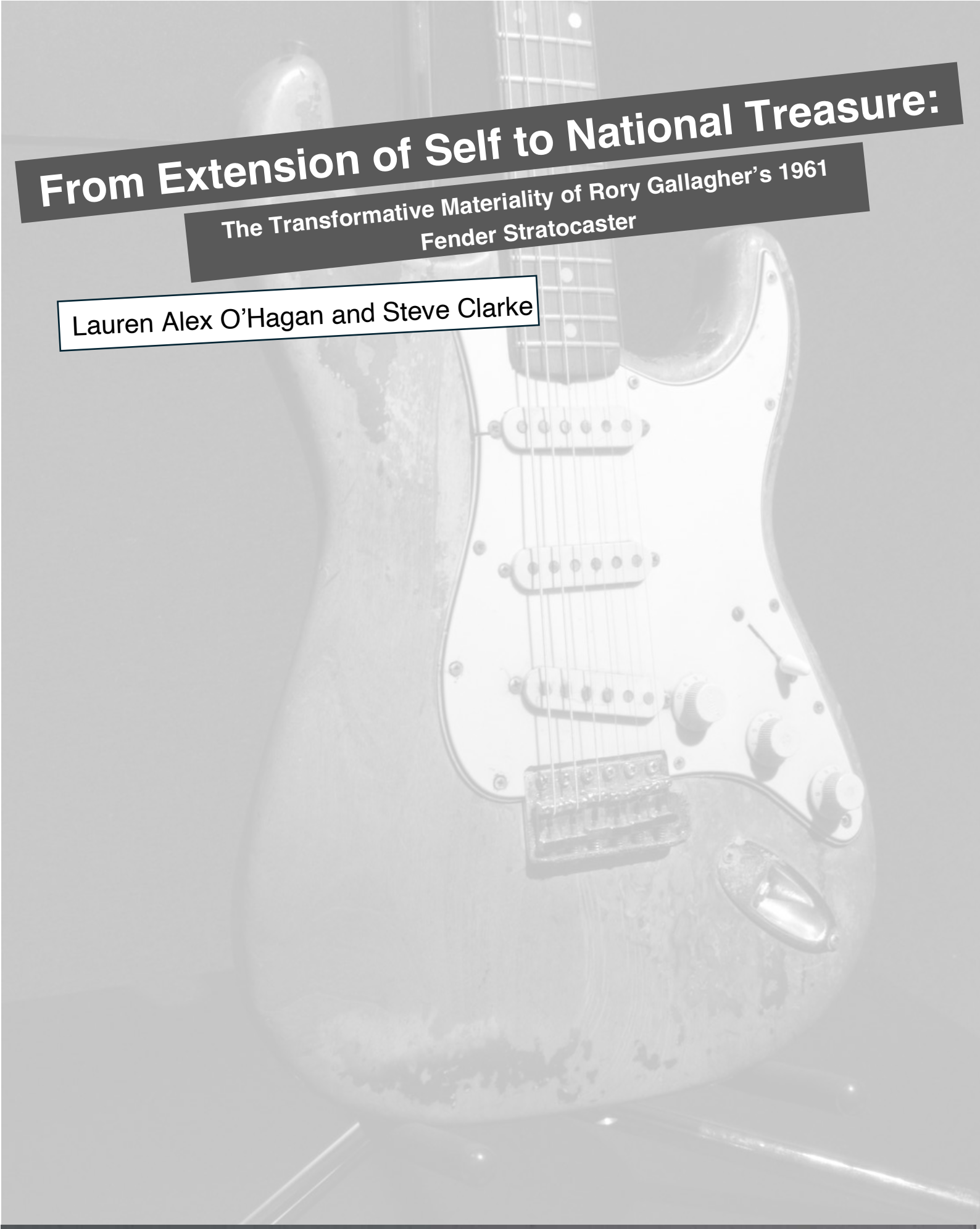
From Extension of Self to National Treasure:

