk of the thesis - is devoted to the disentanglement of the interviews carried out. In the course of doing so, overarching themes will be detected and scrutinised. Five distinct themes emerged - "The Icelandic angle", "Music-making", "Sociality", "Amateurs and professionals" and "Livelihood" - all of them straddling a line between the social and the personal, the universal (a very human need to create) and the local (the surroundings that the musicians deal with on everyday basis).

Finally, in the conclusion, the main themes and threads from chapter 4 will be summarized, followed by critical reflection on the findings along with a clarification of my core argument. The significance of the research and its contribution to the knowledge in the field will be assessed alongside suggestions of possible future work.

1. Iceland

1.1 Music in Iceland, from beginning to the popular music age

“...with a population of only 120.000, Reykjavík, in particular, has been lauded as a hub of prodigious musical activity, its status enhanced by associations with a spirit of frenetic creativity...” (Nick Prior, sociologist, 2014)¹⁶

I was once asked by an editor for a foreign publication to write a piece about the Icelandic music scene, where I would be required to “explain the phenomenon”. His request is one of many that adheres to the notion that something special is going on in Iceland musically, something out of the ordinary, something that is often said to not be in sync with its small population. To put it another way: why is there so much music - and so much quality music - coming from such a small country?

We, the locals, can't help but shake our heads when we face some of these excited proclamations - and perhaps even smirk about it. The enthusiasm is sometimes excessive, and unfounded opinions on Iceland's music scene are widely publicised, often underscored with a sense of exoticism. Writings and discussions relating to the “phenomenon” tend to be simplified and exaggerated, especially when declarations about Iceland's “unique” music scene are put in a per capita context.¹⁷ Both the foreign media and Icelanders themselves have a tendency to opt for chest-beating statements about the unbelievable greatness of the music scene, rather than a sober look at the realities of the country's music culture. More seriously, peoples' attachment to a particular romanticised view of the nation tempts many a music enthusiast to perpetuate dubious, subjective ideals and images that fit to what they want to see – and hear – in Iceland.¹⁸ Interest in the “mundane” truth is thus diminished, the rose-tinted glasses always within reach, and the often boring everyday reality of music-making in Iceland is overlooked – both in newspaper headlines *and* research projects.

At the same time, all of this gets to you as an Icelander. There must be *something* true to all of these claims - or what? Yes, we have musicians that are quite good. Yes, some of them have been making waves abroad. But is it something quite unique and special, compared

¹⁶ Prior, Nick. 2015. “‘It's A Social Thing, Not a Nature Thing’: Popular Music Practices in Reykjavík, Iceland” in *Cultural Sociology* 9, no. 1: 81-98, p. 82.

¹⁷ The numbers game, i.e. “per capita”, is played a lot in Iceland, especially when we need a shot of confidence regarding comparisons to other nations.

¹⁸ I once watched a quite esteemed academic, interested in Iceland and its music, roll out cliché after cliché and “imagined truths” at a conference lecture without flinching. For further insight, see Benedict Anderson's classic *Imagined Communities...*(1983).

to other nations? Or rather, compared to other small nations?¹⁹ What can we attest to and what can we deny in all of this?

To get a better grasp on the subject at hand we need, if briefly, to look at music-making in Iceland in a broader historical context. Popular music-making and playing, i.e. the Anglo-American pop/rock variety which is the focus of the thesis, began a little after the advent of American rock 'n' roll. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the country - an underdeveloped society under Danish colonial rule well into the 20th century - saw swift social and economic progress. Iceland became an independent nation in 1944, and in subsequent decades of popular music-making the country aligned itself with other Scandinavian countries in emulating the most recent trends of Anglo-American pop and rock. For decades, the music only managed to demand domestic interest, most of it non-exportable; regular efforts were made to entice interest from abroad to no avail. The much heralded underground rock band The Sugarcubes, later giving rise to superstar Björk, changed all of that in 1988, snowballing an interest in Icelandic popular music “radically disproportionate to its size”.²⁰

Scholars have described musical life in Iceland since its settlement in 874 AD²¹ in quite some detail.²² Iceland was Christianised in approximately 1000 AD and with that, church singing was introduced - Gregorian chants in the Roman Catholic tradition. Little is known about the musical traditions of the pagan Vikings that preceded this church singing, although the unique Icelandic form of “tvísöngur” (“twin-song” or “two part singing”) is

¹⁹ Jamaica is a small nation but with an immense influence on world music culture, birthing reggae. Still, the population is little under 3,000,000, much higher than in Iceland. The dynamics of the music life in Iceland and the all-around proximity is more akin to a city like Glasgow. But again, this is a misleading comparison, as Glasgow is a part of a nation of millions, whilst Iceland is an independent nation with its own comprehensive infrastructure.

²⁰ Like Nick Prior described it in his article “It’s A Social Thing, Not a Nature Thing’...”.

²¹ The exact year has been disputed, but this is the one most commonly referred to. The first settler - a rich Norwegian farmer, took land in Reykjavík - now the capital of Iceland. The old footpath to his farm is the oldest street in Reykjavík, Aðalstræti (i.e. Main street). A transparent, small society indeed.

²² Jón Þórarinnsson’s, *Íslensk tónlistarsaga 1000-1800 (The History of Icelandic Music, 1000 – 1800)*, gives a detailed overview as does Baldur Andrésson’s *Tónlistarsaga Reykjavíkur (Reykjavik’s Music History)* which goes all the way back to the settlement era as well. Both of these works are available online but in Icelandic only. Also *Tónmenntasaga Íslands* by Dr. Hallgrímur Helgason (translates loosely as *Iceland’s Musical Literature*). A fine B.A. thesis by Berglind Gestsdóttir on music life in Iceland in the 20th century also contains good and succinct chapters on early music life. No general overview is available in English, although academic articles and essays on specific areas are out there and accumulating. The Icelandic scholars Dr. Árni Heimir Ingólfsson and Dr. Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson have been prolific in these matters.

believed to have been practiced at the time.²³ With the Lutheran reformation in the 16th century, Catholic singing was supplanted by an updated Protestant form.

Our knowledge of the Icelandic traditional music or folk music - the “popular” music of the medieval ages if you will - can be attributed to the pioneering work of one man, Rev. Bjarni Þorsteinsson who systematically collected Icelandic folk songs in the late 19th century and published them in the years 1906–1909, forming a sprawling 950 page book. Þorsteinsson’s drive in this enormous task was derived from the fact that he noticed that his school colleagues had given up on the old Icelandic songs in favour of Scandinavian and German tunes that infiltrated the country in the Romantic period.²⁴ Icelandic folk songs were heavily influenced by old church modes, taking cues from hymns and psalms, often characterised by a certain heaviness and melancholia.²⁵ Because of Iceland’s cultural isolation in this period, musical forms remained static for centuries; new strands and upheavals in music, taking place in Europe, thus did not reach Icelandic shores.

One form of folk-music was unique to Iceland. The “rímur” (“rhymes”) first came to prominence in the 14th century and proved to be quite popular through the ages. The rímur are “long cycles of poetic verse delivered in a distinctively Icelandic half sung/half chanted style”²⁶ and are rooted in the country’s ancient literature, the epic Sagas and Eddas. The rímur method also took on a more streamlined form, addressing everyday subjects such as humorous gossip and raunchy matters and in those instances, they were called “rímnalög” (“rhyme-song”).²⁷ The rímur were frowned upon by scholars and the literature elite and the form was almost dead and buried come the 20th century. It survived in closed circles and a society was established in 1929 to preserve it. The society - Iðunn²⁸ - is still active today and at the very end of the 20th century the rímur form infiltrated the Icelandic pop/rock scene with gusto, due to the band Sigur Rós' interest. Sigur Rós, Iceland’s best known musical export apart from Björk, were beginning to enjoy quite some success at that time, both home and abroad, frequently referred to as “Iceland’s golden boys” by the domestic press. On their 2001

²³ See Andrésson and also Bjarni Þorsteinsson in his monumental work *Íslensk þjóðlög (Icelandic Folk Songs)*, p. 764-775). Ingólfsson’s PhD from Harvard University had tvísöngur as a subject.

²⁴ Hreinsson, Viðar. 2011. *Bjarni Þorsteinsson – A Pioneer in the World’s Periphery*, p. 61.

²⁵ Gestsdóttir, Berglind. 2014. “We don’t allow the old style psalm singing here!...”, p. 16.

²⁶ Kvæðamannafélagið Iðunn (Society for Traditional Icelandic Rimur - Chants and Intonation) website, the “Rímur” section: (http://rimur.is/?page_id=371).

²⁷ Sigurðsson, Njáll. 2004. “The art of rhyme-singing: Preservation and history”, pp. 21-24.

²⁸ Iðunn is a goddess in Norse mythology, associated with youth and rejuvenation.

spring tour, they featured a kvæðamaður or “rímur singer” - the chair of Iðunn, Steindór Andersen.²⁹

Instruments were rather scarce in Iceland throughout the centuries, the only constants being small organs used in churches. In homes, the “langspil” (literary meaning “long-play”) was used, a form of drone zither and unique to Iceland (a comparable instrument is the Appalachian dulcimer, also a drone zither).³⁰ The langspil faded from view in the 20th century but has been revived to a small extent in Icelandic folk-music circles. Another similar instrument, unique to Iceland, is called “fiðla” (“fiddle”. Confusingly, the same word is used for a violin in Iceland). Very little is known about that instrument, which disappeared, almost completely, in the middle of the 19th century.³¹

At the start of the 20th century, Icelanders started to claw their way out of cultural darkness, emerging from their caves, almost literally.³² Music wise, changes had begun to take place around the mid-nineteenth century, seeing the emerging of male choirs which have been an integral part of the Icelandic music culture ever since.³³ Pianos and harmoniums also began to adorn Icelandic homes³⁴ and Reykjavík - then with a population of a few thousand people - was the centre of all these activities. At the turn of the century, the population was 6,000 but just ten years later the size of the town had doubled. Things began to move swiftly in many aspects of cultural life and students arrived in droves from Denmark after studying at the University of Copenhagen - the official colonial capital of Iceland at the time - bringing with them new ideas and enthusiasm.

The period from 1900 – 1930 was marked by a steady progression in almost all fields of music. New instruments, schools, people exclusively educated in music, brass-bands, choirs, music venues, composers et al; all of this contributed to the modernisation of Icelandic music life at the start of the 20th century. Svengalis and “larger than life” characters were often at the forefront of the changes, “fire-souls” as the Faroese call it (“eldsál”³⁵).³⁶

²⁹ A self-released six track CD-R featuring Sigur Ros and Steindor was sold at the gigs - a rare item today.

³⁰ Woods, David G. 1994. “The Icelandic “langspil””.

³¹ See Icelandic folk musicians Bára Grímsdóttir and Chris Foster’s webpage for more information (www.funi-iceland.com).

³² A habitable cave in the south of Iceland, with some woodworks, was not abandoned until 1921. See “Iceland’s cave people”, April 18, 2017, *Iceland Monitor*: icelandmonitor.mbl.is.

³³ See later in the literature section.

³⁴ Andrésson, Baldur. 2008. *Reykjavík’s Music History*.

³⁵ This idiom refers to a person that “burns” for a cause and makes certain sacrifices for it.

³⁶ Gestsdóttir, Berglind. 2014. “We don’t allow the old style psalm singing here!...”, p. 27.

At the end of that significant era, Icelanders were starting to enjoy a steady stream of foreign artists, some of great renown, that gave concerts to an ever-growing population of music fans in the capital. In 1925, Hljómsveit Reykjavíkur (“The Reykjavik Orchestra”) was founded, eventually leading to The Icelandic Symphony Orchestra which was established in 1950, something that the original orchestra leaders aimed at from the very beginning.³⁷ Two very significant markers see the end of this period, both from the year 1930. Firstly, the foundation of The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service, i.e. the Icelandic state radio (RÚV) and secondly, the foundation of the very first music school in Iceland, The Reykjavik Music School. The formation of the school was a solution to a fairly practical problem - people that were to join the Reykjavik Orchestra, formed five years earlier, need to be taught to play their instruments!³⁸ It is also worth mentioning that Iceland’s best known composer, Jón Leifs, became active in this period. Leifs was a true fire-soul, relentless in his efforts in advancing Icelandic music culture. His temperament was not unlike his epic, unforgiving music, and his life was littered with controversies. Friendships were lost, enemies were gained but he never wavered from the great cause of enriching Icelandic music life. He founded STEF, the equivalent to the BPI in the U.K., collected Icelandic folk songs, gave the very first symphonic concerts in Iceland in the summer of 1926, and started his career as a composer. Educated in Leipzig, he is best known for his large orchestral works, drawing heavily from Icelandic nature and the sagas.³⁹

Around 1930, Reykjavik had begun to mimic international music trends. Cafés provided live music for their guests, with light music in the day and jazz in the evenings. Slowly but surely, the Icelanders themselves started to handle all of these duties, rather than relying on imported professionals. A growing number of Icelanders sought music education in Europe and introduced their fellow countrymen to what they had been exposed to on the continent. Icelandic choirs were beginning to match their Scandinavian counterparts and Icelandic musicians were getting ever more skilled, even though most of them had to make do with a semi-professional career.⁴⁰ The best of them, like Pétur Á. Jónsson, opera singer, made

³⁷ Andrésson, Baldur. 2008. *Reykjavik’s Music History*.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ragnarsson, Hjálmar H. 1990. “Jón Leifs” in *Andvari*., pp. 5 – 38. See also *Jon Leifs – Life in Music*, a biography by Árni Heimir Ingólfsson.

⁴⁰ Andrésson, Baldur. 2008. *Reykjavik’s Music History*.

inroads into Germany and sang in opera houses for decades.⁴¹ An early example of an “escape” from the stifling realities that talents face in small communities⁴² and one of the themes that will be addressed later in the thesis.

In the 1930s, more music institutions emerged. For instance, Tónlistarfélagið (“The Music Society”, in 1932), an all-encompassing entity, established by twelve culture enthusiasts and assigned to oversee various music activities like the music school, The Reykjavik Orchestra and so on. They also founded the Icelandic Musicians Union (F.Í.H., also in 1932), still very active today, protecting the rights of musicians of every ilk.⁴³ Icelandic Music scholar, Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson, notes:

The year 1930 is a pinnacle in Icelandic music history, where we see the end of a slow, 100 years development of bringing Icelandic music to modern times. Many of the music institutions that characterise other Western societies see the light of day around that time. More would follow in the coming years [...] the development of Icelandic music culture in the 20th century is a good example of how these things progress in Western societies, but the timespan is much shorter.⁴⁴

This chapter should serve as a decent overview of the pre rock ‘n’ roll days in Iceland. In the following pages, I will look squarely at the development of Icelandic popular music in the modern sense, beginning with the arrival of American rock ‘n’ roll.

⁴¹ Jónsson, Helgi. “Pétur Á. Jónsson (1884-1956)”. *Glatkistan*, May 26, 2016. Glatkistan (www.glatkistan.com) is an impressive online Icelandic music archive, edited by Helgi Jónsson. Glatkista translates something as a “vanishing box”, things that go there get lost, a thing that the editor is trying to prevent.

⁴² Jónsson was the first Icelander to sing on a record. It was released in 1910 but recorded in 1907 in Copenhagen. A single sided, 10” 78 RPM record.

⁴³ More on F.Í.H. and STEF in Appendix 1.

⁴⁴ Sveinbjörnsson, Bjarki. 1997. “Tónlistin á Íslandi: með sérstakri áherslu á upphaf og þróun elektrónískrar tónlistar á árunum 1960-90”, p. iii. Transl.: “The music in Iceland: With special emphasis on the origins and developments of electronic music 1960 – 90”. Sveinbjörnsson’s PhD has a great overview of Icelandic music in the first half of the 20th century. Available online, in Icelandic: <http://www.musik.is/BjarkiSve/Phd/phd.html>

1.2 Popular music in Iceland

The thesis focuses on musicians working within the pop/rock sector. The interviews conducted mirror this, so this section will detail how popular music in Iceland progressed from the '50's rock 'n' roll era onwards. Bear in mind, the section is intended as a general overview, and thus emphasis is on artists that breached the mainstream of Icelandic popular music and have made notable contributions to its history. The aim is to give a context to the working environment of my subjects, even if they come at it from quite wide-ranging angles; some professionals, some famous, some almost purely on the amateur side of things.

The country was still a relatively young nation when rock 'n' roll arrived, having gained a full independence from Denmark in 1944 after having been its colony – and before that, one of Norway's - since the 13th century. The independence struggle had begun in earnest in the 19th century and Iceland became a sovereign state in 1918. In 1944, Europe in the throes of the Second World War and Denmark occupied by Nazi Germany, the Icelandic parliament, “Alþingi” (“Althing”), decided to sever all ties with its old rulers. In a referendum, 99.5% were in favour of abolishing the Act of Union.⁴⁵

Incidentally, Iceland was occupied as well, but by the allies. The British army seized the country in 1940, to be replaced by the U.S. army a year later. The U.S. had a base – a naval air station - in Iceland right up to 2006, just outside of Keflavik, a small town some 40 kilometres from Reykjavik. Iceland's only international airport is near Keflavik and was built by the U.S. army in 1943. The impact of the U.S. army on Iceland, both socially and culturally, was substantial: “Iceland at the beginning of the war was a poor, backwards society. The Americans brought cars, films, music, Coca Cola - and lots of money. Suddenly there was ample employment and Icelanders became wealthy almost overnight.”⁴⁶

The base had its own radio and television station, the former started broadcasting in 1951 and the latter in 1955 - a full eleven years before Icelandic national television began operations. Some procedures were made for the signals to reach as little outside of the base as possible but to no avail. The signal was strong in the south-west corner of Iceland, including the capital but was especially strong in Keflavik, turning the town into Iceland's own Liverpool in the '60s, with a strong and vibrant music scene, far exceeding the one in the capital. In 1959, selected members of the parliament made some efforts to try and get the

⁴⁵ “Lýðveldiskosningarnar”, May 25, 1944, *Morgunblaðið* and *Lýðveldishátíðin*. 1945. Reykjavík: H.F. Leiftur. Lýðveldi means democracy.

⁴⁶ Helgason, Egill. “Iceland and the rest of the world”, May 10, 2012, *The Reykjavik Grapevine*.

broadcasts banned and in that year, the Icelandic government erected a 10-foot “quarantine” fence around the Keflavik base to stave off “cultural pollution”.⁴⁷

But Icelanders, just like many other non-Anglo-American nations in the Western world, embraced these cultural influences. Icelandic versions of Elvis Presley sprang up and - on a practical note - a job was to be had for Icelandic musicians at the base as the Americans paid better than the Icelanders did.⁴⁸ The closeness of and relatively easy access to these “forbidden fruits” especially early on, ensured that the base became a fertile bed of cross-cultural musical exchange, particularly benefitting the blue eyed Icelanders. American rock films were shown as early as 1957 (arriving here before they were shipped to other Scandinavian countries) and teenagers duly tried to cause a riot, just like their American counterparts.⁴⁹ Icelanders also got their first taste of live rock music in 1957 when British jazzier Tony Crombie brought his newly established rock ‘n’ roll band The Rockets to the country and played several shows to thousands of rock-crazed teenagers. With the police having to be called in to restore order on several occasions, Icelanders proved themselves quick to replicate the means and behaviours of likeminded teenagers from around the world.⁵⁰

An eagerness to play with “the big boys” was now apparent in the Icelanders’ overall demeanour. Like the little brother that is allowed to play with his elder brother and his gang of friends, he is keen to show that “he can too”. This attitude lies deep in the sensibility of Icelanders, and usually takes flight at international sporting events, when a musician succeeds abroad etc. No wonder that Henry Kissinger referred to Iceland in his memoirs as the most arrogant small nation he had ever encountered.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Campbell, Matthew. 2013. “Crossing the Concertina Wire: Icelandic-American Pop-Performance relations on and off Keflavik Naval Base during the Cold War”. Paper presented at the Music and Diplomacy conference, Tufts and Harvard Universities, Mar 2.

⁴⁸ Dr. Gunní. 2013. *Blue Eyed Pop*, p. 33.

⁴⁹ Guðmundsson, Gestur. 1990. *Rokksaga Íslands: frá Sigga Johnnie til Sykurmolanna*. Reykjavík: Forlagið, 1990, p. 33. Transl.: *Iceland’s Rock History: From Siggi Johnnie to The Sugarcubes*.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Jónsson, Ásgeir. 2009. *Why Iceland?: How One of the World’s Smallest Countries Became the Meltdown’s Biggest Casualty*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, p. 10.

1.2.1 The '60s: We got the beat (as well)

In the '60s, Icelanders continued to emulate Anglo-American popular music. Every self-respecting Western society had their "Beatles" and the Icelandic ones came from Keflavík. After a brief twilight of sharply dressed, well-behaved and synchronised Shadows-inspired bands, the primal and revolutionary energy of the Beatles took hold here as elsewhere. Iceland's Beatles were called Hljómar ("The Chords") and were formed in 1963 by one Gunnar Þórðarson (then 17 years old) after leaving his "Shadows" band (aptly named Skuggar, which literally means Shadows in Icelandic). Keeping in line with the raw, amateur nature of the early beat-bands, he hired his best friend as the bass player with the fact that he had never seen a bass guitar before only a minor concern.⁵²

Hljómar's reign over the beat era was complete, other bands duly followed but Hljómar lead the way, both artistically and popularity wise. By the summer of 1965 Hljómar had effectively dried up the market, having been relentlessly at it for a year and a half and only so much to do in a Scandinavian backwoods society. Iceland's size means that it doesn't take long for a band to play all the main venues twice, to effectively the same audiences. In need for new challenges and new audiences, they naturally looked abroad, like talented Icelandic musicians have done before and since.

Renaming themselves Thor's Hammer, they auditioned for Parlophone - appropriately enough, The Beatles' label in Britain - and promptly secured a record deal. The label released a couple of 7" singles in 1966 (and Columbia released one in the U.S. in 1967) but all of them sank without a trace.⁵³ While responding to the beat boom in the U.K., Icelanders simultaneously took note of the folk revival in the U.S, and Savanna tríóið (The Savanna Trio) were effectively a home-grown version of the Kingston Trio, starting out in the same year as Hljómar. The trio became very popular in the latter half of the '60s, and were inclined to put an Icelandic stamp on their material. To this end, their first record – the second LP to be released by the fledgling label SG hljómplötur (SG Records⁵⁴) – was called *Folksongs*

⁵² The bass player, Rúnar Júlíusson, was to become one of the most legendary figures in Icelandic rock, deeply loved by generations old and new.

⁵³ The music is absolutely wonderful. Brashly played freak beat nuggets with the guitar drenched in fuzzbox effects, coming on like a buzz saw. One song ends in a feedback frenzy, a true proto-punk mayhem. This sonic sojourn was a one off; Hljómar focused on more mainstream music when they returned to Iceland. These 7" singles are sought after collector's items today.

⁵⁴ The label name contains the initials of Svavar Gestsson - Iceland's foremost music mogul and entrepreneur in the '60s and '70s. As a band leader, record company executive and all around Svengali, Gestsson did a lot for Icelandic pop music when it was taking its first steps and his label was more or less the only one that actively released such music.

from Iceland, and contained arrangements of well-known Icelandic folk songs, many of them taken from the fabled collection of Rev. Bjarni Þorsteinsson (See section 1.1). This approach of theirs would echo, if indirectly, down the decades, particularly when Icelandic musicians began to flaunt their heritage rather than conceal it with mimicry of Anglo-American popular music fads of the day.

1.2.2 The '70s: Folkloric prog and socio-realistic pop

1969 proved to be a pivotal year in Icelandic pop and rock music. The decade ended in a seismic way, much like in other Western countries, with the obligatory student protests and a gradually widening generational gap. At the end of the year, a symbolic musical shift took place. The sprightly innocence of the beat groups and the carefree psychedelia that followed had been slowly giving way for heavier leanings and a more thoughtful stance. Five days before Christmas an album arrived in the stores that proved to be a watershed. Trúbrot's ("Breach of Faith") eponymous debut album contained an amalgam of styles - chamber pop with compulsory flutes, stomping proto-hard rock, jazz flourishes and the odd cover version (The Beatles, The Supremes). To reinforce the notion that the band were serious players, a version of 'The Pilgrim's Chorus', found in Richard Wagner's opera *Tännhäuser*, was included and the album closed with an obligatory ten minute freak-out. The album cover is enchanting and artful, in gatefold sleeve which was a novelty in Iceland at the time. All the lyrics are in Icelandic and the cocktail of styles served like a bridge between the closing decade and the one that was around the corner. Trúbrot was a supergroup, made up of members from two of the most prominent groups in the '60s - Hjómar and Flowers - and led the "serious" rock charge at the beginning of the '70s. In 1971, the band released the concept album *Lifun*⁵⁵ which follows the lifecycle of an individual from birth to death. The album was rightly upheld for many years as the greatest achievement in Icelandic pop and rock music, gaining similar status domestically to The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Long-haired groups swiftly followed suit with names like Nature ("Náttúra") and Existence ("Tilvera"). Interestingly, Iceland never produced a bona fide prog rock group in the mould of ELP, Genesis or Yes. Although prog leanings were sometimes to the fore, traces of bluesy rock and acoustic, poppy whimsy were always part of the stew as well.⁵⁶

In this same period, Iceland received a number of visits from famous musical guests from abroad who were usually greeted with much enthusiasm. This was underpinned by a sort of gratitude towards the musicians for simply acknowledging the existence of the country and gracing us with their presence - a mood which is surprisingly dominant to this day. These visits proved positive, if only to infuse the locals with new ideas and eagerness to create

⁵⁵ A rarely used Icelandic word, it can refer to existence or survival. "Living" - in a double meaning, as both a noun and an adjective - would be a clever translation.

⁵⁶ Thoroddsen, Arnar Eggert. 2016. "Prog rock? We can also do that!" - The peculiarities of Icelandic progressive rock in the 1970s". Paper presented at the The Project | 2nd International Conference on Progressive Rock, May 26, The University of Edinburgh.

something by themselves. The Kinks made an influential visit in 1965 and in 1970 Led Zeppelin played at The Reykjavik Arts Festival, shortly before they became the fully-fledged rock monsters we know. The concert would prove significant, egging on homegrown Zeppelin -inspired acts.⁵⁷ Parallel to these “looking inwards” groups and no frills rockers were groups whose mission statement was simply good old fun - dance-bands that travelled around Iceland, playing country dances or “sveitaball”.⁵⁸ Efforts were still made to “make it” abroad, short trips to the U.K. or America with the usual broken promises and slim results. One band, Change, made concerted efforts to break the U.K. market, glam inspired band sporting tailor-made silvery suits in the mould of The Bay City Rollers and Sweet. Nothing came of it, despite the unquestionable talent within the band (most of them stalwarts from the ‘60s) and undeniably catchy singles. Icelanders watched intently on the side-lines, like they’ve done before and since, eagerly hoping that their countrymen would do well on foreign shores.

Iceland – like any other country – also has a healthy dose of bands and artists that *don’t* dream of making it big in the world of pop music and are content to operate solely on home turf. Good examples of this “non-exportable music” came to the fore in the 70s. Mannakorn (referring to manna’s from heaven) is one of Iceland’s most loved bands, their songs so well-known that everyone sings along with them, whether they like it or not. Mannakorn (still going) deliver well written pop/rock with the odd blues thrown in, not deeply serious but neither happy-go-lucky either.⁵⁹ The music contributes to a certain “Icelandicness”, conveying something that cannot be fully appreciated unless you are immersed or deeply rooted in the country’s culture.⁶⁰

In 1975, Mannakorn recorded their debut in a newly opened studio, Hljóðriti (“Sound recorder”). For the first time, Icelandic pop musicians had access to a purpose-built recording studio in their own country, and thus didn’t have to go abroad to record albums to a professional standard. This would prove significant for the progress of Icelandic pop/rock as noted by journalist/pop historian Dr. Gunni: “The opening of the studio was considered a

⁵⁷ “Immigrant Song”, the opening track of Led Zeppelin’s *III*, details that very visit (“We come from the land of the ice and snow / From the midnight sun where the hot springs blow...”).

⁵⁸ The “sveitaball” or “country-dance” is an intrinsic, Icelandic phenomenon, deeply ingrained in rural areas of the country. There’s a quite detailed and insightful B.A. thesis on the topic available in Icelandic, written in the field of folklore/ethnography: Blöndal, Rebekka. 2013. “Where there’s shoddy shenanigans and all kinds of rabble rousers – Country dances then and now”.

⁵⁹ It’s a real shame that the master song craft of main songwriter, Magnús Eiríksson, will never travel.

⁶⁰ Thoroddsen, Arnar Eggert. 2015. “No elves allowed: Icelandic music beyond Bjork and Sigur Ros”. Paper presented at the Iceland Airwaves Festival, November 6, Reykjavik. My unpublished Master’s thesis, ““Throw The ‘R’ Away”: On “Scottishness” in popular music,” delves into these matters as well.

major event at the time [...] and was by all accounts a big boost for Icelandic music.” Indeed, it was an historical “build it and they will come” event.⁶¹ This was the only studio of its kind in the ‘70s, whilst there was only one legendary venue/hangout place (Glaumbær or “Fun town” which sadly burned down in 1971) and one radio station. Iceland’s size makes it barely possible to have a rich variety in eclectic cultural scenes, a characteristic that is still a constant, even if things have been enriched somewhat in recent times. A culture of “one” still prevails - that is to say, there’s one major label, one thrash metal band, one Viking-metal band, and so on.

At the beginning of the decade, a group dubbed Stuðmenn (“The Jovial Guys”) was put together by two friends as a one-off joke for an upcoming entertainment night in their college. A conglomerate of musicians would soon form around the band, spawning both folk-pop band Spilverk þjóðanna (“Plaything of the Nations”, a “true Icelandic wool sweater music”⁶²) and later, folk-rockers Hinn íslenski þursaflokkur (“The Icelandic troll-party”, usually referred to as Þursaflokkurinn in daily communication). The arrival of these three groups, in 1970, 1974 and 1978, respectively, introduced for the first time a more “Icelandic” identity; woven in the music, lyrics and how the members generally acted, talked and manoeuvred themselves. Stuðmenn used a distinctive brand of surreal, cynical, peculiarly Icelandic humour in their art, Spilverk þjóðanna – which took a huge artistic leap when they started to sing in Icelandic – would progress to sharp, social commentators and Þursaflokkurinn would use old Icelandic folk songs from the well-thumbed collection of the aforementioned Rev. Bjarni Thorsteinsson, infusing them with the progressive rock of the times.

This turning of the tide was in part because of all the fruitless, exhaustive attempts at breaking ground outside of Iceland, experienced by the members of said bands, both personally and as observers. They had now arrived at the conclusion that it was better to spend creative energy at home than wasting it on deaf ears abroad, and that there were indeed some artistic opportunities to be had by concentrating on the home-market.⁶³ Spilverk þjóðanna had released two generic albums, sung in English, but when they switched to their mother tongue their music grew more popular. By surrendering the dream of making it

⁶¹ Dr. Gunní. 2013. *Blue Eyed Pop*, p. 71. See also Helgason, Jón Karl. 2017. “Burðarvirki íslenskrar nútímameningar”, a chapter in the History of Iceland series, vol. XI. Transl.: “The Institutional Structures of Modern Icelandic Culture”.

⁶² Ólafsson, Egill (member of Spilverk þjóðanna and frontman of Hinn íslenski þursaflokkur). Quoted from a discussion with this author - February, 2008.

⁶³ Dr. Gunní, *Blue Eyed Pop*, 2013, p. 72.

abroad, and the compromises that come with it, the members broke free of constraints and a brilliant, wholly unique (and very Icelandic) musical template was born. The albums that were made in the aftermath of this move were positively brimming with Icelandic cultural references as well as subtle but hard hitting left-wing critique, laden with cynical humour. The canon produced by these three college bands is wonderfully indefinable - funny and surreal but simultaneously serious and political, it plunges into the nation's psyche and comes up with a unique, inimitable form of Icelandic popular music.

This decade also introduced an important figure – if not *the* most important figure in Icelandic pop - whose enigmatic presence has loomed large over Icelandic pop music ever since. Magnús Þór Jónsson - or Megas as he is artistically known - came out of nowhere in 1972⁶⁴ with an eponymous debut album and, like the three bands already detailed, his contribution to Icelandic music and culture is incalculable. The “Icelandic Bob Dylan” tag is no coincidence. Lyrically, Megas attacked the sacred elements of Icelandic heritage with humorous, sartorial glee. Left-leaning artists and the intelligentsia were quick to proclaim him a genius and a saviour, while conservatives poured scorn on him. Little has changed in those matters but even his staunchest enemies would find it difficult to deny his rich contribution to the Icelandic language, in particular how he showed its lyrical possibilities for depth of meaning, bite and value in the context of popular music.

A distinct brand of “Icelandic” popular music if you will was thus born in the ‘70s⁶⁵ and we can see at least four angles to it: 1) the use of Icelandic heritage, 2) humour, 3) social reality and 4) folk music.

⁶⁴ Well ... Norway - where he was studying at the time.

⁶⁵ Similar developments were taking place in other Scandinavian countries, bands infusing their respective folk heritage into rock music and dipping into their social surroundings for lyrical inspiration. These moves represented a rebellion of sorts against the Anglo-American cultural tycoons that had ruled the ‘50s and ‘60s.

1.2.3 The '80s: Punk emerges and The Sugarcubes break the chain

*“The professional rock music,” Thór [of The Sugarcubes] says with a dismissive sniff, “what it lacks is vitality, the lust for life. We have that in abundance. We are in harmony with life itself.” Welcome to Iceland – pop’s last frontier. For real.*⁶⁶

Although it hit slightly later than in other countries, punk rock made quite an impact in Iceland, as elsewhere. Utangarðsmenn (“The Outsiders”) were the first kings of the punk scene, kicking into gear in 1980 with fast, punk-infused R&B and socially aware lyrics, led by the indomitable and highly charismatic Bubbi Morthens. ‘Bubbi’ - as he is known colloquially - would subsequently become a highly significant figure in Icelandic pop and rock. His work rate throughout the 1980s was incredible and has continued to this day; his solo albums alone number just under under 40. A prime example of a “non-exportable” Icelandic musician, he’s unequalled in terms of the resounding impact he had at the time, an opinionated loudmouth and a larger than life figure whose music is known and loved by generations (similar to the status enjoyed by Kim Larsen in Denmark, or Udo Lindenberg in Germany).

The real punk explosion truly began in the winter of 1981/82, when every other garage was filled with wide-eyed upstarts, galvanised by a liberating do-it-yourself attitude, getting their bands off the ground. This upheaval was documented in the legendary film *Rokk í Reykjavík* (“Rock in Reykjavik”), released in April 1982 and one of the most lauded films in Icelandic history. Because of the delayed arrival of punk - still unexplained by Icelandic music historians⁶⁷ - the period was a weird combination of styles where almost all strands of punk/new wave music up to that time were squeezed into one compact package. Visits from big names such as The Stranglers and The Clash (who played here in 1978 and 1980, respectively) were influential at this point in time, both of them playing in the Laugardalshöll sports arena (just as Led Zeppelin had previously). Indeed, that arena was for a long time the *only* place where foreign acts of considerable size played.

⁶⁶ Excerpt from the article “The Sugarcubes: The Coolest Band in the World”, written by David Fricke for The Rolling Stone in 1988. It is the first “something is stirring in Iceland” article of its kind, setting the scene for what was to follow.

⁶⁷ Having said that, there *is* an unpublished Master’s thesis on Icelandic punk from 2014 (The University of Iceland) that attempts to explain this. Simply put, the Icelandic economy was in such good health in the mid to late ‘70s – unlike the U.K. – that the Icelandic youth was too materially comfortable to tap into the alienation of punk. Bergsveinsdóttir, Unnur María. 2014. “Ekta íslenskt pönk? Myndun íslenskrar pönkmenningar”. Unpublished Master’s thesis. The Faculty of History and Philosophy at The University of Iceland. Transl.: “Real Icelandic punk? The formation of Icelandic punk culture.”

Punk started to wane in c.a. 1982-83 but some significant cultural events had taken place just as the scene started to unravel. In the same year as *Rock in Reykjavik* was debuted *Stuðmenn* - "The Jovial Guys" from the 1970s - released an off the cuff road movie called *Með allt á hreinu* or "On top"⁶⁸, as it was titled outside of Iceland. The film remains the most popular film of all time in Iceland, with quotes from it finding their way into everyday Icelandic language while being simultaneously untranslatable to other languages. As a result, the few foreign audiences that saw it largely left the cinema halls completely dumbfounded.

The movie and the hullabaloo surrounding it at the time is revelatory in terms of the intense nature of social dynamics in Iceland. Cultural consumption is prone to succumb to an either/or reality. *Everybody* sees a certain film, attends some concerts or watches the Eurovision contest. Going back to the "village" metaphor, it's like when the circus comes to town. Finally, something fun for *all* of us to do. This situation has lessened somewhat in recent times, in compliance with growing globalisation, technological advancements and ever more selective entertainment options. Nonetheless, it is still evident to some extent.

Some vital institutional developments, regarding the flowering of popular music, were also put in motion in the '80s. In this most tumultuous year, 1982, a Battle of the Bands competition had its modest beginnings in Reykjavík. *Músíktílaunir* or "Music experiments" would become one of the most important social hubs/greenhouses for young and aspiring pop/rock musicians in the country, and a highly valued institution in a delicately balanced micro-society. Its steady run (in operation to this day) and careful management, where the young are nurtured and assisted in their first steps on a proper stage, has proven invaluable; many of Iceland's most high profile music scenes were gestated there. The competition is the only one of its kind that has stuck and through the decades it has seen the participation, in one way or another, of almost every Icelandic musician that has made his way in the world (the exaggeration is only slight). All in all, approximately 1,000 bands have entered the competition since its conception.⁶⁹

The Icelandic National Radio had been established in 1930 and up until 1983, only one channel had been broadcasting. Pop and rock music was rarely heard, save one or two programmes a week. In 1983, *Rás 2* ("Channel 2") was launched, playing pop and rock music. Three years later, the state monopoly on radio licence was lifted and the first privately

⁶⁸ "Ég er með allt á hreinu" means "I'm on top of things".

⁶⁹ Thoroddsen, Arnar Eggert. 2019 (forthcoming). "Nurturing the roots: *Músíktílaunir*, Iceland's foremost "Battle of the Bands" competition" in *Sounds Icelandic...* (ed. Hall, Dibben, Ingólfsson, Mitchell). Sheffield: Equinox Publishing.

owned radio station, Bylgjan (“The Wave”) was launched. More stations followed, focusing mainly on the lighter aspects of popular music. Emerging by contrast, two grassroots stations proved influential in the promotion of both Icelandic underground rock and new and exciting music from abroad. One was a college station, the other a “wildly” independent one, and their educational role – if unintended – had a deep-rooted cultural effect.

Icelanders also got their very first exposure to the world charts in 1983 with a band that was as far removed from the fertile punk scene as possible. Mezzoforte was a respected fusion band and had a surprise hit with the song “Garden Party” in February 1983 when it climbed to number 17 on the official U.K. chart. Things went into overdrive in Iceland, naturally, and an office was set up in London by the band’s Icelandic label, Steinar, to push the band even further. Although world fame eluded the group, Icelanders revelled in this “the little guy that could” success story for years - and still do.⁷⁰

In 1986, both The Sugarcubes and their label, Smekkleysa/Bad Taste, came into being.⁷¹ These entities would prove to be the year zero in the international recognition that the Icelandic pop/rock world enjoys today. The Sugarcubes were formed as an in-joke by veterans from the Icelandic punk scene, with its members having grown tired of being artsy post-punk musicians. Their mission was to fool around with every pop-cliché in the book, a strategy that backfired beautifully. As Björk stated in an interview from 1990:

When we were in Kukl [The forerunner to The Sugarcubes] we thought that we were in the best band in the world, doing game changing music and we didn’t understand why people weren’t lying in the front of our stage, crying. We thought that the world was quite disrespectful towards us. The Sugarcubes was more of a joke somehow, and we were quite surprised when people started to heap praise upon us.⁷²

Bad Taste was a label/think-tank/art collective which had a manifesto declaring that anything resembling “good taste” was the enemy of all art. The ideas thrown around in Bad Taste’s infancy – some implemented, some not - were to shape the Icelandic avant-garde considerably in the next few years.⁷³

⁷⁰ The international fusion scene holds Mezzoforte in high regard and the band tours quite regularly.

⁷¹ In 1986, Iceland also competed for the very first time in Eurovision, yet another signifier that we had a place among proper nations!

⁷² Matthíasson, Árni. 1990. “Geimveran Björk” in *Morgunblaðið*, November 11. Transl.: “Bjork The Alien”.

⁷³ Bad Taste and its influence has been a popular topic among academics in Iceland and has been the subject of some undergraduate and Master’s thesis in Iceland. See also Sigurðardóttir (2003) and Thoroddsen (2016).

