

‘AS LONG AS IT’S A ROCK GUITAR’: SOUND, MATERIALITY AND ENSKILLMENT AMONG ELECTRIC GUITAR LEARNERSⁱ

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Summer 2021. Three boys, aged seven to nine, perch on metal folding chairs arranged in a loose circle. The chair legs dig into the rough gravel of the carpark, shaded by a pair of cloth awnings, the summer camp having been driven outdoors by Ireland’s pandemic restrictions. The instructor, Dusty, addresses the three boys, asking if they would like to learn to play the guitar this week.ⁱⁱ The eldest of the three thinks for a moment, then responds, ‘As long as it’s a rock guitar’.

I observed this encounter during a series of rock music summer camps programmed by Rock Jam (<https://www.rockjam.ie>), a private, extracurricular, fee-based music education organization located in Dublin, Ireland. Rock Jam delivers ensemble-based rock and popular music education to children and young people aged seven to seventeen. Students’ experience and skill levels vary widely, from complete beginners – as was the case with the three boys in the account above – to those with years of experience through formal or informal education, or a mixture of both. Based on autobiographical interviews with twelve Rock Jam instructors (as part of a larger ethnographic participant-observation project undertaken with Rock Jam in 2021 and 2022), this article discusses how perceptions of the electric guitar change over time, as guitar learners become more skilled on their instruments, and thus in understanding and negotiating the particular sonic and material affordances of electric guitars.

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Figure 1: A number of guitars (mostly electric) sit on a rack in a Rock Jam learning space. Photo by Kayla Rush.

The electric guitar is a potent symbol, encapsulating notions of the instrument's sound and materiality, and taken to imply (for some) the gender identity, physical performance, and/or perceived virtuosity of its player (Ostberg and Hartmann 2015; see also, e.g., Walser 1993, Waksman 1999). From the interaction recounted above, it is clear that this symbolism is apparent to – and indeed embraced by – young music learners with no prior experience of guitar playing. The 'rock guitar', as the boy called it, was clearly valued and desired above its acoustic counterpart.

In my observations, beginner popular music learners in particular evidenced a fascination with technologically mediated sounds and the materials by which they are made. In addition to stated preferences for electric guitars, many young learners were also enamoured of PA systems and the ways in which these could amplify their voices, both spoken and sung. Music learners at Rock Jam often experimented playfully with these pieces of equipment during their downtime, testing how the mediating technologies of amplification (microphones, speakers, and guitar amplifiers) could change the sound of their instruments or voices. The preference for electric over acoustic guitar (at least within Rock Jam's spaces) extended to more experienced learners as well: for example, students with classical guitar training were keen to experiment with the distorted sounds and effects associated with the electric guitar and its technologies.

But what happens after these initial expressions or encounters of desire, experimentation, and play? While sound and materiality are closely intertwined, given that sound 'is perceived and becomes known through its materiality' as physical vibration (Novak and Sakakeeny 2015: 1), the relationship between these components, and in turn their relationships to the musician's body and senses, change over time. I suggest that electric guitar learning (as with instrumental learning more generally) constitutes a process of 'enskillment'. Anthropologist Tim Ingold defines enskillment as 'an education of attention', a process of learning to move through the world with a trained body (1993: 153). Cristina Grasseni (2007) elaborates on this concept, noting that enskillment is a fundamentally multi-sensory, material, and embodied process. While Ingold's focus is on learning to live within and move through the landscape (which is conceptualized as primarily, though not exclusively, visual in both Ingold's and Grasseni's analyses), we might productively apply the notion of enskillment to music education, taking instrumental learning to be a process of progressive 'education of attention'. Through the learning process, the musician is trained (or trains themselves) to attend more skillfully to the instrument's sounds and affordances, first in broader strokes (notes, scales, frets, chords) and in greater detail as they progress (tuning, effects, complicated patterns, and so forth).