The Transformative Materiality of Rory Gallagher's 1961 Fender Stratocaster

Lauren Alex O'Hagan and Steve Clarke



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Introduction

On 17 October 2024, the iconic 1961 Fender Stratocaster once owned by Irish blues-rock guitarist Rory Gallagher sold at Bonhams for a remarkable £700,000 (£889,400 with premium). The guitar was purchased by Live Nation Gaiety Ltd, who subsequently donated it to the National Museum of Ireland, acknowledging its status as a national treasure (BBC, 2024). It will go on display at Collins Barracks in Dublin from September 2025 as part of the permanent exhibition *Changing Ireland* (RTÉ, 2025).

Gallagher's Stratocaster is widely regarded as one of the world's most recognisable guitars, due to its distinctive paint-stripped body. Since his death in 1995, the instrument had been stored in a family lockup, effectively removed from the public eye. Nearly thirty years on, faced with mounting storage and insurance costs, Gallagher's brother and manager, Dónal, made the difficult decision to part with the guitar, along with the rest of Gallagher's extensive instrument collection. In a press release on 8 July 2024, he stated that it was time for "these emblems of [Gallagher's] legacy [to] be enjoyed by others" (Gallagher, 2024).

For Lauren Alex O'Hagan, a British-Irish scholar who first encountered Gallagher's music in 2016 and now specialises in his life and work, the announcement came as a shock. The Stratocaster had long served as a symbolic anchor to Gallagher himself, and its displacement from the protective orbit of the family into the uncertain realm of auction introduced an unexpected sense of rupture and loss (cf. Holmes and Ehgartner, 2020). Viewing the Stratocaster as a powerful material and cultural symbol, she lent her support to a grassroots campaign led by Sheena Crowley—the daughter of Michael Crowley, who originally sold the guitar to Gallagher in 1963—advocating for its return to Ireland.

Steve Clarke, by contrast, had known about the auction three months before it was made public. A professional musician who had followed Gallagher's career since the 1970s and now worked as guitar consultant to Bonhams, he was tasked with authenticating Gallagher's instruments, evaluating their condition, and preparing them for sale. The role granted him rare tactile proximity to artefacts he had previously only admired from afar. It also offered an opportunity to document the Stratocaster photographically, capturing the physical traces that revealed its role as a living, storied companion throughout Gallagher's musical life.

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Two days before the auction, we were both invited to a private event at Bonhams. In this intimate setting, we met members of the Gallagher family and shared a final evening with the Stratocaster and other instruments—an informal wake of sorts, steeped in nostalgia, admiration, and silent reverence. We were also present at the auction itself: Steve attended in person, while Lauren watched online, preferring solitude for what she anticipated would be a tearful experience. Though separated by geography, we were united by a shared emotional weight, aware that the sale was not simply the transfer of property, but the potential loss of a national treasure.

Drawing on autoethnographic methods (Ellis et al., 2011), this visual essay explores the Stratocaster's transformative materiality, the layered narratives embedded in its form, and the successful effort to recognise its status as a crucial part of Ireland's material music heritage. Along the way, we reflect on our personal encounters with the guitar and the emotional responses it provoked, situating these within broader discussions of music, collective memories, and cultural identity.

Material Culture and Music Heritage

Since the early 2000s, there has been a growing emphasis on material culture within the fields of popular music and fandom studies. Research has focused on a wide range of topics, including playback media and listening devices (Deo and Duggal, 2017), music memorabilia (Bennett and Rogers, 2015), DIY practices like fanzines and sew-on patches (O'Hagan, 2020), souvenirs collected through music tourism (Yuen and Mura, 2020), and popular music heritage like plaques, statues, and grave offerings (O'Hagan, 2024).