“It’s not how *able* you are, it’s what you *do!*”⁷⁴ is a famous quote from Einar Örn, The Sugarcubes singer, and a proclamation from his punk rock days.⁷⁵ It’s also an apt description for Bad Taste’s philosophy, which at the time was a healthy blend of DIY⁷⁶, surrealism and the very Icelandic phrase “þetta reddast” or “It will be OK - somehow!”⁷⁷ As it was, the label blossomed quickly, albums and books were released in rapid succession, and a vibrant underground rock scene immediately formed around The Sugarcubes. Things changed quite dramatically in August 1987, when their song “Birthday” was released as a single in Britain. The press in the U.K. went overboard in its praise and when the first album - *Life’s Too Good* - was released in 1988 the attention soared even more, both in the U.K and the U.S.A.⁷⁸

The Sugarcubes were by now underground darlings, mentioned in the same breath as other emerging acts (The Pixies, The Throwing Muses etc.). For the very first time, an Icelandic act was able to sustain something akin to a career outside of Iceland. The Sugarcubes were no one hit wonders⁷⁹; as they proclaimed themselves: “The weird thing is that we didn’t enter the music business through its rear end ... we went straight to the top!”⁸⁰ The success naturally evoked interest in Iceland, the birthplace of the group, as it was quite exotic to the everyperson, and brought sundry visitors to the country; stray tourists at the time were usually met with the quizzical: “What are you doing *here?*”. The international music press spared no time in writing about Iceland as a fertile ground for music-making, spinning

⁷⁴ The original goes: Það er ekki hvað þú *getur* heldur hvað þú *gerir!*

⁷⁵ The Sugarcubes were, all things considered, a supergroup, but I simply don’t have space to rummage through the considerable achievements of the individual members. Einar, for instance, sang in Purrkur Pillnikk; a brilliantly energetic post-punk band in the vein of Gang of Four and early Wire. It’s spiky, angular, yet melodic music is one of the most celebrated parts of the original Icelandic punk scene.

⁷⁶ An abbreviation for “do-it-yourself”. In culture, it refers to: “the ethic of self-sufficiency through completing tasks without the aid of a paid expert ... promoting the idea that anyone is capable of performing a variety of tasks rather than relying on paid specialists”. See e.g. Spencer, Amy. 2015. *DIY: the rise of lo-fi culture*. London: Marion Boyars.

⁷⁷ This phrase can also be applied to the workings of the Icelandic popular music world at large - and Icelandic society in general. “Þetta reddast” has recently entered tourist books as one of Iceland’s unique quirks, and many Iceland enthusiasts are transfixed by it: “so frequently used, it has been described as the country’s motto (McMahon, 2014)”. The phrase can be heard in the preparation of a birthday party, or at university department meetings. It means: “Let’s not worry. It will work out somehow” and, on closer inspection, carries with it an almost zen-like attitude to life. Because the deeper meaning is: “It will be OK, even if it will not be OK (or how you have envisioned it)”. On the other hand, the phrase, which is usually expressed with an almost careless (yet optimistic) tone is said to describe well how unorganised Icelanders are, doing everything at the last minute. The attitude that comes with it is really the nation’s blessing and a curse, and characterises the popular music scene in many ways, as will be clear later on in the thesis. See also Hammel, Katie. 2018. “The unexpected philosophy Icelander’s live by”, BBC Travel (online), June 4.

⁷⁸ “Oh Fuck” was Einar’s reply, when he got the news that Melody Maker had selected “Birthday” as single of the week.

⁷⁹ Matthíasson, Árni. 1992. *Syurmolarnir*. Reykjavík: Örn og Örlygur, p. 23. Transl.: *The Sugarcubes*.

⁸⁰ Matthíasson, Árni. 1987. “Við þurfum svigrúm til að vera við sjálf” in *Morgunblaðið*, October 18. Transl.: “We need space to be ourselves”.

lavish tales about the characteristics of the nation. In this respect, not much has changed in the 30 or so years since.

The sarcastic comment from Þór (Þór Eldon, The Sugarcubes guitar player) at the beginning of this section is typical for the Sugarcubes' dealings with the press at the time. At the same time, you can also detect a sincere belief within it: the unaltered freedom to do what bids you, fortified by the notion that no one is listening anyway. This healthy disregard towards "the game", an almost arrogant attitude shaped by a naïve self-confidence and juvenile ignorance towards what you can and cannot do was at the heart of many musical export efforts from Iceland in subsequent years, musicians often referencing the groundbreaking work of The Sugarcubes as an inspiration.

The Bad Taste label tried to use the exposure of The Sugarcubes to advance more bands from Iceland. A compilation album was released internationally - bearing the heavily ironic title *World Domination or Death, vol. 1* - containing tracks by exciting Icelandic underground acts. U.S. tours were set up, foreign offices opened and distribution deals sealed. The first generation of Bad Taste bands were either making progress or folding come the end of the '80s. On the other end of the spectrum, a new pure pop movement was taking hold domestically, with ambitious bands filling the airwaves as well as the dance halls in the country. The 1990s would then see the fruition of various scenes, especially in the underground, where Iceland was following international developments quite closely, in contrast with the belated arrival of punk.

1.2.4 The '90s: World Domination or Björk

The Sugarcubes folded in December 1992 after three albums - one great LP, followed by a sophomore slump, with the final effort a commendable parting shot. Björk would launch her solo career six months later with radical consequences for the Icelandic pop/rock scene, pushing Iceland to the international limelight and contributing in no small means to its overall visibility, playing a part in the tourist boom that the country is enjoying at the time of writing. Björk is now the most famous Icelander that has ever lived, usually the first thing the common people mention when Iceland comes up in a discussion.

Björk's first album, simply called *Debut*, was released in June 1993, on the British independent label One Little Indian. The first single "Human Behaviour" made the U.K. top 40, accompanied by a quirky video made by Michel Gondry. Björk would go from strength to strength, releasing two more hugely successful albums in this decade - *Post* in 1995, *Homogenic* in 1997 - solidifying her unique vision with every release. She swiftly became a critics' darling, regularly topping end-of-year lists, gathering all kind of accolades while a legion of fans, bordering on cult-like, was formed.

Back in Iceland, fertile scenes sprang up, mirroring similar international genre developments; a series of micro-editions. The country cultivated firm death metal, indie-rock and grunge scenes. Electronica and experimental music also thrived in the underground and seeds for a future hip-hop scene were sown mid-decade, led by the rock-rap hybrid band Quarashi (taking their cue from the Beastie Boys) and Subterranean, a more straight forward hip-hop crew (and at the same time, a multicultural one, a rarity in Iceland). All of these scenes used both Icelandic and English in their lyrics and all of it was supported by the Músíktílaunir battle-of-the-bands competition which emerged as an established cultural entity in this decade, an important fertiliser for the grassroots, whatever the crop was at any given time.

At the start of the decade, a homegrown pop scene was also quite strong. These bands had no real ambitions to make it abroad, instead playing at country-dances and aiming to be play-listed on Icelandic daytime radio. The export-spirit of the decade made most give foreign success a try - with no results in every case. Some still have a huge following domestically and can pack venues easily, although no foreigner could name one tune or the bands for that matter. At the same time the bands were, interestingly enough, artistically ambitious and had a twofold career, on the one hand playing lighter material on a Saturday night but on the

other, releasing studio albums with serious, thinking person's pop music (rarely played at the dances).⁸¹ A second wave of these bands would occur at the start of the '00s.

This decade was somewhat characterised by new possibilities that had always been out of reach. Björk had swung the gates open and the experimental art-collective GusGus was the first Icelandic group to walk through. The foreign media was on the prowl, looking for quirky and cool music from Iceland and GusGus ticked all the "hipper than thou" boxes. A group of directors, musicians, fashion designers, photographers etc. from the downtown 101 Reykjavik era - nine in all - and as talented and experienced as they were cool. They already had some international connections and easily balanced arty heft and business savvy. The band signed a contract with respected British independent label 4AD in the summer of 1996 and a year later their international debut album was out, containing a blend of minimal techno and soul-infused electro-pop.⁸² The media coverage GusGus enjoyed was a good indication of what was to come, i.e. meanderings about elves, quiriness, lava and volcanos. The band did little to fend it off and happily partook in photo shoots amidst snowy mountain backdrops. The attitude towards this among Icelandic musicians is mixed, as will be apparent, some using the hyperbole for their advantage while others shun it.

From the mid to late '90s, ever more artists took similar steps towards the international stage. They varied in type - some of the more resilient indie-bands mentioned at the start of this section tried their hand with English lyrics, a more "appropriate" image and even a name change. Contemporary fads such as trip hop were tried out and a foreseeable dose of arty, Nordic ice-princesses à la Björk also emerged. The advent of the internet also made it possible for experimental, "outer limits" bands to distribute their material more thoroughly to remote regions, a development that begun at a grassroots level before it reached more mainstream areas. A good example of this was the electronica/techno label Thule, founded in 1995, which released Icelandic techno artists at home and abroad through tightly integrated networks.

In 1999, Árni Matthíasson, Iceland's most prominent music writer at the time, wrote an article in which he gathers information on Icelandic pop/rock artists chasing the dream of industry success, referencing fellow journalists from abroad who had been following the

⁸¹ The main bands were Sálin hans Jóns míns, Nýdönsk, Todmobile and Síðan skein sól - translated as, in order, The soul of my John, Newly Danish, And then the sun broke through. These quite peculiar band names are in stark contrast to the catchy pop that was on their plates!

⁸² Garðarsson, Jónatan, Thoroddsen, Arnar Eggert. 2009. *100 bestu plötur Íslandssögunnar*. Reykjavík: Sena. Transl.: *The 100 greatest Icelandic albums of all time*, p. 202.

Icelandic scene and its export possibilities.⁸³ Some of the key characteristics that the “outside ears” saw in Icelandic pop were self-deprecating and surreal humour, a DIY mentality and a kind of wide-eyed disregard for unspoken but well established rules concerning behaviour in the pop/rock world (discussed earlier in relation to The Sugarcubes). They also mentioned that each and every band seemed to represent a genre of their own. This sentiment was reiterated some years later by Nick Prior, where he found that “Reykjavík’s compact spatial configuration is a key condition for these internal logics of division” referencing that the proximity of the bands gives way to a need for differentiation, rather than contributing to sameness. Reykjavik musicians, interviewed by Prior, confirmed the need to sound different from your friends that were practising next door.⁸⁴ Matthíasson also notes in his article that active bands soon find a need to play abroad as the home market is so small, reinforcing statements already made about that reality. The highest vinyl sellers in the ‘80s, for instance, shifted 30,000 copies which represented massive sales in Iceland, but not enough to sustain a living. Internet advancements in the 1990s soon made it easier to establish connections abroad and together with the rising interest in all things Icelandic, bands moved onto the international stage in higher numbers than ever before. For the first time, they started to achieve something more than fifteen minutes of fame.

The band Sigur Ros had been formed on New Year’s Eve, 1994, in a small town just outside of Reykjavik (Mosfellsbær). A hippyish bunch, drawing on recent shoegaze and grunge trends, they quickly established themselves as a popular live draw in the Reykjavik underground scene and in 1997 their first album, *Von* (“Hope”), was released on Bad Taste Records. *Von* was a muddled and longwinded ambient-laden affair, not quite capturing the epic music of their live shows.⁸⁵ In 1999, their second album, *Ágætis byrjun* (“A nice start”), was released. The head of Bad Taste was hoping to sell about 1,500 to 2,000 copies but instead the album became a phenomenal success, both in its native country and abroad.⁸⁶ Entrenched in the post-rock landscape of the time and with a certain formal beauty, the album was critically lauded and became a cult hit, the music compared to “god weeping tears of gold

⁸³ Matthíasson, Árni. 1999. “Íslenski rokkdraumurinn” in *Morgunblaðið* January 10. Transl.: “The Icelandic rock dream”.

⁸⁴ Prior, Nick. 2015. “‘It’s A Social Thing, Not a Nature Thing’: Popular Music Practices in Reykjavík, Iceland.” *Cultural Sociology* 9, no. 1: 81-98, p. 92.

⁸⁵ The album was a part of *The trumpet series*, which contained eight records that showcased the best underground bands at the time. Sigur Ros effectively broke the record label bank with this record, as the studio budget far exceeded the allotted label limit.

⁸⁶ Thoroddsen, Arnar Eggert. 2006. “Sigur Rós – Ágætis byrjun” in *1001 albums you must hear before you die* (ed. Robert Dimery). London: Cassell.

in heaven”.⁸⁷ The album has sold several million copies today, and the band have a worldwide success only comparable in an Icelandic context to Björk.

In 1999, the first Iceland Airwaves music festival was held, a yearly festival in Reykjavik that has proved to be one of the more significant cultural institutions regarding the Icelandic pop/rock world.⁸⁸ A showcase festival, it welcomes both Icelandic and international artists and is, along with Músíktílaunir, the single most important event in the country’s music calendar. The Icelandic bands put on their “good clothes”, knowing that label sharks are potentially in the crowd; it’s akin to an annual festival for the industry at large. A platform for idea exchange and a real world meet-up for people connected solely through email most of the year. As the decade drew to close, a few mini-revolutions were brewing, concerning hardcore punk/metal music, hip-hop and a renewal in all Icelandic and very home-brewed pop music.

⁸⁷ Watson, Ian. 1999. “Sigur Ros--Stunningly Beautiful Soundscapes”, in *Melody Maker*, Vol. 76, No. 45, p. 10.

⁸⁸ Sigurðardóttir, Margrét S., Young, Tómas. 2011. *Towards Creative Iceland: building local, going global -- Quantitative and qualitative mapping of the cultural and creative sectors in Iceland*. Reykjavík: Íslandsstofa.

1.2.5 The '00s: Sigur Rós and The Icelandic Pop “Phenomenon”

Come the millennium, the Icelandic pop/rock world saw some significant upheavals concerning particular styles and subcultures. One manifestation of this was an onslaught of hardcore/metalcore bands, most of them modelling themselves on American counterparts. A few bands had been pointing towards this direction in the late '90s but a full blown scene was born in the aftermath of hardcore band Mínus' win in the Músíktílaunir competition in 1999. Similar to the original Icelandic punk scene and the Icelandic death metal scene, the tentative beginnings of one or two bands gave way to an explosion in activity some months afterwards with a high, concentrated action lasting for about 2-3 years.⁸⁹ A lot of records, concerts and – inevitably – a tight-knit scene and related subculture that thrived at the concerts, select record stores and on community boards on the internet, which was an entirely new development.⁹⁰

Parallel to this was another mini-revolution: an explosion in Icelandic hip-hop. There had been the odd hip-hop band in the '90s but in 2000, an unruly posse called XXX Rottweilerhundar (Rottweilers)⁹¹ won the Músíktílaunir competition by rapping in Icelandic. This was a novel move, as up until then every Icelander rapped in English; it was considered lame or uncool to use their native language⁹². After the Rottweilers' convincing win this changed overnight, a development further reiterated by their debut album in 2001. Detailing the trials and tribulations of Icelandic teenagers using their mother tongue, this was to usher in an exciting hip-hop scene with a plethora of releases in the next two years or so, the scene taking on a similar tight knit characteristic to the hard-core scene and lasting for about the same amount of time (a second wave of Icelandic hip-hop followed in 2014).

While the hip-hop and hardcore scenes looked to foreign idols for inspirations, a very “non-exportable” domestic scene blossomed, under the influence of the homegrown pop-band scene previously mentioned. These bands also had split careers, releasing ambitious albums while touring the country-dances. Critics shunned these bands whilst average music listeners loved them. Hence, the bands themselves were torn - resenting the lack of critical respect they received, whilst also contentedly catering to the needs of the audience at the same time.⁹³

⁸⁹ Proving the sentiment that the average lifetime of any scene never goes beyond three years. See e.g. Reynolds (2009) and Stanley (2013) for further ruminations on this.

⁹⁰ The community message board is inactive today - however, some of its members still communicate through a dedicated Facebook group, reminiscing nostalgically about its heyday.

⁹¹ Then called 110 Rottweilerhundar, after the suburban postcode where the members resided.

⁹² “It’s simply not possible”, said one of the more respected scenesters at the time.

⁹³ Some significant names here were Írafár, Land og synir, Skítamóráll, Á móti sól, Sóldögg, Buttercup, and Í svörtum fötum. This author had recently started at his post for Morgunblaðið daily and duly churned out literate reviews about all of these albums.

This was also the decade when Iceland's second most famous export, Sigur Ros, took flight as a commercial entity. In 2001, their third album, (), was released. For many, this was the first proper introduction to the band and in the next few years, the group established itself as the second most important music export in the history of Icelandic music. These two pillars - Björk and Sigur Ros - were for many bands a tall order to stand up to. Both of them became known for uncompromising, slightly quirky music - sometimes *very* quirky - and in doing so emphasised the notion that all music from Iceland should be a little weird. In the wake of Sigur Ros, experimental Icelandic bands got a chance to get into the limelight. The best known of these is indie-electronica band múm which released - and continues to release - records through Berlin based label Morr music.⁹⁴ The members of múm gave off a twee, bookish aura mixed with studied musical seriousness and introverted demeanour.⁹⁵ Fans of Sigur Ros needed little convincing and, in this decade, the groundwork for the stereotypical Icelandic musician was laid - a wool sweater wearing creature, wandering in mossy lava fields, inspired by the surrounding nature to write a song (or opus) or two.⁹⁶

From 2000 to 2005, quite a few Icelandic artists made concerted efforts to make it abroad. The landscape was, of course, quite different from the one bands were facing in the '70s, and ground had been broken in the '80s and '90s. "Making it" had become, in some ways easier. For instance, Quarashi signed with Columbia in the U.S, selling their debut international album in an excess of 500,000 copies. Mínus, the hard-core kings, signed with Sony in Europe and released an international version of their grand statement, *Halldór Laxness*, named after Iceland's foremost author. Leaves went for a post-Radiohead sound, making some headway in the U.K. Kolrassa Krókríðandi, an all-female unit that had won Músíktílaunir, changed its name to Bellatrix and pursued success in the U.K also, co-headlining a tour in the autumn of 1999 with an up and coming indie band at the time called Coldplay. In most cases these efforts had little success, at least not in terms of what most of the bands were aiming for - a sustainable career at the very least; ideally world fame.

In 2005, an interesting shift took place in the Icelandic indie rock scene. In a way it was derived from important Icelandic underground bands like the aforementioned Sigur Rós and múm, but was ideally in opposition to it. While those bands were introverted, the new

⁹⁴ Morr has released quite a few Icelandic artists in a similar mould.

⁹⁵ Ushering in the so called "krútt" scene (or "twee"). This will be discussed further in the literature chapter.

⁹⁶ It hasn't exactly helped matters that Björk has a knack of going on record telling journalists that when she needs to get inspired - she goes on a nature walk!

scene was extroverted. The order of the day was campy fun and catchy tunes grounded in an indie-rock outlook. Retro Stefson, one of the leading lights, played an eclectic mix of musical styles: a colourful platter laid with indie pop/rock and heaped with bossa nova, disco, jazz and whatever else a creative teenager, who still doesn't know or recognize the aesthetic rules of pop music-making, sees fit to play around with.⁹⁷ Sigur Rós, for example, had considerable qualms, especially at the beginning, with the commercialism surrounding the making of modern pop and rock music, but this aspect was of relatively little concern to this new generation. Sprengjuhöllin ("The Bomb Palace") took their cue from Stuðmenn ("The Jovial Guys"), all jokey shenanigans and pompous declarations. Jeff Who? and FM Belfast also fitted the bill, putting out dance-friendly, jovial indie music and the latter, along with Retro Stefson, managed to make some waves outside of Iceland.

From 2005 to 2010 Iceland's most popular band was a reggae group, called Hjúlmur ("The Helmets"). Their distinct brand of the genre was duly christened "wool-sweater reggae", and the band themselves were pan-Scandinavian, made up of three Icelanders and three Swedes. One of the best examples of a purely home-grown talent - gay icon Páll Óskar - made a triumphant return in the 2000s, having fostered his success in the '90s. Just like Bubbi, Mannakorn and other "non-exportable" acts already mentioned, Páll Óskar is huge in Iceland but remains a non-entity, more or less, in other countries. Other Icelandic talents worth mentioning here are Jónas Sig. and Mugison, both of whom were interviewed for this thesis. Both are of the "hipster" ilk but also tap into a certain "Icelandicness".⁹⁸ Jónas charmed his countrymen with natural eclecticism, surreal observations along with thought-provoking, post-financial crash lyrics and romantic musings about the sailor's life. Mugison went for similar things, starting out as a hip electro-troubadour, fresh from studying in London, but soon enough was serenading the country with his music *and* his irresistible charm; a peculiar blend of international cool and innocent, rural, Icelandic outlook. With a strong work-ethic, the generally work-crazy Icelanders adore him, and Mugison's popularity bridged generational gaps and taste preferences. Both the intelligentsia and the common person loved him - his 2011 album, *Haglél* ("Hailstorm"), sold in excess of 30,000 physical copies, quite an achievement in the internet age.⁹⁹ Basing himself in the West-fjords, Mugison

⁹⁷ Guðmundsson, Gestur and Thoroddsen, Arnar Eggert. 2016. "More than pets of multiculturalism": Diasporic hybridity in Icelandic popular music – the case of Retro Stefson" in *Transglobal sounds: Music, youth and migration*, p. 65.

⁹⁸ A Scottish equivalent would be Aidan Moffat of Arab Strap fame.

⁹⁹ In a bid to keep it real, all the copies were handmade and the massive popularity, not at all expected, made the packaging quite the ordeal for his family and friends.

operates in a quite idiosyncratic fashion, one month supporting Queens of the Stone Age in the U.S. and the next playing free concerts at churches in rural Iceland.

The decade also saw the introduction of some important musical institutions. A special music export office was opened in 2006, modelling itself after Nordic counterparts that were established around the same time. The aim was to “bring together the disparate strands of Iceland’s eclectic scene under one roof ... by increasing access to information about artists, collaborating with companies to promote Icelandic music abroad and organizing marketing strategies, festival and event participation”.¹⁰⁰ IMX was initiated by Samtónn (The Icelandic Music Association), an umbrella organisation of rights holders’ societies, itself founded in 2002.¹⁰¹ More institutions saw the light of day in the decade, such as the Kraumur music awards.¹⁰² The awards are aimed at strengthening and helping out Iceland’s grassroots music scene by selecting a long-list of 25 records every year by new, young and original artists. It has proven itself to be an important asset, fortifying and making that scene more visible. As it is, this DIY type of music is still the one that Icelanders are best known for. At the other end of the awards spectrum, The Icelandic Music Awards - comparable to the Brits or the Grammys - began to be a thing to be reckoned with in this decade. In the ‘90s, it had first and foremost acted as a musicians’ awards, awarding the best drummer, guitarist etc. Emerging as a more developed awards show this decade, and in conjuncture with similar events in Europe and the Nordic region, it forms a nice counterpart to the Kraumur awards.

¹⁰⁰ From the initial IMX press release (www.icelandmusic.is/news/imx-press-release/). See also www.imx.is and www.uton.is.

¹⁰¹ See their official website for more info: www.samtonn.is/english

¹⁰² The funds website: www.aurorafoundation.is/en/kraumur-music-fund/

1.2.6 The 2010s: An ever growing interest

Spring 2010 and yet another Músíktílaunir competition takes place. The winner this time was a folksy pop band called Of Monsters and Men. Most of Iceland's hopeful indie bands and artists have - up to this point - started out by singing in Icelandic and gradually transitioning to English. Interestingly, Of Monsters and Men (abbreviated as OMAM) is a major exception to this rule, and a possible signal towards an increasingly English language based Icelandic pop world. The English-singing indie-folk of OMAM found on their debut album, *My Head Is an Animal*, entered the American Billboard 200 at number 6 in April 2012 and has sold over a million copies in the U.S alone. No Icelandic artist - including Björk and Sigur Rós - has ever seen such swift success. The band has been touring the world since and their music - a catchy folk-pop sound - has been featured in advertisements, television shows and movies. Of Monsters and Men has sung in English from the start, and their sound and image does not emphasise Iceland in any way; thus, some fans have little knowledge about the band's place of origin.¹⁰³ OMAM cemented its place with a perfectly realised sophomore album entitled *Beneath the Skin* in 2015 - it entered the Billboard 200 at number 3, making it the highest U.S charting album in Iceland's history.¹⁰⁴

OMAM went against the grain in one very significant manner: "What's weird about us..." said one of the members in an interview with Morgunblaðið television edition, "is that we are not weird!"¹⁰⁵ This off the cuff remark is in reality incredibly insightful as the 2010s saw Icelandic bands and artists swaying away from the well-trodden "quirky" path, as they entered the international stage. As a token of an ever more globalised world, these artists operate almost exclusively in the international market, using Iceland as a home base between tours.¹⁰⁶ Other acts, comparable to OMAM at the time of writing, are Ásgeir and Kaleo. Both acts do not accentuate their Icelandicness specifically. In a sense, this harks back to the '50s and '60s, decades in which Icelandic bands simply followed and replicated international pop sounds. In those days, the world wasn't interested in an "Icelandic sound" and the chances of

¹⁰³ Már, Hallur. 2012. "Ótrúlegur árangur Of Monsters and Men" in *Morgunblaðið* (online television edition), June 5. Available online: <http://www.mbl.is/frettir/sjonvarp/83214/>. Transl.: "Of Monsters and Men's Unbelievable Success".

¹⁰⁴ OMAM achieved the staggering number of a billion plays on Spotify a year ago: Þórsson, Elías. 2017. "Of Monsters And Men First Icelandic Band With 1 Billion Spotify Plays" in *The Reykjavík Grapevine*, October 5.

¹⁰⁵ Már, Hallur. 2012. "Ótrúlegur árangur Of Monsters and Men".

¹⁰⁶ And just to reify the Icelandic "village" factor yet again: The lead singer lives in the same street as this author, a fairly normal pedestrian street near the Reykjavík city centre.

getting our acts to breakthrough were as poor as other non-Anglo/American nations. For a long while, being different seemed to be the way out of the country (Sugarcubes, Björk, Sigur Rós). But today, playing the Icelandic card is no longer the only option to get a footing in the pop world.

Institutionally, the opening of Harpa in 2011 - Iceland's first purposely built concert hall - was incredibly significant.¹⁰⁷ Music enthusiasts had been lobbying for a house like this for decades – since 1930 to be exact, the year of the first Icelandic music boom - setting up lobby groups but to no avail. The Icelandic symphony orchestra played in a cinema, much to the chagrin of Icelandic music lovers. Harpa stands in Reykjavik harbour, an architectural wonder dominating the surrounding scenery. That such a monumental concert hall was built for a relatively small music scene tells us something about the Icelandic mentality.

In hindsight, the financial crash in 2008 affected the Icelandic music scene in a weirdly positive way.¹⁰⁸ Leading up to the crash, big foreign artists were brought here in droves and the year 2007 was especially bloated in that aspect. After the crash, the lack of money simply meant that the Icelanders had to produce the live music themselves.¹⁰⁹ This meant a small boom in the concert scene in downtown Reykjavik, where there was a significant rise in small concerts in the next years, the home-grown scene – be it indie bands or more mainstream artists – carried that sector of Icelandic entertainment for the next few years.

Regarding strands and fads in music-making, an Icelandic black metal scene is especially strong at the moment, with quite a few bands highly active, on home turf and internationally. Season of Mist, a respected extreme metal label with an impressive roster (Deathspell Omega, Gorguts, Mayhem, Nightbringer, St. Vitus, to mention a few of the internationally renowned names) has been signing some atmospherically inclined black metal bands from Iceland, among them Sólstafir, who now enjoy quite a stature in the international extreme metal world. The more rough arm of the Icelandic black metal scene networks

¹⁰⁷ Actually, The Music Pavilion (Hljómskálinn), a small, octagonal building, was technically the first (and for decades the only) purpose built music house in Reykjavík. Built in 1923, it housed the Reykjavík brass band. However, Harpa was built with the specific intention to function as a classical venue.

¹⁰⁸ See for example Kjartansdóttir, Ingrid Ör. 2013. “Musik er Fiskeri! - Den islandske populærmusikscenes identitet efter det økonomiske sammenbrud i 2008”. Unpublished Master's thesis. Copenhagen. The University of Copenhagen. Transl.: “Music is fishing! – The Icelandic popular music world after the financial crash in 2008”. Also Baker, Sarah. 2014. ““Nobody Expects to be Paid ... Nobody Asks, What is the Fee?” Making a Living from Music in a Time of Economic Crisis – the Icelandic Experience” in Marshall, Lee and Laing, David (ed.). *Popular Music Matters: Essays in Honour of Simon Frith* (pp. 31–44). United Kingdom: Ashgate.

¹⁰⁹ Thoroddsen, Arnar Eggert. 2018. “Óréttlæti er óréttlátt” in *Vinnan*, May 1. Transl.: “Injustice is unjustifiable (sic.)”.

through established underground labels in the U.S. and Europe and are getting significant exposure in that niche. An Icelandic Viking rock band, Skálmöld (peculiarly, the only one we have) have enjoyed quite a lot of exposure in Europe, especially in Germany where the audiences routinely approach its members and say: “Wow, not only a Viking rock band but you also sing in the original Viking tongue!”¹¹⁰

Lastly, Iceland now enjoys a robust hip-hop scene that had a resurgence from 2014. While the first wave was mainly fixed on posses, troupes and gangs and was very male-centred; the one we have now is much more varied. Icelandic is still the dominant language and we have highly experimental avant-rappers, R&B infused pop rappers, intelligent duos, and macho MCs. Creatively, the strongest Icelandic hip hop is from women. Alvia Islandia (solo artist), The Daughters of Reykjavik (a 15+ members crew) and Cyber (a duo, sometimes a trio, sometimes a quartet) deal in explicitly feminist rap, while musically they’re often psychedelic and “out there”.¹¹¹

I’d like to conclude this overview of the Icelandic pop and rock world to comment on gender. As is probably quite clear, women have not been especially visible in this story and Iceland unfortunately is in no way different from other countries regarding the staunch male dominance in the industry. We’ve certainly had some great female artists - our best known export is a woman, and bands like Grýlurnar, Dúkkulísur and Kolrassa Krókríðandi all made a mark on the history of Icelandic pop/rock. Unfortunately, all of these are exceptions to the rule. Things have moved slowly towards some kind of an equilibrium in the last years, all of it because of concerted efforts, either from the industry itself or grassroots associations. Músíktílaunir have been egging women on to take part in the competition for some years and their percentage is on a steady rise. The winners in the past few years have been female-fronted groups - the last two all-female - and that has encouraged more of such groups to partake. “Girls rock” is a music camp/workshop that runs every year and has become ever more popular and effective. KÍTÓN (Women in Icelandic music) was established in 2013 and juries, music boards, radio personnel and critics have become increasingly aware of the gendered gap in music representation. This situation is not addressed extensively in this thesis - although it came up in some interviews - but a thorough investigation of it would be a subject for another thesis, and probably another scholar as well.

¹¹⁰ This anecdote was related by Snæbjörn “Bibbi” Ragnarsson - Skálmöld’s bass player - to this author, November 15, 2015.

¹¹¹ As an endorsement, Alvia Islandia was nominated for the Nordic Music Price in 2018 for her album *Elegant Hoe*.

A few notes about scenes in Iceland

It is important to make some notes here on the nature of scenes in Icelandic music culture. Talk about an “Icelandic scene” or “Reykjavik scene” is misleading, as those scenes are not really recognised locally. The Reykjavik scene and the talk about “all the exciting new music coming from Iceland” usually refers to specific experimental (and not so experimental) indie bands and quirky electronica acts that often consciously cater to what foreign media and scholars seek to find in a “cool”, “exotic” Icelandic music. The template was laid out by influential bands and artists in the ‘90s and ‘00s (Björk, Sigur Rós, múm) and the musicians who have followed that design (consciously or not) have benefitted in terms of press attention at the very least. This is a somewhat simplified definition, but nonetheless we are in the vicinity of what people expect from the “Icelandic scene”. The barriers to entry are quite low.

The extreme metal scene, the underground electronica scene and the hip-hop scene (very active at the time of writing) rarely come into play when foreign media reports are written about Icelandic music. There have certainly been stray news items about those scenes - usually in more specialised music media - but these artists generally don’t enter the narrative coverage about the “Reykjavik scene”. People, at large, are simply not interested.¹¹²

All of the scenes that I’ve mentioned are quite fluid, and you will often find a heavy metal drummer and an electronica DJ playing in a band that also features prominent indie-rockers. The small population and the micro-scene that operates within it forces people to have their hearts and minds open, if they want to play at all. For example, a micro-reggae scene thrived a few years ago, mostly made up of two bands, and all the members came from various worlds: indie bands, hip-hop groups, the avant-garde, folk, blues, jazz, etc. Most were well known players locally, and there was nothing particularly strange in them standing together on stage, locked into reggae vibes for a few months. After this little scene ended, they moved on to something else. Nonetheless, scenes *can* be too far apart aesthetically for such a fusion of players to occur. Icelanders are after all 350,000 in population, not 3,500.

It is possible to think about the “Reykjavik scene” as a scene within the Icelandic popular music world at large, but one which is totally at the mercy of foreign interest. When

¹¹² There’s a recent and quite fine undergraduate thesis where the author writes about the export potential of Icelandic hip-hop. As it transpires, distribution channels for this are almost non-existent, while generic indie-pop bands have plenty of resources. Práinsson, Hafsteinn. 2018. “„Ef þú þorir ekki að fara út fyrir normið bróðir“: rannsókn á möguleikum íslenskrar rapptónlistar á erlendum markaði.” Unpublished B.A. thesis. The Icelandic University of the Arts – Music department. Transl.: ““If you don’t dare to break up the norm bro”- A research into the export possibilities of Icelandic hip-hop”.

such external interest dwindles, the scene - such as it is - evaporates; outside interest informs and facilitates it. Thus the “Reykjavik scene” as such is not as close-knit as the ‘00s hardcore scene for example, as the only thing that the bands and artists have in common is seeking to court interest from afar. Some of the bands may subsequently continue - with or without foreign interest - and would then align with a small, homegrown indie rock scene.

The scenes that are not as interesting for the international ears are more stable. We’ve had a pretty constant extreme metal scene since the late ‘80s, taking on various guises, rising and falling, but always present in some form. Iceland is at the same time such a small country that some scenes just cannot be sustained. We had an alt.country scene that was in good health around 2002 - 2005 but has not been seen or heard of since. By contrast, there is a stable alt.country scene in the U.K and it’s not going anywhere, made possible because of a population large enough to preserve it.

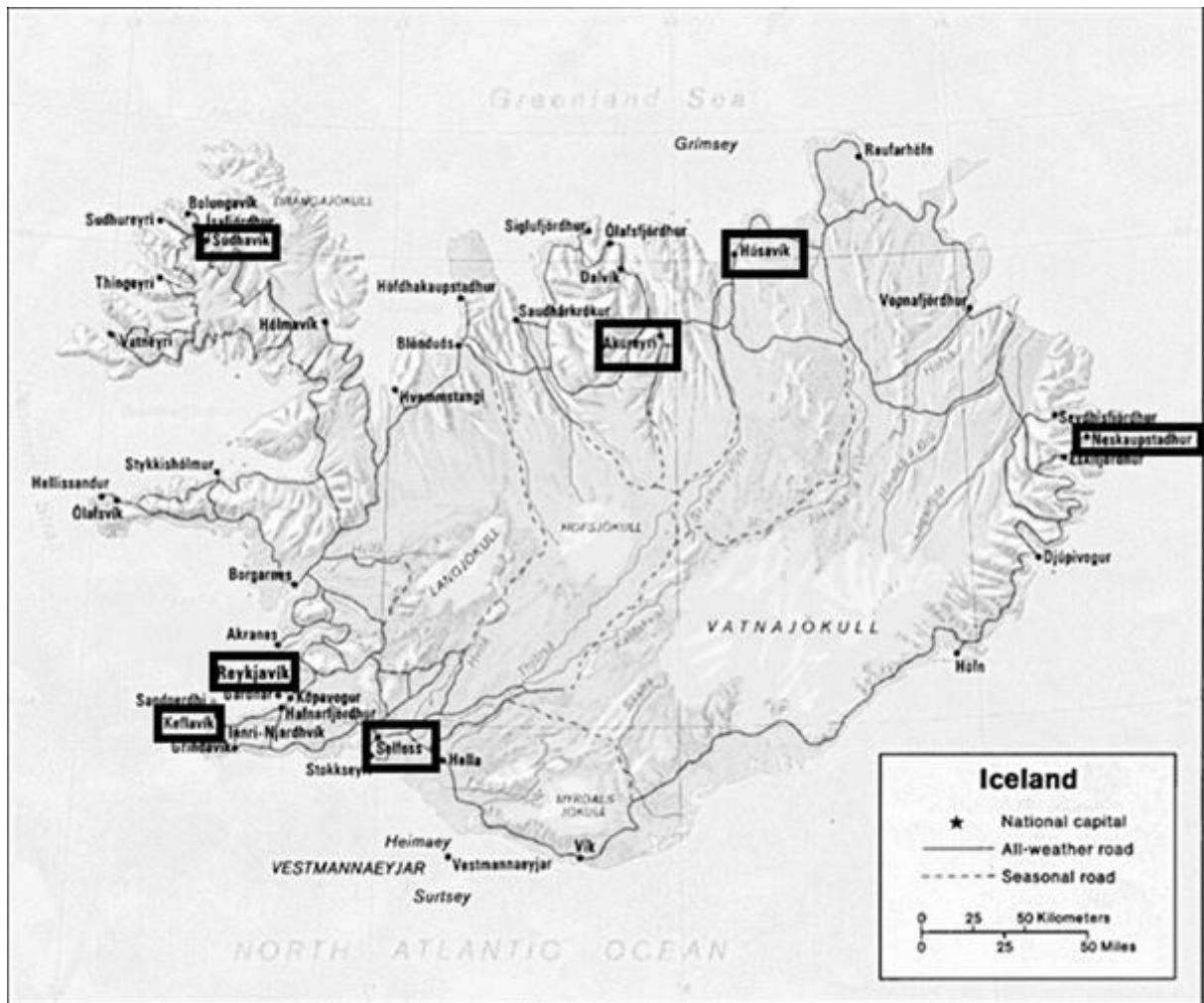


Figure 1. A musical map of Iceland.¹¹³

“**Boxed**” cities/towns, clockwise from Keflavík (bottom left corner):

Keflavík: The “Liverpool” of Iceland, home to the country’s sole international airport, the U.S. army base, and the cradle of the Icelandic beat boom in the 1960s. Population¹¹⁴: 15,500.

Reykjavík: The capital city of Iceland and the centre of the country’s political, cultural and media infrastructures. Birthplace of The Sugarcubes, Ham, and countless other bands, it is therefore the source of much of the research that informs this thesis. Population: 123,000 (Capital region: 217,000).

Súdavík: Home to Mugison, one of Iceland’s most prominent music figures today. North of Súdavík is Ísafjörður, the capital of the West fjords (pop. 2,517) and home to the Aldrei fór ég suður (“I never travelled south”) music festival, which he founded. Population: 212.

Akureyri: Viewed as “the capital of the north”, Akureyri is Iceland’s second largest urban area after the capital region. Population: 18,800.

Húsavík: Due to unusually high number of visits from foreign underground rock bands as well as the presence of similar local groups such as Rotþróin, Roð and Innvortis, Húsavík was considered to be the “rock capital” of Iceland in the 1990s. Population 2,200.

Neskaupsstaður: Home to the Eistnaflug (“The Flight of the Testicles”) music festival, an internationally renowned - and brilliantly named - extreme metal and rock gathering. Population: 1,481.

Selfoss: The Icelandic capital of “pure pop”. The town and the region was the home of bands such as Skítamóral, Land og synir and Á móti sól, the purveyors of the all-Icelandic “pop boom” in the 2000s. Population: 7,700.

¹¹³ © 2014 Maps of Europe. Public Domain.

¹¹⁴ All population data accurate as of 2017.

1.3 Domestic research on Icelandic popular music (general and specific to the thesis)

In terms of existing research on Icelandic popular music, the field is eclectic. In the following two sections, I will give a brief overview of research to date. In the first section, I will look at writings and research carried out domestically and in the second section, I will look at research that has been done by foreign scholars. The sections will be divided between more general writing, and writing that can be tied theoretically to the thesis.

Scholarly articles on Icelandic classical music, modern composition, traditional music etc. exist, but most of them are beyond the scope of the thesis. Some of this research has been cited in my earlier historical exegesis, and a few articles will be introduced later in these sections. Not a whole lot has been done in terms of academic research on Icelandic popular music, and only a few articles have been published in journals in the last ten years or so. The research field is growing slowly though, and foreign scholars have been gradually adding to the literature, as will become apparent to the reader. In Icelandic, we have some general writing on Icelandic popular music, and - apart from criticism/general cultural journalism - biographies make up the bulk of that material. The most detailed and most useful books on the history of Icelandic popular music are tomes written by one Dr. Gunni, a musician/journalist and something akin to a street-scholar. The books carry with them impressive historical research and hundreds of interviews with Icelandic musicians.¹¹⁵ The condensed English language translation of his books, *Blue Eyed Pop*, is currently the only English account on the history of Icelandic popular music so far.¹¹⁶ The author of this thesis co-authored a book, *The 100 Greatest Icelandic Albums of All Time*, initially set out to be a coffee-table book but turned into a quite detailed foray into the history of said albums – making it a good historical overview as well.¹¹⁷ Unfortunately, this has only been published to date in Icelandic. The preservation of Icelandic popular music history can also be found in various other contexts; we now have two museums, The Icelandic Museum of Rock ‘n’ Roll¹¹⁸ - which is impressively designed – and a punk museum. In addition, there are at least

¹¹⁵ A ten episode TV series for the Icelandic National Television network was adapted from these books.

¹¹⁶ The title is a reference to the Sugarcubes song. This researcher is currently working on a book for Reaktion Books/The University of Chicago Press, forthcoming in 2019. Its scope is a history of Icelandic popular music, informed with a sociological slant.

¹¹⁷ Garðarsson, Jónatan, Thoroddsen, Arnar Eggert. 2009. *100 bestu plötur Íslandssögunnar*. Reykjavík: Sena. Transl.: *The 100 greatest Icelandic albums of all time*.

¹¹⁸ Situated in Keflavik, the birth-place of Icelandic rock ‘n’ roll.

three documentaries out there which have mapped out periods of Icelandic popular music upheaval.¹¹⁹

Undergraduate and Master's theses on the subject is a growing field as well. Various themes have emerged in the last ten years or so - on topics like music festivals, export possibilities, feminism, music criticism, record labels, radio, identity, scenes etc.¹²⁰ This is the first doctoral thesis that looks squarely at the popular music world in Iceland.