To better understand how electric guitar enskillment occurs over time, I turn to autobiographical interviews conducted with Rock Jam instructors. These can provide valuable insights into how individual musicians experience the transition from non-player to increasingly skilled player, with particular regard to the electric guitar's intertwined sonic and material properties. All twelve of the interviewed teachers (eleven men and one woman) have at least a basic level of guitar skill, gained through both formal and informal musical study. Five of the interviewees (all men) play the guitar as their primary instrument; of these five, three – Swifty, Michael Kelly, and Dusty – spoke in detail about the material and sonic properties of their first guitars, and of the roles these affordances played in their own learning processes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Swifty: I think the thing that really got me interested in guitar was there was one Christmas, it was like a family get-together, and my cousin brought over an electric guitar, and I remember he plugged it in and he played it. And as a six-year-old child, seven, I was like, that's the coolest thing I've ever seen. So naturally I begged mam and dad for a guitar. And they thought it was a bit of a phase first. So they bought me like a toy guitar at a Smyths

[toy store] just to sort of see if I put it down after a week. And yeah, I couldn't, they couldn't get [it] out of my hands. And then I actually discovered it was a toy guitar, and I started crying because I was like, I couldn't. I was like, no, I'm going to do this properly and stuff. So funny enough at that age, like at seven, we went to a music shop and I wanted a blue guitar. I didn't care what, like what style it was, if it was a classical guitar, an electric guitar, I was like, I want a blue guitar. And I ended up getting a classical guitar, and my mam and dad explained, they're like, you know, this is for like grades [graded exams] and classical and all that. I was like, I don't care, yeah, yeah, cool.

In this recounting of his introduction to the guitar, Swifty describes a state of fascination and desire, one that begins with witnessing and hearing the electric guitar. Its technological affordances and electronic materiality are central to that early memory: Swifty's cousin 'plugged it in and he played it'. At seven years old, moreover, Swifty describes himself as already having a clear sense of the difference between a 'toy' guitar and a 'proper' one. While he was unable to distinguish his first guitar as a toy upon initially receiving it (he did not make clear how he eventually 'discovered' its toy-ness), he had a clear sense that in order to 'do this properly' he needed a 'real' guitar on which to learn and practice. When in the guitar shop, materiality became the key criterion for selecting a 'proper' guitar: he wanted (and received) a guitar that was blue in colour, regardless of whether it was acoustic or electric.

Swifty narrated this story to me humorously, recognizing and recounting the naïveté of his actions as a seven-year-old non-player with a desire to learn. The clear, unspoken implication is that, while this decision set him on the path toward guitar enskillment, as an adult Swifty would no longer choose a guitar based solely on its colour.

Michael Kelly's autobiographical narrative similarly demonstrates an early sense of desiring a guitar with professional or mature qualities, though Michael emphasizes desiring a particular sound rather than a specific colour:

Michael: *I think it was about nine-ish or ten, maybe, when I picked up the guitar, because my dad had these big acoustic guitars and I wasn't big enough to play them really. He bought me my own little one, but I just, I never really quite got the hang of it until I was a bit, a little bit older. [...]*

Kayla: *You talked about how you had kind of your smaller guitar your dad bought for you. And he had these big guitars. So was part of it, kind of, finally picking up the big guitar that got you into it?*

Michael: *Yeah, I think so. I think so. I think the smaller one, it was a nylon string. I just didn't get the same sound out of it that my dad used to get.*

For Michael, then, his guitar learning did not take off until he was physically able to play his father's guitars, which he perceived as having a more desirable sound than the smaller nylon-string guitar his father had gifted him. Here the impetus to begin learning was rooted primarily in sound – in particular, in the ability to produce the (perceived) more mature sound that he heard when his father played – but it is inextricably intertwined with Michael's own physicality: he could not play the guitars whose sound he desired until he had grown large enough to use the full-sized instruments.

It is interesting and telling that both men's accounts discussed, largely unprompted, the specific material qualities of their first guitars. In Michael Kelly's case, that description evidences the enskillment that has passed in the decades since: nine-year-old Michael is unlikely to have been

able to identify the source of his dissatisfaction as lying in the particular material used to craft the guitar's strings, which in turn affect their sound.