Additionally, there has been an increasing body of work examining the materiality of musical instruments, as well as their sociocultural significance beyond their functional use (cf. Bates, 2012). In the context of guitars, Bennett and Dawe's *Guitar Cultures* (2001) marked a significant early contribution to this area of study, with its focus on the guitar as both artefact and icon. A chapter by Ryan and Peterson (2001) emphasised how "vintage" guitars have become "instruments of desire" for many musicians, audiences, and collectors, while Waksman (2001) explored the construction of Edward Van Halen as "guitar hero." Everett (2003) expanded on this with a case study of guitarist Reuven Rivera, highlighting how his guitars serve as "material companions" in his life. Subsequent studies have explored the links between the guitar, performance skills, and entrance to "guitar worlds" (Dawe, 2013), the materialities and embodied practices of specific guitars, such as the cigar box guitar and pedal steel guitar (Barker, 2012; Atkinson, 2020), and the communicative construction of YouTube product reviews (Gibson, 2022).

Work has also been carried out on "celebrity guitars" and their transformation into collectable artefacts and luxury items (Uimonen, 2017; Fairchild, 2019). Uimonen (2017) claims that these guitars possess "special status" due to their physical connection with famous musicians, thus carrying an "aura of uniqueness" and authenticity. He cites high-profile sales like Eric Clapton's Stratocaster "Blackie", which sold for $959,500 at Christie's in 2004, and Bob Dylan's Stratocaster, played at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, which fetched $965,000 in 2013. Fairchild (2019), similarly, examines celebrity guitars in popular music museums, arguing that they enhance historical narratives and encapsulate the complex web of ideas surrounding an artist. These guitars, therefore, symbolically and materially stabilise or enhance pre-existing notions of canonically-validated "great" artists.

The deep cultural significance of these celebrity guitars is not only tied to their iconic status and association with pivotal events in a musician's life (such as when Dylan went electric), but also to the signs of wear they accumulate over time. Yet, these physical traces remain underexplored in musicological scholarship. While studies of body-instrument relationships exist, they often conceptualise the body in abstract terms, focusing on

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physical gestures, movements, and the tactile experience of performance (cf. Schroeder, 2006; de Souza, 2017). What is frequently overlooked is the reciprocal, material entanglement between a *specific* body and a *specific* instrument—how each shapes and is shaped by the other over time.

Gallagher's relationship with his Stratocaster—an instrument central to his career since he was 15 years old—strikingly embodies this fusion. The guitar does not merely bear the marks of musical use; it bears the marks of Gallagher himself. We argue that these abrasions, dents, and worn surfaces function as "battle scars" that tell the intertwined story of the guitar and musician, illustrating how the instrument evolves into an extension of self. Following Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986), we understand the guitar as possessing its own "social life," moulded by ongoing processes of exchange, use, and transformation that constitute its "cultural biography."

Delving into this embodied dimension is essential as the integration of materiality and memory reflects intersecting layers of heritage: the artist's personal history with the guitar, the instrument's own biography, and fans' recollections of concerts and the emotional impact of the music. Such instruments can even play a crucial role in helping fans process grief and memorialise the musician following their death, becoming a channel through which collective memory is preserved (O'Hagan, forthcoming). In the case of Gallagher's Stratocaster, this materiality became a key argument in the grassroots campaign to bring it back home to Ireland and preserve it in a museum.

Rory Gallagher's 1961 Fender Stratocaster

Gallagher began his career in 1963 when he joined the Fontana Showband at just 15 years old. At the time, he had successfully auditioned playing a Rosetti Solid 7 electric guitar. However, everything changed for him when he spotted a "Buddy Holly look-alike guitar" (Gallagher, 2004) in the window of Crowley's Music Store in his hometown of Cork. Recalling the magical moment in a 2018 interview with *RTÉ*, Gallagher's brother and manager Dónal noted: "it was like looking at a spaceship that had just landed." The brothers would spend hours outside the shop window, mesmerised by the guitar, until one day Gallagher finally decided to go inside.