In 2004, Ágúst Einarsson, economist at the University of Iceland, published a book in the field of cultural economics called *Hagræn áhrif tónlistar* or *The economic impact of music*.¹²¹ The book itself had quite an impact, arguing that the Icelandic music industry has a positive effect on Iceland's economy. Artists, for a long time ridiculed for being bloodsucking lazybones, cheered as Einarsson detailed the market share of the creative industries and scientifically showed that it represents a larger share of GDP than agriculture. Economic researches on the Icelandic popular music world are the ones that usually make the headlines and are best known by the general public. Similar researches have been carried out since (e.g. Sigurðardóttir, Young, 2011¹²²) and in 2018, a report headed by Dr. Margrét Sigrún Sigurðardóttir (economist and head of the Research centre for the creative industries at the University of Iceland) showed that the influx of capital in relation to Icelandic music festivals and concerts is 14 million pounds per annum.¹²³

Academic writing on Icelandic popular music, published in English language journals, has been remarkably scarce. From the literature angle, there's an important article on Icelandic punk by Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson, "Coming in from the Cold: Icelandic Punk Rock

¹¹⁹ The most important ones are: *Rokk í Reykjavík* (1982) which detailed the punk scene and *Popp í Reykjavík* (1998) was a snapshot of the music scene of the late '90s, it's title a cunning reference to the earlier movie (there was little pop on offer, mostly happening underground bands and export ready indie-bands). Also worth mentioning are *Screaming Masterpiece* (2005), which revolved around Sigur Ros and the growing attention being paid to Icelandic popular music in general and *Heima* (2007), a musical travelogue made by Sigur Ros which has been the subject of quite a few academic articles.

¹²⁰ The bulk are in Icelandic, some in English and all to be found at www.skemman.is. English abstracts are sometimes included. Skemman.is is an open access online institutional repository for various Icelandic universities.

¹²¹ Einarsson, Ágúst. 2004. *Hagræn áhrif tónlistar*. Reykjavík: Viðskipta- og hagfræðideild Háskóla Íslands, Transl.: *The Economic Impact of Music*.

¹²² Sigurðardóttir, Margrét S., Young, Tómas. 2011. *Kortlagning á hagrænum áhrifum skapandi greina*. Reykjavík: Íslandsstofa, 2011. Transl.: *The mapping of the economic impact of the creative industry*.

¹²³ Sigurðardóttir, Margrét S., Guðmundsdóttir, Erla R. 2018. *Íslenski tónlistariðnaðurinn í tölum*. Reykjavík: Rannsóknarmiðstöð skapandi greina. Transl.: *The Icelandic music industry in numbers*.

and Sites of Cultural Memory”.¹²⁴ Only of indirect use for this thesis’ purpose and theoretically out of sync with my project here, Vilhjálmsón article deals with the retrospective validation of the original Icelandic punk scene. Vilhjálmsón argues that the memorialisation of the movement is heading towards a nationalistic uplift and he “attempts to historicise the intricacies of the construction of Icelandic punk as an artistic movement” and focuses on the “manner in which certain forms of mediation of the punk legacy in Iceland have become virtual places where memories circulate and punk images are made available for retrospective reflection and meaning construction.”¹²⁵ One of his conclusions is that the success of Icelandic musicians abroad is met with communal celebration, national pride and nationalistic image construction rather than accusations of selling out. I don’t wholly agree with Vilhjálmsón’s article - it is unnecessarily convoluted at times, although the point about communal celebration is strong. Nonetheless, the article is in-depth, and contains a detailed mapping of the punk scene in question. Up until the recent, accumulating sociological incursions, literature scholars were those that made attempts at contextualising Icelandic popular music. Yet too often their articles seem to stem from an academically faraway place - dare I say a slightly disinterested one? - the writings more like a side-line to the scholar’s main and “proper” interest.¹²⁶

Edging towards more specific writing, in 2019, Equinox Publishing in Sheffield will release *Sounds Icelandic: Essays on Icelandic music in the 20th and 21st Centuries*¹²⁷, a book containing writing on Icelandic music of all kinds, by both Icelandic and foreign scholars. “That such a small country can produce so much music of quality, value and acclaim is a fascinating situation,” goes the necessary blurb, but the book is nonetheless a landmark publication, the first academic book solely on Icelandic music. In the popular music studies field, we have writings on the role of Reykjavik, The Eurovision contest, the indie scene, the hip-hop scene and “Surrealism in Icelandic Popular Music”. Most of the articles are by scholars that have shown Icelandic music proper interest in the last few years, and I will look at their contributions in more detail in the next section. What’s significant about the book is

¹²⁴ Vilhjálmsón, Björn. 2011. “Coming in from the Cold: Icelandic Punk Rock and Sites of Cultural Memory” in Momcilovic, Drago (ed.) *Resounding Pasts. Essays on Literature, Popular Music and Cultural Memory*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16. Following on from this quote, Vilhjálmsón in fact pre-empts the idea of the Icelandic punk museum by five years. It opened in 2016, five years after the publication of the article, fittingly in an old public toilet.

¹²⁶ For other similar articles, see e.g. Dagsdóttir, Úlfhildur. 2005. “Metamorphoses of the Imagination: Imagining Björk”.

¹²⁷ Edited by Þorbjörg Daphne Hall, Nicola Dibben, Árni Heimir Ingólfsson and Tony Mitchell.

that the topics are becoming more varied and ever closer to a suitable academic research on what's actually happening in Icelandic music. We've had quite a few articles and theses in the recent past that are usually directed at Björk and Sigur Ros, focusing on supposed connections of these artists to Icelandic nature - how the guitars in Sigur Ros' music sound like molten lava, etc. Although not *necessarily* incorrect, these articles are often closer to misguided fandom rather than having appropriate academic aims.

I authored one chapter myself for *Sounds Icelandic...*, "Nurturing the Roots: Músíktílaunir, Iceland's foremost "Battle of the Bands" Competition", in which I trace the story of said competition and look at its role as a cultural institution that encourages grassroots musical growth. The article is rooted in sociology; Becker and Bourdieu come into play, as well as Lucy Green's theories about "musical enculturation". The communal aspect of Músíktílaunir, with its peer relations and idea swapping is an essential factor to the competitions longevity, where the young get enlightened "by immersion in the everyday music and musical practices of one's social context."¹²⁸ Músíktílaunir's importance can be viewed from both a macro- and micro-social angle. It's interesting to see how big an effect such a long running and deeply rooted cultural institution can have on such a small musical society but on a more micro sociological level it has functioned as educational institution of sorts, motivating young and aspiring musicians – most of them still at an amateur level – fortifying and creating connections and introducing them to the world of professional musicianship.

A significant academic work in relation to this thesis is an Icelandic language book by sociologist Gestur Guðmundsson, published in 1990, the period when The Sugarcubes were making waves. The English title is *Iceland's Rock History: From Siggi Johnnie to The Sugarcubes* (or *Rokksaga Íslands: frá Sigga Johnnie til Sykurmólanna*). Icelandic popular music history is traced from its initial exposure to rock 'n' roll, up to the reign of The Sugarcubes. Written with a general audience in mind, Guðmundsson nonetheless puts proceedings through a macro-sociological prism with a particular focus on the development of Icelandic youth culture.¹²⁹ Gestur and I then joined forces on an article called "'More than pets of multiculturalism': Diasporic hybridity in Icelandic popular music – the case of Retro

¹²⁸ Green, Lucy. 2002. *How popular musicians learn: A way ahead for music education*. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate., p. 22.

¹²⁹ Some music related writings by Guðmundsson have appeared in journals, see e.g. Guðmundsson, Gestur. 1993. "Icelandic rockmusic as a synthesis of international trends and national cultural inheritance" in *Young*: 48 - 63.

Stefson”.¹³⁰ The aim was to look at how Icelandic popular musicians with immigrant roots fair, making use of Paul Gilroy’s theories about hybridity and the Black Atlantic. The case study was the indie band Retro Stefson, led by two brothers of Angolan ancestry.¹³¹ The article also contains a description of the Icelandic cultural environment since the Second World War, looking at some of the musical hybridisation waves that have hit Icelandic shores. There are not many ties between this and my approach here; nonetheless, it represents an important, perhaps niche analysis of an overlooked aspect of Icelandic popular music culture.

Dr Sigrun Lilja Einarsdottir, sociologist at Bifröst University, Iceland and a former student of Tia DeNora - one of the scholars that will make her mark on this thesis - has written an article about the role of singing in the lives of amateur choral singers in Iceland.¹³² The purpose of the study was to investigate what motivates people to sing in choirs as a leisure activity, a very direct touchpoint to this thesis. Subjects were retrieved from members of ten amateur choirs and results indicated that participants gain both personal and social benefits from singing in a choir. As will be clear in some of my findings later, non-musical things often act as significant drivers in music activity participation. In Einarsdottir’s article, personal enjoyment of singing and a *positive social atmosphere* (italics mine) seem to be the strongest motivating factors for voluntary participation in choirs.

Continuing on classical notes, two recent Master’s theses (in Icelandic) delve into the social dynamics of classical Icelandic musicians, using ethnographic research tools, taking on a similar research frame as this thesis. Birgisdóttir explores how professional instrumentalists in the field of classical music feel about their education and profession.¹³³ She especially focuses in on expectations of young players regarding future employment. One of the findings was that encouragement and interest from the *environment* (italics mine) seems to have greatly influenced the way participants were drawn to music, and none of them appeared to have chosen music because they expected a high salary or job security. Demand for excellence is high in the field, unlike the underlying strands of thought in the pop/rock sector, and all the subjects went abroad for further training.

¹³⁰ Mentioned in section 1.2.5: The 00s: Sigur Rós and The Icelandic Pop “Phenomenon”.

¹³¹ Iceland is actually quite poor in these matters - a predominantly “white” country with few multi-cultural scenes to speak of.

¹³² Einarisdóttir, Sigrún Lilja and Guðmundsdóttir, Helga Rut. 2016. “The role of choral singing in the lives of amateur choral singers in Iceland” in *Music Education Research* 18(1), 39-56.

¹³³ Birgisdóttir, Guðrún Sigríður. 2017. “...Og þá opnaðist þessi heimur“: Viðhorf nýu hljóðfæraleikara til menntunar sinnar og starfa”. Unpublished Master’s thesis. Bifröst University, Iceland. Transl.: “...And then these worlds opened up to me”: How nine instrumentalists feel about their work and education”.

Gestsdóttir uses Bourdieu to shed light on the musical habitus of Icelandic classical singers, examining how classical singers experience their occupation in Iceland and abroad.¹³⁴ Eight singers of both genders were interviewed and the drive behind their chosen career was mainly the pleasure derived from singing and acting. Most of the singers obey to the ruling powers of the music world, a sacrifice made to be able to practice their craft (little job security, low wages, meagre employment opportunities etc.) and mentioned that social networks are important in gaining jobs.

Finally, I would like to mention Þorbjörg Daphne Hall's contribution to this emerging field; she was one of the instigators behind the *Sounds Icelandic...* book and one of the editors.¹³⁵ Among Hall's published articles on popular music is an article on Sigur Ros and their film *Heima* and a chapter on Icelandic twee-pop (i.e. "krútt") in the *Sounds Icelandic...* book. Her article on Sigur Ros' documentary, which takes the band to various locations in their homeland, centres on nostalgic qualities in two songs of theirs (featured in the film).¹³⁶ The songs are put in context with the ideologies of the "krútt" scene and the social reality of Iceland today. As the world depicted in the film appears to be the home of the band, i.e. "their" Iceland, its grand display of an imagined rural past has little to do with the harsh and difficult reality of either Icelanders past or present. As Hall says: "Arguably, the world created in the film represents an urban or even foreign view of a world and nature," emphasising Vilhjalmsón's claim about nationalistic ideals fused with Iceland's popular music while at the same time, revealing the subterfuge that's often on display for non-Icelanders. The chapter in *Sounds Icelandic...* ("Even cute babies will bite when provoked: Icelandic popular music and the rise of the "krútt"¹³⁷) dissects the Icelandic twee or "krútt" generation, best exemplified by electronica band múm.

¹³⁴ Gestsdóttir, Ása Fanney. 2017. "Þetta er bara bévítans hark: Veruháttur íslenskra óperusöngvara og upplifun af starfsvettvangi". Unpublished Master's thesis. Bifröst University, Iceland. Transl.: "Habitus of Icelandic opera singers and experience in the field of work".

¹³⁵ Hall is now a programme director and assistant professor of musicology at the Iceland University of the Arts.

¹³⁶ Hall, Þorbjörg Daphne. 2014. "Nostalgic ideology in the film 'Heima' by the Icelandic 'krutt' band Sigur Ros" in *Social Alternatives*. 33 (1): 39 - 43.

¹³⁷ The term first appeared in 2002 and has been attributed to the writer Gerður Kristný, who saw the emergence of a new group of artists who deployed cute personas and "publicly appeared as they still ate sand".

1.4 Foreign research on Icelandic popular music (general and specific to the thesis)

A few scholars from abroad have shown Iceland interest in the last ten years or so and some of them have already been mentioned. Media interest in Icelandic music from abroad is substantial and on the rise. We have the regular proclamations of an “amazingly active scene considering the size” from music journalists, echoing the typical travel book that details the quirkiness of Icelanders, proclaiming things that have little or no root in reality.¹³⁸ There’s also no shortage of blogs about Icelandic music, run by enthusiastic foreigners. For example, there are two Polish websites exclusively about Icelandic music and one Wim Van Hooste, a Belgian, runs several blogs, highly detailed and going deep into subjects that most of his Icelandic counterparts could not even dream up.¹³⁹

For some reason, there’s a weird fascination from Australia towards Icelandic popular music. Two antipodean scholars who have specialised in Icelandic popular music will be introduced later in the section and the third, Robert Faulkner¹⁴⁰, wrote a book about Icelandic male choirs in 2013, titled *Icelandic men and me: sagas of singing, self and everyday life*. Faulkner, who lived in Iceland from 1986 – 2006 interviewed more than 50 members of the male choir group Hreimur in rural Iceland in 2000-2006. He comes to the conclusion that singing is a vital part of everyday life and is about national identity, being with other men, and dealing with life’s ups and downs. The communal benefit is not lost on Faulkner but still, the book is strangely prone to clichés about the Icelandic way of being, especially considering how long Faulkner stayed here.

Dr Kimberly Cannady is an ethnomusicologist that has written about music practices in Iceland, The Faroe Islands, Denmark and Greenland. Her dissertation (2014) combined ethnographic and historical approaches in a study of the relationships between music-making and nation-building in Iceland. She builds on that in her chapter “Echoes of the colonial past in discourse on North Atlantic Popular Music”¹⁴¹ where she brings a postcolonial perspective into the study of popular music in Iceland and the North Atlantic.

¹³⁸ Some recent titles: “Waking up in Iceland”, “Alles ganz Isi – Isländische Lebenskunst für Anfänger und Fortgeschrittene (German book about the characteristics of the Icelanders) and “My journey to Iceland: 10 crazy years later and I am still here”. And so forth...

¹³⁹ My colleagues in the Faroe Islands call people with a high interest in all things Faroese, “Faroe freaks”.

¹⁴⁰ Faulkner is an associate professor in early childhood and music at the graduate school of education at the University of Western Australia.

¹⁴¹ In *The Oxford Handbook of Nordic Popular Music* - more of which later.

Her argument is that the fascination with Icelandic culture and nature, in which popular music plays a key role, evolves from a sense of “discovery” in the ‘80s in Anglophone media that echoes a longer colonial history. The fascination with the present is grounded in the familiar myth of an isolated culture and nature untouched by modernity. Iceland’s authenticity is thus inseparable from the country’s mythical status as a deep freeze for Old Norse heritage and its location at the margins of Scandinavian modernity. Cannady’s arguments have some grounding, and she touches on the “Borealistic”¹⁴² fascination that foreigners have with Iceland, something that tends to litter their writing. Few scholars have effectively gone against this “nature/viking” grain, as I have detailed, and Cannady does well in that aspect. Cannady’s chapter is in the recently published *Oxford Handbook of Popular Music in the Nordic Countries* (2017)¹⁴³, also featuring Tony Mitchell (“Music and Landscape in Iceland”) and Nicola Dibben (“Music and Environmentalism in Iceland”). Strangely enough, no Icelandic scholar was approached for the book.

Tony Mitchell has written a few journal articles on various topics concerning Icelandic popular music - a psycho-geographical¹⁴⁴ account of Sigur Ros, a report on the Icelandic hip-hop scene and an article on the experimental label bedroom community.¹⁴⁵ Unfortunately, the articles more often than not feel like they are written by a fan in a state of wide eyed wonderment rather than a discerning scholar. Unfounded clichés are bandied about and the writing stays on the surface, more or less. There are also some useful insights certainly, whilst historically and context-wise he’s more or less on point; the hip-hop article is strongest in this respect.

A fellow antipodean, Sarah Baker, on the other hand, has written a fine, worthwhile article called “Nobody Expects to be Paid ... Nobody Asks, What is the Fee?": Making a Living from Music in a Time of Economic Crisis – the Icelandic Experience”.¹⁴⁶ The article details the plight of Icelandic musicians in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash. Using

¹⁴² “Borealism” is a concept, formulated by Icelandic ethnologist/folklorist Kristinn Schram, which deals with exotic performances and representations of Icelanders and “the North”. Found in e.g. Schram, Kristinn. 2011. “Banking on Borealism: Eating, Smelling, and Performing the North” in Chartier, Daniel and Ísleifsson, Sumarliði R. (ed.). *Iceland and Images of the North*.

¹⁴³ Holt, Fabian and Kärjä, Antti-Ville. 2017. *The Oxford handbook of popular music in the Nordic countries*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴⁴ Psycho-geography is a term derived from the Situationist Guy DeBord, but in this instance refers to a) how music can express a “spirit of place” and is a b) topographical dimension in which musical forms, idioms and modes of expression mirror features of landscape and cityscape.

¹⁴⁵ Written with no capital letters.

¹⁴⁶ In *Popular Music Matters: Essays in Honour of Simon Frith* (pp. 31–44).

research that she's carried out with David Hesmondhalgh on cultural work, she addresses the general public view on work in the arts – and the scholarly view as well - by quoting Mark Banks (author of *The Politics of Cultural Work*, 2007): “The notion that cultural work is actually work (that is, an economic activity for which one receives payment) escapes the attention of scholars due to a belief that the worlds of art and culture [lies] outside the remit of economic analysis ... with employment in music, art, fashion, television and so on, often being understood as a “fun” or pleasurable vocation rather than as structured economic activity.”¹⁴⁷

I've detailed a few Icelandic reports set out to contest this and Baker's research aligns neatly with recurrent themes in my interviews, where people describe their views about making a living from music-making, descriptions that were brimming with all kinds of doubts. Unsurprisingly, Baker found that many of the Icelandic musicians were “prepared to trade off poor conditions because of the potential for their labour to provide them with a sense of autonomy, interest and involvement, self-realisation and pleasure.”¹⁴⁸ She indeed got romantic responses from the elder statesmen (“musicians aren't concerned about earning money because they're so happy to be able to do what they do” and “when music is your quest, you don't worry about the other stuff”) but the reality was more gritty as: “The emerging and mid-career musicians I spoke to were all passionate about their craft, which is why they persist in difficult circumstances, yet they were also acutely aware of and concerned by the labour conditions of the Icelandic music industry that lead to poor pay and limited earnings...”¹⁴⁹

Baker has also written about Iceland's participation in the Eurovision song contest¹⁵⁰, drawing on interviews with Icelandic music industry workers. Setting out to examine how the nation navigates and experiences a competition that is so divergent from the “left-field pop music” for which Iceland is internationally renowned, Baker does a good job in moving away from the usual gateway into Icelandic music, directing her gaze at Icelandic “normal” music - a very under-researched field to say the least.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁵⁰ Baker, Sarah. 2019 (forthcoming). “Beyond Reykjavik 101: Iceland's Popular Music Mainstream and the Eurovision Song Contest” in *Sounds Icelandic...*

¹⁵¹ I gave a paper at the Icelandic Airwaves festival in 2015, talking about normal, homegrown “non-exportable” music. Related to this, I regularly have to explain to starry eyed “Iceland freaks” that in Iceland, boring music is also a part of the musical landscape!

Nicola Dibben (one of the co-editors of *Sounds Icelandic...*) wrote a highly detailed musicological book on Björk where both cultural and social affiliations come into play along with pure musical analysis.¹⁵² This led her to work on Björk's *Biophilia* project, working in associated workshops and writing explanatory text for the accompanying apps. Dibben also wrote a fine article in 2009 on the relationship between Icelandic national identity and popular music¹⁵³ as seen in selected videos made by Icelandic musicians, looking especially at environmental politics and the conflation of nation with nature. A slight clouding romanticism is discernible but on the whole, Dibben is acutely aware of her standing and delivers a sturdy article on the workings of Icelandic popular music.

Tore Størvold, a young Norwegian scholar, wrote a Master's thesis on Icelandic popular music ("Beats, Strings and Volcanic Things: Cross-genre Musical Practices in the Independent Music Scene in Reykjavík, Iceland", completed in 2016) and is now working on a PhD thesis, exploring "the relationship between music, nature and identity in contemporary Iceland" on an eco-critical note, asking what "music can tell us of how we relate to our physical environment, in an age where climate change and environmental debate makes such questions unavoidable". Størvold, not unlike Dibben, looks at how artists like Ólafur Arnalds and Valgeir Sigurðsson for example write critically about their surroundings in their music, "in order to imagine and critique different conceptions of nature and the human within it."¹⁵⁴

His Master's thesis examined the contemporary independent music scene in Reykjavík, Iceland, with an emphasis on musical practices that pose a challenge to the institutional divide between the cultural fields of the classical and the popular. Using ethnographic descriptions (Størvold did field research for some months) to seek out how cross-genre, cross-hierarchy musical practices relate to the city of Reykjavík with its specific urban and social geography. Størvold found that "the relatively small population and compact, centralized urban structure of Reykjavík prove to be facilitating factors in the emergence of collaborative musical practices founded on close social proximity."

Last but not least, Nick Prior authored an article in 2014, called "'It's A Social Thing, Not a Nature Thing': Popular Music Practices in Reykjavík, Iceland."¹⁵⁵ Interviewing some of

¹⁵² Dibben, Nicola. 2009. *Björk*. Sheffield: Equinox Publication.

¹⁵³ Dibben, Nicola. 2009. "Nature and Nation: National Identity and Environmentalism in Icelandic Popular Music Video and Music Documentary" in *Ethnomusicology Forum* 18, no. 1: pp. 131-51.

¹⁵⁴ Information from Størvold's profile at the University of Oslo site: www.hf.uio.no/imv/english/people/aca/temporary/torstorv/. See also Størvold, Tore. 2018. "Music and the Kárahnjúkar Hydropower Plant: Style, Aesthetics, and Environmental Politics in Iceland" in *Popular Music and Society*, published online, 20 Jul.

¹⁵⁵ In *Cultural Sociology* 9, no. 1 (2014): 81-98.

the most prominent musicians working today in Reykjavík, Prior aimed to show “how the city’s spatial configuration favours the development of dense creative networks and attendant forms of knowledge, conflict, diversity and collaboration ... Getting a sense of the city’s routine musical practices, it will be argued, opens an aperture on the location of place-based musics within prevailing social and economic conditions.”

Prior duly notes that the country has been positioned as one of the world’s most vibrant cultural hotspots and “the music has been subject to a number of journalistic eulogies, books and documentaries ...” Prior mentions that one of the strands found there is to announce the vibrancy of the country’s music scene as radically disproportionate to its size.¹⁵⁶ He agrees with the notion that Iceland’s reputation is certainly surprising in the light of the micro-reality it deals with, but this much heralded activity is down to how musicians and musical networks form on the island. He sums up the “nature error” like this:

Those looking for answers are invariably directed to a raft of ill-defined conditions: The nation’s Viking heritage, its geographical isolation in the middle of the North Atlantic, as well as a hostile climate that forces musicians to spend dark winters in recording studios (Sullivan, 2006). Another explanation with traction is apparent in the drift of much music journalism as well as some academic work, and it is the idea that the country’s music is deeply rooted in and inspired by its nature and landscapes. Here, the sheer quality and depth of feeling apparent in Iceland’s music is attributed to the creative turbulence of its natural environment. As with nature, so with culture.¹⁵⁷

Prior’s article is the most important writing on Icelandic popular music by a foreign scholar yet. Prior’s dense yet compact style, loaded with theory, cuts to the chase and shows quite convincingly that endless nature references are misleading: “...directing one’s gaze to the wonders of Icelandic nature is less sociologically instructive than keeping it to the ground – to everyday places, venues, streets and practices.”¹⁵⁸ Just like Størvold, this is something that Prior experienced first-hand, simply by being present in Iceland while conducting the research, letting the realities seep in like the old style anthropologists (Finnegan’s trade, remember).

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 82

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 95.

2. Literature

The literature chapter is divided into two sections. The first one introduces background theories by Pierre Bourdieu and Howard Becker, along with some classic researches on music-making in small communities, the usage of music in everyday life settings and its communal role in group and friendship formations. The second section deals with academic research into the division between amateur and professional musicians, an area that informs a lot of issues within the thesis.

2.1 Music-making in small communities

Some key ethnomusicological excursions into music-making have helped to shed a light on the topic at hand. Ruth Finnegan is the foremost scholar in this aspect but before I delve into her landmark research I will look at two classic sociological theories that will serve as a background to the understanding of creative endeavours in societies. These are Bourdieu's much heralded theories on the *habitus* and *The Field of Cultural Production* and Howard Becker's writings on art as a collective action in his book *Art Worlds* (1982).

In an article admittedly set out to criticise his theories, Nick Prior contends that “in many ways, Bourdieu has set the agenda for post-Marxist investigations of socio-musical practices as they play out relationally ... His concepts of cultural capital, field and habitus in particular, have been central to the formation of a critical paradigm in music sociology that demonstrates how the social penetrates, produces or contextualizes music.”¹⁵⁹ Bourdieu's name is frequently seen in various research on music and its social realities. One of his most used theories in that respect has to do with the hierarchy of taste, where “tastes are socially conditioned and that the objects of consumer choice reflect a symbolic hierarchy that is determined and maintained by the socially dominant in order to enforce their distance or distinction from other classes of society”. This includes music of course, but this one approach of his will only be used indirectly in the thesis.¹⁶⁰

The idea of the habitus is a grand one and convoluted, as is Bourdieu's wont. It is created through a social, rather than individual process leading to patterns that are enduring

¹⁵⁹ Prior, Nick. 2011. “Critique and Renewal in the Sociology of Music: Bourdieu and Beyond” in *Cultural Sociology*. 5 (1): 121-138., p. 122.

¹⁶⁰ Allen, Douglas E. and Anderson, Paul F. 1994. “Consumption and Social Stratification: Bourdieu's Distinction” in *NA - Advances in Consumer Research* Volume 21. Allen, Chris T, Roedder, Deborah and Provo, John (ed.). UT: Association for Consumer Research, pages: 70 - 74.

and transferrable from one context to another, but that also shift in relation to specific contexts and over time. Habitus “is not fixed or permanent, and can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical period”.¹⁶¹ Paraphrasing Bourdieu, habitus is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by a kind of interplay between the two over time, i.e. dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures, and that shape current practices and structures and also, importantly, that condition our very perceptions of these.¹⁶² In this sense habitus is created and reproduced unconsciously, “without any deliberate pursuit of coherence... without any conscious concentration.”¹⁶³

Bourdieu’s theories about the Field of Cultural Production¹⁶⁴ are interlocked with the idea of the habitus and cultural capital, where a field is a setting in which agents and their social positions are located. The position of each particular agent in the field is a result of interaction between the specific rules of the field, agent’s habitus and agent’s capital (social, economic and cultural).¹⁶⁵

Bourdieu’s ideas about the role of practice, habits and embodiment in social dynamics are quite revelatory in terms of music-making and the culture around it. Nick Prior writes in his critical take on Bourdieu’s legacy:

Far from being an act of pure love, however, time spent with art is a misrecognized investment in a game of social elevation through which certain dispositional orientations (the habitus) are produced and reproduced. So the sociological truth of art is, for Bourdieu, the uncomfortable truth of its adhesion to objective logics of structural and systematic inequality. It behoves the sociologist of art to shine a light into the murky waters of artistic fields to show *what really guides them* (italics mine), to reveal the hidden depths of inequality in what appear to be disinterested practices and to demonstrate how power relations in such fields fulfil a grander role of hardening structures of social and cultural inequality at large.¹⁶⁶

I won’t go full force into class conflicts and how structural realities (or inequalities) inform and guide Icelandic music life. Not that it isn’t appropriate - and a strong idea for a future thesis, indeed - but one of the characteristics of Icelandic society (i.e its village factor) is almost an immunity for proper excursions into how class structure shapes music-making. Things are actually changing (for the worse) concerning class division in Iceland, but theorising along those lines is not the task here. Prior’s assessment says much about the not so

¹⁶¹ Navarro, Zander. 2006. “In Search of Cultural Interpretation of Power” in *IDS Bulletin* 37(6): p. 11-22.

¹⁶² Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London, Routledge. p. 170.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Found e.g. in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) and *The Rules of Art* (1996).

¹⁶⁵ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

¹⁶⁶ Prior, Nick. 2011. “Critique and Renewal in the Sociology of Music: Bourdieu and Beyond”. *Cultural Sociology*. 5 (1): 121-138, p. 124.

clear cut realities of the thesis' subject, as will be clear in fuller detail when the interviews are mapped out and arranged. Most of the musicians detailed a pure love for music but then there's everything else; the struggle, misconceptions, getting their art across etc. "The uncomfortable truth", indeed.

Howard Becker's influential book, *Art Worlds*, is also crucial to this thesis. A classic sociological examination of art as collective action "exploring the cooperative network of suppliers, performers, dealers, critics, and consumers who—along with the artist—"produce" a work of art".¹⁶⁷ Looking at the extended social system in which art is created his "analyses move beyond the individual artist to show us the interacting network of people who work around them, providing them with materials, teaching them to turn those materials into art, distributing that art for them, and, eventually, consuming it".¹⁶⁸

Becker's writing on one, networked world with different agents serving one mean, at the end, tells us a lot about the Icelandic music world that's under scrutiny. We are dealing with, in broad terms, the Icelandic pop and rock world but within it there are sub-genres (mini-worlds) and also well-trodden bridges to other, related worlds, like the classical and the jazz worlds, respectively. One of the main characteristics of the Icelandic music scene is a rapid traffic and co-operation between such different music worlds, due to the compact nature of Icelandic society. Becker's ideas about the production of culture revolve around cultural texts as both "a point of reference for people engaged in interaction and products of interaction."¹⁶⁹ Becker writes: "Social organization¹⁷⁰ consists of the special case in which the same people act together to produce a variety of different events in a recurring way."¹⁷¹ Here, I interpret "act together" as "being together in the same world and acting by its rules and regulations" rather than people working on one piece of art. Becker continues: "Social organization (and its cognates) are not only concepts, then, but also empirical findings" and:

Whether we speak of the collective acts of a few people—a family or a friendship—or of a much larger number—a profession or a class system—we need always to ask exactly who is joining together to produce what events ... we can study social organizations of all kinds by looking for the networks responsible for producing specific events, the overlaps among

¹⁶⁷ Becker, Howard S. 1982. *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹⁶⁸ Cluley, Robert. 2012. "Art Words and Art Worlds: The Methodological Importance of Language Use in Howard S. Becker's Sociology of Art and Cultural Production" in *Cultural Sociology*. 6 (2): 201-216.

¹⁶⁹ Becker, Howard S. 1986. *Doing Things Together: Selected Papers*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, p. 19.

¹⁷⁰ In this case, the Icelandic pop/rock world.

¹⁷¹ Becker, Howard. 1974. "Art As Collective Action" in *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 39, No. 6. (Dec.), pp. 767-776, p. 775.

such cooperative networks, the way participants use conventions to coordinate their activities.¹⁷²

Ruth Finnegan's landmark study of the musical worlds in the English locality of Milton Keynes, published in 1989 in the book *The Hidden Musicians: Music-making in an English town* was an early inspiration for the thesis. Finnegan set out to map "grass-roots music-making as it is practiced by amateur musicians in a local context"¹⁷³ looking at the activities of "ordinary" musicians as she puts it in the preface. Milton Keynes was designated as a "new town" in the 60s and lies northwest of London with c.a. 200,000 inhabitants. It was Finnegan's home for many years, a fact she used to her advantage later in her career.¹⁷⁴ Finnegan's early career was typified by anthropological research in non-Western societies, but in this case she set out to document various home-brewed music scenes in Milton Keynes: "Rather late in the day I realised that what was going on around me was an equally interesting subject, linking with many of the traditional scholarly questions about the social contexts and processes of artistic activity and human relationships."¹⁷⁵ Finnegan thus scrutinised music scenes in church choirs, amateur operatic societies and the ones led by enthusiastic, generally self-taught musicians playing varied popular music styles such as jazz, rock, folk, and country. She drew from interviews, field research and her years living in the community.

This focus on the layperson rather than the educated professional proved to be a revelation of sorts regarding academic research on music. Finnegan talks about how grass-roots musical activities tend to be underestimated in scholarly fields in the preface, given the "accepted emphasis in academical and political circles on great musical masterpieces, professional music, or famed national achievements."¹⁷⁶ She then goes on to say that in her study there's room for the "bad" as well as the "good", the untrained as well as the highly accomplished, based on her conviction "that amateur practitioners are just as worth investigation as professional performers."¹⁷⁷ This stance of hers was in line with what influential musicologist Joseph Kerman called for at the beginning of the '80s regarding musicology, that the discipline should broaden its scholarly scope and take into account fields like sociology, anthropology, post-modern thought, feminist studies etc.¹⁷⁸ Or in the words of

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Finnegan, Ruth. 1989. *The Hidden Musicians...*, p. 3.

¹⁷⁴ In truth, not too dissimilar to this researcher!

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. p. xi.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. p. xii

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ This argument is laid out succinctly in Kerman's 1985 book *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (published in the UK as *Musicology*).

his contemporary, Jeremy Noble: "...nor should we, collectively, confine our attentions exclusively to geniuses."¹⁷⁹

What's brilliant about Finnegan's analysis is that this micro-historical approach of hers tells us a bigger story, as the reader can know and recognize the patterns she has laid out in other communities; be it your own, or those you have heard of or visited. She's asking "large questions in small places".¹⁸⁰ The musicians which are the subject to this thesis lend themselves well to Finnegan's research and insight. Most of them are semi-professionals or amateurs and seldom sustaining a living purely out of music. Many are self-taught, and those who did attend music school rarely worked that education into their music, at least not formally. Just the title of Finnegan's book, referring to the musicians as "hidden" is a brilliant allegory, referencing, among other, the nonchalant existence of some active "musicians" that almost don't realise that they perform music until pressed about that very fact.

Finnegan's insights are rich and varied and at the end of the book, as her investigation draws to close, she talks about "pathways in urban living", which has to do, among other things, with habitual behaviour within a defined system - not unlike how Becker and Bourdieu describe the social dynamics of art/music-making. These pathways are musical of course, and also varied, matching the heterogeneity of urban living (90% of my interviewees live in the capital, Reykjavik, which has a population of circa 120,000).¹⁸¹ These pathways, according to Finnegan "bring ... a sense of belonging and reality: travelling not in an alien environment but along familiar paths in time and space, in family continuity and habitual action." All my interviewees had shared experiences, stemming from the simple fact of being born and raised in Iceland. In addition, they are pursuing similar goals with their endeavours and are besotted with what we could call the spirit of music. Finnegan describes the pathways as "depending on regular sets of largely predictable and purposeful activities" that would be easy to overlook if the focus would be solely on networking individuals or special interest groups, and by that she sets the pathways aside from individual activity as an almost autonomous entity.¹⁸² The people who follow set pathways are:

forging and keeping open the routes which to them bring not just value and meaning but one framework for living in space and time ... I have no doubt that other towns [than Milton

¹⁷⁹ Noble, Jeremy. 1982. "Archival Research" in Holoman, Dallas Kern and Palisca, Claude V. (ed.) *Musicology in the 1980's*. New York: Da Capo Press., p. 36.

¹⁸⁰ Joyner, Charles W. 1999. *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois.

¹⁸¹ Finnegan, Ruth. *The Hidden Musicians...*, p. 324.

¹⁸² Ibid.

Keynes] too have their pathways which represent neither tight-knit “community” nor alien anonymity but one established and habitual way in which people find their meaning in urban living¹⁸³

She also notes that:

The many different forms of musical activity . . . a series of familiar and - by their followers - taken-for-granted routes through what might otherwise have been impersonal wildernesses of urban life . . . They were not all-encompassing or always clearly known to outsiders, but settings in which relationships could be forged, interests shared, and a continuity of meaning achieved in the context of urban living. These pathways did more than provide the established routines of musical practice which people could choose to follow: they also had symbolic depth. One common impression given by very many participants was that their musical pathways were of high value among the various paths within their lives. Of course, this varied among individuals and was scarcely susceptible to precise measurement. The several different pathways any individual followed were often not in direct competition so did not need to be explicitly ranked, and in any case assigning ‘importance’ is a notoriously tricky undertaking.¹⁸⁴

As with Finnegan’s point of departure, I’m not interested in the end results and the aesthetic value of the musical product, be it a recording or an experience in a live setting. Rather, I’m interested in the making of the music, the investments of the producers and how people carry themselves in this respect - that is to say, what makes them as music-makers tick and carry on with doing sometimes fruitless work.

Tia DeNora makes similar claims in her excellent book, *Music in Everyday Life*.¹⁸⁵ She casts a light on musical endeavours that are hidden, something that “people do”, often out of a habit rather than some grand plan and in that sense, the text echoes Finnegan’s efforts. But rather than examining activities, DeNora is interested in how music surrounds us in sometimes mundane everyday activities and how we construct our life - consciously and unconsciously - through it. DeNora draws from a series of ethnographic studies - an aerobics class, karaoke evenings, music therapy sessions and the use of background music in the retail sector - as well as in-depth interviews to “provide theoretically grounded accounts of music’s structuring properties in everyday experience” and to show “how music is a constitutive feature of human agency”.¹⁸⁶

DeNora states in the preface: “Within modern societies, music’s powers are – albeit strongly ‘felt’ – typically invisible and difficult to specify empirically.” In the preface, page

¹⁸³ Finnegan, Ruth. *The Hidden Musicians...*, p. 324 – 325.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ DeNora, Tia. 2000. *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁸⁶ DeNora, Tia. *Music in Everyday Life*, p. i.

x¹⁸⁷, she mentions Antoine Hennion's research as comparable to hers (which I will refer to later in this chapter).¹⁸⁸ She also details the ways in which psychologists have led the way in environmental approaches for socio-musical studies rather than the sociologists - a statement made in 2000, admittedly, and may now be somewhat dated.

One of my subjects aligns particularly well with DeNora's research, a musical group that was one big question mark when I asked them (a band of brothers and cousins from the north of Iceland) "why" they did music.¹⁸⁹ They clearly had never thought about it, the musical activities clearly a habit, as natural as taking a shower every now and then or brewing coffee in the morning. In this case, even though the music plays a big part in their lives, they seemed to be very unconscious about it, unaware, and difficult to "spotlight them as they engage in musical practices that regulate, elaborate, and substantiate themselves as social agents" as DeNora put it.¹⁹⁰

DeNora also talks about the difference between "traditional" and "modern" musical practice, an anthropological division between Non-Western and Western music-making. Without describing Icelanders as noble savages, the societal structure here has many village traits where bureaucratic regulations are dropped for more direct (i.e "fluid") ways of doing things, for better and for worse. Yes, things get *done*, but the cost is often a lack of transparency and professionalism. In the light of this, it's interesting to see how DeNora introduces the difference between "traditional" and "modern" musical practice, where the latter is "characterised by a commercial and professional mode of music production and the activity of music consumption or use depicted as a relatively private affair" while "musical use within "traditional" societies is portrayed as deeply embedded in temporal and ritual custom and in communal practice."

The implication is that musical experience is impoverished in modern cultures; this assumption often derives from a tendency to romanticise "exotic" and "folk" cultures ... that aesthetic and affective bases of action have declined in relation to bureaucratic and rational modes of ordering.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ This is the roman numeral, not a typo.

¹⁸⁸ This PhD is similar to Hennion and DeNora in regards to the in-depth interviews undertaken, but reflects Finnegan in terms of lived experiences and ethnographical approach - as experienced by the author himself as a participant and journalist in Iceland's music scene.

¹⁸⁹ The band is called Helgi og hljóðfæraleikararnir (Helgi and the instrument players) and their leader was interviewed for the thesis. The remarks come from an unpublished interview which was conducted by the author in 2003 for The Morgunblaðið daily paper.

¹⁹⁰ DeNora, Tia. *Music in Everyday Life*, p. 63.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

The Icelandic music scene is often depicted, mainly by foreign academics and journalists, as some kind of a wild country, where everyone is a poet or in a musical group and the creativity flows all around the tight-knit village. To describe it as a “traditional” music community is nonetheless off the mark and these journalistic descriptions are mostly in the realm of adapted Orientalism or Borealism, wishful thinking about a dreamt-up Iceland. Traits from both practices can be found nonetheless, and there are correlations between the compact workings of the scene here at large and the communal practice found in the “traditional” practices, detailed by DeNora.