In a 2003 article, Holly Everett recounts the biography of professional guitarist and university lecturer Reuben Rivera, also elicited through autobiographical interviews. Despite being separated from the Rock Jam teachers' stories by decades (Rivera was born in 1942, roughly 35-60 years before the Rock Jam instructors whom I interviewed), his deployment of an enskilled perspective to reflect on his initial sonic and material desires for and interactions with the guitar echo Swifty's and Michael's closely. Rivera described his first guitar, a gift from his mother when he was twelve years old, as 'a Gene Autry plywood guitar' (quoted in Everett 2003: 334). He told Everett,

I really enjoyed the guitar, but it was a very difficult guitar to play and one of the things I noticed from going to early rock and roll shows that Alan Freed would have in New York [City] was that most of the groups had really shiny electric guitars and this was just an acoustic guitar that was very, very difficult to play in tune. So I was visiting my father in New York one time and I told him about this. And we went to a music store and he bought me a shiny Gretsch guitar and a little amplifier. (quoted in Everett 2003: 334-335)

Rivera's narrative juxtaposes his early desires for the electric guitar – described as 'really shiny', reminiscent of Swifty's fixation on a blue-coloured guitar – with his enskilled understandings of why he struggled with the first guitar he was given – in addition to being 'just an acoustic guitar', it 'was very, very difficult to play in tune'. His account is quite similar to that of Michael Kelly, using contemporary knowledge of guitar properties, gained via decades of enskillment, to reflect on his desires as a beginning player, and on the particular sonic mismatches that their young selves could not necessarily name, but which troubled each of them nevertheless.

It is worth noting that there are certain differences between these men's guitar encounters and enskillment experiences and those of the young people they teach today. Guitars and related technologies have advanced at the beginner level in the intervening years.^{iv} These generational differences in available technologies are evident in comparing Rivera's initial 'plywood' instrument to the more sturdily built and materially sound beginner guitars of Michael and Swifty.

Additionally, rock schools and rock music camps like Rock Jam present a relatively new form of access to guitar learning, beyond self-teaching and parent-to-child transmission at home. These are a recent intervention in the music education landscape (see Rush 2021: 378), one to which, in the Irish context, only the youngest Rock Jam instructors would have had access as children. One of the twelve interviewed teachers, a (masculine-presenting) bass guitarist in his early twenties who chose the pseudonym Laura, attended the inaugural teaching semester of a rock school in his Irish Midlands hometown as an older teenager, but he noted that because at this point his otherwise self-taught band were already playing gigs, 'I guess we felt like we'd outgrown it a bit'. Rock school experiences will undoubtedly further change enskillment processes for guitar learners, and it will be interesting to see how this unfolds among the next generation of rock school instructional staff.^v

A third Rock Jam teacher, Dusty, spoke at length of the enskillment process itself, his narrative emphasizing the ways in which the electric guitar's sound and materiality are closely intertwined within this process. Like Swifty, Michael Kelly, and Reuben Rivera, Dusty's guitar-playing story begins with a guitar gifted by his parents:

Dusty: In terms of playing then, I started playing guitar, I got a guitar for Christmas when I was nine, like a small guitar. Even though my dad played a bit and there were guitars around the house growing up, it wasn't until they [my parents] got me [one] when I actually started

playing for some reason. [...] My dad is like a huge Jimi Hendrix buff, really massive into Hendrix. When he would be driving us to school or whatever, this is like pre-CD, he had a tape machine in his car, and he'd a tape of like, you know, just different Jimi Hendrix songs, and he'd put that on. [...] I can just remember listening to that. Probably why I'm so into guitar, I guess, as well. It was just listening to that, those sounds. And it's gas when you're, when you're that young and you've no idea how someone's creating that kind of sound. You're just like, oh my God, this is incredible.