Dónal Gallagher's (2004) account foregrounds the sensory and affective dimensions of this first encounter—an almost instantaneous bond between musician and material object:

"Being the younger brother, Rory had instructed me as to how I should behave in the event that he would go into the store and ask the owner, Michael, for a better look at the instrument. My sibling informed me that possibly he may want to hold the guitar and see how it felt to hold a 'Stratocaster' […] The instrument was taken from its cradle in the store's window and put for the first time into my brother's arm […] The 'sunburst' [became] welded to Rory's fingers."

The Stratocaster (serial number 64351) was secondhand, having previously belonged to Jim Conlon, the guitarist for The Royal Showband. Conlon had ordered a Fiesta Red finish like Hank Marvin, but the guitar that arrived from the US had a Sunburst finish instead (Vignoles, 2018). He used it for several months while awaiting a replacement and then traded it back to Crowley's. According to music folklore, it was the first Stratocaster in Ireland (Gardner, 2019).

Gallagher agreed to return his Rosetti and transfer the current hire-purchase agreement to the Stratocaster instead, convincing shop owner Michael Crowley that his mother was happy with the £100 price tag. At this time, hire-purchase was an integral part of consumer culture in Ireland, facilitating access to instruments and equipment for many aspiring showband musicians seeking to establish themselves (Miller, 2014).

The process of bringing the instrument home further underscores Gallagher's early material and emotional attachment to the Stratocaster. As Dónal recalls (Gallagher, 2004):

"Rory and I ran out the door with the 'Strat' in its beautiful tweed case. Nearing home, I was sent ahead to make sure the path to our shared bedroom was clear of adults. In the room, Rory slowly opened the case. I was stunned at the beauty of it, all from the orange velvet lining to the compartment with all the extras. I wasn't allowed to touch the guitar and had to give my word of honour to Rory, who would give the matter consideration and might let me hold it at some point, provided that I stick to my promise […] 'Please can I polish your guitar?' I would often ask of my brother. 'No, you're not to touch it,' he would reply."

Bob Hewitt

Initially hidden under Dónal's bed, the Stratocaster was eventually discovered by their mother, who allowed Gallagher to keep it, trusting that he would repay the cost through his gig earnings.

From this date forward, the Stratocaster became inseparable from Gallagher, serving as his instrument of choice throughout his entire career. It accompanied him on more than 2,000 live shows and always travelled by his side (Bonhams, 2024). Famously shy and reserved, Gallagher would often hold the guitar during interviews, deriving comfort from its presence, illustrating how the instrument functioned not merely as a musical tool but, in Everett's (2003) terms, a "material companion."

In the 2010 *Ghost Blues* documentary, Dónal spoke poignantly of the moment his brother passed away on 14 June 1995 and how: "All I could do was look at his hands and look at his guitar and say, 'You poor orphan. Who's ever gonna play you like he did?'" The Stratocaster was even present at Gallagher's funeral, propped up against his coffin "like an ineffably poignant still life" (Stokes, 1995).

While for Dónal, the Stratocaster “became like another family sibling” (Gallagher, 2004), the music press frequently personified the instrument as Gallagher’s “wife,” “mistress,” “partner for life,” and “companion” (O’Hagan, 2022). This personification emerged partly because Gallagher was never romantically associated with anyone, yet it risked reproducing a problematic logic of possession and objectification, aligning the instrument with traditional representations of women as objects of desire or control (cf. Halstead and Rolvsjord, 2017). Interestingly, Gallagher himself did not personify his guitar in these terms, as others have done (e.g. BB King’s Lucille); rather, he referred to it as his “best friend,” saying:

“This is the best, it’s my life, this is my best friend. It’s almost like knowing its weak spots are strong spots. I don’t like to get sentimental about these things, but when you spend 30 years of your life with the same instrument, it’s like a walking memory bank of your life there in your arms […] I hate using your one-line clichés, but this guitar is part of my psychic make-up. I’ve had troubles with it, but I’m fortunate enough. It's like B.B. King has a hundred Lucilles, I’ve only got one Strat” (Minhinnett, 1995).