DeNora’s theories support David Hesmondhalgh’s recent foray into the “affective turn”¹⁹² and “the role of aesthetic experience in modern life” detailed in his wide-ranging and often excellent book, *Why Music Matters*. There, he examines the role of music in our lives as well as how people forge connections with others through it. Hesmondhalgh, in his introduction, talks about “two contrasting yet complementary dimensions of musical experience in modern societies”. The first dimension has to do with how music is “intensely and emotionally linked to the private self” where music provides a basis for intimate relations with others. The second dimension has to do with music as “the basis of collective, public experiences, whether in live performance, mad dancing at a party, or simply by virtue of the fact that thousands and sometimes millions of people can come to know the same sounds and performers”¹⁹³ Hesmondhalgh’s writings fit very well with the experiences detailed by the musicians interviewed, where many of them stress the need for communication/friendship as a crucial, intricate part of their identification as musicians/artists.

Nick Crossley, a professor and sociologist at Manchester University analysed “the social network of key actors involved in the ‘inner circle’ of the early UK punk movement in London” in his article “Pretty Connected”.¹⁹⁴ The article is empirically based and utilises the methods of formal social network analysis. Crossley stresses the importance of social relations and the dynamics therein: “Whatever artistic influences and social strains are expressed in punk, it only took off as a recognisable cultural movement in virtue of the pattern of connections and interactions linking its key actors.”¹⁹⁵ He further emphasises:

¹⁹² Hesmondhalgh, David. 2013. *Why Music Matters*. Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell.

¹⁹³ Ibid. p. 1 - 2.

¹⁹⁴ Crossley, Nick. 2008. “Pretty Connected: The Social Network of the Early UK Punk Movement” in *Theory, Culture & Society*, Nov 25: 89-116.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 90.

I take my lead from the work of Martin (1995, 2006) and Becker (1982). Both argue that the key to a properly sociological understanding of music (and, in Becker's case, other art forms) lies in our viewing it as 'collective action', coordinated within a 'network'. What they mean by this, in part, is that the production and circulation of music requires interaction between multiple actors who each make a different contribution.¹⁹⁶

Crossley also builds on the concept of a music "scene"¹⁹⁷, an approach that fits well with the small Icelandic scene: "Whatever else is involved in a scene, it entails a network of actors who belong to and participate in it".¹⁹⁸ Iceland's popular music is divided into small sub-scenes, just about big enough to be considered just that.¹⁹⁹ As detailed in 1.2.6., on the notes about scenes, foreign journalists and scholars tend to talk about the "Reykjavik scene" or the "Icelandic scene", lumping together all the bands that have made some headway in the international media. It's only possible to consider these as scenes from these viewpoints: a) all the musicians more likely than not know each other or at least know of each other and b) are connected, if loosely, by this herding of the international press.²⁰⁰ Crossley explains his methodology a bit: "Reference to 'structure' does not imply determinism or erasure of the actor. Network structures are (in this instance) structures of relations and interactions between flesh and blood actors who act purposively and enjoy a capacity for self-reflection, deliberation and choice."²⁰¹ He then explains the functions of tightly woven networks thus:

...collective action and mobilization, which is what the birth of punk is about, is far more likely in the context of dense social networks ... Collective action requires coordination and thus communication and cooperation. It requires the pooling of resources and arguably also the trust between participants that allows each to take the risks that it entails. This requires that actors interact, forming a network. And it is much easier to achieve when at least some of the actors involved are already connected and thus some part of the network already exists, not least because networks between potential parties to a collective action and the meaningful relations they involve can take time to form and certainly do not form just because they are necessary for a particular action.²⁰²

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Andy Bennett has written a lot about the concept of scenes. E.g. in "Consolidating the Music Scenes Perspective" in *Poetics*, 32, 223–234 (2004) and in the book *Popular Music Scenes and Cultural Memory* (2016) co-written with Ian Rogers. See also *Music scenes: Local, translocal & virtual*, a key work which he edited with Richard A. Peterson. Published in 2004 in Nashville, TN, by Vanderbilt University Press.

¹⁹⁸ Crossley, Nick. 2008. "Pretty Connected...", p. 92.

¹⁹⁹ I sometimes wonder what the population has to be at minimum for a society to be able to sustain sub-scenes. We have our small sub-scenes here in Iceland (pop. 350.000) but our brethren in the Faroe Islands (pop. 50.000) aren't able to sustain them all (hip-hop, noise music etc.)

²⁰⁰ This plays out quite interestingly on algorithmic terms. On Spotify, for example, all Icelandic artists are put under the "related artist" tag, having nothing in common but their nationality. In effect, Iceland itself is being used as a de-facto "genre".

²⁰¹ Crossley, Nick. 2008. "Pretty Connected...", p. 91.

²⁰² Ibid., p. 94.

Crossley also mentions the role of highly motivated people: “Very early innovations took off because they were taken up within a network of similarly attuned or perhaps, rather, mutually attuning actors”.²⁰³ This is in harmony with Michael P. Farrell’s book about collaborative circles, which I will look at more closely in the next section.

Finally I want to mention Crossley’s use of “density”: “Insofar as all actors are equally affected, this tends to produce a context of trust and cooperation (social capital) wherein actors are able to achieve more than they would in a ‘backstabbing’ environment (Burt, 2005; Coleman, 1990) ... and the benefits of this ‘circle of trust’ constitute a further incentive to keep one’s place within it.”²⁰⁴ This fits very well with the small Icelandic scenes, the level of co-operation is very high - both within a scene and across different musical disciplines.

Crossley’s article provides good insights, and the U.K. punk scene is a suitable parallel model to the Icelandic music scene in terms of size. Everybody seems to know each other, and have established within it close friendships as well as musical, romantic and other relationships.

Sara Cohen’s research into the rock culture of Liverpool has many correlations with this thesis²⁰⁵. Cohen takes into account, not unlike Finnegan, the extracurricular activities and the psychological twists and turns that follow music-making (“associated conventions, rituals, norms, and beliefs at a particular point in time”).²⁰⁶ Local, amateur rock bands are used as case studies and Cohen touches on many points, found in the Reykjavik scene, i.e. by considering “the interrelationships between art and society, attempting to explore the tension between creativity and commerce through description and analysis of the processes of musical production and performance by the bands,” all “within the context of the bands’ social and cultural lifestyle”²⁰⁷:

It [the band] could also play an important cultural and social role, providing an outlet for creativity and a means by which friendships were made and maintained. Basically, most people were in bands for these social and cultural factors. They enjoyed it.²⁰⁸

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 102.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 103.

²⁰⁵ For another similar approach, see Shank, Barry. 1994. *Dissonant identities: The rock 'n' roll scene in Austin, Texas*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

²⁰⁶ Cohen, Sara. 1991. *Rock culture in Liverpool: popular music in the making*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

²⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 5.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 4.

It's also worth mentioning the work of the anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino as anthropological work on music life in "undeveloped" countries has informed the research carried out in urban areas. In his book, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*²⁰⁹, Turino analyzes various musical examples among indigenous Peruvians, rural and urban Zimbabweans, and American old-time musicians and dancers for example. Ruth Finnegan did extensive research in Fiji, Japan and Africa; on music, communication and oral literature, before she turned her eyes and ears to Milton Keynes. A precursor to *Hidden Musicians* was an article where the anthropological prism was emphasised ("Studying local musicians in an English town: an example of *modern anthropology*". Italics mine). Sara Cohen wrote an enticing essay on these approaches in 1993, launching the article thus:

Simon Frith (1982) once bemoaned the fact that students would rather sit in the library and study popular music (mainly punk) in terms of the appropriate cultural theory, than conduct ethnographic research which would treat popular music as social practice and process. Ten years later the literature on popular music is still lacking in ethnography.²¹⁰

One recent, and quite a comparable research, content-wise at least, is Joshua Green's Master's thesis on Faroese music life (now a published book). Starting the research with a focus on the heavy metal scene, Green soon widened out his angle and included the music community as a whole.²¹¹ Green's research became much more sociological than he had anticipated, and after a three month stay there and 35 interviews he concludes that "music, in a great diversity of forms, is somehow central to Faroese society."²¹² This is backed up by reference to sheer numbers - for example, the sale of as many as 10,000 albums by a Faroese singer within the country over the span of only two years, as well as the fact that as much as one fifth of the population attends music festivals held on the islands. Teitur Lassen, one of the islands' best

²⁰⁹ Published in 2008 by the University of Chicago Press.

²¹⁰ Cohen, Sara. 1993. "Ethnography and Popular Music Studies" in *Popular Music*. 12 (2): 123-138.

²¹¹ The thesis has now been published as a book, as *Music-making in the Faroes: The experience of music-making in the Faroes and making metal Faroese* (2014). An interesting difference between this thesis and Green's is that Green is Canadian, and is effectively an outsider looking in, just as I was when I wrote my Masters thesis at the University of Edinburgh on Scottish popular music. A good friend from the Faroese Islands and one of the most respected music moguls there (Jón Tyril) told me this, referring to Green's book: "Yes, it's good. But there are things that he can't possibly understand." This reminds me of my own meeting with Professor Simon Frith, when I asked him to supervise said Master's Thesis. Having told him that I wanted to understand the Scottish psyche, he answered with a knowing smile: "You'll never understand the Scottish psyche..."

²¹² Green, Joshua. 2014. *Music-making in the Faroes...*, p. 247.

known musicians, explains the situation keenly, one which is closely attuned with that of Iceland's. Here is Lassen's description, in Green's words:

...though they are a nation, are more like a small, tightly knit community which one strongly feels themselves to be a part of; a nation in "microcosm," which has all of the trappings and infrastructure of larger nations, without their comparatively massive size or population. Interestingly, he also mused that this small size and sense of nation-wide sense of a community that you can feel made living in the Faroes an especially emotional experience because everyone empathizes with and is tied up in one another's lives so wholly.²¹³

²¹³ Ibid., p. 258.

2.2 Amateurs and professionals

“amātor (latin): lover, devoted friend, devotee, enthusiastic pursuer of an objective”²¹⁴

The source and incentive for music-making informs the research question behind the thesis: “Why do you have to make music, why do you bother?” From a sociological point of view, the relationship between the individual’s need to make music and their social environments are crucial, whether on a micro-level (i.e. in a band setting) or a macro-level (i.e. operating in Reykjavik). The mode of music production can happen within the confines of leisure or amateurism: an individual making music as a hobby for his or her enjoyment and with no expectation of a financial reward, or the music-making can be “institutionalised”, happening in a professional environment where the musician makes a living out of it, either wholly or partially. The difference between the two intrigued me, especially when I found out - on closer inspection - that the dividing lines are very muddled.

By way of an anecdote: in the initial stages of this research, I posed a question about amateur music on my personal Facebook profile or “wall” (a hefty dose of my Facebook “friends” have various ties to the Icelandic pop/rock sector). Being relatively wet behind the ears at the start of the research, I innocently inquired about prominent amateur musicians. The response surprised me, as it almost immediately dissolved into a heated debate of what constituted an amateur musician and what didn’t. Some of the musicians took offence to my inquiry, as it was “demeaning” and inconsiderate. Here are some choice comments:

This foggy criteria of yours is at the same time patronising and unbelievably unclear.

Aren’t most Icelandic musicians amateurs/hobbyists?

This is difficult to define. It’s a matter of taste. When is the music bad enough to be considered “disaster pop”?²¹⁵ And if a disaster artist releases a good album. Is it disaster pop?

Professional is boring. Amateurs are more likely to do something fun.

A professional musician does sessions, is a musician for hire. An amateur musician does music purely for the enjoyment.

A professional is constricted by his audience, an amateur answers only to himself.

²¹⁴ Definition derived from The Free Dictionary (www.thefreedictionary.com, 2013 Farlex, Inc.).

²¹⁵ “Disaster pop” is an Icelandic term, referring to “bad” outsider music (or great, depending on how you look at it).

Amateur is derogatory. A loser. But its roots are in the word "amor". The one who does his thing out of pure passion rather than for monetary means.

The professional has a job doing music. The amateur does music as a hobby, and never for payment. But it's a fuzzy line.

This is a complex matter. The professional gets paid, while some have the music purely as a hobby on the side. But, the professionals can be very "amateurish" and the amateurs can be very pro.

*Look ... I can paint my apartment very professionally. But I'm not a professional painter.*²¹⁶

As is clear, the word "amateur" has a negative connotation in Iceland, thought of as derogatory - almost the same as the word "fúskari", someone who does things not up to standard. When an Icelander says: "He's an "amatör"" it means that the person is not particularly good at something, does not have the same skills as a professional, and the work has therefore less value. The meaning is not so loaded in the U.K. Amateur choirs are understood as choirs that people attend to on a regular basis, and hasn't the same implications as it does in its Icelandic translation. Interestingly, in Iceland, a hobbyist is another thing. If someone professes to be making music in spare time, as a hobby, it's looked upon kindly (I do it in my "empty hours" i.e. "tómstundir", the Icelandic word for hobby). This is indeed convoluted. The amateur - sticking to the strict meaning as someone who engages in a pursuit on an unpaid basis - can be brilliantly skilled, a master at his craft, even a "professional" in his trade.

Reading through this Facebook thread was interesting. Those involved were musicians, industry people, journalists and music fans alike. The main argument therein was an economic one, a simple definition where a professional musician makes his living out of music full-time; the amateur makes music but cannot sustain a living out of it. Some of the responses went for the skill/craft answer, i.e. a professional is a skilled musician while the amateur is lacking in this regard. Thus, what the amateur does is "bad" and has lesser value than a professional's output. Some saw the professional as almost signifier of evil - while the amateur does music for its own sake, the professional plays for money and is therefore lacking in heart. This is a gross oversimplification and could easily be inverted: a working musician loving every minute of it, and an amateur making music with unfocused, bored intent. Who are we to judge the session player, playing a Led Zeppelin solo for the 1000th

²¹⁶ The post/status is from September 24, 2013. A link here:
<https://www.facebook.com/arnareggert/posts/10151959084881340>

time at some tribute gig? He could be having the time of his life - the quality (or lack of it) in this experience is not self-evident.

More interesting pointers also came into play in this thread. A professional needs an audience, and has to play for them to some extent, while the amateur does not have to worry about any of this. The professional is also bound by particular demands and pressures - “he’s getting paid, so he’d better be good”. It was also apparent that the musicians that commented on the thread were the ones that tried to come up with measured answers, while non-musicians were very adamant that professionals were boring and amateurs more interesting and fun.

The muddled line between a profession and a hobby tells us a lot about music-making in Iceland, as so many of our musicians operate in this grey area. Almost all working musicians in Iceland are semi-professionals up to a point, and specialisation is nigh on impossible. Living in Iceland and playing free-jazz exclusively is impossible, because of the society’s size. The most prominent players are therefore “forced” to play other kinds of music, something that proves both constricting and rewarding, as will be clear in the next chapter. This makes for a necessarily open mind, prompting varied connections between different musicians and fluidity between genres /worlds - something that Icelandic musicians mostly look at positively.

Contrasting a professional with an amateur is therefore a tricky undertaking. Ruth Finnegan devotes an entire chapter to amateurs and professionals at the start of *Hidden musicians...* where she tries to dissect the terms and bring forth their differing qualities. The division is not automatic, as an absolute amateur or an absolute professional category is almost nonexistent. Instead, what is apparent is a big and quite varied flock of semi-professionals (or semi-amateurs, if you will). The variations on how people can approach musical endeavours are many and the term amateur is “surprisingly elusive”, as Finnegan puts it.²¹⁷ As she states: “Unfortunately there is no simple answer, nor are the ‘amateur’ always unambiguously separated from the ‘professional’ musicians.”²¹⁸

She describes all kinds of forms of how different musicians approach their field, and if professionalism and amateurism would be values distributed on a parameter, the musicians are all over the scale. People who were once professionals but now engage in music mostly for leisure (maybe with the occasional paid engagement), people who look at music as their

²¹⁷ Finnegan, Ruth. 1989. *The Hidden Musicians...*, p. 12.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

only real employment (with varying success in terms of monetary returns) and then people who “value it as an enjoyable but serious recreation outside work, and some treat it as a part-time occupation for the occasional fee.”²¹⁹ To try to simplify, Finnegan looks, mostly, at the ‘professional’ as someone who gets paid for playing/doing music while the ‘amateur’ does it “for love”. But the “actual cases on the ground”, in Finnegan’s words, carry with them complications that lie, among others, in interpretations: What does it mean, for instance, to be “working” in music and be “professional”, terms that stir different responses from Finnegan’s participants.²²⁰ Charles Seeger wrote, some 70 years ago:

[Distinction between] the professional and the amateur is commonly made, I believe, upon an economic basis. The professional cultivates a field as a vocation, a means of livelihood; the amateur, as an avocation, a hobby. Perhaps it is equally common to view the professional as a disciplined and the amateur as a comparatively undisciplined worker. The distinction is a useful one but does not always stand upon either count to even upon both. We all know persons who do not earn a cent from their activity in a field of study but are well disciplined either by training or experience, or both. There are also persons without any discipline to speak of who make a living at a study. And some of the best disciplined obviously pursue scholarly work more with the air of a hobby than do some comparatively untrained workers.²²¹

Finnegan notes that these terms, professional and amateur, carry with them loaded meaning; a political/emotional one, referring to abilities and status rather than simply economic meanings, connoting high-standard against “mere amateur playing”. As Finnegan puts it: “Thus the emotional claim – or accusation – of being either ‘amateur’ or ‘professional’ can become a political statement rather than an indicator of economic status.”²²²

Finnegan’s foray into the music-making world of Milton Keynes has so many parallels to my research that I have to resist the temptation of quoting her book in full. So, I will leave Finnegan, for now, with this statement: “It would be more accurate to say that it [her research] focusses mainly on the amateur rather than professional end of an overlapping and complex spectrum, taking account of the variations along this continuum.” That’s exactly the departure point of this one thesis.

The Canadian sociologist Robert A. Stebbins coined the term “serious leisure” or The Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP). Leisure under SLP is a “contextually framed activity engaged in during free time, which people want to do and, using their abilities and resources,

²¹⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

²²⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

²²¹ Seeger, Charles. 1949. “Professionalism and Amateurism in the Study of Folk Music” in *The Journal of American Folklore* 62, no. 244: 107-13, p. 107.

²²² Finnegan, Ruth. *The Hidden Musicians...*, p. 16.

actually do in either a satisfying or a fulfilling way (or both).”²²³ Stebbins has written about all sorts of activities, including music. Serious leisure is “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that is highly substantial, interesting, and fulfilling and where, in the typical case, participants find a career in acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience.”²²⁴ Stebbins writes about hobbyists, volunteers, dabblers and amateurs. He defines amateurs thus:

Amateurs are found in art, science, sport, and entertainment, where they are inevitably linked, one way or another, with professional counterparts who coalesce, along with the public whom the two groups share, into a three-way system of relations and relationships. By contrast, hobbyists lack the professional alter ego of amateurs, although they sometimes have commercial equivalents and often have small publics who take an interest in what they do. The professionals are identified and defined in (economic rather than sociological) terms that relate well to amateurs and hobbyists, namely, as workers who are dependent on the income from an activity that other people pursue with little or no remuneration as leisure.²²⁵

Stebbins begins his article on amateur classical musicians with this lovely comment: “The amateur classical musician, on whom the following pages focus, are charmed by their leisure and by their friends and acquaintances.”²²⁶ With that, he jumps headlong into the romanticism associated with the amateur, that he does thing “purely” but he also emphasises a theme I will be exploring, that music-making often has more to do with our need of friendship and human connection, than the need to create art. Stebbins looks at the nature of the links that bind musicians in their shared activities, coming to the conclusion in this particular article that amateurs can afford to move more freely between groups and practice settings than the professional, who often needs to be in a less than ideal situation, simply because he’s obligated as a jobbing musician. Amateurs also seek out friends with similar social stature and dabble together in extracurricular activities alongside the music, gossiping, bantering and unconsciously growing and nurturing a friendship that goes far beyond the stated purpose of making music together.

Stebbins also talks about how serious leisure and serious pursuit are goal oriented, call for devotion over time rather than the occasional dabble. “What is a ‘serious pursuit’?,”

²²³ Stebbins, Robert A. “The Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP) – Basic Concepts”. At <http://www.seriousleisure.net/concepts.html>.

²²⁴ Stebbins, Robert A. 1992. *Amateurs, professionals and serious leisure*. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, p. 3.

²²⁵ Stebbins, Robert A. 2007. *Serious leisure: A perspective for our time*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, p. 6 - 8.

²²⁶ Stebbins, Robert A. 1976. “Music among friends: The social networks of amateur musicians” in *International Review of Sociology* (Series II), 12 (April - August), pp. 52-73, p. 52.

asks Stebbins: “The concept comprises two forms: serious leisure and devotee work. The second refers to a strong, positive attachment to a form of self-enhancing work, where the senses of achievement and fulfilment are high and the core activity (set of tasks) is endowed with such intense appeal that the line between this work and leisure is virtually erased.”²²⁷ Stebbins is describing the problem that musicians often face, when the line between work and enjoyment is fuzzy, a reality often exploited by those who hire them for engagements. But Stebbin’s assessments also describe the reality of my subject quite clearly, where the unexplainable “inner need” to make music directs them and often calls for all kinds of sacrifices.

Michael P. Farrell, sociologist, writes about the history of powerful and influential collaborative circles in the book *Collaborative circles: Friendship dynamics & creative work* which has quite some parallels to Nick Crossley’s research on the first wave of U.K. punk (and builds on, among others, Becker’s work). Taking to task influential groups like the Fugitive poets in Nashville and the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, he demonstrates how the unusual interactions in these collaborative circles drew out the creativity in each member:

Many artists, writers, and other creative people do their best work when collaborating within a circle of likeminded friends. Experimenting together and challenging one another, they develop the courage to rebel against the established traditions in their field. Out of their discussions they develop a new, shared vision that guides their work even when they work alone.²²⁸

Farrell also presents vivid narrative accounts of the roles played by the members of each circle. He considers how working in such circles sustains the motivation of each member to do creative work; how collaborative circles shape the individual styles of the persons within them; how leadership roles and interpersonal relationships change as circles develop; and why some circles flourish while others flounder.²²⁹ The Bad Taste label in Iceland, founded in the 80s (The Sugarcubes et al) was one such circle, and a highly influential one considering the small underground rock scene in Iceland at the time.

The characteristic of the circles are universal, or at least adhere to similar models in the Western world. They usually consist of people that have similar social background and the members take on - more often than not - different roles within these groups. As time

²²⁷ Stebbins, Robert A. 2013. “From dabbler to serious amateur musician and beyond: Clarifying a crucial step” in *International Journal of Community Music*. 6 (2): 141-152. p. 142-143.

²²⁸ Farrell, Michael P. 2001. *Collaborative circles: Friendship dynamics & creative work*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²²⁹ Ibid.

progresses, members observe the ideals of the group almost blindly. Friendships are forged, and groups and coalitions within the group are formed. The group dynamic results in members believing that their vision should be presented to the world.²³⁰ Finally, the groups dissolve and individual members go their own way.²³¹ Groups can also develop what Farrell coins a “magnet place”: “... a setting where novices perceive there to be a network that will help them become experts in a discipline.”²³²

French sociologist Antoine Hennion has written about the role of the amateur in the world of music, a report titled “Music industry and music lovers, beyond Benjamin. The return of the amateur.”²³³ Hennion presents an “ethnographic research on music lovers today,” the amateurs in hand referred to as “music lovers” using the literal meaning of amateur to nice effect. “Special attention is paid to the objects, gestures, and contacts brought into play in listening or playing,” he argues, not excluding himself to instrument playing but general consumption and activities surrounding the music. He sums it up like this:

The intention of my ethnographic survey of amateurs is to return to the meaning of their love of music, firstly through their own accounts, but also, and mainly, through the ethnological analysis of their practices ... To observe and analyse amateurs is to return to the meaning of the practice of music, to restore the balance of history, to centre on the works, on one hand, and social attitudes, on the other. As amateurs are well able to tell you, there are many inventive and varied ways of playing, listening to and loving music, and a wide variety of ways and means of doing so — concerts, media, groups, individual playing, etc. — which go together and redefine each other.²³⁴

Hennion uses an amalgam of ANT (Actor-Network Theory), pragmatism and phenomenology, a devoutly anti-Bourdiesian method. He cites statistical reports carried out by the French state that show a rise in artistic activities in leisure time. Hennion attacks the assumed passiveness of amateurs as mere robotic consumers rather than engaging, thoughtful and imaginative “users” of the medium. “There are no passive amateurs”, Hennion says. “It is we who have too few categories to understand the variety and ingenuity of the love of music. This is “doing”, not merely a question of taste. The amateur, using all the means at his

²³⁰ Bad Taste’s slogan was: “World domination or death”.

²³¹ Farrell, Michael P. 2001. *Collaborative circles...*, p. 13.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 72. There is a concert venue in Reykjavik, specialising in experimental music, which is precisely that - drawing in raw talent which becomes the building blocks for a scene.

²³³ This report - published by the European Music Office in September 1996 - was on “Music in Europe”, and its second part was entitled “Music, Culture and Society in Europe”, containing six critical essays and five case studies. Hennion’s contribution was one of the case studies.

²³⁴ Hennion, Antoine. 1999. “Music industry and music lovers, beyond Benjamin. The return of the amateur”, p. 3.

disposal to re-compose his music for himself, pays little attention to academic divisions and orthodoxy of taste. The return of the amateur, in the sense in which we speak of the return of someone driven away, must permit a new look at music, period.”²³⁵

Hennion admits that his assumptions about the realities of the amateur did not hold up when he “hit the ground”, echoing Finnegan’s findings:

...as the characteristics of the amateur gradually became clearer, he acquired an importance which I had not suspected. He quickly threw off the mould I had cast around him: a priori the amateur is presented as a contrast with the professional, by practising freely, in every sense of the word. He plays “for pleasure” or “for himself”, during his leisure time and “the amateur is not the original mythical figure of a love of music, led astray by our universe of specialists. Far from being the slightly ridiculous provincial cousin who insists on blowing his tuba, he is every bit as modern as the musical environment dominated by professionals, techniques and market forces.”²³⁶

Hennion addresses listening habits and how people manoeuvre themselves around music. Taking in the good *and* the bad, his dissection calls to mind Ruth Finnegan’s proclamation that people’s musical engagements run the emotional gamut: “joyfully, fearfully, attentively, reflectively, proudly; in a spirit of exaltation or energy or irritation; in sorrowful, celebratory or nostalgic mood; with boredom (that too!), with dance, with tranquillity”.²³⁷ Describing a concert attendance e.g., Hennion says: “Enter the concert: you are not in a state of grace, you are mistrustful, sceptical, calculating, you compare and judge according to other versions you know, you cruelly lie in wait for the weaknesses of the interpretation.”²³⁸

Hennion emphasises the social activities and nuances that follow music consumption, that are too often left out when the significance of the “music life” is researched: “We focus on listening itself as a practice, with its moments, its tools, its arrangements and emotional effects, its highs and lows ... musical properties which focusing exclusively on the music “itself” tend to mask or leave in the shadows, due to the little, insignificant, daily events which everyone thinks exclusive to him, though they could not be more common.”

The amateurs Hennion interviews come from a variety of music worlds: classical, jazz and rock. When he summarises the findings he coins the term “ceremonies of pleasure”: “There is a third aspect which emerges, both more local and personal, and more closely linked to the practical use we make of the various musical facilities available: it is music as a ceremony of pleasure, a series of little habits and ways of doing things in real life, each to his

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

²³⁶ Ibid. Note: The English translation (not my own) of Hennion’s report is wobbly at times.

²³⁷ Finnegan, Ruth. 1989. *The Hidden Musicians...*, p. 156.

²³⁸ Hennion, Antoine. 1999. “Music industry and music lovers...”, p. 4.

own taste, a group of routines, arrangements and surprises.” At the end, he tries to challenge the taste hierarchies put forth by his fellow countryman Bourdieu, coming to the conclusion that: “socially determined “taste” seems to be so, in fact, far less directly by belonging to a social class than indirectly through all the differential means of access to music which I do or don’t have, and with which I create my little musical domain.”²³⁹

In his ethnographic work on open mic nights in Edinburgh, Adam Behr uncovers a “junction between professional and amateur practice.”²⁴⁰ Behr approaches his research from the theoretical context of different musical “worlds”. Like a “Battle of the Bands” competition, the nights act like a practice ground for aspiring musicians as they “face towards the commercial popular world, as exhibited in the use of microphones and the privileging of individual performers.” Early on Behr contends: “The relationship between local music “scenes” and the wider industries is complex and multi-faceted. The “proto-markets” of local activity are early sites of audience and performer interaction ... serving as training grounds for the wider arenas, and not just for musicians.”²⁴¹

Behr also notes about the open mic nights that “It is woven into the fabric of their operating conditions that they provide a physical and social space for “dabblers” to meet “devotees”, amateurs to try their hand at professionalism, with some of its attendant trappings, even if they do not always achieve financially professional status.”²⁴² Here he addresses the flux between amateurs and professionals and the division between those two can be muddled in Iceland. There’s a frequent co-operation between these two “factions”, made possible by the “village” factor that characterises Icelandic society.

Nick Prior details in his article “The Rise of the New Amateurs: Popular Music, Digital Technology and the Fate of Cultural Production”²⁴³ how a change in technology, making it more user friendly, gave way to a more frequent participation from musicians who would perhaps not have dared otherwise. He marks the shift in the year 1983, when the first synthesisers and music computers became both more widely available and simpler to use. “New technologies do not create music worlds from scratch. But they have facilitated or

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁴⁰ Behr, Adam. 2012. “The real “crossroads” of live music – the conventions of performance at open mic nights in Edinburgh” in *Social Semiotics*. Vol. 22, Iss. 5, p. 561.

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 562.

²⁴² Ibid., p. 564 - 565.

²⁴³ Prior, Nick. 2010. “The Rise of the New Amateurs: Popular Music, Digital Technology and the Fate of Cultural Production” in Hall, John R., Grindstaff, Laura and Lo, Ming-cheng Miriam (eds.). *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*. New York: Routledge, pp. 398-407.

afforded new possibilities,” Prior states in the conclusion.²⁴⁴ Prior also mentions the advent of the compact disc in relation to this and that in 1983, the TCP/IP protocol was introduced, which the internet is based on. The dissemination possibilities bound in all of this - a chance to manipulate, restore, mangle up, copy, sample and distribute far and wide - set up a whole new ball game. The distant giant that was the record company and its complex workings were challenged like never before, and gave way for easier ground to manage, record and release your own music. In the case of the Icelandic music market this was keenly felt from 2000 onwards, when amateurs stepped out in force with their home-burned CD-Rs. Iceland’s small market and easy gateways further encouraged this. “The digital is many things,” says Prior: “A rhetoric, a claim, a set of technologies. But it is also a shorthand, a formation, a condition - one that opens up creative agency, unhooks it from place, and sends it into flows of global information.”²⁴⁵ Boundaries are now blurred, between producers and consumers but also *professionals and amateurs* - “the contemporary model is much more diffuse and multiplicitous ... In its wake has emerged a decentralised system of post-industrial cells individually insignificant, but collectively powerful in providing alternatives to the mainstream commercial industry.”²⁴⁶

Prior then addresses the amateur question: “Another ideal is being serviced by digital technologies, that of the self sufficient amateur producer. Huge swathes of the population are making, filtering, editing, and distributing digital culture, creating micro-organisational worlds with systematic, macrological effects.”²⁴⁷ Prior, like Hennion, challenges the stereotype of the passive amateur/consumer. He talks about shifts in what constitutes amateurs and professionals: “They [the amateurs] are threatening the very boundaries around professional and amateur, expert and non-expert, so central to modern social configurations” and “the welling up of small-scale, specialised, and participatory projects is, in other words, meeting top-heavy delivery of content head on, potentially chipping at the surety bestowed upon modern credentialism and the status of the modern professional.”²⁴⁸ Prior also goes back to the positive connotations related to the amateur, something that was lost in the 20th century but is possibly gaining some foot again: “In historical terms, this valorisation is actually a

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 405.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 406.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 400.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 401.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

return. Just over a century ago, the amateur was lauded as the epitome of virtue, respectability, and grace.”²⁴⁹

In the last two decades or so, the status and position of the amateur have been redeemed and a new, less aristocratic, breed of amateur has emerged. These are techno-logically literate, seriously engaged, and committed practitioners working to professional standards but often without the infrastructural support or conventional credentials of the professional. Disproportionately, though not exclusively, drawn from the educated middle classes, they deploy their cultural capital in projects and self-organized cultural milieux (Bourdieu 1990; Leadbeater and Miller 2004; Battani 1999). They are unlikely to earn much of their total income from their activities, but their sense of identity is firmly attached to the pursuit of serious leisure (Stebbins 2007).”²⁵⁰

Prior also bemoans the lack of research – like many others – into amateur endeavours pointing out that Finnegan is the only one and “herself notes how musicological analysis has gravitated to the best or highest forms of music-making.”²⁵¹

Even the amateurs - here, the quirky bedroom troubadours and outsider musicians that formed the initial motivation for this thesis - work in a kind of network, if not at the same level of intensity as indie rock groups. In their instance, their networking is more in conjunction with institutions like media or record outlets, where they try to push their music, if sometimes in a shy and introverted manner. They try to “connect” in this way and sometimes they are even pushed by a relative or a friend, encouraging them to publicise their work. So, there is a resource - a hidden network almost - where these types of musicians can go to and use to their advantage, even if they are barely conscious of its existence. This leads to the last literature piece, an interesting article by Andrew Killick which addresses a form of amateur music-making that has “hitherto been neglected by ethnomusicologists and other students of music”, as he states in his abstract.²⁵² “Solitary music-making for personal satisfaction is a widespread form of musical behaviour ... by analogy with “participation” (taking part), this activity might be termed “holicipation”.”

Killick talks about these practices as a means and an end to themselves and taking himself as an example of this: “the playing may not be very distinguished, but it is mine and, if it pleases me, it serves its purpose.”²⁵³ These musicians don’t want company necessarily, or

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid., p. 402.

²⁵² Killick, Andrew. 2006. “Holicipation: Prolegomenon to an Ethnography of Solitary Music-Making” in *Ethnomusicology Forum*. 15 (2): 273-299.

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 275.

perhaps at all, a solitariness being the purpose of the playing: “In a life that (like most adult lives) is largely occupied with meeting the demands of others, playing music alone appeals to me as a particularly satisfying way of marking out a space and a time of my own.”²⁵⁴ Killick implies that the music is rather a means to disconnect, rather than to connect, the latter being the main thrust of the literature so far: friendship, a need to connect, sharing the music and so forth. Some of my interviewees complain about lack of time in regard to music-making, but always in relation to their ambitions with the music in more or less communal setting (band practices, marketing the music etc.). None of them complained about not having time to play music as an escape purely for themselves, to doodle with it or dabble alone, mainly because that usage is beyond my scope. In addition, no one took it upon themselves to mention this in the interviews I conducted.

Killick goes systematically through the musicological literature and laments the lack of such studies, as all research, ethnologists, sociologists, musicologists, old and new, emphasise *communal* music-making. Killick takes an example:

Thus, Bonnie Wade, in the introduction to a series of textbooks on world musics, puts the holicipant at one end of a spectrum of music-makers: Music makers are individuals and groups, adults and children, female and male, amateurs and professionals. *They are people who make music only for themselves, such as shower singers or secretly-sing-along-with-the-radio types* [italics mine], and they are performers, people who make music purposefully for others. (Wade 2004, 1) But, after this initial mention, “people who make music only for themselves” receive no further discussion anywhere in the book.²⁵⁵

Killick deepens this:

Moreover, the examples chosen trivialise holicipation by detaching it from (indeed, contrasting it with) the levels of skill and sense of “purpose” identified with performing for others. Both examples – “shower singers” and “secretly-sing-along-with-the-radio types” - are restricted to singing, presumably by untrained voices, but holicipants also include trained singers and (I suspect, to a greater extent) instrumentalists, who take their music-making seriously and try to do it well.²⁵⁶

My case studies all seek communal connections, to various degrees - even the shy ones seek out communication, be it through CD releases or the occasional live concert. A contact with the social, even if meagre, is crucial. In his conclusion, Killick tries to theoretically frame the holicipation thing as, in a way, a communal one nonetheless. He argues, referring to an

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 277.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 279.

imaginary example given by Christopher Small (who coined the “musicking” concept²⁵⁷) about a herdsman which plays the flute alone for him and the animals: “even solitude is social or, in my terms, even holicipation is a form of participation. No one, after all, ever really has music all to themselves.”²⁵⁸

The very existence of holicipating musicians is dependent on social and cultural conditions, and, in important ways, their solitary music-making is a social and even a sociable practice ... Carhart speaks of holicipation as “getting to know the music - and its composer - from the inside” (2000, 52, emphasis added), and, as Frith suggests, even solitary music-making can be about “enjoying being together in [imagined] groups” (2003, 100). Even the wish to be alone is a social disposition.²⁵⁹

Killick is effectively talking about the primal need to make something, but without the necessary need to show it to people. Interestingly, he comes to the conclusion that even in solitary circumstances, we are not alone. This thesis on the other hand is interested in what drives the musicians on, what makes them produce the music and the *social setting* has been an integral part of my excursions. Killick’s model - and it has some ties with Prior’s writing about the new, often bedroom bound, amateurs – is perhaps especially fitting in regards to the beginnings of young musicians, when they doodle alone at their parents’ house (there are prime examples of that in the interviews). However, most of my subjects have graduated from that position and are, more or less, preoccupied with their surroundings or at the least, acutely aware of how they play a significant part in their music life.

²⁵⁷ A verb that encompasses all musical activity - from composing to performing, to listening to a Walkman or singing in the shower.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 290.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

3. The Music-Makers

In this chapter, I will introduce the 30 musicians that partook in the thesis. I will also introduce six parameters, relating to the realities of professionalism and amateurism in music, intended as a helpful tool in regards to the status each and every one of them enjoys.

3.1 Six amateur/professional parameters

What follows are six parameters, envisioned by the author, mapping out amateur/pro approaches to music-making. At an early stage in the thesis, the plan was to station each and every musician on the parameters, attributing them with values like “skilled”, “amateur”, “formal education” etc. and possibly place them accordingly on a scale (very skilled, quite skilled etc.).

I discarded this idea as the thesis started to shape up, mainly because it would have made it unnecessarily complex. However, some parameters will be of use to the reader, helping in positioning the interviewees to an extent. Here are the parameters, followed by an explanation. The qualities on the left pertain to amateurism while the qualities on the right pertain to professionalism:

Non-formal education <--> Formal education
Hobby <--> Profession
Unconscious <--> Conscious
Unskilled <--> Skilled
Ideological <--> Business
Non-Career <--> Career

Non-formal education/Formal education

This one began as Uneducated/Educated but that’s too definitive and misses out on self-taught musicians and musicians who have learned to play and sing through various ways, not always conventional. By simply playing an instrument or opening up one’s mouth to sing shows that the individual knows *something*, how little or how bad or how inefficient it turns out to be. In its amended state, “non-formal education” applies to these self-taught musicians and the “formal education” to the ones that have an education/degree. A combination of both traits is the reality in most of the case studies presented here, although most of the musicians are slanted towards the “non-formal education” end.

Hobby/Profession

This applies to what people seek with their music-making - as a means of financial income or a nourishment for the soul (and one does not exclude the other, which makes this parameter problematic). Some people work 9 - 5 jobs and tend to the music purely as a hobby, not concerned with financial benefits. For some, music *is* the 9-5 job. Most of the case studies in this thesis operate in an area somewhere between these opposites. A fictional example: A professional bassoonist tends to his hobby rock band at night with his friends. The rock band becomes famous and turns into a full time job. In old age, the bassoonist lives of the rock band royalties and plays “professional” instrument in his spare time. There are examples of wonderfully gifted musicians that could easily live of their music if they wanted to but simply don’t aspire to. Hobby is also a convoluted thing, the energy and mind-set of hobbyists vary and there’s a difference between hobbyists and dabblers for instance.²⁶⁰

Unconscious/Conscious

The concern here is how aware people are of the workings, needs and the “magic” of the pop/rock world and how consciously they seek to operate within its confines. The 60 year old, “salt of the earth” plumber who finally realises his dream of releasing a CD with his songs, helped out by his cousin who owns a cheap CD-R machine, is rarely aiming for world domination. On the other hand, aspiring teenage bands often model themselves very strictly after what is hot and what is not in the modern pop world (e.g. The Beatles at the very beginning), at one time amateurs longing for the professional life.²⁶¹

The unconscious approach, where the musicians are unaware of any unwritten rules, often gives way to highly original music (sometimes dubbed “outsider” music, as I have explained earlier).²⁶² The conscious approach makes for some, even rich, knowledge of the complexities of the music industry, and almost all of my interviewees approach that end of the parameter’s spectrum.

²⁶⁰ See e.g. Stebbins and Behr, detailed in the literature chapter.

²⁶¹ See e.g. Behr (2014) and Frith, Brennan, Cloonan, Webster (2013).

²⁶² See Thoroddsen (2016).

Unskilled/Skilled

This applies to musical skills, i.e. technical abilities, proficiency and such. This parameter is problematic in many ways. You can be well-schooled and professional but not that highly skilled, while the amateur can be a virtuoso. Furthermore, it's well established that technical skills do not necessarily produce good music.

Ideological/Business

This relates to the core aim of the music-making, like a harder edged version of the Hobby/Profession parameter. A prime example of ideological musicians would be socio-political band like Crass, using the music primarily as an ideological vehicle. "Pure business" musicians could be The Eagles, or a similar world trotting retro-band. The parameter has to do with mental states and ethical means: the "pure" artist vs. the "greedy" business savvy person. At the same time, it's difficult to come up with absolutes, who is to say that The Eagles (or some member therein) isn't enjoying themselves on stage and it's easy to imagine a long-suffering political punk band, going through the motions. Another view, is that the ideological musician is not compromised by economic reality while the person composing ad-music is catering to the needs of the product. Again, it's difficult to judge the mind-set of the ad-music composer. They could be doing it in a detached manner, or potentially could be having the time of their life.