Kayla: *So it's kind of a process of you learning how to reconstruct those sounds, sort of, or an interest in doing that?*

Dusty: *Yeah, I think so. Like, I mean, like at the time I didn't have a clue what was going on. It's mad, like, when you're older and you listen to it. I mean, I listen to someone like Jimi Hendrix now, and it's, it's almost like a bit of the mystery goes out of it when you know what's going on. Like, oh, I know he's using a wah pedal on that. Or like he's doing this and that. Whereas when you're a kid and you're just hearing it purely sonically, and you've no idea how someone's creating that, that's amazing.*

Dusty's reflection on re-hearing Jimi Hendrix through the lens of Dusty's current skill and knowledge evidences not only a clear process of enskillment, but also a demonstrable awareness of that process and an ability to reflect thereon. He revisits his early, naïve hearings of Hendrix, which he notes were mediated by the available playback technology ('pre-CD', via the 'tape machine' in his father's car), and which, similar to the other biographies recounted here, were facilitated by a male relative with an interest and level of skill in the guitar. (See Rush in press for more on the roles of male relatives, particularly fathers, in popular music education.)

Dusty's description of listening as a non-guitar player is especially fascinating: he says that without guitar-playing knowledge, 'you're just hearing it purely sonically'. While this is, perhaps, not technically true – after all, Dusty interacted with the material of the car's tape deck and his father's cassette tapes, not to mention the physical qualities of sound – his statement highlights the fundamental changes in relationship to the guitar's sonic qualities that occur when someone ceases to be a non-player. Through interacting with the guitar as a material object (as well as certain associated technologies, such as the wah pedal), Dusty's relationship to the sound on those cassette tapes has changed utterly.

There is a hint of loss in this narrative: while Dusty has undoubtedly gained skill since those initial encounters with Hendrix, he notes a parallel loss in the unskilled fascination that drew him to the guitar in the first place: 'It's almost like a bit of the mystery goes out of it when you know what's going on'. This is the trade-off that occurs with enskillment: while naïve listening may be accompanied by a sense of wonder or magic, enskillment in guitar playing is simultaneously an education of attention in guitar listening. This brings with it significant advantages – for example, Dusty can now listen to other players and imitate their sounds and techniques more easily, a process that he described to me in detail later in our interview. But it is a departure from the initial desires ('shiny', 'blue', etc.) that draw young musicians to the 'rock guitar', its sounds, and its materials in the first place.

This short article, and the stories contained within, point to the value of an enskillment perspective for understanding and discussing popular music learning practices. The musical autobiographies of Swifty, Michael Kelly, Reuben Rivera, and Dusty highlight that musical enskillment consists not only of mastering physical movements or techniques; it is a complex process of learning to interact increasingly knowledgeably with sound and materiality – including

technological materiality – in particular and specific ways. This education of attention applies both to playing and to listening. It affects how enskilled guitarists hear music and how they conceive of and describe their biographies, including their memories of their earliest encounters with the guitar. The accompanying narrative of loss – of ‘a bit of the mystery go[ing] out of it’ – is the price of enskillment, as these new, enskilled modes of listening may be perceived as less enchanted or magical than the listening of the novice. It is clearly a worthwhile trade for all of these men, who make their livings through their musical knowledge; but their autobiographies also evidence feelings of nostalgia for the un-ensilled mode of listening. It is a story that I suspect will feel familiar to many.

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Notes

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ⁱⁱ All instructor names in this article are pseudonyms selected by the interviewees.

ⁱⁱⁱ At the time of the interviews, Swifty was in his early twenties, Dusty in his mid-twenties, and Michael Kelly in his early thirties. Dusty and Michael both held bachelor’s degrees in music, and Michael held a master’s degree in music as well. Swifty was in the final year of his undergraduate studies, also in music. All three men earned income through a combination of performing and teaching.

^{iv} Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer who pointed this out and shared their own guitar learning experiences with me in the process.

^v Since I conducted the initial round of this research in 2021, Rock Jam has begun to employ its first alumni teachers, and its summer camp teaching staff is approaching gender equality, with far more women teachers than in previous years. I hope to conduct a follow-up autobiographical study in the near future to capture these changes and examine how these new teachers’ experiences compare to the data presented in this article.

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