In this statement, Gallagher emphasises the mutuality of his relationship with the Stratocaster, framing it not as an object to possess, but as a partner with whom he shares affinity, loyalty, and respect. Rather than invoking a feminised or romanticised relationship, Gallagher foregrounds the guitar as an integral part of his identity, thereby reinforcing the symbiotic nature of their bond.

To watch performances of this relationship in action—Gallagher’s physical fluency with the instrument, the intuitive ease of his movements, and the absence of theatrical “ownership” gestures—is to witness a dynamic rooted in connection, not conquest. This is something that Lauren reflected upon in her diary after watching Gallagher’s 1977 *Rockpalast* appearance for the first time:

“They move as one. A single entity. I’ve never seen such seamless unity between a musician and his instrument. I’m absolutely mesmerised by those hands, how effortlessly they glide over the strings. This is musical perfection.”

Bob Hewitt

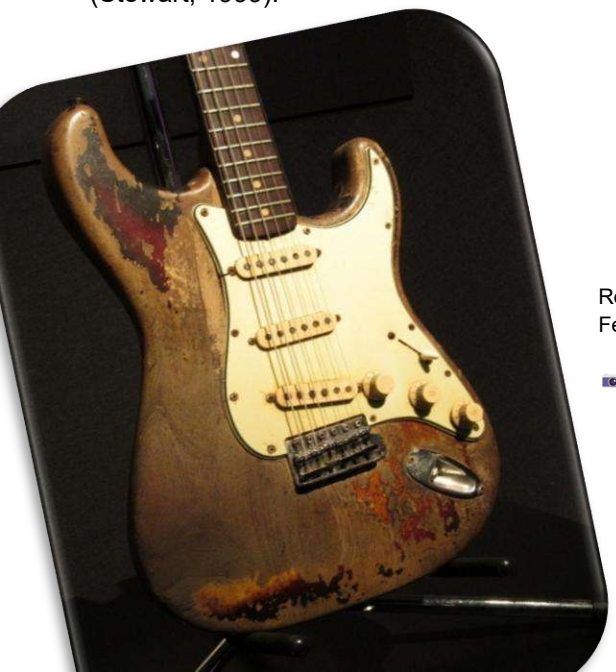
Bob Hewitt is a music photojournalist who developed a friendship with Gallagher after first photographing him for *Guitarist* magazine at the Calpe Rock Music Festival in Spain, July 1984. Lauren became friends with Hewitt in 2020, after meeting him through the Rory Gallagher Instagram fan community.

Transformative Materiality

The material-cultural turn in social anthropology during the 1980s marked a significant shift in how objects were understood, emphasising that their cultural meanings are most fully grasped through the lens of everyday use and individual appropriation (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986). This approach repositions objects as active agents in social life, whose meanings are continually shaped and reshaped through interaction and embedded cultural contexts.

Mason (2008) deepened this perspective by examining the relationships between people and objects through four dimensions of affinity: fixed, negotiated and creative, ethereal, and sensory. Of particular relevance to this study is sensory affinities—a concept that foregrounds the physical and sensorial bonds forged between bodies and material things. Holmes (2020, 2024) further developed this idea through her theory of "material affinities," highlighting how everyday objects become tethered to specific people, places, and moments in time. These bonds transform them into "aura-laden objects" (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015:7, cf. Benjamin, 1935) that facilitate "emotionally charged rituals and experiences on which various communities thrive."