Non-Career/Career

This is also related to the Hobby/Profession parameter but has to do with visibility and how people position themselves as musicians. You can have a career as a rock star, symphony violinist and even as a hobby musician, attending to the music as a serious leisure. The non-career musician has not made a name for themselves - willingly or unwillingly - in the public sphere. They dabble in it at home, sing lullabies for their children or at family gatherings. This is a very musical person, but exempt from any wishes to make it a profession or get an adulation because of it. Traditional folk pubs/clubs in the U.K. are a fine example, where highly skilled singers attend habitually to meet friends, doing something that gives them joy. Finally I include two musicians, where different qualities have been ascribed, as an explanatory tool. These are extreme examples, intended for the sake of clarification, and they were not interviewed for the thesis:

- Donald Fagen (of Steely Dan fame) would be classified thus: Non-formal education, Profession, Conscious, Skilled, Business, Career.²⁶³
- Sigríður Níels (an Icelandic amateur/outsider artist) corresponds: Non-formal education, Hobby, Unconscious, Unskilled, Ideological, Career.²⁶⁴

As already described and as can be seen in these examples, putting the interviewees on some kind of an amateur/pro scale would have proved a logistical nightmare and too far removed from the intention of the thesis. The organic nature of each individual's case simply doesn't allow for it, bluntly put. I would have e.g. encountered problems with interpretation (how do you accurately measure "skills", "consciousness" etc.) and the interviewees were not asked to fill out a form, relating to this, so information about each parameter is incomplete and differs from case to case. Nonetheless, in the following section, I try to let the information about the musicians reflect the parameters as closely as possible. Scaling all of them, the group is circa in these confines:

- Non-formal education <--> Formal education: Most of them near to the non-formal end.
- Hobby <--> Profession: Most of them somewhere in-between, semi-professionals if you like.
- Unconscious <--> Conscious: Most of them are quite "conscious".
- Unskilled <--> Skilled: Most of them, somewhere in-between.
- Ideological <--> Business: Most of them, nearer to the ideological end.
- Non-Career <--> Career: Most of them somewhere in-between.

²⁶³ Fagen describes himself as a self-taught pianist, even if he spent a few semesters at the Berklee College of Music.

²⁶⁴ Her "career" was entirely accidental and not something she sought actively.

3.2 The interviewees, accompanied by short biographies

1. Benedikt Hermann Hermannsson (b. 1980)

Benedikt Hermann Hermannsson started out as a guitar player in his teens, playing with various bands that focused mostly on the twee-pop genre. He had a formal music education and is the current head of the art department at Seyðisfjörður school, a scenic, art friendly village in the East fjords (where he teaches music, among other things). Hermannsson, under the guise of Benni Hemm Hemm, tapped into the fertile scene that followed the success of Sigur Ros and mum in the early 00s, releasing albums that were distributed in Europe, the U.S. and Japan and following them up with international tours. He lived in Scotland for a while, working with people like Dan Willson (Withered hand) and Alisdair Roberts. His last solo album was released in 2016, and Hermannsson attends to music quite regularly; be it through teaching, radio programming, concerts or record releases.

2. Berglind Ágústsdóttir (b. 1975)

Berglind Ágústsdóttir was a scenester in the early 90s indie/underground boom that followed Bad Taste's first wave of underground bands in the late 80s. Ágústsdóttir often recited poetry at concerts which led to a CD release in 1997, where she was accompanied by luminaries from that scene. Following that, she dived headlong into the art world, getting a degree from the Iceland Academy of the Arts in 2003 and eventually moving to Berlin where she currently resides (with intermittent residence in Seyðisfjörður). Ágústsdóttir mixes art and music, working with Icelanders and people from various countries. She hosts events, curates shows and works on music in the deep underground, either alone or in collaborations, self-releasing cassettes, etc. Writing about her album, *I am your girl*, she states: "I'm very much interested in the feeling of the first take and most of them [the songs] were made at home. I wanna create experimental pop music that is honest and comes from my heart."²⁶⁵

3. Björn Valur Gíslason (b. 1959)

Gíslason has been a fisherman since 1975. He was a freezer trawler captain in the '90s – '00s and served as a parliament member (Alþingi) for the Left-Green movement in the years 2009

²⁶⁵ See on: <http://iamyourgirl2013.tumblr.com/>

to 2013. When helming the trawler, Gíslason took care in involving the crew in music which resulted in a few CD releases in '00s, under the band name No Skin – No Bone (including songs by Gíslason, which he wrote on his guitar). The band/crew got to be quite known in Iceland, performing on special occasions such as the annual Fisherman's Day.

4. Davíð Ólafsson (b. 1971)

Ólafsson is a guitar player in the punk band Saktmóðigur, formed by rural southerners around Christmas time, 1990, when he was 19. The band has been running ever since alongside the member's professional careers, with sporadic releases and gigs. The members all have "proper" jobs; academics, lawyers, IT gurus etc. Ólafsson is a historian, working at the University of Iceland. None of them are educated musicians, the band as raw as it gets, and no concerted efforts have ever been made to sustain the band as a source for income.

5. Einar Scheving (b. 1973)

Scheving is a renowned jazz drummer in Iceland – a "boy wonder" since the age of fifteen – and has made his mark on many Icelandic recordings. He's formally trained and spent ten years in the U.S, seeking further education but returned in 2006, accompanied by his first solo album. Scheving makes his living off music by juggling various aspects of it; i.e. teaching, doing session work on albums (playing many styles) and gigging. His albums have been fantastic, where he works with the cream of the crop in Icelandic modern jazz. In many ways, Scheving is a good example of a working musician in Iceland, where he combines two primal needs - a financial one and a creative one. His stature has enabled him to make a 100% living from making music, but he doesn't calculate his solo albums into that equation. They are done out of creative need, and have been quite difficult to squeeze into his all-encompassing work schedule.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁶ As told to this author. In 2016, Scheving applied for a professorship in Switzerland, but wasn't successful. On his Facebook page, he jokingly said that he would go back to "eking out a living in the land of low wages. Have drums, will travel :)." His friends of course patted him electronically on the back but celebrated that the inevitable "brain drain" didn't occur, one of them being the chair of the Icelandic Musicians' Union.

6. Eyþór Gunnarsson (b. 1961)

Gunnarsson first became known in Iceland as a member of Mezzoforte, a fusion band famous for being the first Icelandic band to enter the U.K charts (see section 1.2.3 for further information). Gunnarsson had some music education, but had difficulty in reading music, and so learned to play by ear instead. Gunnarsson is held in high esteem in the Icelandic music world, renowned for his musicality and fluency as a pianist. He's worked as a producer and a session player with a wide variety of musicians, playing in bands ranging from pure pop to avant-garde improv. He manages to sustain a livelihood from music, earning his keep from various projects and fulfilling his artistic needs through more experimental undertakings.

7. Guðmundur Ingi Markússon (b. 1969)

Markússon is one part of the Reptilicus duo, Iceland's best known industrial group, active since the late '80s and influenced by bands like Einstuerzende Neubauten, Throbbing Gristle, Skinny Puppy, Can and Front 242's early work. In the early '90s, the band had a foothold in the international industrial rock scene, mainly through their contacts with World Serpent Distribution, a label that had also released work by Current 93, Coil, and Nurse with Wound. Markússon works a full time job today in academia, but attends to Reptilicus with his co-member (Jóhann Eiríksson) when needed as demand for the band - either for concerts or for recorded output - still prevails.

8. Guðmundur Andri Thorsson (b. 1957)

Thorsson is one of Iceland's best known authors and is currently a parliament member for the Social Democratic Alliance. In 1983, he and some friends formed the band Spaðar (Spades) where he plays the guitar and sings. Almost all of the members work in academia, in the field of literature or in some prestigious sphere of Icelandic society, earning them the reputation as "Iceland's smartest band". They started to practice regularly, releasing cassettes, deliberately operating under the radar and annually hosting a big concert/ball. The music is quite a mix, incorporating klezmer and balkan music, blues, country, folk, rock and whatever else the band fancied. The band is run like a bridge-club, i.e. the members meet quite regularly to play and be together, a leisure that's taken seriously. Amateurs in the old, literal sense of the word (i.e. "devoted friend", "devotee", "enthusiastic pursuer of an objective") the hobby mentality is to

the fore. Even so, the band still releases CDs regularly, earns radio play, and hosts the occasional gig.

9. Halldór Warén (b. 1971)

Warén runs a small label in Egilsstaðir, the largest town in East Iceland (pop. 2,300). The label (Warén Music) is a cottage industry, with a handful of releases of quite eclectic nature (Siberian folk music, children music, Beatlesque soul-pop). “The smallest record shop in the world” boasts the labels website. Warén is a Jack of all trades, producing and playing music, getting caught up in various local activities while living in a house, outside of Egilsstaðir, with his wife, three children and some pets. He’s now running a hostel/café with his wife, the music always just *one* of the things that he does, even if it’s deeply ingrained.

10. Hallur Már (b. 1978)

Hallur Már was the bass player in Leaves, an alternative rock band who made quite a successful, if brief, foray into the world of international stardom. The band toured the U.K. and the U.S. with the likes of Supergrass and The Coral in the post-Radiohead times of the early ‘00s, absorbing a complete crash-course in the workings of the international music industry. Hallur is a completely self-taught musician and the band came into being as a result of old friendships. Foreign interest in the band was swift, almost intrusive, as the band was but a few days old when the members found themselves waiting for a phone call from the Dreamworks label. After leaving the band, Hallur has been working as a journalist, and rarely touches the bass today.

11. Haukur Viðar Alfreðsson (b. 1980)

Alfreðsson is the singer and guitar player in the melodic punk rock outfit Morðingjarnir or The Murderers. The band was quite successful domestically for a while, filling a “rock” gap in the Icelandic music scene between the years 2005 – 2010., releasing well-received, sturdy albums with clever lyrics, describing the trials and tribulations of the everyperson. Alfreðsson works for an advertising agency today while the band is in a “bear-like hibernation”, as he told this author.

12. Heiða Árnadóttir (b. 1971)

Árnadóttir is an educated singer, completing a Master's degree from the Royal Conservatory in The Hague in 2005. Her projects have been varied, ranging from church music, to lied and modern composition. Árnadóttir teaches music as well, and has also done the odd job outside of music, to support herself. Her biggest passion - according to her biography and as told to this author - is singing with her group, the quartet Mógil, which composes and play experimental music, working with Icelandic folk music, modern jazz and elements of improvisation. In Mógil's case, the expressive, artistic need overrides any monetary concerns, according to Árnadóttir.

13. Heiða Eiríksdóttir (b. 1971)

Eiríksdóttir has been a part of the Reykjavík scene since the early '90s, working with various groups, as a solo artist and has also done some extracurricular musical activities (writing, radio programming, music competition jury boards). In the mid-'90s, she was the singer in Unun, for a while touted as the next big thing from Iceland, counting among its members Þór Eldon of The Sugarcubes fame and Dr. Gunni, the street-scholar introduced in the literature section. Eiríksdóttir is highly ideological (looking at the Ideological <--> Business parameter) and continues to release solo works unabated, if with limited distribution on formats like cassettes and limited edition 7" vinyl.

14. Helgi Þórrsson (b. 1969)

Þórrsson is a farmer and an artist, living just outside of Akureyri, the capital of the north (population just under 20,000). Þórrsson has led his band, Helgi og hljóðfærarleikararnir (Helgi and the Instrument players), made up of brothers and cousins, since the late '80s. Playing some kind of punk infused folk music, the band gigs every once in a while and self-releases CDs, enjoying a small cult following, both in their home surroundings but also in the capital area. Everything about the band is slightly out of sync and beautifully eccentric; Þórrsson's musical agenda is almost completely at the amateur end of all the parameters. An interesting polymath, Þórrsson writes novels and short stories and regularly publishes scholarly articles on agriculture, specialising in forestry. He grows renowned strawberries at his farm, is a tailor (designing clothes from plastic materials), writes musicals (overseeing every part of the

production) and co-organises a medieval festival. Þórsson is quite the character, a unique man, and visiting his farm is like entering a fairy-tale, co-authored by Tove Jansson (*The Moomins*) and Astrid Lindgren (*Pippi Longstocking*).

15. Hjalti Jón Sverrisson (b. 1987)

Sverrisson first came to prominence through his post rock band Miri, releasing an album in 2011 called *Okkar* (“Ours”), where he played the bass. Miri hailed from the east but enjoyed some exposure in the capital, embraced by likeminded souls. Sverrisson is a theologian and works in the church, overseeing youth programmes, but still attends to the music, if sporadically. In 2015, he soft launched a solo album through various streaming platforms.

16. Höskuldur Ólafsson (b. 1977)

Ólafsson was a part of the rap group Quarashi, which broke through internationally in the early ‘00s. The band’s Columbia Records album *Jinx* shifted 500,000 units worldwide, featuring an energetic hybrid of rock and hip-hop. Before that, Ólafsson had been a part of the Reykjavik underground rock scene in the 90s. Ólafsson quit the group in 2002, enrolled in university, and finished his undergraduate degree in Icelandic and comparative literature. He did a stint as a journalist, earned a postgraduate degree in philosophy, and currently works as a copywriter. Ólafsson raps, sings and plays a few instruments and although he has declared himself retired from music, he’s put the latter two talents to some use in recent years through various, low key projects.

17. Jófríður Ákadóttir (b. 1994)

Ákadóttir is one of Iceland’s brightest musical hopes at the moment, releasing solo stuff as JFDR and also working with some bands. Born into a musical family - both parents are active musicians, her father a well-regarded “outer limits” experimental musician - she went through a traditional music education but started to write her own music and perform it at a very young age. Ákadóttir has already released quite a few albums internationally and is in the midst of forging a sustainable career as a performing and recording artist. The music is on the underground/independent side of things, a dreamlike electronica drawing from classical and

folk elements, in some ways following the path laid out by Björk but with enough originality to make powerful tastemakers prick up their ears.

18. Jónas Sig. (b. 1974)

Jónas Sig. (Jónas Sigurðsson) has had quite an interesting career. Originally from the south, he went to college in the east where he performed with garage bands but played paid gigs at the country-dances as well (a drummer at the time). In 1995, a joke duet *Sólstrandagæjarnir* (“The Beach Guys”) became an overnight sensation in Iceland, and the band ran with it for the next year. Disorientated, Sigurðsson abruptly quit music in 1996 and deliberately kept out of the public eye, doing dead end jobs for a few years. He then learned computer programming that landed him a job with Microsoft in Denmark and even greener pastures beckoned in the U.S. Unable to shrug off his musical need, he released a solo album for the Icelandic market in 2006, while still living in Denmark. The album was met with much critical acclaim, effectively jump-starting his music career a second time. Now wiser and more content, Sigurðsson has since built a respectable music career in his home country, enjoying quite some success and has been able to build a bridge between an indie audience and the mainstream crowd. Interestingly, Sigurðsson is quite adamant in keeping his music-making and day job as a computer programmer in two separate slots, going as far one time to split them bi-weekly.

19. Lára Rúnarsdóttir (b. 1982)

Rúnarsdóttir grew up in a musical household - her father is a well-known musician - and she enjoyed some training in this field as a child. Her first solo album was released in 2003 and she’s made five albums in all, the last one released in 2015. A lot of stylistic shifts can be detected through her discography, the first two albums carried elements of the singer songwriter, dark-hued at times while her third album went for sprightly pop sounds resulting in quite some domestic radio play. Some export efforts were tried in the aftermath, such as her fourth album, which was somewhat darker and edgier. Her latest album was her first in the Icelandic language, dreamlike and poetry clad where she’s “bringing it all back home”. Lára has worked on her music in project based blocks, one year it’s all music, the next year she’s doing something else. She’s an educated yoga teacher, worked as a project manager in implementing gender budgeting for the city of Reykjavik, and has also been prominent in the

KÍTÓN group, an association that works in the interest of women in Icelandic music. She now owns the Cacao temple Andagift (“Inspiration”) in the heart of Reykjavík that offers ceremonies, deep relaxation and sound healing.

20. Myrra Rós (b. 1983)

Myrra Rós was a late bloomer, teaching herself the guitar in her twenties, originally to put some music to her poetry. She’s managed to build a career since then, and if not making a 100% livelihood from the music, she has released two albums in the 2010s and gigs regularly around Europe. Myrra Rós lives in a scenic village on the south coast with her husband (also a musician) where she has a little cottage industry, hand-carving unique items and artwork from wood, mostly wings and feather. The music was a source for livelihood for a time, but the wood-carving has mostly replaced it now.

21. Ólafur Örn Josephsson (b. 1977)

Josephsson is a luminary from the Icelandic underground scene and started to release records under the Stafrænn Hákon moniker (“Digital Hákon”²⁶⁷) in the ‘00s. His releases have been quite rapid and he/the band are an omnipresent entity in the Reykjavik underground scene. Josephsson works a full-time job as a web manager.

22. Páll Ragnar Pálsson (b. 1977)

Pálsson is a guitar player with Maus, Iceland’s foremost indie rock band of the early ‘90s, and a classical composer. Guitars to the fore, Maus drew influences from Icelandic post-punk and ‘80s gothic tinged pop a la The Cure. Dynamic yet melodic, with riveting live performances to match, the band dominated the ‘90s in that aspect. The band went on a hiatus in 2004, leading Pálsson to study music, finishing a PhD in composition from the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre in Tallinn in 2014 (receiving individual lessons from several renowned composers, among them Arvo Pärt). Pálsson’s career as a classical composer is now underway, along with teaching obligations for the Iceland University of the Arts, where he is

²⁶⁷ Hákon is a man’s name in Iceland.

an adjunct. Pálsson still rocks out with Maus every now and then, the band enjoying a somewhat legendary status.

23. Róbert Örn Hjálmtýsson (b. 1977)

Hjálmtýsson is from Breiðholt, Reykjavík's biggest suburb, where working class flats mix with affluent detached houses. A childhood friend of the aforementioned Josephsson *and* Eiður Smári Guðjohnsen, Iceland's best known football player²⁶⁸, the latter actually funding Hjálmtýsson's second album under the band name Ég ("I", referencing that it is in reality a one man band). Hjálmtýsson released a few titles under that moniker, playing most of the instruments himself and directing his band in concerts like a Scandinavian Captain Beefheart. The records are uncanny, psych-influenced rock with unusual twists and turns and Ég are critically adored, Hjálmtýsson often anointed with the genius tag. As an inevitable result, acceptance by the listening majority has eluded him and radio airplay and even festival appearances have been hard to come by, often to the chagrin of the great man.²⁶⁹ In spring, 2018, Hjálmtýsson officially disbanded Ég.

24. Salka Sól (b. 1988)

Salka Sól is one of Iceland's brightest pop stars at the moment. She first came to prominence as the front-woman in Icelandic reggae band AmabAdamA but has also made her name as a radio host, TV presenter, voiceover actress and dramatic actress (for example, playing a role in the breakout Icelandic murder mystery *Trapped*). Music and acting came natural to her as a teen but it wasn't until after her Actor Musicianship studies in London that she embraced a career in these disciplines.

²⁶⁸ The consensus now is that Guðjohnsen is Iceland's greatest ever player. He and Hjálmtýsson played together as teenagers in youth clubs. "He was OK," remarked Hjálmtýsson to this author. "I was a bit better if anything. But I was too artistic in my playing."

²⁶⁹ Hjálmtýsson's music and view on life is so unique that the fan boy in me sought him out as the last interviewee, even if just as a symbolic addition to the interview batch. Our meeting in his apartment at the far east side of Reykjavik, overlooking "The Red Lake" was like a scene from a novel. I let the interview run long deliberately and we chatted away quite informally, ensuring that only about 5% of the discussion was usable for this thesis.

25. Sóley Stefánsdóttir (b. 1986)

Stefánsdóttir underwent a formal music education but was gradually drawn to the magic of the underground music scene in Iceland, beginning with her time as a keyboard player in indie darlings Seabear. In 2010, she released her first solo EP, *Theater Island*, where she made good use of her training, producing a wonderfully atmospheric album referencing Erik Satie and classical minimalism while structuring a weirdly captivating sonic world. The album had quite an impact internationally, enabling Sóley (her artistic name) to tour the world and release further albums in similar mould, putting Sóley in the same league as Agnes Obel, Susanne Sundfør, Ane Brun and similar Scandi-songstresses. Not unlike JFDR, Sóley ploughs some established furrows, like the one pursued by twee-pop countrymen múm at the start of the 2000s, while putting her own indelible stamp on it. Even if she has a relatively stable career internationally, she has taken on the odd job in between tours and recording projects, like teaching the piano, or lecturing at The Icelandic University of the Arts.

26. Steinunn Sigrúðardóttir Jónsdóttir (b. 1999)

Jónsdóttir is one half of the asdfhg. duo, the name being the most common random input on a keyboard (the “h” and “g” intentionally switched though). Making lo-fi electronica in her bedroom, Jónsdóttir put an album up on the Bandcamp website²⁷⁰ and then forgot about it. She was then selected for the Kraumur Award shortlist (see section 1.2.5), a challenging nomination for the jury as there was no contact info on her mysterious Bandcamp and it took quite the detective work to track her down. The nomination and the attention that followed it gave Steinunn and her musical partner (Orri Ólafsson) a boost, and they became quite active in the aftermath - proof that industry accolades and competitions *can* have a positive effect on music-making and creation. Jónsdóttir is still in college and does a lot of other creative work - like writing and designing - and her music is not necessarily seen as a vocation.

²⁷⁰ A popular, artist-friendly streaming site where artists can upload songs and albums. In doing so, they are afforded control as to how they sell it, setting their own prices, offering fans the option to pay more (which they do 50% of the time), as well as selling physical merchandise. See www.bandcamp.com/about.

27. Styrmir Sigurðsson (b. 1967)

Sigurðsson had a formal music education, and as a teenager he joined one of Iceland's leading new romantic bands, Pax Vobis (featuring the renowned bass player Skúli Sverrisson), as a keyboardist. Sigurðsson did not see music as his sole focus, so he studied film-making and works as a director. Sigurðsson crops up regularly with music projects, it being a thing of pure passion, and has released cool, cocktail lounge music with the Belafonte duet and noir-pop with jazzy undercurrents through the band Geislar ("Rays", featuring some of Iceland's best jazz players) to name but a few examples. Recently, he got a degree in jazz piano playing from the F.Í.H. school of music, and has been working occasionally as a piano teacher.

28. Svavar Pétur Eysteinnsson (b. 1977)

Eysteinnsson cut his teeth in the '90s underground scene, leading various indie rock bands. In the '00s he started an alter-ego, Prins Póló (referencing a highly popular Polish chocolate wafer bar in Iceland, Prince Polo, which is as "Icelandic" as fermented shark or the "Lýsi" cod liver oil). Prins Póló, while aesthetically and musically rooted in the avant-garde and the underground, has made interesting forays into the mainstream. His songs – quirky everyday observations set to simple catchy tunes – are played on the radio and more or less accepted by the everyday listener (and not dissimilar to Jónas Sig. or Mugison). Eysteinnsson has done various jobs to support himself, mostly working as a graphic designer and doing book layouts. But in 2014, he and his wife did a 180° turn (or at least 110°) and moved to the east fjords to live as farmers. Not at all dispensing with their artistic/cultural leanings, the couple run quite a colourful operation at the farm, under the Havarí name (informal Icelandic for "shenanigans"). They run a guesthouse, a coffeehouse and a concert venue and also produce vegan sausages ("bulsur") and organic vegetable chips ("sveitasnakk", the name is an ode to an old Icelandic indie rock-anthem).

29. Þorgeir Tryggvason (b. 1968)

Tryggvason comes from Húsavík, a town in the north - at one time famed as the rock capital of Iceland. Tryggvason has done music all his life alongside other things but never thought of it as a means for an income (Tryggvason works as a copywriter). He's also a respected theatre and literature critic and is also a playwright, director and actor, often working with amateur

theatre groups. He and his friends from Húsavík formed the band Ljótu hálfvitarnir (a rough translation: “Darned fools”) in 2006, a jovial, humorous and quite eclectic folk-band – and very “Icelandic”. The band has released a few albums that were quite the success and their energetic live gigs are always well attended. “I’ve accepted that I will never be very good in one field but I am possibly of some use in a few of them,” Tryggvason said in an interview once.²⁷¹

30. Örn Elías “Mugison” Guðmundsson (b. 1976)

Mugison came out of nowhere in 2002, fresh from his studies in London. His debut album, *Lonely Mountain*, was critically acclaimed but success came in droves after his second, *Mugimama! Is this monkeymusic?* Despite the sometimes surreal music on offer, Mugison managed to unite disparate group of audiences, not dissimilar to Beck’s feat in the ‘90s.²⁷² In the aftermath, Mugison became everyone’s favourite, be it grandmothers or hard-core hipsters. His undeniable charm (truly a God’s gift to the journalists) and musical integrity made him one of Iceland’s best loved musicians in the ‘00s where he gracefully strutted a line between an Icelandic rural romanticism and international hipper-than-thou aura. Mugison lives in the West fjords, a self-proclaimed dabbler on his instruments (mainly guitar), but surrounds himself with like-minded, proficient musicians. His projects have been quite varied, from the absolute avant-garde to straight up, paid jobs, something that he hasn’t shied away from in order to sustain himself. He has also shown quite the savvy and know-how when it comes to marketing his music, using unusual tactics and clever ploys, playing the media to his advantage while never sacrificing his integrity as an artist.

²⁷¹ Bergþórsdóttir, Kolbrún. 2011. “Eins og illa skrifuð Rocky-mynd” in *Morgunblaðið*, April 10. Transl.: “Like a badly scripted Rocky movie”.

²⁷² American musician Beck released challenging and strange records through a major label in the aftermath of the grunge revolution in the mid 1990s. *Mellow Gold* and *Odelay* managed to reach the ears and pockets of mainstream audiences, despite both albums’ innate weirdness.

4. Themes

I had already expected certain themes to emerge from the interviews. As they increased in numbers, some of these themes were asserted, while others fizzled out. I thought that some would be more prevalent than they were, whilst others were repeated surprisingly often, thus birthing a theme I hadn't foreseen. The procedure was like this: I started the theme mapping by writing down some expected themes and then herded the interviewee's comments and thoughts into the appropriate theme compartment, gradually inserting everything of value from the interviews.

I decided to present as many direct comments as possible, letting the musicians speak and tell the "story" in their own words – hence the biographies presented beforehand rather than being tucked away as an appendix. I will interpret proceedings along the way, connecting the findings and themes to the literature, as fully and appropriately as possible. I was partially inspired in this by Tony Parker's book, *Red Hill: A Mining Community*²⁷³, where Parker spoke to the inhabitants of a colliery community in the North East of England, following the miners' strike of 1984 - 85. Parker never situates himself into the transcription, the book a very pure "oral history", and quite effective for that very reason. "Here are men and women with all their quirks and oddities, their emotions and prejudices," says on back of the book. Ruth Finnegan, on the other hand, tells a lot of Milton Keynes's story in her own words, rarely using direct comments. I'm aiming for a kind of a hybrid of these two methods.

At this point, I will introduce five organising themes that this thesis reflects: "The Icelandic angle", "Music-making", "Sociality", "Amateurs and professionals" and "Livelihood". Within each, there are a number of sub-themes.

²⁷³ Published in 1986 by Heinemann, London.

4.1 The Icelandic angle

This theme is divided into four sub-themes. The first one, “Social realities”, handles the dynamics and workings of Icelandic society, in relation to the musicians and how it pertains to their work/experiences and infuses their social dynamics. The second one, “Image”, contains reflections from the musicians on how Iceland is conceived by the foreign media and how that impacts their work and outlook. The third one, “Communication”, tackles how easy communication routes and informality can shape the careers and working methods of the musicians. Finally, the fourth, “The city vs. the rural areas”, briefly compares urban and rural experiences.

4.1.1 Social realities

“It’s easy to get exposure in the media. You know everybody and the access to musicians and gear is good - easy. I like living here because I get so much space, both mentally and ... I don’t know, you can follow your own path somehow. You are not constricted. I’m also wondering about geographical space and just imagining living in New York or Tokyo in a cramped apartment and not warming to it I have to admit. Here, it’s just more free and relaxing in a way.”

-Sóley. A “more or less” professional musician on the indie-experimental side of things.

Most of the interviewees were quite aware of how the social environment shapes their work, how the small population, i.e. the “village” factor colours their activities and chances:

People are forced to wear many hats here in Iceland. It’s nigh on impossible to delve into any one thing. When I tell foreign friends that I’m working for an ad-agency and playing in a popular band and writing theatre reviews they gasp. And I tend to answer: “Well, it’s a small nation. People just have to cover what needs to be done.” I’d like to think that this situation almost underpins a certain kind of amateurism in everything and not necessarily in a bad light. This also makes for an openness, versatility and a certain degree of cunningness. You just have to solve things as well as you can, given the situation (Þorgeir Tryggvason, amateur musician).

The optimism in Tryggvason declaration is echoed by quite a few people, and both of the purely professional musicians agree, but also point out the negatives:

The positives are that if you are fairly open minded, musically, you get to play styles that you maybe would never have a chance to encounter in a bigger society. The negatives are that there’s no time to specialise. The market is simply too small. You can’t make a living off playing only avant-garde jazz (Einar Scheving, professional musician, jazz background).

Well, the obvious fact about the Icelandic music industry is the small size and the nearness of everything. That’s the main characteristic. The sections, if we can call them that, are wide open and a lot of traffic between them. A lot of musicians have played a variety of styles that they wouldn’t be able to play in bigger societies. In

New York, you could play avant-garde jazz all the time and you wouldn't have to play anything else. It's unnecessary in a way. We can look at this as an advantage but the disadvantage is the difficulty in specialisation, something that you can't really do in Iceland if you want to live of the music (Eyþór Gunnarsson, professional musician with various ensembles, roots in jazz and pop).

Both of these musicians have an actual experience of playing everything from “outer limits” experimental music to children's music. The musical micro-reality of Reykjavik can also be applied to related activities, like record collecting. The few secondhand shops of yesteryear had limited supply and those eager to expand their record collections had to make do with what was on offer, often buying records that they wouldn't have bought in a bigger society. In doing so, by accident of the market - to paraphrase Gunnarsson - they actually expanded their tastes, improvising because of limited choice. This has all changed because of online record shops and such, but this was very much the reality some thirty years ago.²⁷⁴

Depending on who you talked to, both positive and negative perspectives were advanced. Put in a position where they know they are talking to an academic, and having had an explanation of what the thesis is aimed at, people tended to look at both sides of the coin. Musicians who had some experience of the international music business, and had seen its good sides and bad, gave measured answers, acknowledging what's possible outside of Iceland and at the same time, aware of the stifling surroundings that are inevitable in small societies:

Niche-genres in Iceland are, naturally, very small. You can have hundreds or thousands of people in bigger countries making up sub-genres but an industrial scene in Iceland? Just a handful of people and everyone knows each other. I experienced the smallness here as a hindrance. In London, being an industrial artist, you could release a record and sell a few hundred copies and sustain a career in some way. In Iceland, this is not possible (Guðmundur Ingi Markússon, part time musician with Icelandic industrial legends Reptilicus).

It's easier to be a part of an alternative culture in bigger cities, because the numbers are simply bigger. You can live and operate within that culture, and not notice the mainstream culture somehow. In Iceland, it's not possible. All the different cultures are so small, that they can't but rub off each other. And you can't escape from the mainstream culture, no matter how hard you try. (Heiða Eiríksdóttir, musician, artist and underground scenester).

Other musicians mentioned this twofold reality. I never sensed any deep bitterness because of this though; interviewees' ruminations were lightly wistful “what if” thoughts, underscored with realism:

²⁷⁴ This is built on my own experience as a record collector and the many discussions I've had with like-minded souls through the decades.

Well, what we face here in Iceland is the population. Which can be a blessing and a curse. If we would have been operating in California we could launch a reunion tour every now and then, 3rd on the bill or whatever, but still make a living. In Iceland, even though we had a good run, we could never put up a tour like that. The numbers are against us (Haukur Viðar Alfreðsson, guitarist with melodic punkrock group Morðingjarnir (The Murderers). Works for an advertising agency).

Lára Rúnarsdóttir had an experience with concerted efforts to export her music, but goes for a more restrained observation:

The tight knit community here is good, it's easy to plug your music. Just a phone call away really. And then you have an appreciative audience that turn regularly up at your gigs, and that's not a given. I'm very grateful for that. At the same time, the size of Iceland's market, makes playing abroad an enticing aspect and it's very understandable that Icelandic musicians try their hand at that, just to try and widen their fan-base (Lára Rúnarsdóttir, part-time musician).

All of these comments reflect how Iceland can both liberate and stifle creativity.²⁷⁵ The word “suffocating” was uttered more than once. The positive take was more frequent, but a perspective of being “locked in the village” also came up - little variety in music, always the same people, lack of fresh ideas etc. Some referred to the smallness and the “village” factor as an aid to the creative process, the closeness evoking creativity, as laid out by Prior. You simply don't want to sound like the band in the next room. The youngest musician interviewed for the thesis lays it out bluntly, but like the others, quite aware of what she's going through in the present:

Well, just the mainstream here is small. So doing experimental music, that's an even smaller scene. Which is annoying. But, you get to know the people in the scene really well and that's good. After getting recognition, I sensed that it was always the same people everywhere in the industry (Steinunn Sigbrúðardóttir Jónsdóttir, young musician from the Reykjavik underground/DIY scene).

Some musicians went deeper in their thoughts about the Icelandic music community, like this comment from Sigurðsson, still contrasting Iceland with other, larger societies, continuing the theme of thinking about Iceland in relation to how it's done elsewhere:

There's a certain energy to the Icelandic music scene at large. All the musicians are aware of how the scene is looked upon by foreign eyes and ears. It's not the nature, it's an attitude, a strong DIY sense. The close-knit reality also carries with it that you have some connections to the people who have gotten far with their music. So it's not that unreal that you could succeed as well.” (Styrmir Sigurðsson, filmmaker and musician)

²⁷⁵ Thoroddsen, Arnar Eggert. 2016. “Music-making in Iceland: The creativity question...”. Paper presented at the IASPM UK & Ireland Biennial Conference – University of Sussex and the British and Irish Modern Music Institute, Brighton, UK, May 9.

Sigurðsson echoes Prior (attitude rather than nature) but he also makes a point (“close-knit reality”) that has been closely scrutinised by Viðar Halldórsson, Iceland’s foremost sport-sociologist. Halldórsson has focused on how we can understand achievement and excellence in Icelandic sports, by looking at its social context.²⁷⁶ His book, *Sport in Iceland: How small nations achieve international success* (Routledge), tries to explain in sociological terms how Iceland’s soccer, basketball and handball teams have all qualified for major international tournaments in recent years, which is an unprecedented achievement. Halldórsson argues that team sport success is culturally produced and that in order to understand collective achievement we have to consider the socio-cultural context, just like this thesis is trying to do. Icelandic cultural capital plays a major role in its sporting success according to Halldórsson, and referring back to Sigurðsson’s comment on the close-knit connection, Halldórsson talks about the importance of close-knit ties. How a) everyone knows each other or at least, about each other (one-degree of separation) and b) that having role models in the extended family, e.g. a nephew playing for the national football team, has an empowering effect as the idols are close by and therefore “it’s not that unreal that you could succeed as well,” as Sigurðsson states.²⁷⁷ Iceland, as a whole, is a lot like Milton Keynes, the setting for Finnegan’s analysis: “People are bound by numerous ties, know each other, and have some consciousness of personal involvement in the locality of which they feel part.”²⁷⁸

As Sigurðsson remarked, Icelandic musicians - at least those who are even slightly attuned to the possibility of taking their music abroad - are well aware of what the foreign music press writes about the Icelandic music scene. There’s even a tangible pressure from these outside forces:

Icelanders are hung up on the idea of making it big abroad while here in Berlin, people are more relaxed. Content on playing for select audience or making a living out of semi-regular gigging. In Iceland, it’s often this pressure to either be big or nothing. But it’s hopefully changing and we can create art and music for the sake of creating (Berglind Ágústsdóttir, experimental musician, working in Berlin).

Mugison describes how this manifests itself in the Iceland Airwaves festival, one of the big institutional drivers in Icelandic music culture of late. He goes half and half in his assessment:

²⁷⁶ See Halldórsson, Viðar. 2014. *The Social Context Of Achievement And Excellence In Sports: Towards 'a sociology of excellence'*. Saarbrücken: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing.

²⁷⁷ Halldórsson, Viðar. 2017. *Sport in Iceland: How small nations achieve international success*. London: Routledge and Halldórsson, Viðar. 2012. *No man is his own creation: The social context of excellence in sports*. Reykjavík: University of Iceland, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences (PhD Dissertation).

²⁷⁸ Finnegan, Ruth. 1989. *The Hidden Musicians...*, p. 299.

The Iceland Airwaves festival is a great thing for the Icelandic music community, the biggest carrot by far for the artists, spurring them on to be active and do something. They know that foreign agents will be in the venue and they put on their “good clothes”, ready to take no prisoners. It’s like a vitamin for the scene. But ... there’s another angle to this, and not as pretty. It’s not enough to get up and go just once a year, I’d like to see more activity throughout the year, more hours put in.” (Mugison (Örn Elías Guðmundsson), full time musician, more or less. Avant leanings but highly popular among Icelanders).

Naturally, Iceland isn’t a prison of sorts, and in this day and age, those with the knowhow, luck, the right connections and a burning desire *can* walk out of the village and make the grade internationally. And, unlike some decades ago, more and more Icelandic artists have their main source of income from foreign markets, be it through touring, airtime on the radio or album sales (and streaming). But of course, it’s a bit more complex than that:

Things have changed. There’s an overflow of talent at the moment and difficult to stand out from the crowd. Making music, marketing it ... this has in a way become easier. And this leads to the scene becoming a bit more competitive. It’s more of a business. The Icelandic Music Export office is a great thing but at the same time, an innocence has been lost somehow, maybe inevitably. Also, because of easier technology and access, there’s ton of Icelandic stuff on Bandcamp for instance that no one knows about, unless they’re following the scene closely (Ólafur Örn Josephsson, part time musician, leads his own indie-rock band).

I met Jófríður Ákadóttir (see 3.2) at a café in Reykjavik. A bright spirit with quite the work ethic, I could nonetheless sense how weathered this 22 year old had become, after having been sucked into *the business* at a relatively tender age. Getting to grips for the first time with the lawyer-talk and the seedier sides of the music business, just hearing her explain her situation brought grey clouds over the table. All of those things, so far removed from the magic of music-making:

I feel like it has changed in the last years (the assumed tightness and friendly aura of the Icelandic music scene, at least the one that Jófríður operates in). When I was starting out, 14 years old, it was very laid-back and supportive but I sense a more competitive edge now, especially among the bands that are trying their hand at success abroad. People are also simply realising that they can go abroad with their music now, and it’s easier than it was decades ago. Is it influencing the actual music-making?²⁷⁹ Hmmm ... possibly, but I think it’s difficult to assess (Jófríður Ákadóttir, JFDR, a young full time musician, working successfully on various projects on the underground/indie side of things).

Myrra Rós agrees on the non-possibility of sustaining a living out of your music in Iceland but acknowledges that right now, being from Iceland is clearly an asset once you are out of the island:

²⁷⁹ To put it another way, are people composing music to please foreign ears, accentuating a particular version of “Icelandicness” and complying with what they think is expected from them?

It's hard to sustain a living, full-time, operating in Iceland. It's too small. But on foreign shores, you get "in front" with so many things, simply because you are from Iceland. People look at you and the music through rose tinted glasses. Sometimes, it's like they've decided that your music is inspired by elves, lava and glaciers (laughs) (Myrra Rós, a part time underground/indie musician).

I want to conclude this section on this quite pointed, if light hearted, observation by Sigurðsson:

I once went to a gig in Reykjavik, which was quite avant-garde but there were a lot of people in attendance. I thought, "Wow, this can be done after all!" When the gig was over, nobody left. It was all friends and family. This describes the realities of Icelandic music life quite accurately I think (Styrmir Sigurðsson, filmmaker and musician).

4.1.2 Image

“You got the usual questions about the inspiration from nature and that was absolutely non-existent in our case. And if we had some shenanigans in the after-party we got the “hey, watch out for the crazy Vikings” comments.”

-Hallur Már, a one-time bass player with 00s breakout alternative rock band Leaves.

The image bestowed upon the Icelandic musician (and Icelandic music) has been a source of mortification, laughs and even some monetary opportunities over the years. The sometimes mythical qualities and “Borealistic” fascination (discussed by Cannady in her article, referenced earlier in the thesis) can be a source of conflict, an internal tug-o-war for the musicians where their identity and creative means can be jumbled up and thrown off course. Some play up merrily to the myth and take the “Let’s give them what they want” stance. It is a savvy business move. After all, if a glacier on the cover helps to sell more copies, why not? Some denounce it, simply tired of being asked to ride a horse in the hillside, having been holed up in a Reykjavik cellar most of their teenage years, listening to The Velvet Underground rather than to the sounds of waterfalls and geysers. Yes, *urban* kids are here in droves with a specifically urban outlook on life, where nature and romanticism is a long way away. Even bands like Sigur Ros haven’t resisted the urge to poke some fun at this situation, their tour announcements sometimes written with tongues firmly in cheek, promising “epic, transcendental” nights and so on. This is a gesture that possibly goes over the head of some fans, but is easily decoded by those in the know. Berglind Ágústsdóttir, solo experimental musician, describes it thus:

I was interviewed once and got all the usual elf-questions and I just said no to the interview. I didn’t want to do it. Then I got an email from the editor, and he said that he would do the interview himself and then it was proper. When I objected, they changed course. But the first interview was ridiculous. Some Icelanders I know, in the music business, simply say that they are from Denmark to free themselves from answering tiring questions about Björk and lava-fields (Berglind Ágústsdóttir, experimental musician, working in Berlin).

This comment from Ágústsdóttir sums up the situation quite well and most Icelanders talking to the foreign press have faced questions like these, of differing “qualities” and with different amount of clichés. The situation, interestingly, is not getting any better, many music journalists go head-on for these types of interviews/answers, possibly under orders from their editors.²⁸⁰ Some musicians, as detailed at the beginning of this section, use the situation to their advantage:

²⁸⁰ A situation I know myself from my experience as a music journalist.

We (Mógil, the band) emphasise the fact that we are from Iceland because that fact gets things moving. People love that stuff! We've been playing in The Netherlands and Belgium and they adore it. So, it's good to be an Icelandic musician in this day and age (Heiða Árnadóttir, classically trained singer, music teacher and semi-professional musician with an experimental outfit).

Ákadóttir recognises a trend towards some kind of an alignment with all of this, although she didn't want to make any judgment about music-making in that aspect (see her comment in 4.1.1):

You get the sense that Iceland is a brand now, and people are putting all kinds of stuff into that box and consciously producing things that they think will fit into a preconceived frame. You know, foreigners are arriving here in search of something authentic and the tourist boom is deluding all of that. In a way at least (Jófríður Ákadóttir, JFDR, a young full time musician, working successfully on various projects on the underground/indie side of things).

She also comments about the musical situation and the heavy shadows cast by Iceland's musical giants:

For us Icelandic girls, Björk hangs over heavily (laughs). It's enough for us to open our mouths it seems and then we are affiliated with her. I can understand the comparison in my case, a bit, but it's often just lazy...

As can be seen, most of my interviewees didn't address the question about playing up to a myth or clichés specifically. It was not in the main focus and few found the urge to talk about it. There's a recent Icelandic Master's thesis (2016) on this topic, called (my translation) "To break through: Do Icelandic bands benefit from their origin?" Written from an economic perspective, it looks at the Icelandic music "brand" and how it's portrayed in the U.K. media.²⁸¹ The results were that Björk and Sigur Rós are a highly dominant force in all coverage but the researcher also found that in the case of new, and highly popular artists (Of Monsters and Men, in this case), the writing tends to change somewhat, as it's harder to infuse the subject with the usual Björk references.²⁸²

²⁸¹ For a similar take, see e.g. McCrone, David, Morris, Angela and Kiely, Richard. 1999. *Scotland - the brand: The making of Scottish heritage*. Edinburgh: Polygon.

²⁸² Gunnarsson, Kristján. 2016. "Að slá í gegn: Græða íslenskar hljómsveitir á því að segjast vera frá Íslandi?" Unpublished Master's thesis. The Faculty of Economics and Business Administration at the University of Iceland. Transl.: "To break through: Do Icelandic bands benefit from their origin?"

4.1.3 Communication

The smallness of Iceland helps. You can literally walk off the street, into a venue, and set up a gig the week after. There aren't 300 bands waiting in line. The bureaucratic slowness is almost non-existent.

-Davíð Ólafsson, historian and part time musician.

How hard is it to set up a gig, borrow gear, get your music played and get your face into the media in Iceland? The most common answer to this question is “easy”, and this is the key-word in this section. Most praised the short-cuts to most things, the informality and general lack of bureaucratic stiffness:

Everybody knows everyone. Well, at least you know someone who knows someone. In order to get things done, the communication channels are short and easy to cross (Þorgeir Tryggvason, amateur musician).

It's ridiculously easy really. Even when we can't be bothered to do the promotional stuff, we are all over the media (Guðmundur Andri, parliament member, author and an amateur musician).

Musicians talked positively about institutions like the national radio and the music export office, describing them as “embracing”, the staff literally one phone call away.²⁸³

There's so much happening here, a lot of festivals. It's easy to travel abroad, and easy to get meetings with the music export office. A positive atmosphere somehow (Heiða Árnadóttir, classically trained singer, music teacher and semi-professional musician with an experimental outfit).

The media, especially the national radio, were praised extensively and it's fair to say that the National Radio is very adamant in nurturing Icelandic music-making, giving it attention through live sessions, quota on music time (50% of all music played is Icelandic) and so forth.

Two musicians especially noted how positive this stance is for music-making in general:

It's very easy to get into the National Radio and they do make the effort to introduce Icelandic music. You get quick answers, and the music-programmers want to play your music, talk to you and get you to do a session. It's something that's not a given. There's no fuzz, it's literally one phone call and you are there the next day. This gives you hope and the fact that you can actually get on the radio eggs you on in creating (Björn Valur Gíslason, captain on a freezer trawler, politician and amateur musician).

My wife, which is from Estonia, was surprised how easy it is to get your music played on the radio, if you are an amateur here in Iceland. This is without a doubt a stimulus for music-making in Iceland (Páll Ragnar Pálsson, composer and rock guitarist).

²⁸³ It's been noted by foreigners how transparent the Icelandic phonebook is for example. The prime minister publicly lists his mobile number there.

Things are not clear cut in these matters though and some interviewees pointed out a certain “either/or” situation:

It’s easy to plug your music in Iceland, in a way, but the village aspect has its shortcomings. It only needs one or two powerful people in the media to dislike what you are doing and then you can’t catch a break. The gatekeeping can be quite harsh in that aspect (Höskuldur Ólafsson, rapper in breakout group Quarashi, now mostly retired).

It tends to be the same people over and over. If you are “in”, you get endless requests from journalists to tell them what’s in your wallet or something. If you are not up for it one day, then you are in the cold (Berglind Ágústsdóttir, experimental musician, working in Berlin).

Musicians Lára Rúnarsdóttir and Sóley also took this stance and added the feminine factor. Rúnarsdóttir also turned the romanticised “lack of bureaucracy” on its head, where friendships rule over proper professionalism²⁸⁴:

You sense that there’s a clique. Some musicians are accepted and some are in the cold. I think this can be even more delicate in small societies. Also being a woman, when you are called upon solely to even out the gender quota. I don’t know if I should rejoice in being called up or abhor it (laughs) (Sóley. A more or less professional musician on the indie-experimental side of things).

The dark side of the village factor in Iceland is that if you are outside of the clique, you can’t catch a break. It’s too tight in that way, and decisions are often made from friendship factors rather than professional ones. This, for instance, has put women in a very difficult position, where most of the alleyways are closed (Lára Rúnarsdóttir, part-time musician).

Let’s conclude with a fine, enlightening – if romantic – description of life in the music village:

The small size of the music community has its advantage. We are all in the same boat somehow, even if we are doing different music. Generational difference and popularity difference play a surprisingly little role. We got Jens Hansson (a member of Sálín hans Jóns míns, a legendary and respected straight-up pop band) to play saxophone in a song and it was no hassle. He had never met us before, enjoyed the session, and when we tried to pay him he was having none of it. “Forget it boys. This was fun”. We’ve worked with more artists of similar stature and it’s always one phone call away. And everybody are up for everything (Haukur Viðar Alfreðsson, guitarist with melodic punkrock group Morðingjarnir (The Murderers). Works for an advertising agency).

What’s been described here is of course relatable to Green’s writing about the Faroese Islands, which is an even smaller society and Tryggvason crystallised the nature of village life

²⁸⁴ This is actually a cause for consistent problems in Icelandic society at large - simple things like manning music juries can be difficult because of endless ties to the musicians.

at the beginning (“Everybody knows everyone”). “In a small-scale society anonymity is impossible” wrote the anthropologist Burton Benedict²⁸⁵ and Ruth Finnegan describes well in *The Hidden Musicians*... the intensity, friendship, dynamics and collaborations that carry music life in a small-scale setting (See especially chapter 4, “The organisation and work of local music”).

A final note on the role of the Icelandic radio, as there was a very different story in the Faroese Islands for a long time, where Danish music ruled the airwaves. The islands themselves are still an autonomous country within the Kingdom of Denmark, as Iceland was in the past. Radio, especially the state radio stations in Europe, are still very much a robust cultural entity, influential in shaping cultural consumption and identity, and a wee comparison is appropriate and beneficial. I contacted Knút Háberg Eysturstein, a young musicologist in the Faroe Islands and asked him about the state of Faroese Radio. This was his answer:

Kringvarp Føroya plays a lot more Faroese music these days compared to the olden days. That’s one thing that has changed for the better ... they also do more with A and B playlisting etc. But it’s often weirdly commercial and narrow for a public service radio. Their music profile could be a lot deeper and broader. But the Faroese stuff they play more than they used to. They finally figured out that it’s the only way to distinguish themselves from the rest of the radio/internet market. To my knowledge there are no regulations or percentages per se. I think the change was relatively swift but the realisation behind it was gradual ☺ The week leading up to FMA - Faroese Music Awards - is “Spæl føroyskt vika” by the way. There should be regular features like album of the week, live appearances etc. There is some of that but it’s sporadic.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁵ Benedict, Burton. 1967. *Problems of smaller territories*. London: Published for the Institute of Commonwealth Studies by Athlone P., p. 51.

²⁸⁶ This came as part of a Facebook Messenger conversation between this author and Eysturstein, January 29, 2018.

4.1.4 The city vs. the rural areas

This section is brief, as none of the interviewees ventured far into this topic. Of the five interviewees out in the country, two were expats from Reykjavik and one was holidaying in his hometown, having moved to Reykjavik in his teenage years.

More than half of the Icelandic population lives in the Reykjavik metro area. The second largest town is Akureyri (just under 20,000 in population) and the rest of the towns are strewn around the coast, with 200 to 5,000 inhabitants. Naturally, none of these places can sustain various scenes of the Reykjavik kind, but music life is generally rich. If a scene grows (like in Akureyri) its lifetime is usually brief, consisting of two or three bands, often sharing members.

Helgi Þórsson, the polymath farmer, described going to Reykjavik like hitting New York - “the big world”, as he put it with a wry smile. It’s interesting that the smallness and laid-back notion that foreigners get after visiting Reykjavik is lost on the rural musicians, where Reykjavik is, as Þórsson says, like a bustling metropolis. Weren contemplates on similar notes:

It’s easy to put things together and in motion in the country, because there’s peace. In Reykjavik, there’s always some distractions, everyone calling each other and you are driving people back and forth constantly (Halldór Weren. Part-time musician and a small label owner in the East fjords of Iceland).

The comment on the cars was also mentioned by Mugison - when you are in the city, you are just driving friends and family back and forth. As Þórsson said, Reykjavik is also an alluring place for those with their eyes on the prize, and that’s seconded by Sverrisson:

Coming from the east fjords, Reykjavik was a holy grail and the musicians there, especially those that were older, were legends in our eyes. If someone famous came to see our gig, you really took notice of it (Hjalti Jón Sverrisson, part time musician and theologian).

4.2 Music-making

Tia De Nora writes:

A sociology of music concerned with the ground level of musical practice ... quickly leads to the idea that it is probably more reasonable to propose that music's relation to forms of social order within Western cultures is not inactive, but, rather, usually unnoticed by social scientists ... the major differences between music in modern [i.e. this thesis] versus traditional cultures can be seen to lie in the relations of music's production – how and where music is created, how musical forms undergo change, how music is performed and the quality of the performer–consumer relationship (for example, modes of attention, spatial relationship, who may count as a musician and how evaluation takes place and how music is distributed – such as many to many, one to one, one to many, many to one). Key, here, is the issue of how music distribution is controlled and, in modern societies, consolidated, as with the large record production firms and the burgeoning empires of music distribution. Key, too, are the social relations of how music is deployed within settings and the degree to which soundtracks for settings are negotiated.²⁸⁷

The aim of this section is to look at the following three research questions:

- a) Why do you make music?
- b) Why do you have to make music?
- c) Why do you have to release it ... and/or play it live for an audience?²⁸⁸

The section is ordered into three subsections, one leading to another. In the first one, the primal need to make or play music is addressed, then the need to release it in physical form²⁸⁹ and finally, the need to face the audience with your compositions in the physical world and play them live. The first question, which was my number one concern, is also the fuzziest one, a question no one could give a clear and substantial answer to. The other two were more grounded, a fact that was reflected in the answers. The other two also relate more directly to DeNora's proposal at the opening of the section.

²⁸⁷ DeNora, Tia. 2000. *Music in Everyday Life*, p. 156.

²⁸⁸ Here, I combine questions d) and e) from the introduction.

²⁸⁹ This question needs adjusting for future research, as the advent of streaming has made it possible to release music non-physically.

4.2.1 The need to make music

“When you connect with the muse, it’s utterly transcending. I remember it very clearly when I had a perfect moment with the musinc. You are absolutely present – not in need of anything – while at the same time absolutely disconnected.”

-Hjalti Jón Sverrisson, part-time musician and a theologian.

Sverrisson’s quote is beautiful, poetic almost, but also quite descriptive of how many of the interviewees tried to explain the unexplainable. I will start this section with some choice quotes where musicians try to talk about a deeply felt need to play and compose music. Our talks about this aspect of the music-making usually ended in some kind of a defeat, with an admittance along the lines of “it’s just there ...”. To understand this primal need better, I would need the help of music psychologists - a route I will most definitely *not* be taking. What I will try to get to, on the other hand, is how the musicians fare off in their surroundings with their craft and practice, how they apply it outwardly, either as studio musicians, in a live setting or in a living room jam.

Let’s start with a bang, literally, where two musicians admit to probably exploding, were they not able to attend to their calling:

When I was 19 my vocal cords went awry because of overuse. The doctor said I would be fine – if I would not sing for eight months. I regularly exploded in this phase, I could not NOT sing. It was extremely difficult and when the ban was over I felt very deeply how important this was for me (Heiða Eiríksdóttir, musician, artist and underground scenester).

I think I would explode if I wasn’t able to create. Just *something*, not even music necessarily. Besides, it’s so fucking enjoyable! Fun. It’s also interesting to get to know yourself, seeing new sides to yourself so working on music/records is at the same time an artistic and psychological procedure. It’s nurturing but also demanding – even boring at times. You don’t get the one without the other. (Sóley. A “more or less” professional musician on the indie-experimental side of things).

A much younger musician (the youngest one in the thesis) describes a similar thing, but music being only one of many alleyways:

I have a deep need to create, or to put the things I’m thinking about into some kind of a form. Music, writing, films, drawings. What have you got for me? I write poems, draw, take photographs, videos, and design and at this young age, I skitter around various forms (Steinunn Sigbrúðardóttir Jónsdóttir, young musician from the Reykjavik underground/DIY scene).

More musicians talked about how they absolutely could not abstain from making music, even if they tried. It represented a destiny of sorts:

Now, I find it convenient to have a small studio which I can use when I need it. And the need comes as simply as a need to go to the toilet. I have to obey. I feel itchy when the songs starts to emerge. I can't *not* make music (Svavar Pétur, musician and a farmer).

I tried to stop singing after my studies but I couldn't do it. There's some need inside of me that prohibits me from doing it. A need to express myself (Heiða Árnadóttir, classically trained singer, music teacher and semi-professional musician with an experimental outfit).

I find it very cleansing to make music. It's a calling. To make music and art. I could never work a 9-5 work. I don't have a choice (Berglind Ágústsdóttir, experimental musician, working in Berlin at the time).

Eyþór Gunnarsson, one of the professionals, gave an elaborate answer, emphasising the sense of wellbeing that comes with music, either by playing it or listening to it:

I couldn't read music, the notations were all scrambled in my eyes, and I didn't enjoy my music studies.²⁹⁰ I quit when I was twelve and I'm self-taught really. At the same time, I'm very curious about certain aspects in music theory and I've been studying that on my own. But as I say, I didn't go the conventional way. But if you are interested in the *why* ... it's very primitive. I found, as a child, that playing music made me feel good. It's a very deep feeling. I was also very interested in listening to music, and when I heard a beautiful melody, it just made me feel good inside. And this is ongoing, always. A search for this experience, a search for the satisfaction that music can give you (Eyþór Gunnarsson, professional musician with various ensembles, roots in jazz and pop).

More musicians went contemplative in their answers, seeking to understand the primal human need for musical expression:

My mother-in-law was a typical amateur musician. She composed, released a CD once and conducted choirs. She experienced the same thing as me with my [trawler] crew. The need to sing, make music, was rich in everyone and in reality it's quite easy to draw this from the people. I once read a book about the war in Yugoslavia, and the author talks about how easy it is to awaken the killer instinct in us. We go about killing like it's the most natural thing in the world. I sensed a similar thing, in relation to music, in my crew. I was surprised when I saw the musicality in almost everyone. Everyone enjoyed listening to it and it was relatively easy to get them to make it (Björn Valur Gíslason, captain on a freezer trawler, politician and amateur musician).

Jónas Sig. describes how he surrendered to music, tried to escape from it and then surrendered again:

I had been working on and off as a musician since my teens; playing professional gigs, starting all kinds of bands and even "made" it in Iceland with an infamous duet, getting the taste of fame. It all came crumbling down one day and I went in hiding for some years. Worked the odd job but finally made it to Denmark where I found myself on a career path within Microsoft. At the same time, I had calmed down, gotten myself together in many ways and when the space opened *the music* came at me with

²⁹⁰ Gunnarsson is widely considered to be Iceland's most talented keyboard player, a true natural and internationally recognised as such.

a vengeance: “Hey, remember me!?!?” it said. I had to give in. I moved back to Iceland and slowly began to make music again and play it in a live setting. I realised that music and music-making was a part of my life and I could never get away from it. Which was a calming realisation. For a long time I tried *not* to do it but it sought me out, always (Jónas Sig., semi-professional musician).

Lára Rúnarsdóttir has a similar take on this - a kind of a struggle with an artistic muse - with some efforts to part from it, but to little avail:

My father is a musician²⁹¹ and I studied some music. But more or less, the ability to compose and play is a natural one. After one of my earliest gigs I was asked to make a record with an up and coming producer which we did and there was no looking back after that really. Making records comes in spurts for me. Sometimes I don't play for months. After the first record, I was really motivated and wanted to do more. But after each record, there's a kind of a down-spiral and I “quit”. I say to myself “never again” but then it comes back to me. I can't escape from it. Before I know it, some songs come into being and I'm applying for some studio-funds etc. The project emerges somehow and I enter it wholeheartedly and forcefully (Lára Rúnarsdóttir, part-time musician).

The meditations from Gunnarsson, Jónas Sig. and Rúnarsdóttir carry with them a certain amount of burden. There is a sense in which anguish and insecurity are bound up with music-making, where it represents an external force that threatens to possess you and envelope your entire being. At the same time, their comments are also imbued with a kind of reconciliation, with Jónas Sig. almost religious in his valuation (“a calming realisation”). The eyes of my interviewees always lit up when they dug into their musical past, remembering how pure, naïve and straightforward the joy was at the time. Gunnarsson is especially succinct, and manages to describe the all-encompassing wonderment that music can bring simply and effectively (“I found, as a child, that playing music made me feel good. It's a very deep feeling”).

Some musicians emphasised a melancholic element, but never with an air of defeat - rather, a carefree optimism:

I sometimes think, “why do I bother?”, but it never cuts deep. And I don't have a clear answer to why I need to make music. It's just there (Halldór Waren. Semi-pro musician, small label owner in the East fjords of Iceland).

Probably like you, with your thesis. You find an urge, a strong need to do this. A connection. But then you discover, it's not an “everything's coming up roses” situation or a procedure. Far from it (laughs) (Lára Rúnarsdóttir, part-time musician).

One musician gave an interesting answer to this, acknowledging a primal need, but his is something that could be called an “assisted primal need”:

²⁹¹ Rúnar Þórisson, guitar player for Grafík, one of Iceland's best known bands, especially in the 1980s.

If I'm not doing music, I don't have any peace. I'm not a natural musician, but it's natural for me to create. I'm pretty competent today as a player, quite good I would say, but that's because I've simply learned to play and put in the time (Hjalti Jón Sverrisson, part-time musician and a theologian).

While accepting this impulse towards music-making, some musicians fused it with practical matters, with musicking making other things more bearable or sharpening them into focus, recalling theories on everyday usage of music. This is reminiscent of an argument of Tia DeNora's: "Respondents use music as a resource for the conduct of emotional 'work', and for heightening or changing energy levels"²⁹²:

It's cleansing and gives you peace, to play and compose music (Hallur Már, a one-time bass player with '00s breakout alternative rock band Leaves).

The need to create is strong. I was working at an office and to get my mind off that, I set up a keyboard in a spare room. When I got frustrated in the work, I went into the room and wrote some music. I wrote a whole album, alongside the office work (Lára Rúnarsdóttir, part-time musician)

I was always artistic, creative. I could do various things quite well. I started doing music properly when I was 20 years old, a bit late in the game. I started to strum the guitar, incidentally because I thought it was cool to play guitar and I also wanted to accompany my poetry with music. Then I started to play live, write songs, but I was a dabbler for quite some time. Then I released an album eventually. And it felt good. It made me interested in doing more, work on this craft (Myrra Rós, a part-time underground/indie musician).

Some musicians were well aware of the determining power of societal forces, and with that, dismissed the romanticism somewhat:

I have no choice but to do music. I've been singing since I was a toddler. There's music in the family so I guess some of it, the natural ability, is in the DNA. But then, what are you going to do with it? That's another question entirely. Everyone has some need to do this but it's down to cultivation I think. If you do music regularly, a need develops. But I think that you have to activate it, or be in a situation where you can do it. Then, when you have a feel-good experience from doing something, you naturally want to do more of it (Heiða Eiríksdóttir, musician, artist and underground scenester).

Why do I feel the need to do music? You can't really answer a question like that without going for some monstrous clichés. Well, clearly it's a strong need to express something but also some attention seeking need. To stand on stage and play ... it was absolutely nerve wrecking. Terrible. And then ... it gets better. You listen to yourself on a playback and it's ... pretty good. And your confidence grows steadily (Haukur Viðar Alfredsson, guitarist with melodic punkrock group Morðingjarnir (The Murderers). Works for an advertising agency).

My dad is a music teacher so I don't have any memories of *not* being in music school. And I enjoyed it. As a teenager I got a bit bored of the piano studies but at that exact time I joined a brass/marching band and a big friendship grew out of that. The members became active with all kinds of music related social activities, we formed

²⁹² DeNora, Tia. 1999. "Music as a technology of the self" in *Poetics*. 27 (1): 31-56, p. 31

bands etc. But at that time I had no inklings towards popular music-making. It wasn't until I joined Seabear²⁹³ that I got a real insight into the Icelandic scene as a participant. Up until that time I had been like a mega-fan of Icelandic bands, watching from the side-lines. I was a huge múm fan and would have fainted if someone had told me that I would get to know these people, let alone work with them (laughs) (Sóley. A “more or less” professional musician on the indie-experimental side of things).

Ákadóttir is on a similar line as Sóley, and touches on the influence of musical parents:

I learned to play the clarinet early on and both my parents are practising musicians. I got a guitar at eleven and we started our first band when I was twelve. I've always had an easy time composing songs, singing and performing. The songs come easy, and I become agitated when they don't. I'm not a master on the instruments in any sense, but I know my way around many of them (Jófríður Ákadóttir, JFDR, a young full time musician, working successfully on various projects on the underground/indie side of things).

Some connected their need to do music to outside influences - down to a youthful realisation that music was an enticing thing, looking up to transnational events or even institutions. Here, the Eurovision contest plays a significant part, as much as the influential punk boom:

It was actually the first Icelandic Eurovision competition in 1986 that fired me up towards music-making. I was nine years old then. I said to my father, who dabbles in music that we should compete as father and son. It would have been a landslide victory of course! Dad thought I was joking but I was not. This was the first time that I got an idea or a concept for a band. And this stuck somehow – I wanted to make music, set up bands etc. (Svavar Pétur Eysteinnsson, musician and a farmer).

I remember sitting on my father's tractor, very young, singing some poetry I put together myself. And I've tried to think about why I was doing this but I haven't found an answer. But I was surrounded by music, my elder brothers listened to heavy metal and such. And when I heard punk music that was freeing. It was definitely *not* something you considered to be sissy pop music and was a great contrast to what you considered to be out of touch music played and listened to by your teacher. That was the spirit surrounding our band at the very beginning (Helgi Þórsson, farmer and part-time musician in the north of Iceland).

Author Guðmundur Andri made a brilliant comment, this researcher's absolute favourite, flinging into the air questions about what constitutes a musician and what not:

I've always found it odd when I'm referred to as a musician. Because that's not what I do (Guðmundur Andri, parliament member, author and an amateur musician).

Here is a man, which practices and plays music on a very regular basis (see his mini-biography in 3.2), releases records and plays gigs, saying that he is indeed, *not a musician*. Finnegan's hidden musicians immediately come into mind, where, in Milton Keynes, she

²⁹³ This was an Icelandic indie-pop band, active in the 2000s, which made some headway in Europe through the Berlin based label Morr Music. Being in this group effectively gave birth to Sóley's solo career.

“revealed the remarkable amount of un-noticed, ‘commonplace’ music-making that was taking place in this community ... ‘under the radar’ of other community activities.”²⁹⁴ A certain “shrug of the shoulder” utterance of “Well ... I really don’t play though”. The qualities that people take into account when asked if they do music or not seem to be quite different from person to person. In Guðmundur Andri’s case, he’s accentuating that he is an author first and foremost - the music a hobby. If pressed, you could get him to admit that he plays the guitar, sings and writes songs. But, he would probably never admit to being a “musician”, rather someone that “plays music” and there’s a difference, not even a subtle one.²⁹⁵ Nonetheless, this author has come across people who own guitars, play them regularly, write songs and record them and even play some dinner music now and then - that is to say, all the activities we usually ascribe to musicians. Nevertheless, I’ve asked some of these people if they play music and I’ve gotten either a hesitant “no” or even a flat, firm “no”. These contradictory self-evaluations never cease to amaze me.

Two musicians were “un-romantic”, at least compared to the high flying gushing of so many:

The music has never possessed me. I enjoy it but somehow, it’s one of the things I simply do among various other things (Þorgeir Tryggvason, amateur musician).

It’s a habitual thing for me now. I can’t imagine not doing it. As soon as I finish a record, I start to think about the next one (Ólafur Örn Josephsson, part time musician, leads his own indie-rock band).

Surprisingly few kept their feet on the ground like these two, going for emotional explanations rather than subdued ones. The reasons could lie in how I approached them or in how some of them used the opportunity to express themselves about a thing quite obviously very dear to them. It could be a mix of those two, with other variables thrown in. At the very least it is apparent that the need to make music comes from a variety of sources. Most of the interviewees were caught up with the unexplainable, primal need (partly reminiscent of Killick’s article about holistic music-making) while some were acutely aware of the influence of one’s surroundings.

“I’ve never sought out to be an artist. But I accept that I am one and I am at peace with that.”
-Róbert Örn Hjalmtýsson, part time underground rock musician.

²⁹⁴ Veblen, Kari. 2008. “The many ways of community music” in *International Journal of Community Music* 1: 1, pp. 5 - 21., p. 17.

²⁹⁵ Tracy Thorne of Everything but the Girl fame admits to the same thing in her fascinating and well-written biography, *Bedsit Disco Queen: How I grew up and tried to be a pop star*. She identifies as “someone that sings” rather than a singer.

4.2.2 The need to release your music

“Well, getting attention certainly plays a part. To get some feedback, the need to show something and even show off. When I was a wee boy, I used to do flower paintings, mostly so I could take them to my grandmother and get the compliments. That was the main drive.”
-Helgi Þórsson, farmer and part-time musician in the north of Iceland.

“I release my music because I think it’s good. Otherwise, I wouldn’t do it!”
-Ólafur Örn Josephsson, part time musician, leads his own indie-rock band.

When the child learns to draw, once finished with a picture, it runs to its parents and holds it up: “See what I did?” The research so far presents peoples’ need to create and play music, yet still it is mostly described as a self-sufficient endeavour. There has been an emphasis on doing music “for the music’s sake”, for one’s own enjoyment, perhaps sitting in their bedroom at the tender age of twelve, strumming a guitar. Later, people find the urge to perform their music in front of others and/or release it in a physical form, a need I will inspect further in this and the following section. Some people release music but never perform live, and for some it’s the other way around. In any case, these parts of the music-making process are quite ingrained in us - be it musicians or audience, and is considered a very natural part of proceedings. But the need is somewhat different than a solely creative impulse. Rather than a need for expression, it’s a need for communal acceptance, some kind of feedback, to feel that you are not doing this in a void. When I worked as a journalist, musicians turned up to interviews with their CD’s, fresh from the plant, always beaming and proud. “It’s not *finished* until I hold an album in my hand,” they used to say.

An ego thing? In a way. It’s like this very natural need for attention and gratification but also, when you have put so much of yourself into something, you want to share it with others. But I think the former part is stronger in us (Lára Rúnarsdóttir, part-time musician).

I think everyone has the need to share their creations and get feedback.
(Styrmir Sigurðsson, filmmaker and musician).

For some, releasing your music is a form of declaration, a proof that you are doing something worthwhile, something that demands a release:

It’s got something to do with proving that you are doing something viable. To show it to people, to play it for people (Hallur Már, a one-time bass player with ‘00s breakout alternative rock band Leaves).

Not at the release stage yet, Guðmundur Andri ponders the simple need to run his creations by someone else:

I've been composing songs, songs that I find interesting. But I need a platform for outing, I need an outside opinion. Should I do this in G or maybe rather in C? I have to show them to someone (Guðmundur Andri, parliament member, author and an amateur musician).

For some, the release procedure is a way to make an artistic object, as viable a creative undertaking as the music itself:

I want to release proper stuff, put care into it. I still tie a ribbon around every children's CD I release. It would bug me if I would go for a cheaper option. There's something about the actual "doing of it" (Halldór Warén. Semi-pro musician, small label owner in the East fjords of Iceland).

Some - in this case, our friend the farmer from the north - has a completely different view on this:

The first record we did was recorded in a professional studio but we've worked our way backwards, we could say, from that point on.²⁹⁶ For me, it's secondary who presses the "rec" button. It's like the old Indian woman who left an error in the carpet she knitted, to make sure it wasn't perfect. You have to have a reason to continue doing this (laughs). We knowingly keep it rough, I'll admit to that (Helgi Þórsson, farmer and part-time musician in the north of Iceland).

The word "closure" was often used. A record release is the final outcome to a lengthy phase of creative work - an end point which is a necessary undertaking for the musician before they will be able to move on with a clean slate to the next project. This was a big thing for most of the interviewees, and almost a given in their minds.

All the family is maybe entangled in the creative process, having been put through listening ordeal months on end. But when you finally get a closure, when you see the finished article, it makes it worthwhile (Halldór Warén. Semi-pro musician, small label owner in the East fjords of Iceland).

It's about closure and ending things. I once did an album about heartbreak and releasing it was like sharing a secret with others. It was good to get it off your chest and out of your mind somehow. And maybe a song, that handles difficult things, is now "just a song" for everyone to hear. It somehow dampens things and normalises them. Takes an emotional pressure off. It's done with, it's out there, and not only in *my* mind anymore (Berglind Ágústsdóttir, experimental musician, working in Berlin).

The records are *always* a closure. Like showing your paintings at a gallery show. Then you move on. But it's also about leaving something behind. It doesn't have to be brilliant. Just something for future generations to look at and listen to (Helgi Þórsson, farmer and part-time musician in the north of Iceland).

Ákadóttir talks about similar things, but stresses that the release is also a bid for connection:

²⁹⁶ Since 1990, Helgi og Hljóðfæraleikarnir have released thirteen records, most of them recorded in a consciously sub-standard way.

Releasing the music is a form of closure. And I get annoyed when there are unnecessary delays in the release schedule. You sit on this stuff, alone, and it's just depressing. In a way, it's this pure and primal need to connect. I'm not talking to a wall now, I'm talking to you. We need connection, feedback, attention. Simple as that (Jófríður Ákadóttir, JFDR, a young full time musician, working successfully on various projects on the underground/indie side of things).

In one of the interviews, a musician started to talk about a shelved album that his band couldn't afford to release. Almost without noticing it, he started to emphasise the need to get it out somehow so that he and his band would be able to "move forward":

We talked among ourselves ... "Are we going to spend x amount of money to finish it, then get 1000 CD's pressed and sell maybe 250?" I think we'll just throw it out on the internet, just to get it out of the way and be able to do something else.²⁹⁷ (Haukur Viðar Alfredsson, guitarist with melodic punkrock group Morðingjarnir (The Murderers). Works for an advertising agency).

In some cases, the need to release one's music diminishes. This seems to be a scenario that is naturally more frequent with those who already have some records under their belt:

I used to enjoy the release process but not as much now. Or rather, I don't find the need to release stuff on physical formats anymore. It's too much of a hassle these days, the kick out of it is gone. But, there has to be a closure of some sorts, and usually people find that in releasing stuff on tangible objects (Svavar Pétur Eysteinnsson, musician and a farmer).

But I have to admit, we have been recording a lot lately, and I don't find the urge to release it yet. If things turn out to be semi-good I don't rush them out – or even feel the need to release them at all (Helgi Þórsson, farmer and part-time musician in the north of Iceland).

The need for human connection came up, the release process something much more heartfelt than already described:

I think it's like with preparing food and the need to give it to people. You put your love into it and you want to share it. And maybe, someone will be touched by what you've done (Berglind Ágústsdóttir, experimental musician, working in Berlin).

Heiða Eiríksdóttir laid down a thought-provoking scenario, where the urge to release is heightened by success. You can predict, by experiencing success at a particular level in the music industry, that your release has a chance of going down relatively well. This then acts as a catalyst for further creation - a scenario that wouldn't much resonate with the average Joe:

Well, for me, first of all comes the need to do music. I guess people like Paul McCartney, which has a history of hits, knows when he's written one and that will be a part of the urge to release it. He knows, more or less – or has an educated guess – about the results in releasing his music. There's a pathway. But, if you are not him, just writing music in the best way possible, my thought is about catching the songs

²⁹⁷ This is exactly what they did, about two months after the interview.

and then think about arrangements and such. Then there's comes this natural need to show what you are making to other people, even if it's just your boyfriend or friends (Heiða Eiríksdóttir, musician, artist and underground scenester).

The procedure is one fraught with many emotional challenges:

Well, this is weird. You are exposing yourself in a way and it's a terribly delicate area. It's like, if you don't like the music you don't like *me*. At first, I wanted to release a record every ten years but now I've changed my mind completely. Just *do it*, and if you are in the zone, just get it all out. And some like it and some not and so what?" (Sóley. A "more or less" professional musician on the indie-experimental side of things).

I was in a band, I enjoyed creating the music and hear my own songs ("Hey, this almost sounds like Sonic Youth!"). But we didn't dare to play live. We didn't have the courage. We hadn't even dared to release the stuff. Then we shyly asked a local records store to sell a CD-R for us. They sold some and that ignited something in me. I wanted more of this. But for me, this was incredible. A record of mine in an actual record store! (Ólafur Örn Josephsson, part time musician, leads his own indie-rock band).

This is a nurturing, even inevitable, procedure in the eyes of many, more or less a positive affair. But the dark side is always looming, a yin to every yang. One musician talked about a purity lost, when the music was transferred from homely pastures to hard copies and the business of promotion - inevitable in most cases - can be unappealing:

There was a strike and I said to the guys: "Let's release a CD, rather than resting on our laurels!" I was joking. But then people egged me and the guys on. Most of it had the air of home-made charm to it, some of the CD's were burned on a machine that our friend owned in Ólafsfjörður, the home-harbour of the ship. But we were enthused about this, thought about the cover for example and we put in the work. We also got professional players in, to play on the records. When we got "better" musicians to play with us, something was lost (Björn Valur Gíslason, captain on a freezer trawler, politician and amateur musician).

Regarding the promotion, I have been at meetings with music entrepreneurs, discussing how to present what I have done and created. Emotionally, I didn't like that procedure. You become greedy and aggressive somehow, the ego is inflated and I really didn't like that part at all. I always quit "the biz", not the music as such (Lára Rúnarsdóttir, part-time musician).

Finally, a standalone comment, from the innocence of youth:

Well, I need to get the things out, out of *me*. I don't have a huge need to release it widely or even show it to other people. It's OK to get feedback but that's absolutely not the drive for the creativity (Steinunn Sigprúðardóttir Jónsdóttir, young musician from the Reykjavik underground/DIY scene).

This was an interesting comment, describing a need to get the music out, but not necessarily for anybody. A subtle need, almost veering towards solipsism, but communal nonetheless ("I don't have a huge need to release it *widely*").

This last comment recalls Killick's writing about solitary music-making, which doesn't necessarily include the need to show it to others. But just like Killick, that concludes that even within the bedroom walls, people seek a communication of sorts. Jónsdóttir confirms that a communal need exists, even if ever so slight.

Talk of artistic closure was prevalent in talk of musician's motivations. The simple enjoyment that comes with completing a task is bound up with a record release. Both the relief of being finished and the enjoyment in bringing your art to the public are intertwined. It's sometimes said that while art and commercial musicians have an end point (a singular text, like a composition, LP, etc), others, like jazz/free improvisers, folk and amateur music-makers see music as a fluid, creative process.²⁹⁸ In these Icelandic cases, the motivation of an end point was quite clear. Some of them would agree on the romantic notion that their music life will always be an ongoing process (as they declared, informally, in section 4.2.1) but the closure, in this case, has to do with specific, physical objects. Also, with amateur choirs or improvising musicians, a festival appearance or a gig has the same proclivities; it is a project that has a start and an ending point.²⁹⁹

It was interesting to see the many varieties of reasons in terms of the desire for the release of music: an ego-trip, a source for empowerment, simple feedback, as well as a platform for connecting emotionally with listeners. Unlike the need to create, the need to "release" is a communal affair, involving other people and activities, sometimes with little relation to music-making (contacting pressing plants, disseminating media packages etc.). All of this fits neatly with the communal theories detailed in the literature chapter, by the likes of Hesmondhalgh ("Music provides a basis for intimate relations with others"), as well as Finnegan and Crossley (stressing social relations and their dynamics).

²⁹⁸ This point - wondering about closure and non-closure - derived from an email conversation with Professor Simon Frith.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

4.2.3 The need to play your music live

“It was the kind of concert where you feel that we have never played better. This is the best “high” in the world. Music. What a masterful genius it is!”

-Snæbjörn “Bibbi” Ragnarsson, bass player with Icelandic viking-metal band Skálmöld).³⁰⁰

In this third sub-section, I will look at musician’s need to perform their music in a live setting. Asked about the need to create, most of them had no problem in admitting their strong desire to make music. Asked about the need to release their music, the answers were somewhat subdued, but pretty forward nonetheless. A record release almost like a natural step up, derived from the music-making itself. Asked about the need to play live, the answers were a bit different. For the first time, some of the interviewees were shy to admit that particular need, relating as it did to an unhealthy need to show off and be pompous, an act driven by ego rather than an understated need to share or express. In the first section, people talked about purity, but in this instance, things are disarrayed. Their stance was stronger in the first section, where they talked about the personal need towards creating music but when entering the communal stage, more so here than in the “release” section, people get insecure and shy:

When you are working on a song you have to play it to other people. What’s difficult in our case, is that we are all kind of introverted and it’s not easy for us to perform in front of a live audience. I always say to my friend when we are driving to the venue: “Why am I doing this?” And I really don’t understand it, because I have zero need towards this. But then, when upon stage, I always enjoy it! The feedback from the audience is good, validating (Guðmundur Andri, parliament member, author and an amateur musician).

Some of the musicians described the live playing as a natural extension of the recorded work:

Playing live for us was a simple extension of the CD releases at first. We played in the TV, as a part of the Sailor’s day festivities etc. We never travelled out of our confines you could say. What made it worthwhile as well, for us, is that we could make the profits from the sales go into charities. It was also just simple fun. We really enjoyed it. It was easy in that way, no pressure (Björn Valur Gíslason, captain on a freezer trawler, politician and amateur musician).

However, most interviewees were quite aware of the communal aspect of it, the bonds forged between performer and audience etc. Most of them described this with tangible joy:

We are in it for fun, but it’s not that we don’t care. It’s not only for us. We care about people coming to listen to us, that’s an integral part of it. Someone has to listen. Art rests on communication – some need to connect. It’s a kick, playing a concert. Magic. Communication. Something that you did is touching people. Success – and a

³⁰⁰ Ragnarsson, Snæbjörn. 2014. “Bibbi bloggar úr Evróputúr Skálmaldar: Toulouse”, www.kjarninn.is, November 8, Transl.: “Bibbi blogs from Skálmöld’s European tour: Toulouse). It goes without saying that said bass player is also an author, amateur-actor and a fully employed copy-writer (and plays with Tryggvason in the Darned fools).

validation for the things you are writing/making (Þorgeir Tryggvason, amateur musician).

As stressful as it can be to perform it can be as fulfilling afterwards. It's different than making records, composing and all that because here you have a direct connection between the artist and the audience. They meet in the flesh. An important "real" encounter, especially seeing the ongoing digitalization of society. Also some lingering need for attention, feedback to what you are doing (Sóley. A "more or less" professional musician on the indie-experimental side of things).

In my childhood, I experienced a strong need to play music for others and get something we could call approval. Also just in parties, I wanted to share music that I loved by playing it from the hi-fi and get others to listen as well. But, this is a part of being a musician. To seek out audience for what you want to say (Eyþór Gunnarsson, professional musician with various ensembles, roots in jazz and pop).

For me, there is no closure to the songs you've written, until you play them live. Share them with others (Jónas Sig., semi-professional musician).

The emphasis here is on a collective sharing - Jónas Sig.'s comment gently implies that a song doesn't really exist, unless it's sounded out. Tryggvason is talking about responsibility, among other things and that "art rests on communication". And he, Sóley and Gunnarsson mention the need for validation – as so many did in the section on "the need to release". All of this underpins the desire for self-sufficiency discussed in the first section, and the communal aspect which runs through this portion of the thesis.

The music-making section, all three elements, carry with them a *universal* theme – the urges on display are pretty much the same in China, Angola or Iceland. A specific Icelandic angle is more prevalent in the next three sections (and made for the first one, 4.1).