Central to Holmes' argument is that these affinities are not only felt but physically and imaginatively inscribed into the material qualities of objects themselves. In line with Stewart (1999), Latour (2000), and Gregson et al. (2010), Holmes (2024) draws particular attention to the instability of materials, their capacity for transformation, and the performance effects this can evoke. Drawing from Grosz's (1994, 1995) concept of the "leaky body," she suggests that objects, too, possess porous boundaries: their parts and materials may detach, be altered, or carry traces elsewhere. In this view, objects become "palimpsests"—layered sites of accumulated meaning—or what Ingold (2010) sees as a "gathering of threads" enmeshed in the flows of everyday life. Through processes of wear, maintenance, and exchange, these materials store our labour and affections, revealing a dynamic interplay between materiality, memory, and selfhood (Stewart, 1999).



Rory Gallagher's 1961 Fender Stratocaster

Lauren Alex O'Hagan

A 1958 Fender Stratocaster with a Sunburst finish. Although produced three years earlier than Gallagher's own model, it demonstrates how the original guitar looked before its transformative materiality.

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This is vividly illustrated by Gallagher's Stratocaster, where each mark, dent and modification becomes part of its evolving story. For Steve, the responsibility of working on such a revered instrument was immense:

"To see such an iconic guitar when you first open the case is a bit surreal. You grow up seeing this instrument on so many gigs and being played on his albums. Although I have been fortunate enough to look at many famous guitars, I never take for granted the trust Bonhams place in me. This guitar has been with Rory for so many years that I can see every scratch and dent that came from years of road wear and tear. The guitar today is not just an instrument but a piece of art that still can be played."

Gallagher's Stratocaster, thus, exemplifies what we term *transformative materiality*—an object shaped through intense use, accruing layers of meaning that render it more than just a tool. As O'Hagan (forthcoming) notes, the guitar stands as a material proxy for Gallagher himself, its visible wear forging an enduring bond between musician and instrument. Over the next five pages, we demonstrate how the biography of the guitar is inextricable from the biography of Gallagher (cf. Humphries and Smith, 2014), drawing on both our personal encounters with the instrument and archival sources.

When examining Gallagher's Stratocaster up close, the first thing that struck us was the condition of its body, which has been almost entirely stripped of its original Sunburst finish. According to the official Rory Gallagher website (2025), the origins of this distinctive wear date back to 1967 when the guitar was stolen following a performance in Dublin with Gallagher's band, Taste. The theft was featured on RTÉ's *Garda Patrol*, drawing national attention to the case. A few days later, the guitar was discovered abandoned in a ditch and returned to Gallagher, who vowed never to let it out of his sight again. Dónal Gallagher (2012, cited in Morales, 2022) later recalled that the period of separation felt "like someone we knew had been kidnapped," adding that "Rory was so depressed and, as family, you'd take on the depression as well." Standing in front of the guitar, it is hard not to sense something of that affective charge (cf. Mason, 2008).

Much of the subsequent wear to the guitar's body came through Gallagher's extraordinary commitment to live performance, playing an average of 300 concerts per year, often for three hours a night. This intensive physical contact left its traces: Gallagher's rare blood type, combined with his unusually acidic sweat, is said to have acted like a "paintstripper" (Leonard, 1998), chemically accelerating the breakdown of the lacquer.

Steve Clarke

In a 2014 interview, Gallagher's nephew Daniel likened the Stratocaster to a "piece of driftwood" and Gallagher to the "ocean" because the guitar had been moulded to the contours of his body through years of consistent use. Having the rare opportunity to observe the rear of the guitar, we could clearly see the evidence of this: the areas where it had repeatedly made contact with Gallagher's clothing had developed a smooth, almost polished texture, worn down by his movements on stage. The imprint of denim from his jeans was also visible, leaving a distinct blue tinge on the wood. Additionally, numerous dents from Gallagher's belt buckle punctuated the guitar's surface, marking the intensity and energy with which he performed.

Viewing the guitar in person foregrounded the instability of its materiality, responsive to both nonhuman and human forces, whether environmental exposure or Gallagher's own body (Latour, 2000). Like Grosz's (1994) notion of the "leaky body," the Stratocaster is a porous site of interaction, challenging the idea of bodily boundaries and fixed, stable objects and bearing witness to Gallagher's corporeality, labour, and devotion to music.