Tryggvason's comments echo Christopher's Smalls idea about a certain quest for well-being for all that happens at live concerts, with contributions from the musicians *and* the audience. Hesmondhalgh writes, quoting Small: "Central to our enjoyment of performance, wrote Small, is a feeling that we have been "in the company of like-feeling people, in an ideal society which musicians and listeners have together brought into existence for that duration of time"." Hesmondhalgh then comments, almost taken aback by Small's indications: "The idea that musicians and listeners have a *common concern* (italics original) with bringing into being an ideal set of social relationships is striking."³⁰¹ One of Hesmondhalgh's main theoretical thrusts in *Why Music Matters* is the so called "affective turn", a recent ideological upheaval in the field of cultural studies. Its implications can be used in the context of this section, where

³⁰¹ Hesmondhalgh, David. 2013. *Why music matters*, p. 89 - 90. Hesmondhalgh is referencing Small's book, *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and celebration in Afro-American music*, where he first cultivated the musicking concept, later expanded on in *Musicking* (1998).

“sensations, moods and feelings” are often on the surface of the interviewees’ recollections and general assessments. Hesmondhalgh explains affect thus:

Theorists of culture and affect have usefully pointed beyond the limitations of an excessive focus on signification, meaning, and discourse (apparent in media and cultural studies) towards the more complex bodily effects of cultural experience ... recognising that sensations, moods, and feelings are a key part of cultural experience alongside emotion ...³⁰²

Finnegan underpins these assessments as well, describing the sense of exhilaration and self-fulfilment that concerts could bring band members – and in a way, audience as well (even though she doesn’t state it as clearly as Small). This part of the music-making process, a stage that many reach after dabbling in their bedroom and maybe shyly releasing their music (often done through streaming sites today) fortifies and strengthens the music activities in general, keeping the players on track. “The experience of participating in the performance itself was something else that drew players together both as members of a shared band world and in a commitment to their own group. Player after player commented on the sense of achievement in joint public performance.”³⁰³

Going back to Hesmondhalgh’s quote on affect, I would like to conclude this whole section (i.e. music-making in general) by referring to Tia De Nora’s writing in *Music in Everyday Life*, where she speculates about the same term. She opens that one chapter (“Musical affect in practice”) with a quote from Aristotle, “What we have said makes it clear that music possesses the power of producing an effect on the character of the soul.”³⁰⁴ Her conclusions within that chapter are quite illuminating for this thesis, as she combines *the personal* (i.e. Hesmondhalgh’s writing on affect and terms like “identity” and “authenticity”, discussed in 4.4) with *the social* (e.g. Finnegan), a concern that colours all of the themes here. She describes how music’s semiotic powers “may, moreover, be ‘stabilized’ through the ways in which they are constituted and reinforced through discourse ... through consumption practice and through patterns of use over time,” in effect describing how the Icelandic musicians are at the same time a product of their environment and its producers (and by that, echoing network theories like those of Becker and Crossley’s and Bourdieu’s theories on

³⁰² Hesmondhalgh, David. 2013. *Why music matters*, p. 13. See also Clough, Patricia, Ticineto, Jean, O’Malley Halley and Hardt, Michael. 2007. *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Durham: Duke University Press and Gregg, Melissa and Seigworth, Gregory J. 2010. *The Affect Theory reader*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press.

³⁰³ Finnegan, Ruth. 1989. *The Hidden Musicians...*, p. 268.

³⁰⁴ Quote from *The Politics*. In Denora, Tia. 2000. *Music in Everyday Life*, p. 21.

habitus and the field of cultural production).³⁰⁵ She goes on in “Finnegan”-ian style, pointing out the hidden constituents of music communities: “Non-musical materials, such as situations, biographical matters, patterns of attention, assumptions, are all implicated in the clarification of music’s semiotic force.” She concludes:

Of interest then is the reflexive problem of how music and its effects are active in social life, and how music comes to afford a variety of resources for the constitution of human agency, the being, feeling, moving and doing of social life. To understand how music works as a device of social ordering, how its effects are reflexively achieved, we need actually to look at musical practice.³⁰⁶

“When I think back, kids were constantly asked about what they wanted to be when they would grow up. I didn’t have any answers really. But just the other day, I was thinking about this and then I remembered that I saw myself as a rock star! So, thinking about identity, subconsciously, I’ve been working on this childhood dream throughout my career.”
-Helgi Þórsson, farmer and part-time musician in the north of Iceland.

³⁰⁵ Denora, Tia. 2000. *Music in Everyday Life*, p. 45.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

4.3 Sociality

This section deals with how the Icelandic musicians, within the scope of the thesis (roughly, the pop/rock sector), intersect and communicate. Either within their own bands, with each other or within the predefined music community that they operate in, in relation to institutions for instance. The term/word “sociality” is a fine and descriptive word for the task at hand, a few choice dictionary explanations being “social nature or tendencies as shown in the assembling of individuals in communities”, “the action on the part of individuals of associating together in communities” and “the tendency of groups and persons to develop social links and live in communities.”

Becker’s and Bourdieu’s grand sociological theories, pertaining to the thesis, are especially important to this section. The tight networks in Iceland – with their multiple ties and informal communications - contribute to a social capital that can provide the musical networks that will be discussed here with all kinds of opportunities and influences that are missing in larger societies. “Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible”³⁰⁷ and “networks are resources that connect people to something that is larger than themselves. No one person controls the networks but all can benefit from them through the ongoing interaction that occurs within them.”³⁰⁸

The section is divided into three subsections. In the first one, the ways in which musicians step into predetermined music worlds and communities is discussed. In the second, their experiences playing with their friends comes to the fore and in the third, their experiences in playing with other people in a more business-like context is scrutinized.

³⁰⁷ Coleman, James S. 2003. “Social capital in the creation of human capital” in *Foundations of Social Capital*. 159-184., p. 163.

³⁰⁸ Christakis, Nicholas A. and Fowler, James H. 2011. *Connected: the surprising power of our social networks and how they shape our lives*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.

4.3.1 Pathways and readymade surroundings

“There’s always a scene, culture, surroundings that you walk into at any given time. And that moulds your output to a certain degree.”

-Páll Ragnar Pálsson, composer and rock guitarist.

Musicians described how they entered a predetermined world, in hindsight acknowledging that in many ways, their own personal agency was fairly minimal:

I started in all of this by accident. I was playing the trumpet and vocals were needed for one song. Then for five songs. And so on. I’ll admit that the promise of fame and fortune was of course enticing. As for most young teenage boys. It was cool to be in a band. You somehow enter a world which you’ve heard about and you think it’s like this and that. You are led into this in a way. But I always found it hard to be in a group. And later in my career, a massive stage fright began to develop. But I never really felt a need to make music. It just came with the territory. That’s what you have to do when you are in a band. Write songs!” (Höskuldur Ólafsson, rapper in breakout group Quarashi, now mostly retired).

Of note, Ólafsson was the only musician interviewed that admitted that he found it difficult to be in the music-making business. Others talked about occasional doubts and hard times, but mostly, emphasised fate-like occurrences that suggested that they were born to do it - whether they liked it or not. Usually, these statements were articulated with discernible contentment. It’s also interesting how Ólafsson describes a near lack of impetus or creative need on his behalf. It’s more like he entered a job unwillingly, where he’s showed the tasks he must do before reluctantly complying.

Others emphasised the mechanical nature of the music world’s workings, and how it keeps on turning, whether you are a partaker or not:

It’s like the music-making has a life of its own. I enjoy it, it’s like a window to “something else”. I don’t control it in a way, I follow it. It’s difficult to describe. It’s more like we are catering to Reptilicus’ needs, not the other way around (Guðmundur Ingi Markússon, part time musician with Icelandic industrial legends Reptilicus).

Asked if he would describe his work as habitual, one musician partially agreed, but didn’t like the implication of the word:

It’s almost sterile to call music-making a habit. Like it’s joyless somehow. But, on the other hand, many of the things you do, in order to do all of this, are mundane affairs, like setting up the gear etc. (Þorgeir Tryggvason, amateur musician).

Two musicians described how moving from the rural areas and into the city changed their approach:

Then we moved to the city and secured a rehearsal space. And we released a cassette because that's simply what you do when you are in an underground punk rock band. We almost unconsciously followed a well-trodden path in those matters. It wasn't like we *had* to do it out of artistic need, more like, this is what you *do* if you are in a band of this type. We didn't give it a second thought really (Davíð Ólafsson, historian and part time musician).

Berglind Ágústsdóttir is an example of a musician that entered a scene by chance and made her mark within its confines. She was, in a way, sustained by the scene and her activities there inspired her to study fine art later on. When I interviewed her she was taking a break from living in Berlin and was living in Seyðisfjörður, a remote, picturesque and artist friendly village in the East fjords. Many artists from Reykjavik have houses there and work there either in the summer or the whole year round. "I'm taking a break and grounding myself," she said with a smile. "Then it's back to the bohemian nonsense (laughs)":

I was born in a little town in Iceland. I was always drawing and writing poems when I was young. In Reykjavik, I started to recite poetry at underground rock concerts and things just slowly started to happen. I was asked to make an album for Bad Taste records. In the aftermath I sang with people who made the music. When I moved to Berlin I started to make music myself. I don't know anything about this, I just experiment and learn by doing. But I started to compose and make music more frequently after I moved to Berlin. All kinds of improv and experiments (Berglind Ágústsdóttir, experimental musician, working in Berlin).

These descriptions all assimilate neatly with the "big" theories, Bourdieu's field of cultural production and Howard Becker's conception of art worlds, where people partake in a system or a cultural entity that structurally exists beyond them. Bourdieu foresaw a muddled line where it's difficult to see where the individual's contributions and the system's contributions lie, that being the nature of the field/habitus. Looking at his theories, detailed in the literature chapter, a field/habitus or rather, the world or worlds in the thesis, are "created and reproduced unconsciously ... without any deliberate pursuit of coherence... without any conscious concentration."³⁰⁹ Their very existence "neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by a kind of interplay between the two over time."³¹⁰ All of this echoes the interviewees tales of entering a culture where they did things they thought were "appropriate", given the rules that they thought were in motion.

The descriptions in this section also conform well with Crossley's network theory ("Whatever else is involved in a scene, it entails a network of actors who belong to and participate in it"³¹¹), supporting Markússon's admittance that his band controls his action

³⁰⁹ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 172-173.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

³¹¹ Crossley, Nick. 2008. "Pretty Connected...", p. 92.

rather than the other way around, making him almost a subconscious actor in a network that thrives with or without him. Finnegan's pathway term is also apt, as it has to do with habitual behaviour within a defined system, where, as referenced in the literature chapter, the pathways "bring ... a sense of belonging and reality: travelling not in an alien environment but along familiar paths in time and space, in family continuity and habitual action."³¹²

³¹² Finnegan, Ruth. *The Hidden Musicians...*, p. 324.

4.3.2 Playing with friends

“It’s the love of playing together. To be in sync, to hear what the others are doing. Something happens, which you can’t explain. That’s the kick.”

-Guðmundur Andri, parliament member, author and an amateur musician.

Friends can start bands as a vehicle for shared activities but friendship can also grow within the confines of a band, between relative strangers that perhaps started the band from a purely musical standpoint. Some of the musicians describe their participation in bands as almost accidental, an unplanned thing with no grand scheme, other than to “do something together” (a sentence often uttered):

We began in a college in the country, and out of sheer boredom. There was a room where we could rehearse so in a way, the facilities steered this activity. It was all about noise punk, Nomeansmo, Steve Albini and such. We had no ambitions, but signed up for The Music Experiments competition (Músíktílaunir) as a lark. And we wrote some songs, simply because we had to reach their quota of four original songs (Davíð Ólafsson, historian and part time musician).

Other musicians talk about an inherent need to be a part of something. The very human and simple need to connect to other human beings steers the endeavour, and has more value in this sense than the actual music-making. The sociality factor, discussed in the preceding section, becomes quite dominant. Some of the following comments are quite touching in this respect. Musician Hallur Már was very clear about the pecking order. Friendship first, music second:

I bought a guitar when I was 17. Simply because my friends were doing music stuff. That was the reason. I had no interest in being alone in my bedroom, picking up songs from the radio. I wanted to do something with my friends. Do something, make something *together with them*. To be a part of something bigger, to be a part of a gang. Us against the world. And it felt good. Not many would admit to this, but you also wanted to be in a band, because it was cool. Music knowledge or skills were secondary in that respect (Hallur Már, a one-time bass player with 00s breakout alternative rock band Leaves).

This is seconded by Eysteinnsson:

I didn’t do any sports and those of us that started to play music together shared that. We sensed a need to do something, even if the initial drive was purely a social one. Personally, I absolutely sensed a need to create something, make something happen and the guitar is a nice tool for that. But I also had the very simple need to meet people and just do *something* with them. Me and a friend spent one summer together watching music documentaries and videos and that inspired us of course. This is one way to “hang” we could say. This need is unchanged to this day. To meet people and make something with them (Svavar Pétur Eysteinnsson, musician and a farmer).

Musician Benni Hemm Hemm (Benedikt Hermann Hermannsson) goes funnily against Eysteinnsson in his view, and it should be added, Hermannsson and Eysteinnsson have played together in various music ensembles through the years:

Unlike many of my musician's friends, I really dreaded the practice sessions in the garages. So many of them absolutely love this, mainly for the social part of course. I have a full understanding of this, I know where they are coming from and I love playing with them on stage. But I don't know, perhaps I am too time conscious for the practice? I couldn't stand the "hanging around" part, when we got something down, more or less, I wanted to go home! (Benni Hemm Hemm, a part-time musician and a music teacher).

The healthy mix of music-making and active friendship was mentioned by many:

The band (Ljótu hálfvitarnir, "The Darned Fools") is first and foremost a fun endeavour for us. It's kind of a network, made up of people who have musical and friendship ties in Húsavík, our hometown. It then took off, popularity wise, and we just went with it (Þorgeir Tryggvason, amateur musician).

You know, I've never given it much thought ... [on how he feels spending time with his friends, making music]. We meet once a week. Yes, there's harmony and empathy between us. Unspoken bond. Two of us often share the car ride to the practice session and the conversation during the ride is often fun filled. So, the friendship is cultivated and nurtured, for sure (Guðmundur Andri, parliament member, author and an amateur musician).

Me and Jóhann (his partner in Reptilicus) are good friends and our collaboration has always been very easy. We had been in different bands but when we started to work together, it just gelled immediately. The first time we met, we started to record music together and the rest is history! There's a healthy no-nonsense factor in our working relationship (Guðmundur Ingi Markússon, part time musician with Icelandic industrial legends Reptilicus).

One musician sensed the bond in his band later on, when they had been through the grinding mill of (Icelandic) fame. Páll Ragnar Pálsson was, just like the other members, a teenager when indie rock band Maus was formed (see mini-biography in section 3.2). He barely knew the other members when the band started out, and lived in another neighbourhood than the rest of them, which all lived in the same suburban neighbourhood. In their instance, music took central stage as their career quickly took flight. The friendship grew all the same, but the sage talk about friends enjoying music-making in harmony, like in Guðmundur Andri's case, is simply not what the game is about when you are sixteen, playing the rock star game:

Later in our career, with a bond solidified between us, I detected the chemistry between us. I felt it. It was good. Fortifying you could say. Within the group, you were totally free (Páll Ragnar Pálsson, composer and rock guitarist).

Talk about identity also came up, musicians sensing themselves as an integral part of the band - the band being an identity marker of sorts, a part of what they do but also a part of who they *are*. Ólafsson (Davíð) discussed his double identity:

I have difficulty framing this thought, but when we meet, the guys, it's not me, the historian or Stebbi, the computer scientist that are meeting up to play music together. I am not that man any more, I'm Davíð in Saktmóðigur, the guitar player, something that I've done since I was a teenager. The band is an effortless part of my life somehow. Not that I am conscious about this, but this is the feeling I have. These two worlds are completely separate (Davíð Ólafsson, historian and a part time musician).

Þórsson gave a more heartfelt admission, where the human connection clearly overrides the act of music-making:

To be together in this, to make music with other people, takes it to another level. I remember when Bobbi (his cousin in the band) decided to take a break. I was quite taken aback and realised then how important this was for me. It's an identity thing, to be in the band is a part of who you are. And you can't easily switch it off. It becomes a very natural part of you, and you become a bit shocked when someone else decides to walk away from it. It's somehow bigger than the both of you (Helgi Þórsson, farmer and part-time musician in the north of Iceland).³¹³

Some musicians saw the communal playing as serving an extra purpose, not just feeding the friendship, the music or hopes for fame and fortune. This seems a clearer, more grown-up view in a way:

We formed a band from the crew, just as a way to heighten the morale and get the men to relax, as we were all meeting on a new ship, coming from various ones (Björn Valur Gíslason, captain on a freezer trawler, politician and amateur musician).

We had all finished our studies, set up families and the band was thus formed, purely as a hobby. Something to keep the friendship alive. We composed songs and worked on them together. It was clear in everyone's minds that the band would remain purely as a hobby. No one has ever pressed on about changes in that department – and not that we've ever had a real chance of that anyway (Guðmundur Andri, parliament member, author and an amateur musician).

Gíslason describes the formation of the freezer trawler band as a means to an end, a platform to boost morale among the men. The same goes for Guðmundur Andri, the band first and foremost a glue for ongoing friendship. This purpose-filled aim also took on a more personal turn, where a musician finds him in an extracurricular role which he enjoys:

³¹³ I remember reading an interview in the Melody Maker with Curve's singer, Toni Halliday, when I was 17 years old or so. In the interview she quite calmly said she would rather break up the band than losing her friendship with the other member, Dean Garcia. This struck me as odd - but at the same time as graceful, honest and brave somehow.

We meet regularly to play and rehearse but the output in terms of records and live playing is minimal. I've noticed that we aren't too keen on live playing. We can't be bothered. But we've played one rock/metal festival each year in the last summers and that seems to fulfil that need.³¹⁴ I personally have had some joy in planning these things, design some posters, making calls, the work around it. You know, just some joy in that activity and run-around. Doing something, making something. In a true DIY spirit (Davíð Ólafsson, historian and a part-time musician).

Guðmundur Andri mentions the habitual nature of music-making when working in a group, but in a more optimistic light than Tryggvason did in the preceding section:

It becomes a kind of a habit. You are stuck in it. The creative process is fun, challenges in writing the lyrics and the music. Sometimes it is collaborative, sometimes someone brings something for the other to see and hear (Guðmundur Andri, parliament member, author and an amateur musician).

Ólafsson (Davíð), who has been prominent in this section, has the final say, noting how outside forces spurred his band on, echoing proclamations from 4.1, where the Icelandic effect was discussed and the positive role that the media and institutions can play:

We (his punk rock band, Saktmóðigur) were also starting to get some positive feedback and that egged us on. There was a certain dialogue or dynamic between us and the people who liked us, like two of Iceland's most respected edgy music writers who wrote glowing pieces about us. That exposure and acknowledgement was important (Davíð Ólafsson, historian and a part-time musician).

As can be seen, the need for human contact and companionship often steers people into music-making. And that, in fact, being the main drive for the musicking, rather than the music itself. The band activities then frame and nurture friendships, which for some, formed a part of their identity. Finnegan writes: "Working together in a group has sometimes been called one of the most profoundly human of experiences."³¹⁵ She then expands on this, putting it into a concert playing context: "How much more this must apply when the joint work constituted an act – that of artistic expression – widely recognised as a deeply valued one and acclaimed by the band's close friends."³¹⁶ On the value of live playing, she says: "This could not in itself keep players together, but was certainly experienced as one of the deep rewards of participating in a band and building on the jointly acquired skills of playing together which alone made the experience of public performance possible."³¹⁷ Here, Finnegan nails what the interviewees described in this section but also how they described their need to play live, in

³¹⁴ Eistnaflug or "The Flight of the Testicles": a heavy metal festival held in a small village in the East fjords, attracting quite some big names from abroad and most of the active extreme metal scene in Iceland.

³¹⁵ Finnegan, Ruth. 1989. *The Hidden Musicians...*, p. 268.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 268 – 269.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

section 4.2.3. Stebbins also talked about how musicians, of the amateur ilk are “charmed by their leisure and by their friends and acquaintances” and:

Seek out friends with similar social stature and dabble together in extracurricular activities alongside the music, gossiping, bantering and unconsciously growing and nurturing a friendship that goes beyond the stated purpose, the one of making music together.³¹⁸

The descriptions and experiences also align neatly with Farrell’s assumption in his “collaborative circles” research, where “such circles sustains the motivation of each member to do creative work.”

³¹⁸ As stated in the literature chapter, section 2.2.

4.3.3 Playing with other people

I was fifteen years old and I was simply desperate to join a band. And I made some concerted efforts to make that happen. But at the same time, it was natural somehow. I was just in this state. This is going to happen.”

-Páll Ragnar Pálsson, composer and rock guitarist.

This section is intended to include ruminations on group playing, without limiting it to the friendship angle that characterised the preceding section. The musicians here either describe how they started out by playing with people they didn't know that well, how they got people/professionals in on projects, and the simple pragmatic advantage to it, as Myrra Rós stated bluntly: “It inspires you (playing with others). You get ideas.” The activities described here are not necessarily cold and calculated, but the music takes first place, rather than the need for friends and connections, especially when the musicians are, sometimes reluctantly, taking their first steps:

At this time, I did not have enough self-esteem to write songs on my own. But to do it with my friends and band members, that worked. You are more secure somehow. I brought my stuff to the table from day one but I found it a little bit nerve-wrecking I must admit. As the years passed, it simply became easier. But you are always a bit wary, representing your stuff. It was a very co-operative unit, the band, I must say. And we did a lot and had a lot of drive. Always playing, rehearsing and releasing records. Create, create, create (Páll Ragnar Pálsson, composer and rock guitarist).

Rúnarsdóttir bravely admits that group work is difficult for her:

On my last record I got an arranger on board and it felt good to loosen up control a little bit. But it has to be someone that meets you in the middle – and I have never found that person. I've tried to form bands, tried to put the solo-artist to the side, but to no avail. I've only made solo albums and I'm always the director of the project. My husband is a musician and he thrives on the friendship, found in the bands. I find this utterly charming and I would like to experience it but I haven't yet found the avenue. I would like to try to be more diplomatic, to be one part of a puzzle, but I really don't know if I would know how (laughs)! I've done it a little bit through the KÍTÓN association (Icelandic Women in Music) but not in my own music-making (Lára Rúnarsdóttir, part-time musician).

Styrmir Sigurðsson describes how he got elevated as a musician when he joined older and more experienced players, echoing both Behr's writing on the flux between the amateurs and professionals, where “dabblers” meet “devotees”, and Farrell's writing about “magnet places”, where Sigurðsson's band acted like “... a setting where novices perceive there to be a network that will help them become experts in a discipline.” This is not to say that Sigurðsson was a dabbler - I'm using Behr's analysis here to understand how people climb the musical “success ladder” and can utilise bands/people in that respect:

When I was a child I went to a music school and enjoyed it. I liked the creative part of it and picking up songs by ear, rather than sight-reading classical music. I quit when I became a teenager and joined a band. I played with a variety of bands but I was stoked when I was asked to play with a band called Pax Vobis³¹⁹. It was on another level, creative wise, and I was very excited to be able to partake in that. Playing with others, it's like a drug, I guess. Playing in a band, for instance, where everyone is locked into a beautiful groove, that's simply euphoric. That's one of the most fulfilling aspects for me in terms of music-making (Styrmir Sigurðsson, filmmaker and a musician).

I'll conclude with Mugison's beautiful remark on joint music-playing:

Playing with others, that connection is holy in my mind. I live for that. I wouldn't be in music, if it wasn't for that. It's spiritual. I'm not a religious man, but to play with your soul-mates, there's nothing that trumps that. Nothing. This communication without words, it's just irreplaceable (Mugison (Örn Elías Guðmundsson), full-time musician, more or less. Avant leanings but highly popular among Icelanders).

³¹⁹ Pax Vobis was one of the most prominent New Romantic bands in Iceland.

4.4 Amateurs and professionals (and the big grey area in-between)

*“Derivation of the word “amateur” from the Latin amare, to love, has resulted in the curious situation in which cultivation of a field as a pastime presupposes love of it, whereas cultivation of it as a task may imply that love of it is irrelevant, if not dangerous.”*³²⁰

This section was for a long time the crux of the thesis and although not playing the dominant role I intended it to do, it still gives a very important insight into and helps with an understanding of how Icelandic musicians manoeuvre themselves. Personally, I relate strongly to Seeger’s fine comment at the beginning of this section. I very easily slipped into the “either/or” categorisation that he describes when I started this project, where all amateurs are fair of heart and the professionals stone cold businessmen. Seeger continues:

We all know of amateurs who are so enthralled by the object of their devotion that their activity is sometimes not quite rational. On the other hand, we all know professional workers who are themselves dry as dust and make everything they touch dry as dust. It is sometimes found that the discipline of study may shackle love of the field studied.³²¹

The difference to being an amateur musician and a professional one is far from clear-cut as I have detailed. The area between those two polars is huge, and often, musicians are either semi-professionals or semi-amateurs. It’s also a dangerous simplification to say that the professionals are cold and calculated while the amateur is doing everything exclusively for the art itself. Sigur Ros is a brand today, a fully professional band where members make their living of it, but they can be as emotionally invested in their art as anyone, despite the commerce involved.

In this section, there are four facets to this. In the first sub-section, some of the musicians’ brush with fame (and lack of) will be explored. In the second, there are accounts from musicians that work on music alongside other work obligations, and in the third one a comparison will be drawn between the skilled artisan to the (untrained) amateur. Lastly, I will analyse the distinction between untamed, inspired artistry and disciplined, made-to-order work.

³²⁰ Seeger, Charles. 1949. “Professionalism and Amateurism in the Study of Folk Music” in *The Journal of American Folklore* 62, no. 244: 107-13, p. 107.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

4.4.1 Fame and fortune vs. grounded reality.

“I really detested the music industry. It’s 10% making some music and then 90% doing some bullshit.”

-Höskuldur Ólafsson, rapper in breakout group Quarashi, now mostly retired.

Most of my subjects didn’t have the luck (or misfortune, depending on how you look at it) of Ólafsson, who got to travel the world, sell thousands of records, act in MTV videos, work in professional studios etc. As his biting comment proves, not all that glitters is gold.

In my work as a music journalist, I detected a not so subtle difference between musicians from the jazz/classical worlds and the popular music world. When asked about the potential commercial viability of the records they were releasing or the projects they were undertaking, players from the first world tended to be grounded, eyes on the job at hand rather than on dreams of making it. The popular musicians - especially the younger breed - usually came across as idealistic. The explanation is fairly transparent, and has to do with the working atmosphere in each world; the rules, formal or unspoken, that people adhere to. People from the classical/jazz world, where everyone had gone through a formal education of some sort, had a lot of set pieces in front of them; paid jobs in an orchestra, funds from associations and a rather constricted path in that sense.³²² The popular musicians, on the other hand, had all kinds of back stories and the biographies in this thesis (3.2) make for a fairly representative sample. One of the musical worlds that Finnegan dissects in *The Hidden Musicians* is indeed the world of “rock and pop” as she calls it. She ties her observations together thus:

Perhaps the most prominent single characteristic of the preoccupations of rock players in Milton Keynes ... was their interest in expressing their own views and personality through music-making: a stress on individuality and artistic creation which accords ill with the mass theorists’ delineation of popular music.³²³

Finnegan then goes on to talk about the emphasis on *self-teaching* (italics hers), the self-reliant patterns of operation and the “well-founded expectation that even a young musician just starting could play effectively with friends and perform in public”³²⁴. Finnegan does well in framing the aspirations and desires of the pop/rock musician, seen in the theme mapping here and in the “heads in the clouds” sentence I put forward a few paragraphs ago. The

³²² Amiina, a string quartet that played frequently with Sigur Ros in their initial stages, was established especially so that the members could bypass the usual route. See Thoroddsen, Arnar Eggert. 2008. “Að læra ... til að skapa”, in Morgunblaðið, January 12. Transl.: “Learning ... to create”.

³²³ Finnegan, Ruth. 1989. *The Hidden Musicians...*, p. 129.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

Icelandic popular musicians follow similar lines as their British counterparts did some 40 years ago:

Nevertheless, a sense of personal pride and achievement was one striking feature that seemed to run through all these bands. It was in such bands that their members felt they could really make some individual mark both now at the local level and, perhaps, more widely in the future. In contrast to the hierarchies and insecurities of school, work or the social services, playing in a band provided a medium where players could express their own personal aesthetic vision and through their music achieve a sense of controlling their own values, destiny and self-identity.³²⁵

The subjects of this thesis were operating in a music world which had some examples of musicians having gone “all the way” (Björk, Sigur Rós) and a constant talk about how rich and efficient the music life in Iceland was in their ears. Their underlying notion was usually: “Well, why not us?”:

Of course, we wanted to be famous. That was the dream. Things have changed rapidly in regards to playing abroad; bands today have better chances and they are more professional. We tried it a little bit, but it wasn't really a concerted effort (Páll Ragnar Pálsson, composer, rock guitarist).

At a certain point in my life, given the chance to become a famous musician? Yes, absolutely! Thank you very much (Haukur Viðar Alfreðsson, guitarist with melodic punkrock group Morðingjarnir (The Murderers). Works for an advertising agency).

Musicians with some experience under their belts have seen the changes in the industry, referring - amongst other things - to local changes, detailed in the sections on the '90s and especially the '00s in the chapters on Icelandic music history:

We wanted to be famous, absolutely. We strove for it. The global village and the digital reality has somehow grounded the “big dream”. There are more artists striving for it, and in a way, the chances of getting somewhere are slightly bigger (Hallur Már, a one-time bass player with 00s breakout alternative rock band Leaves).

I sense that more bands today have their eyes on the prize, compared to when we were starting out in the early '90s. We never gave this a thought. It's like the bands today sense that they have a real possibility of becoming professional (or semi-professional) musicians. They also know more about the biz and have grown up with the internet, which makes it both easier to communicate between countries, other artists and producing the music itself. At the same time, there's not as much pressure on the bands to make it, as they are so many and it's almost a given that some percentages of them will go for it. For younger musicians, active today, it's not a question of “make or break”, it's rather a possible route, grounded in a more sober reality (Davíð Ólafsson, historian and a part time musician).

³²⁵ Ibid.

Faced with questions of fame and fortune, the opportunities and the compromises this entails, the answers were quite varied. I often received the “I don’t compromise my art” kind of response:

I wouldn’t mind to have more audience, play in a proper venue etc. I wouldn’t mind to be able to have the financial freedom to do the music I would like to do. But I could not do it if it wasn’t 100% on my terms (Berglind Ágústsdóttir, experimental musician, working in Berlin).

There were also clear, level-headed estimations in evidence, drawn from experience:

I do music for the music’s sake and because I need to create with others. For some, popularity plays an integral part. Like, if you are not a *popular* musician you are not a musician. I’ve been in that state of mind myself. But lately, I’ve backed from this and come to the idea that music is one of the things that I do, a thing I *need* to do, and any aspirations for popularity are secondary. I’ve felt relieved by this, I must say (Svavar Pétur, musician and a farmer).

This was also an issue that usually prompted long-winded, thoughtful responses. Some of the musicians hadn’t worked out quite what to make of this and some were getting their first chance to reflect on this and their career with a sympathetic, informed person. Regrets and doubts came to the fore but also warm - if bittersweet - memories:

Well ... of course you think, “I should have done this or that”. But we didn’t know what we were doing, business wise, at the time. For instance, we didn’t follow up our first album with a similar one, and I got the feeling that our label wasn’t that into our sophomore album. Things like that (Guðmundur Ingi Markússon, part time musician with Icelandic industrial legends Reptilicus).

When I think back, our name wasn’t especially helpful, when it came to radio-time (The Murderers). We started the band as a joke and the name is perfect for those kind of tomfooleries. But as we progressed, we wouldn’t have minded getting a bit of airtime on the radio etc. But the name wasn’t the only reason for our lack of success, of course. Our aim at the beginning was to keep this squarely as an underground thing, releasing cassettes and such. When we realized that we could actually play and the band was gelling, our vision for the band changed. There was a kind of a gap at the time in Icelandic rock and we saw that we could perhaps fill it in some way. Our ambitions were not out of any proportion, but I admit, for a moment I foresaw us as some kind of rock saviours here in Iceland. However, it didn’t come to fruition (Haukur Viðar Alfreðsson, guitarist with melodic punkrock group Morðingjarnir (The Murderers). Works for an advertising agency).

When you are in a band, the individual members sometimes have different ideas where they want to take the band. I wanted it all, and thought that it was almost a given that we would be superstars (talking about his post-rock band Miri). I wasn’t exactly with my feet on the ground. Two of us were very eager and two were ... not as eager.³²⁶ When we were active, all of us were very opinionated about the artistic direction of the band and that was, simply put, hard. The energy within the band could be overwhelming. We were talking about it, just yesterday, that bands need to have one member who is more or less neutral about where things are going. He’s

³²⁶ As it is, of the eager ones, one of them is a member of FM Belfast today, a quite renowned Icelandic band and Hjalti, who is a theologian, still does music part-time. The non-eager ones are part-time musicians as well.

undramatic and just holds a steady beat. When the band went on a hiatus, I finally had time to self-reflect a little. And I asked myself, what was the real reason for these dreams about fame and fortune? Was it the ego? Was it some kind of a solution ... and solution to what? (Hjalti Jón Sverrisson, part-time musician and a theologian).

Alfreðsson describes something that could be called “gradual ambition” while Sverrisson goes for the classic inner tensions of almost every working pop/rock band; the constant drama and intrigue that keeps much of the music press going. Again, Behr’s writing on how amateurs try their hand at professionalism on open mic nights is insightful, if we adapt it to the wide-eyed hopes displayed by the interviewees when they were starting out.

There’s also a kind of “innocence lost” aspect to all of this. Pure souls, with music-making skills as an asset, facing the reality of the big cold machine of the music industry. Will I stay an amateur/“unprofessional” and cling to the joy? Or expand my audience, chase the dream and possibly lose something ... even compromise? See Ólafsson’s doom and gloom comment at the very start. Here are some choice quotes from Simon’s Frith article, “The Industrialization of Music” that sheds a nice, clear light on this. Frith states that music is “the most spontaneously human activity” therefore making its industrial production “suspect”.³²⁷ “The contrast between music-as-expression and music-as-commodity defines twentieth century pop experience,” says Frith and the difference between this is at the very heart of many issues in the thesis. Frith continues:

What such arguments assume ... is that there is some essential human activity, music-making, which has been colonized by commerce. Pop is a classic case of alienation: Something human is taken from us and returned in the form of commodity ... in the language of rock criticism, what is at stake here is the *truth* of music – truth to the people who created it, truth to our experience. What is bad about the music industry is the layer of deceit and hype and exploitation it places between us and our creativity.³²⁸

This passage is repeated in many different form in the thesis. In 4.2. (Music-making) the musicians are more or less preoccupied by truth, sincerity, purity etc.; in 4.3 (Sociality) the importance and joy of making music with other human beings is to the fore, and the positive experiences of that accentuated throughout. In this section, the musicians are preoccupied with the fear of losing something precious, should money enter the frame and the same arguments are upheld in 4.5 (Livelihood).

³²⁷ Frith, Simon. 1987. “The industrialization of music” in Lull, James (ed.). *Popular Music and Communication*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications., p. 11.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Finally, Jófríður Ákadóttir, the sole interviewee taking her first steps towards fame and fortune, slightly echoes Ólafsson's fed up proclamation at the very start of the section. She manages to be world-weary and just a touch naïve at the same time:

Of course I think, "Why do I bother?", when I'm faced with some music industry bullshit. I absolutely don't care for the non-musical things you have to do but unfortunately, the people who tend to succeed, market-wise, are the ones who are in tune with this. It's weird, in a way, that the music as such is not enough (Jófríður Ákadóttir, JFDR, a young full time musician, working successfully on various projects on the underground/indie side of things).

4.4.2 Doing music alongside non-music things

“I can’t do a 100% job alongside music-making. I simply haven’t got the energy to create after work. The passion has to be in place, if I’m going to be able to make music, and a generic 9-5 job simply kills it.”

-Róbert Örn Hjálmtýsson, part time underground rock musician.

It was interesting to talk to the musicians about how they fit music-making into a life filled with full time jobs and family obligations. All sorts of routes were taken towards their “calling”, and I emphasise *towards*, as most of them admitted that abstaining from music-making was nigh on impossible, as detailed more thoroughly in chapter 4.2. Daniel Cavicchi, co-author of *My Music: Explorations of Music in Daily Life*, writes, reflecting on Tia De Nora:

It has always struck me as slightly absurd to have to talk specifically about something called “music in everyday life.” After all, for me and for millions of other people in the Western world, music is experienced *only in everyday life* (italics mine), only as a brief, fleeting part of life’s mundane moments: commuting to work, eating in a public restaurant, going shopping at the mall, playing with children, or watching television. Like many people, I live in a small house in the suburbs, far enough from the rich urban musical culture trumpeted every Sunday in the newspaper to make it seem otherworldly. My musical life stopped being about regularly playing in an orchestra, or going out to hear bands, a long time ago. Instead it means listening to the radio or the CD player when I get a chance; indiscriminate hearing of music on television, in public places, or while on hold on the telephone; and maybe fooling around a little bit, alone, on the guitar or trumpet for twenty minutes each weekend until my kids beg me to stop. *Like many adults, I music when I can, within the constraints of the culture in which I live* (italics mine).³²⁹

Despite Cavicchi’s somewhat academic tone, the situation he describes is quite apt for many of my subjects. It also depends on who you talk to, how comfortable they are with their place regarding this:

I used to split it in half. Doing music one week and a paid job the other. This I did to keep the music “pure”, as I didn’t know if there would be income from it or not. Some people get worried about not being able to work on music, something that they love, so they go into sound-engineering or something like that, tricking themselves that by that, they are devoted to their calling. I don’t agree with this (Jónas Sig., semi-professional musician).

Jónas’ take on this is curious, and thought-provoking. It is a stern and slightly unusual approach to his practice but seems quite sensible, at least in theory.³³⁰ He also has an “all or

³²⁹ Cavicchi, Daniel. 2002. “From the Bottom Up - Thinking About Tia Denora’s Music in Everyday Life” in *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol. 1, #2, December. See also *My Music: Explorations of Music in Daily Life*, where forty individuals of various age and stature are interviewed about how they enjoy, experience, and use music. Edited by Crafts, Susan D., Cavicchi, Daniel and Keil, Charles. 1993. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

³³⁰ I do know for a fact that he doesn’t follow this model 100%; it varies from season to season, for example.

nothing” view on how a musically creative person should act towards this, rejecting out of hand any side routes people are inclined to take, just so they are able to do “something” relating to music. In fairness, Jónas is exclusively talking about people who long to create music but do something else instead, not people who are happy doing engineering work. That stance is clearly informed by his own experience and his quasi-religious revelations at the time. Others were less dramatic and Sigurðsson sees things in a more down-to-earth manner:

I knew from a young age that I would do something creative. Music, films, whatever. I was very enthusiastic about all of this. I also remember, that when I did play, briefly in a cover-band, a paid job, I really disliked it. I knew that I could never do that kind of thing for a living. So I just decided. The music would have to be 100% pure, straight from the heart, and the livelihood would have to simply be something else. So, I went to film school and I work in that field today. I love what I do but the music is a passion that will never leave me and I have to nurture it pretty regularly. It’s more than a hobby, it’s an ingrained part of me (Styrmir Sigurðsson, filmmaker and a musician).

This is a similar take to Markússon, who is quite content with his lot:

It depends (on having time to do music). Sometimes I don’t have any, sometimes a gap opens. But I’m doing this alongside family life and a 100% job. On the other hand, I don’t do sports, fishing or anything like that. So I consider the music-making as my hobby (I asked: “A serious leisure then?” and Guðmundur nodded) (Guðmundur Ingi Markússon, part time musician with Icelandic industrial legends Reptilicus).

There is also a certain wry nonchalance evident in this:

My income is not based solely on music. I’ve sometimes wondered, that it would be fun to be able to make a living off it. But I think it would be difficult. And what’s the end aim really? Like in my case, I’ve never thought about whether the albums will sell or not. I’ve never given it one thought really (Halldór Waren. Semi-pro musician, small label owner in the East fjords of Iceland).

Heiða Árnadóttir, from experimental outfit Mógil, has an interesting tale, when she had to face a judgemental music snob, who saw things in a more dogmatic fashion:

I once met a man who asked me, “Do you do something else for a living than singing?”, and I said, yes. Then he replied: “Then you are not a singer”. He was clearly coming from this snobbish TOTAL ARTIST angle. But then again, if I’m asked, what you do, I answer: “I teach singing.” I don’t say, “I’m a singer” (Heiða Árnadóttir, classically trained singer, music teacher and semi-professional musician with an experimental outfit).

Árnadóttir’s identity, even authenticity, was challenged in this exchange and I’ll look closer at that aspect in general at the end of this section. But as she states herself at the end, it depends on who you talk to, and how they describe themselves. Guðmundur Andri’s case is instructive here, as he looks at himself as an author rather than a musician (see 4.2.1). You can also have

boastful “musicians” who do little activity of that sort, as well as very active musicians that shy away from describing themselves as such.

The difficulty in doing music full-time, trying to balance income from a steady job and a potential career in music – which may or may not come to fruition – is well described in Sarah Bakers’ article, ““Nobody Expects to be Paid ... Nobody Asks, What is the Fee?”: Making a Living from Music in a Time of Economic Crisis – the Icelandic Experience”.³³¹ Most of her subjects describe an almost panic induced reality, and bear in mind, the interviews were carried out not long after Iceland’s financial crash in 2008. Here’s a descriptive quote from one of them, a young musician beginning to make his way:

I also have a family --- I have a child and everything ... And there are maybe, like, one or two hours in the day that I can maybe do something in music, or creative work. Sometimes you’re just too tired to do anything. So I really feel that I need to do something about it now, because now’s the time.³³²

³³¹ Baker, Sarah. 2014. ““Nobody Expects to be Paid ... Nobody Asks, What is the Fee?...”, p. 33.

³³² Ibid., p. 41.

4.4.3 Skills and craft vs. amateurs

“Amateurs are more pure. They don’t need the acceptance as much as the professionals or the people who are aware of the ‘enchanted’ pop and rock world. They do it for the music, unaware of the business.”

-Höskuldur Ólafsson, rapper in breakout group Quarashi, now mostly retired.

In this sub-section, yet another side to the amateur/professional question will be put into perspective. Seeing the “pure” amateur in a glowing light was quite prevalent, while the skills and craft of the professionals were at the same time met with understanding. But it really was down to who you were talking to. Younger interviewees, raised on rock, were more prone to prejudice while the older interviewees, and especially those who have some experience in doing paid jobs, were more sympathetic to music as a profession. Guðmundur Andri put things into historical perspective:

There was a rupture, a tension, between the up and coming young bands in the ‘60s and the older, professionals, who took pride in their work as skilled craftsmen. The younger groups were in a way putting a stain on their work in their opinion (Guðmundur Andri, parliament member, author and amateur musician).

Interestingly, all the quotes relating to this, contained a certain celebration of the amateur virtues, at times verging on mild snobbery. The comments are characterised by pride - it’s cool to be a bit amateurish, and part of a deviant DIY. This is underlined with a belief that there is inherent value in imperfection:

I remember at the time (early ‘00s) that it wasn’t considered cool to be professional. That was the stance in the underground scene, and you took it with you. You weren’t afraid to be a bit amateurish, you had the approval from the cool kids (Hallur Már, a one-time bass player with ‘00s breakout alternative rock band Leaves).

We made a point of doing everything by ourselves on our CDs. Not to get professional players in, which is a rarity, I’ve heard. A real DIY stance. And we like to keep the recordings not too shiny or “corrected” as is the wont (Guðmundur Andri, parliament member, author and amateur musician).

I bought the punk ethos wholesale. I’m a complete dabbler on all kinds of instruments and my playing can be heard on all kinds of records. And I couldn’t care less about the quality of my playing (there was an audible sense of pride in this exclamation) (Þorgeir Tryggvason, amateur musician).

I like mistakes and imperfection. I record my demos on cheap software. The thing is to get them in, to do it, and not let perfectionism stop you. There can be a charm to raw and gritty music (Berglind Ágústsdóttir, experimental musician, working in Berlin).

4.4.4 Skills and craft vs. artistry

“I remember when we were reviewed on the radio, and the reviewer called us “amateurs” and that we were in another division – that we should be judged on other merits. This she did, without putting us down or anything like that. I was pleased with that review.”

-Björn Valur Gíslason, captain on a freezer trawler, politician and amateur musician.

When the question of artistry vs. craft (that includes commerce) came into play, the replies and ruminations became somewhat heated. Let’s start with a wonderful story from Mugison:

I’ve run the gamut. I’ve been a heavy, arty snob and done very commercial things. And all kinds of things in between. And ... it all goes down to a need for recognition. The left-field is my clan, all things considered. In my view, everything that’s *real* comes from there. But I remember a strong conflict when I was asked to duet on a record with one of Iceland’s best known pop singers.³³³ The knee-jerk reaction was NO! Then after a couple of cigarettes, I found myself to be a very obnoxious and arrogant guy. And the place it was coming from was an inferiority complex. In a way I think ... this is not perfectly formulated in my head. I was just annoyed about me wanting to put things into boxes. When we run our music festival in the West Fjords³³⁴ it’s all about mixing all of these things up as much as we can. There’s an instance, relating to this, that I remember very vividly. I was with some musician friends and we were talking about how lame it was to play for the banks or some relatable firms and that it was simply bad for everyone. Another musician friend then enters the conversation and flips out. Absolutely flips out. He says, succinctly: “Are you man-haters? These are human beings, asking you to play music for them! And you are dissing them, because of their background. If you accept to play, it’s your duty to hone your craft and respect the audience. But if you turn up full of resentment, hate and feelings of inferiority, you are just man-haters.” Strong words, but there’s something there. It at least rattled my brain quite heavily. (Mugison (Örn Elías Guðmundsson), full time musician, more or less. Avant leanings but highly popular among Icelanders)

There’s many connotations in Mugison’s story, one of them the long held suspicion that commercialised music-making of any kind is inherently compromised (see Frith’s writing on this in 4.4.1). Mugison nonetheless acknowledges many paradoxes and describes well a mild soul torture in light of this. Eypór Gunnarsson, one of two professional musicians in the thesis, describes well how one thing does not exclude another. A joyful artistic fulfilment can be had as a free roaming artist *and* within paid confines:

Today, what I enjoy the most is to play with improv players and head to musical pastures unknown with them in tow. I want to try something new. How do I surprise myself? Not by playing what I already know. The session work I do is in reality my “job” while I get the artistic need fulfilled with the improv players. But of note, I

³³³ Björgvin Halldórsson, Bo, a legendary Icelandic pop singer. Imagine a hybrid of showbiz Presley and Sinatra, with a dash of Johnny Cash and Cliff Richard.

³³⁴ The festival is called Aldrei fór ég suður (“I never travelled south”, after a classic Bubbi song) and is a small festival, rich in rural atmosphere and all around local “Icelandicness”. It features both Icelandic and international acts.

don't look down on the more generic work and I enjoy it to a certain extent although you have to draw the line somewhere. But there, I'm providing a service, assisting other people in their creation (Eyþór Gunnarsson, professional musician with various ensembles, roots in jazz and pop).

Gunnarson even sees a communal value in his "job", assisting others and helping them to see their creations come to being.

Jóhann Jóhannsson, Iceland's famed film composer, who died this February, had his bread and butter from soundtrack work, which enabled him to do work on a more personal, uncommercial note, a kind of a split in work emphasis not unlike Gunnarsson. This can, of course, be combined, as Hallur Már says:

Who says you can't work on music, on the industry's term, and still produce something beautiful and authentic? The music is simply judged by its own merits (Hallur Már, a one-time bass player with '00s breakout alternative rock band Leaves).³³⁵

Continuing on that note, Tryggvason proclaims that joy must be inherent in music-making. The amateur *and* the craftsperson have a right to the romantic light:

You can't ever proclaim that a session player comes from a cold and calculated place. I think, if he would not have some joy from the playing, he would quickly become bad at what he does. And in my experience, what they bring, with their experiences, is rooted in some old, pure joy that got you in there initially. I find the idea of the artist as a skilled craftsperson romantic. You approach the job like a craft, put effort and skills in it, airy dreams of fame and fortune don't blind your sight but you enjoy presenting this in a proper way (Þorgeir Tryggvason, amateur musician).

Also, craft is necessary for musicians to harness the talent they possess. A work ethic and discipline are crucial in that respect:

You can't expect to be churning out masterpieces on a daily basis. In order to do proper work/music you need time, experience and to work at it. The only way to be a real musician is to approach it like office work. I remember how outraged people were when Nick Cave said he created in that situation but I thought: "What else is there to do?" I also read somewhere that Damon Albarn quits working, 4.30 pm, always, even when he is in the middle of something." (Páll Ragnar Pálsson, composer and rock guitarist).

In terms of the difference between a God-given, "natural" talent and accumulated skills and insights, where does it lie?:

³³⁵ On a sidenote, Jóhannsson was heralded as a progressive film composer, pushing the "genre" to pastures anew with his soundtrack work in *Sicario* and *Arrival*. Some are of the opinion that he went too far with the recent *Blade Runner* soundtrack in this aspect, resulting in him being axed from the project at the last minute and the more commercially viable Hans Zimmer brought in.

The idea of the genius is dangerous. I remember, when I was studying in Estonia, we were told to stop thinking about extreme cases like Mozart, if we wanted to get a realistic idea of how people manoeuvre themselves as composers. He's that far outside of the curve. But we crave these people, we love this idea of the mad, bohemian genius. It's very persistent." (Páll Ragnar Pálsson, composer and rock guitarist).

Even if people are skilled, they can be reluctant to use them, in the (mundane) context of a paid job:

I've been asked sometimes to entertain people at parties, a paid job, and I absolutely loath it. To be under some kind of a pressure to be funny, I can't do it. The knee-jerk reaction is to become boring (laughs) (Helgi Þórsson, farmer and part-time musician in the north of Iceland).

Finally, Tryggvason has an interesting point on classical musicians. Referring to the competent nature of their vocation, their skills as a certain means to an end (securing a job) and if they're not enough, an almost natural conclusion to simply lay down your instrument and do something else, lacking the all-encompassing deep need to create so vividly displayed in section 4.2:

I've heard from classically trained friends of mine, that quitting at one point altogether playing your instrument is perfectly logical for them. If you can't be as good as you need to be for certain stature/job, you can just as well quit altogether. I'm quite amazed at how common this is, people in that world quitting after years of hard work and playing and not touching their instruments in the aftermath. A complete either/or (Þorgeir Tryggvason, amateur musician).

The terms "identity" and "authenticity" is something that needs consideration in relation to this section and all of its subsections. The musicians are positioning themselves: Is my work of any value? Does it matter? How should I approach it? What kind of a musician *am I*? I will try to be as un-convoluted as possible discussing these terms and focus on the social reality that informs them. One of the parameters presented in 3.1 had to do with consciousness/unconsciousness and most of the interviewees are quite conscious about the workings of the music business and industry, aware of how people behave and more importantly, how people *should* behave (seen in the pathways section for instance). Many writers have focused on this problem, including Behr (2015)³³⁶, McLaughlin (2012)³³⁷ and Frith (1996)³³⁸ where the social context of the terms are at stake, how they are acted out and

³³⁶ Behr, Adam. 2015. "Join Together with the Band: Authenticating Collective Creativity in Bands and the Myth of Rock Authenticity Reappraised" in *Rock Music Studies*. 2 (1): 1-21.

³³⁷ McLaughlin, Sean Robert. 2012. "Locating Authenticities: A study of the ideological construction of professionalised folk music in Scotland". Unpublished PhD thesis, The University of Edinburgh.

³³⁸ Frith, Simon. 1996. "Music and Identity" in Hall, Stuart and du Gay, Paul (eds.). *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage.

performed in a way and how they can have a hollow ring to them, on closer inspection (how is the left more *real*, for instance, in Mugison's account?). Frith writes:

In talking about identity we are talking about a particular kind of experience, or a way of dealing with a particular kind of experience. Identity is not a thing but a process - an experiential process which is most vividly grasped as music. Music seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective ... The experience of identity describes both a social process, a form of interaction, and an aesthetic process; as Slobin³³⁹ argues, it is the "aesthetic rather than organisational/contextual aspects of performance" that "betray a continuity between the social, the group, and the individual" ... What I want to suggest, in other words, is not that social groups agree on values which are then expressed in their cultural activities (the assumption of the homology models) but that they only get to know themselves as groups (as a particular organisation of individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) through cultural activity, through aesthetic judgement. Making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; *it is a way of living them* (italics mine).³⁴⁰

³³⁹ As laid out in his book, *Subculture Sounds. Micromusic of the West* (published in 1993 by Wesleyan University Press, Hanover).

³⁴⁰ Frith, Simon. 1996. "Music and Identity", p. 108.

4.5 Livelihood

David Hesmondhalgh writes:

There is a massive oversupply of potential workers, which depresses remuneration for all but the highly successful (who are vastly over-rewarded, because of the “winner takes all” structure of the sector), and creates a labor (sic) market marked by a vast reservoir of unemployed and under-employed musicians, many of them well-trained and extremely talented. Clearly, the result is a context in which the pleasures and rewards of musical collaboration are compromised by structural conditions. Put simply, very few people indeed are able to make a living out of making music.³⁴¹

In this last section, I will look at how the subjects try to use music as a means of income/livelihood. In 4.4 I looked at this side of the music-making from a more abstract point of view but here I want to focus on actualities. In the first sub-section, the interviewees’ experience of making a living off what I call “generic” music-making will be delineated, i.e. where people use their musical skill to play music purely for an income, not necessarily to channel artistic needs or desires. In the second sub-section I will look at the opposite - musicians who sustain a living out of music-making that could be considered to some degree non-commercial. In the last sub-section, the contrast between making music as a means for livelihood and making music with no thoughts about such things whatsoever is explored.

4.5.1 Making a living from generic music-making

There’s wasn’t much to be had about this topic, simply as my subjects didn’t do a whole lot of generic music-making. Eyþór Gunnarsson, our standby professional musician, has a fine monologue about this aspect of music-making:

I’ve sometimes said that I haven’t done “proper” work since the late 70’s, which was the last time I did a summer job as a teen. I’ve managed to sustain a living from music ever since. Playing at country dances, studio work etc. I’ve managed to get by, month from month, but to be able to do that I have to cast my net pretty far and wide. So, all kinds of project have come my way. So I’m up for a hire in that way (he says this in a knowingly jokey, downgrading way). So, early on, I experienced myself on the fringe in regards to normal citizens. I was not a part of the 9 - 5 society. Simple things like taking our kids to school (note: Eyþór’s wife is also a musician) was tricky, because we weren’t used to waking up that early because of the late hours. So, I felt like an outsider in that way and you could sometimes sense condescending vibes from people. The taxi driver saying for instance: “So, you are always playing music are you? Don’t you do any work alongside it?” There was a lot of music in my upbringing and I never faced any criticism from the household towards my music endeavours. It was my main hobby for a long while and all of a sudden I started to get paid for doing

³⁴¹ Hesmondhalgh, David. 2013. *Why music matters*, p. 129.

it. Yes, I do feel that I'm lucky in that respect (Eyþór Gunnarsson, professional musician with various ensembles, roots in jazz and pop).³⁴²

It's maybe symbolic for the scope of this thesis that the only other comment revolves around resisting working in a generic environment:

I could live off the music here in Iceland. By doing paid jobs, singing in churches, at dances etc. But that's not for me. Then the music would become a job, and I don't care for that (Lára Rúnarsdóttir, part-time musician).

³⁴² Gunnarsson pointed out that some of Iceland's most famous singers of yore did other jobs alongside singing throughout their career.

4.5.2 Making a living of arty music-making

“If I was living in the U.S.A with my talent, my musical knowledge and craft, be it composing, playing, arranging etc., I would be a millionaire. I wouldn’t be super rich or super famous but there would be enough to do, enough people to serve and play for. A big enough market, in other words. In Iceland, you are too confined and it can be frustrating”

-Róbert Örn Hjálmtýsson, part time underground rock musician.

Many interviewees blamed the size of the Icelandic market, on not being able to sustain a living from their (great) music, as blatantly stated in the opening comment. The American underground rock band the Melvins tour and release a record almost every year, and have done so for over 30 years. That’s how the members make a living. The music is uncompromising, but they have big enough fan base around the world – and in America - to sustain themselves.³⁴³ The Icelanders talked about how they got their creative kicks in experimental music-making (interestingly, no one talked about getting a kick through “normal” music-making):

There’s a very slight chance to be able to work on your own music 100% in Iceland. You would have to do other jobs as well, could be music related but few can make a living working only on their own personal music (Styrmir Sigurðsson, filmmaker and a musician).

However, some have indeed tried:

I have twice made rigorous efforts to do music 100% and make a living out of it. Hired a work/practice space, went in there 8am in the morning and did it like an office job. I could sustain this for two or three months and then I simply lost the thread (Svavar Pétur, musician and a farmer).

In the beginning, we were very serious. The aim was to make a living of this. And at the very beginning, things looked good. We were in London and our album *Crusher of Bones* was to be distributed by our heroes in the industrial scene. We felt like we had “made it”. We put everything we had into this. Then, slowly, you sober up towards this. Today, you are not making music to conquer the world. You are doing the music for its own sake and then you get offers for a festival or something and that’s just an enjoyable bonus (Guðmundur Ingi Markússon, part time musician with Icelandic industrial legends Reptilicus).

Sóley, at the time of writing, was doing her own music 100% of the time *and* sustaining a living and she was grateful:

I don’t take this for granted (on being able to sustain a livelihood from music-making on the artists terms). I often think: “Wow, I’m lucky”. There was never any grand plan on becoming a “pop star”. And it all unfolded very naturally. And I sometimes

³⁴³ In a way, in the Melvins instance, the members couldn’t possibly go back and do something else, as their skills are absolutely bound up with the band. You could say that they are forced to keep going, even if the creative well has dried up.

get a bit of a guilty conscience. I look around and there are tons of very talented people who can't catch a break. You know, why me? (Sóley, a "more or less" professional musician on the indie-experimental side of things).

But at the same time she displayed an annoyance almost that those options weren't available for those who truly possessed a talent towards music:

Somehow, I could not imagine myself *not* doing music in my life. And when some of my cohorts gave it up for, let's say, studies in the university, I became a little agitated. "Hey, weren't we in this together! To make music?" And then you start to doubt yourself, should I maybe go to the uni. as well?"

Hjálmtýsson, who opened this section, is almost in a stunned state because of this:

I would love to be able to live of my music. That would make me glad. And I honestly think it's quite weird, that that's not the situation. I'm forced to work. I could go for the "living on the dole" option but that eats you up.

Mugison describes a tactical way to be able to put an emphasis on the arty music-making, but he lives in a rural area, where general living costs are cheaper:

Living in the West fjords is cheaper than living in Reykjavik and by that I can abstain from playing weddings, funerals etc. The masses see you as a musician, that enjoys playing for the people, but there are hidden alleyways to all of this. Alleyways that people really don't want to see (Mugison (Örn Elías Guðmundsson), full-time musician, more or less. Avant leanings but highly popular among Icelanders).

Mugison is insightful, in pointing out the romance that most feel towards musicians. In his instance, we *want* to see him labouring over an album infused with thoughtful lyrics and ground-breaking music rather than playing half-heartedly for bankers. Hidden alleyways, indeed - yet these are pathways that musicians are forced to walk, in spite of the ignorance the general public may have about this. Salka Sólf, one of Iceland's brightest pop stars today describes her reluctant path to a full time job in music/arts:

I went to music school, enjoyed it, quit as a teenager, but I continued to do music. Played guitar, sang and learned to play all kinds of instruments, just on my own. This was easy for me. I was active in music but I didn't get to the point to think about it as a possible career. Which is strange, because my father is an actor and an artist. I just didn't, for some reason, reach that point at the time. I don't know why it didn't happen. But music was my deepest love, absolutely. I just foresaw that I would work and do that somehow on the side. I moved to London to study Actor Musicianship, and that changed my attitude towards music-making and art making in general. "I can do this, pretty well, and I can do this as a job." At the same time, I still didn't dare to dream. I was so careful not to build castles in the sky. I don't know, trying to be realistic? I was afraid, but at the same time ... the confidence was building (Salka Sólf, full time musician and actor).

Gunnarsson concludes on an optimistic note:

My feeling is that today, people are more aware of the possibility of making a decent living out of music. Here in Iceland the general public has examples like Björk, Sigur Ros and Of Monsters and Men. When I was starting out, in the 70s, music was often connected to party-hardy lifestyle so people looked down on it.

Here are various accounts on how to manoeuvre oneself in a difficult job market, and most of the answers are relatively optimistic to say the least. David Hesmondhalgh writes extensively about this in his tome *The Cultural Industries* where he describes its workings as complex, ambivalent and contested. A “risky business” with often “high production costs and low reproduction costs” and the creativity/commerce tension, described by the interviewees helps to “generate the relative and provisional autonomy that many symbol makers attain”, adding “to the uncertainty and difficulty of the environment in which cultural businesses work.”³⁴⁴

³⁴⁴ Hesmondhalgh, David. 2013. *The Cultural Industries*. London: Sage. p. 7 – 10.

4.5.3 Making a living of music vs. making music with no expectation of financial rewards

Árnadóttir tells of how stepping into an experimental music world, with little or no chances of financial gain, helped her reconnect to her muse, giving her a second life in music:

I love teaching music. I do that 50% of my time, not too much, so I get an enjoyment out of it. Then I'm working on Mógil stuff, without salary, but I love it. It's my baby in a way. So, in a way, I'm now doing music 100% of the time, and I enjoy both parts. I could do more to sustain a living out of music, like singing in funerals for instance, but I'm simply not interested in that particular field. Working with Mógil has given me so much. After six years of hearing about how to do things and how not to do things in the conservatory it freed me up. It took the fright away, I had become scared to sing. I didn't know how to behave, everything was so stiff (Heiða Árnadóttir, classically trained singer, music teacher and semi-professional musician with an experimental outfit).

Two of the interviewees talked about how they never saw their endeavour as a means for income:

I've not even come close to be able to sustain myself financially from music-making. The highest fee we ever got in our career for a single gig was 500 pounds and we were stoked. But we played a lot, we amassed 250 gigs in three or four years, maybe not as much as a professional band, but for three anxiety ridden youngsters with full jobs it's quite something. We knew that we would never be able to make a living off of this but speaking from a personal viewpoint I was always a bit miffed that we couldn't get just a bit more of an audience to see us. And you start to doubt yourself. Aren't we cool enough? Is the music not good? Is the name ruining all of this for us? Etc. But, at the core, this was a hobby, but a hobby we took very seriously. (Haukur Viðar Alfreðsson, guitarist with melodic punkrock group Morðingjarnir (The Murderers). Works for an advertising agency).

I would like to be able to sustain a 100% living out of music. But the terms have to be right. I tried to get myself established in the ad/films music business but it didn't come to fruition. The competition is stiff. But I think that doing music by design wouldn't fit me (Ólafur Örn Josephsson, part time musician, leads his own indie-rock band).

These three musicians talk about music-making as a means to an end. They are, unlike the musicians in 4.5.2, free from any angst as to whether they are selling their souls or not, or whether they hit the jackpot with their arty music-making. Josephsson admits that he tried to make a living from music-making, failed and is now content with his position. Alfreðsson states that he knew that they wouldn't have a break in making their band a livelihood but the prettiest story is from the ever optimistic Árnadóttir. She rekindled an old flame by taking the plunge, re-establishing herself as a creative and adventurous musician through unpaid work and by that, empowering herself for paid jobs in that field (festival playing, concert trotting through Europe etc.).

Conclusions

For sake of clarity, this chapter is divided into three parts. The first is a succinct summary of the themes in the foregoing chapter that leads into a second part, the results from the research. I will reflect critically on the findings and contrast them with the key literature already detailed. A core argument about the peculiarities of the Icelandic popular music world and its unique traits will be presented, synthesized from these factors, thus highlighting the academic significance of the work carried out and its contribution to the knowledge accumulated about social dynamics of music-making in small societies. I also include some final thoughts, where, among other things, possible future research is suggested.

Summary

The thesis became an exploration into a relatively small music community in a northern isle, a thoroughly Western one, culturally, but bearing many traits that one finds in a small rural village in terms of communication. I say *became*, because initially the scope was much narrower. The music community I've been looking at - all things considered - is effectively the Reykjavik pop and rock scene. The stray exceptions from this have been noted in the main text. The age span of the interviewees (circa 35 – 55 years) makes for a collected overview from people that have an experience in the field.

I must stress that even if all the subjects are Icelandic, and all the experiences they describe are “Icelandic”, the themes dissected in the main body often had to do with universal aspects, rather than purely local ones. Most of the musicians were “thinking globally while acting locally”, as when asked about their need to make music - a deeply ingrained human need that can of course be extended around the world. Initially, this universal need was my main concern but the Icelandic angle of course underpins the need in various ways. In mapping the themes, the Icelandic angle is most prominent in 4.1 (The Icelandic angle) and 4.3.1 (Pathways and readymade surroundings), whilst the universal one takes up most of 4.2 (Music-making) and 4.3.2/4.3.3 (The topic of playing with other people, in the “Sociality” theme). The local/global situation thus runs across various themes, sometimes in an intertwined manner. In 4.4 (Amateurs and professionals), where the difference between professional musicians and amateur ones was in focus, the results displayed a hybrid of the social dynamics of Icelandic society and the often highly personal outlook of a self-identified musician.

Concerning the Icelandic reality that musicians face every day, they were asked to reflect on questions of social dynamics, the image that Iceland tends to take on in the media and ease (and difficulty) of communication, i.e. getting their creations across. All of them acknowledged how the societal structure of Iceland shapes and impacts their music-making. Some of them embraced the “village” factor; how the closeness and scarcity of cultural resources imbues the music community with open minds and hearts, spurs it on activity wise (“Well, it’s a small nation. People just have to cover what needs to be done”) and in reality, that’s what makes for a vibrant and diverse musical life. Reversing the argument, some musicians saw these conditions as suffocating, where there's no room to specialise, and the small size works against creative minds.

The musicians were also quite aware of the standing of Iceland’s popular music culture in the eyes of foreign media and the multi-faceted effects that this was having. Many of them described tiring of the constant questions about lava and elves, while some were more level-headed and pragmatic, seeing opportunities behind the clichés. The temptation to cash in on the ongoing craze, musically, wasn’t acknowledged or recognised by this thesis’ interviewees, apart from in one or two comments from younger musicians.

Almost all of the musicians described communication channels in the pop/rock sector as easy and supportive, likening it to a small village where you can book a gig on a days’ notice. The same was attributed to the media (radio) and institutions (festivals, music competitions etc.). The other side of the coin, mentioned by some, was that if you were not a part of a certain group you could be totally isolated, an either/or situation, and opportunities therefore few. Referring to the interplay between the personal and the social, the musicians, mostly, gave off an air of confidence, something akin to satisfaction with the current state of play. This suggested a constructive outlook towards their environment, seeing it as more beneficial than not for them. The mainly positive feedback mirrors the questions to some extent; if I would have asked specifically about monetary concerns or issues with record labels in the past, I am certain that the outcome would not have been so positive.

The question about music-making was threefold - why do you need to make music, release it, and then play it live? This section of the theme mapping was by far the most intense one, the interviewees often laying their feeling towards “their calling” bare on the table. It was interesting to see how the answers changed in each section. Answering the first question, people tended to be very open and emotional, talking intently and in depth about their introduction to music, their need to create and play it, and their devotion to the cause - all of it bound up in romantic descriptions of artistic destiny. Addressing their need to release their

music, which demands, at least, some minimum of social interactions, the answers became more guarded and self-aware. This only intensified in the question about playing the music live, where people started to talk about their ego and insecurities, in stark contrast to their ruminations in the first part where they were, in some way, more “free”.

Most of them talked about their need to do music in a purely personal way, a deeply felt sense that they absolutely had to obey. Some of them were more analytical, and tried to put their longings into some kind of social context. Of the thirty musicians interviewed, only one “devalued” the music as just one of the many things he did. All the other ones were true believers, one could say.

A need to release one’s own music was strong, the musicians referring to things like feedback and a need for closure, putting an end to a project. Most shyly admitted to the need for attention: “When I was a wee boy, I used to do flower paintings, mostly so I could take them to my grandmother and get the compliments. That was the main drive.” Most of the musicians talked about the cathartic nature of music-making as a quite natural one, yet in one instance a musician felt that something “organic” was lost in the process of dissemination.

What characterised the responses about live performance was mostly a sense of pure, unadulterated joy, bordering on the religious in some instances - a music-making benefitting themselves, others and society as a whole. In terms of the personal/social, the replies took on an increasing social awareness as the questions progressed, from initial talk about self-sufficient music-making leading to address their views on music-making (playing) in a social setting, accounting for quite different views and ruminations.

Looking squarely at social settings, the third theme dealt with the construction of the world(s) that the musicians operate within and their interconnections when they are collaborating together, either as tight-knit, longstanding friends or on a more impersonal, professional note.

Many of them acknowledged that they were stepping into predefined settings when they started out as musicians, settings which they had little control over, underlining classic social system theories by the likes of Bourdieu and Becker. When it came to band formations, many of the interviewees admitted that the impetus had more often than not to do with finding an activity within a group of friends, rather than being a musical one. Most of them stated that the joys were indeed twofold, i.e. that of the friendship *and* the music-making as such. In the instances when the musicians were playing with unknown people (either at the very start, having recently joined a group or working with hired hands), they tended to talk about learning curves and gaining experience, like students. By contrast, the descriptions concerning

playing with friends had more intensity to them - more mentally taxing, but simultaneously more rewarding on the whole.

Again, these descriptions were more or less positive, as the musicians I interviewed emphasised great love for collaborative work. Some went even further, describing it as an integral part of their persona and identity - it was something that they simply could not imagine existing without.

Examining the grey area between amateur music-making and a professional one proved to be challenging, the shades of “grey” being many and varied. The bulk of my subjects admitted freely to wanting to be famous and/or living solely of their art; some had tried, some were advancing towards it but on the whole, these longings seemed to be quite prevalent in the pop/rock sector, an inherent part of that field. Given the age of my interview sample, many had a good degree of experience and could therefore detect a changing of the times in relation to this. In this respect, the groundwork for attempts at fame and fortune have been made somewhat easier today because of institutions like the Iceland music export office, non-existent until fifteen years ago. Asked about the best way of attaining that ever elusive success, answers differed between artists, some emphasising a determinedly non-commercial stance, whilst others were more nonchalant. A light tug-o-war between staying “true” or selling out was suggested, whilst some negative experiences and resentments with “the industry” were also mentioned - although not on a deep-seated level.

Time affordances and practical feasibility in relation to music-making was discussed. All of the subjects had various ways of nurturing their calling, with almost all doing it semi-professionally, either with a part-time or full-time job supplementing it. Some did this quite meticulously, while others tried to fit it in when a gap opened in their calendar. In this context, the tone turned a bit negative in some cases, with musicians bemoaning either the lack of time they had on their hands or their general fate, as they were forced to do “other” jobs as well. Others were more balanced and realistic about this necessity.

In conversations about the amateur way of doing music, pitted against professional skills and craft, a number of musicians hailed the amateur approach to art making as more “pure”, “beautiful” and the like. But when skills and craft were put up against “arty” music-making, things started to get conflicted, taking yet another turn. Whilst gamely praising the amateur at the expense of the professional in the preceding section, the attitude shifted when discussing tensions between artistry and professionalism. This led to a modicum of soul-searching, as these two apparent opposites rattled musicians’ self-identification somewhat. Thinking about the difference between arty music-making as a virtuous undertaking alongside

professional musicianship at the behest of others side-tracked some of the interviewees, with questions of identity and authenticity coming into play.

The amateur question was the most interesting but also the most complex one. Regarding the personal/social question, most of the subjects used the opportunity to contemplate their actual status as musicians, channelling it through the “Icelandic reality” prism. A concerted view, applying to most of them, was not to be found in this section, their interpretation of their own standings as varied as they were many.

Finally, the question of livelihood was brought up, and how the musicians sustain themselves - if at all. Given the genre backgrounds of most the interviewees, very few of them had any pointers on session music-making, but when it came to making a living out of art music, the interviewees were enthusiastically engaged. Icelandic reality made a strong impact, with some of the musicians blaming the size of the Icelandic market, describing it as a barrier to their quest of fulfilling their ambitions. This echoed the duality seen in the “Iceland” section, where some saw freedom whilst others saw shackles. Most of the musicians had clearly thought out ways to be able to make a living from their own compositions and artistic stance, but most of them conceded that it was nigh on impossible to do that 100% of the time. Some were comfortable with seeing the music as a non-earner, and in doing so relieving the pressure of seeking success whilst making a living through other means.

Discussion: The peculiarities of the Icelandic popular music world

Throughout this thesis I have established the peculiarities of Iceland's pop/rock world, but here I would like to draw attention to the key findings in a more compact manner, i.e. the realities that set the Icelandic popular music world apart from similar entities, thus justifying the undertaking of the thesis in the first place:

1) The small size of Icelandic society is a most defining factor, directly influencing the workings of the popular music world where a "village" factor is a determining dynamic in terms of communication, self-awareness, hopes and aspirations. "The village" is simultaneously strengthening and suffocating. The shared reality of the interviewees - i.e. being aware of the small market they are operating in - instills them with a pragmatic outlook, knowing that if they would be determined to make a living out of music in Iceland, the chances of doing it squarely on their own terms are slim (working abroad is a separate thing). Co-operation in the "village" is much in evidence in the Icelandic pop/rock community compared with the Icelandic film industry/world for example, an insight gained from my work as a cultural journalist.³⁴⁵ This is often mentioned in the foreign media, dressed up in exaggerated language, but it's also more true. A claim that can be supported by referring to the testimonies in the thesis and is also confirmed by the work of Green (The Faroe Islands), Baker, Storvold, Prior and other scholars referenced in the "Foreign research" section (1.4). The music community is intrinsic and close, for better or for worse. This proclamation by Finnegan (mentioned in 2.1) is descriptive of the working of the Icelandic pop/rock world: "Settings in which relationships could be forged, interests shared, and a continuity of meaning achieved in the context of urban living. These pathways did more than provide the established routines of musical practice which people could choose to follow: they also had *symbolic depth* (italics mine)." These "drivers" are among the defining factors of the Icelandic pop/rock community, along with the dynamics of Icelandic society at large, its customs and mores. These general social dynamics are also effective in other Icelandic cultural worlds, see "4.1.1 Social realities", the section on sports for example. Most of the musicians recognized that they were stepping into predefined social settings, or following a pathway, as in Finnegan's research. Whether it is the anthropological lens (Finnegan, Cohen) or the sociological one

³⁴⁵ A cross comparison research between different Icelandic art worlds would be an interesting undertaking.

(Crossley, DeNora), the subjects in this research are engulfed by norms and conventions, particular to Icelandic society.

2) There was a noticeable optimism in most of the subjects regarding music-making in Iceland, which can be linked directly to the passage above. The easy access to media outlets for up and coming musicians and the general “no nonsense” air surrounding the popular music world, born out of the “village” factor, lends support to relatively high activity. This can be seen in album releases, for instance, which number about 500 in every calendar year. Activity such as this spurs the musicians on in trying their hand at exporting their music, supported by institutions such as the Icelandic music export office.

3) Both 1) and 2) then feed into the musicians initial need to play music and then sound it out in a social setting, thoroughly explored in 4.2 (Music-making) and 4.4 (Amateurs and professionals...). The three stages of music-making, defined in the thesis as a) “the need to make music” (an often intense, solitary undertaking), b) “the need to release your music” (with its rising societal complexities) and then c) “the need to play your music live” (with even further complexities), are all characterized by the “Icelandic angle” as well as having a universal need and function, as detailed by DeNora and Hesmondhalgh. Because of the population size, the dividing line between amateurism and professionals was nigh on indistinguishable, often making for an open minded and optimistic outlook to music-making, helping to generate an active scene. This “naturalism”, often found in the amateur outlook, is confirmed by Stebbins and Prior (see the 2.2 in the literature section) and further elaborated on by Farrell (referenced in the same section), where he writes about friendship dynamics, so prevalent and important for the Icelandic scene.

Other findings worth mentioning are:

4) Iceland's striking brand identity in commercial music terms (extreme nature, mysterious elves, Viking heritage) is not lost on practising musicians in Iceland and they are keenly aware of it. It both annoys and serves them (in marketing sense) as detailed in the main text.³⁴⁶

5) Unlike Britain for example, Iceland lacks a strong national popular music tradition. The folk scene is almost non-existent, perpetuated in museum set happenings mostly reserved for the elderly. Younger generations bypass Scandinavian forms of folk almost exclusively and - if they deal with the folk form - it's usually via Anglo-American influences. As detailed in the thesis, Anglo-American popular music forms (of the pop/rock kind) have directed everyday popular music-making in the country more or less since the Second World War.

³⁴⁶ Two pending researches of a differing nature and length are worth mentioning here. Þorbjörg Daphne Hall's PhD thesis, supervised by Sarah Cohen, is now in examining stages and is an incursion into Icelandic popular music, national identity and its portrayal in the media. This author also has a pending article, co-authored with Margrét Sigrún Sigurðardóttir and Kristján Már Gunnarsson, where the Icelandic popular music brand is examined.

Final remarks

As I mentioned at the start of the thesis, this is the first PhD which delves exclusively into the Icelandic pop and rock world. It was high time, considering all the attention that has been placed upon it in the last decades. The opportunity to dispel some of the persistent myths towards it - from laypersons and academics alike - was a welcome one. From a purely sociological standpoint, Iceland made for the perfect sample, a micro-nation which nonetheless contains all of the recognised components that other independent nations possess. My position within all of this also made for a relatively straightforward approach. When I was pondering what to do, in terms of PhD writing, a good friend rightfully told me that I would be throwing a huge chunk of knowledge and insight out of the window, should I *not* do this. Being Icelandic, and having been involved professionally with music journalism for so many years, many of the answers and emerging themes did not surprise me all that much. Many of the findings were to be expected - although some were not - as duly reported in the results.

My research questions were necessarily focused on music-making within Iceland. It would be interesting to conduct similar research with Icelandic musicians who work (or make their living) outside Iceland - whether as travelling rock, jazz or classical musicians, writing soundtracks for films and advertisers. Do they have any sense of themselves as *Icelandic* musicians? Is such an identity tied up with ways of working (as suggested in this thesis) or with some sort of national sensibility? This is of particular interest now because of the way in which technological developments make it ever easier to be part of a music-making community that is not defined by the occupation of a shared national space. In that way, this research is also a contribution to on-going debates about the place of music.

There is much more work to be done on the relationship of *small communities* and *small nations* in the making of music worlds. Iceland is obviously both these things, but elsewhere there can be small music-making communities *within* a nation (as in Finnegan's study) and small countries which may not have such a clear sense of a single music-making community and music-making communities which challenge or seek to develop existing national identities (as in Scotland). My work here does not draw on the range of ethno-musicological work on these questions, due to the specificity of my research focus, but this thesis does raise a number of interesting comparative questions for future researchers from both the fields of ethnomusicology and popular music studies. My hope is that the results within the thesis, and the data it contains, might be helpful in furthering an understanding of the role that popular music (i.e. pop/rock) plays in these societies, and the

benefits and hindrances that inevitably can come with it. A deeper understanding of Icelandic music life especially - and music-making in small societies more generally - may thus be reached.

The thesis' strength, first and foremost, lies in the often deeply felt admittances, reflections and comments of its 30 subjects. It is fine proof of the qualities that a sensitive incursion into the lived experiences of people can bring forth. What rises to the surface can be quite revealing about how people carry themselves in a society and/or smaller communities within, helping us to understand some of the core assets we possess as human beings, making our way in the world.

To conclude, naturally, I will quote from Ruth Finnegan, where she reflects on Alasdair MacIntyre's claim that in recognised cultural practices, humans exercise and exhibit human virtue in the full sense of the term³⁴⁷:

Among the most valued and, it may be, most profoundly human of such practices in our society is that of music ... this deeply human practice of music is engaged in and fought over and created and maintained by the many many unacclaimed local musicians whose work both reveal them as creative and active human beings and serves to uphold the cultural traditions we take for granted.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁷ In MacIntyre, Alasdair C. 1980. *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press. These arguments are laid out in chapter 14 ("The Nature of the Virtues").

³⁴⁸ Finnegan, Ruth. 1989. *The Hidden Musicians...*, p. 341

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Appendix 1

In the following, I have provided a short text on the Icelandic Musicians' Union (F.Í.H.), related associations, and a brief comparison to its British counterpart. It was written at a very early stage in the thesis, with the aim of shedding a light on the institutional view on what makes a musician officially “a musician” in Iceland. As it transpired, it did not have an effective role in the body of this research but is included here for those interested in this aspect of Icelandic music-making.

Musicians' Unions definitions and criteria for “acceptable” musicians

In Britain, it seems that any musician - with or without a formal education in the craft - may join the Musicians' Union. The core criterion for those who are considered eligible for membership is that “they are following the profession of music”, a sentence that is wide-open to interpretation and, in reality, makes it easy to recruit a wide variety of members.³⁴⁹

The Icelandic equivalents, on the other hand, are a jumble of different unions, associations, societies and lobby groups. There's the big one - The Icelandic Musicians' Union (F.Í.H.) - that contains a sub-group that presents itself as its “classical arm” (confusingly, there's no such thing for jazz, pop etc.). The name of the classical arm is also a weirdly general one - “Association of Icelandic Musicians (FIT)”. There is also an association for classical composers (TI), and one called The Icelandic Songwriters Association (FTT, pop and classical). FTT is preoccupied with copyright and gathering royalties for its members, but also works to promote the social role of musicians in Icelandic culture, as well as the “the greatness” of Icelandic music etc. There are even more examples, their place and function not always clear, or at the very least convoluted. Iceland's micro-societal reality often produces in-fighting and petty arguments between these small societies, which more often than not share members.

The different criteria for membership of each of these organisations is interesting in itself. In FTT, eligible members are those who “have written a musical piece or lyrics to accompany a musical piece that has been officially aired.” No educational demands are made. The membership is then divided into two halves: main-members and general members; main-members must have a “considerable income from their music”. The official aim of the

³⁴⁹ Musicians' Union Rules, p. 237. Found here: www.musiciansunion.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/MU_Rules.pdf

association is that at least half of its members should be “main-members” so the definition of “considerable income” is subject to that aim.

FIT, the classical arm of F.Í.H, has very specific rules for eligibility as it handles the goals and interests for educated, professional musicians in the classical sector. Those who apply for membership must have had a “thorough” formal music training, be active in the Icelandic music scene (and elsewhere if that applies) and recognised for their work in the public sphere.

F.Í.H. has a built-in paradox. It portrays itself as *the* advocates for professional musicians in Iceland but the criteria for membership is deliberately open as it states: “Anyone who works as a musician or *wants to work* as a musician can be a member.” This union seeks its strength in numbers so it’s understandable that it wants to entice as many members as possible, even if some of them are not - in the strictest sense - “professional”, i.e. not working as musicians.