These observations bring a new dimension to studies of body-instrument relationships (cf. Schroeder, 2006; de Souza, 2017), emphasising the intertwined material relationship between Gallagher and his Stratocaster. The guitar's textures and markings become a material stand-in for Gallagher himself, evoking the memory of his onstage magnetism and the emotional resonance of his performances.

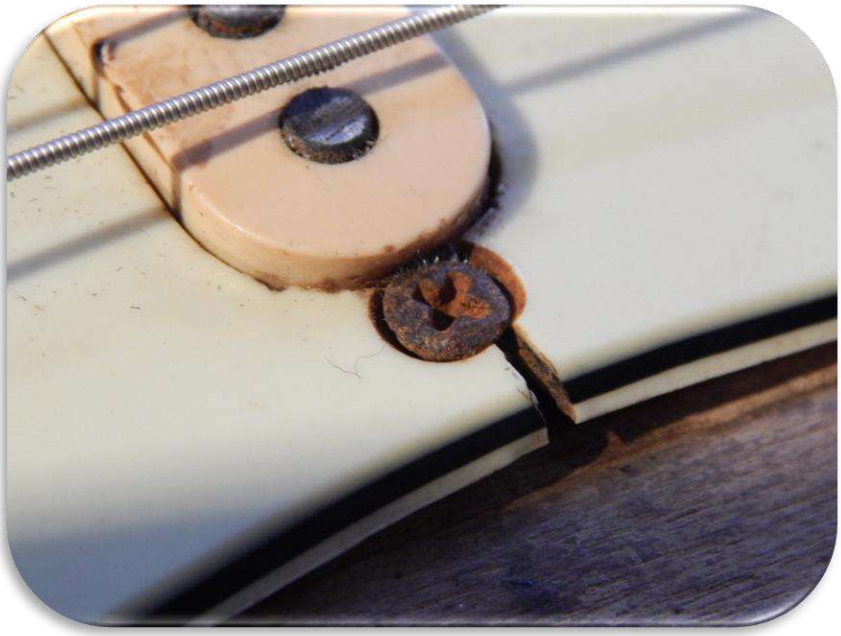
Steve Clarke

The original pickguard on Gallagher's Stratocaster was replaced in the late 1960s after it became warped from the heat generated by playing in small venues, where stage lights, the guitar's electronics, the close proximity to the audience, and cigarette smoke created an environment of intense physical and material stress (Fitzpatrick, 2024).

Despite its replacement, the new pickguard did not escape further wear, bearing the accumulated traces of Gallagher's distinctive downstroke picking technique. For instance, we observed a noticeable split in the groove around the pickguard. Indeed, his strong, heavy right hand often struck the wood, causing chips to form across the top (Rory Gallagher official website, 2025).

The screws securing and surrounding the pickguard have significantly rusted, serving as a striking example of the interplay between human use and material degradation (cf. Grosz, 1994; Holmes, 2020). With the constant adjusting and replacing of screws, wood filler was applied to keep the screws secure.

While efforts are often made to limit or mask the effects of material decay (cf. DeSilvey, 2006), the rust and improvised repairs on Gallagher's guitar add to its authenticity and affective impact. It underscores the limits of human control over the environment and the inevitability of entropy—how materials age, break down, and attest to their histories despite our best attempts to preserve them (Sumartojo and Graves, 2018).



Sometime in the late 1970s, Gallagher removed the original neck of his Stratocaster and hung it up to dry—a pragmatic response to the sheer amount of moisture and sweat it had absorbed through relentless touring (Rory Gallagher official website, 2025). During this period, he used a replacement neck. Although the guitar kept more in tune, Gallagher confessed that he “missed” the original neck as it was such a “vital part of the sound” (*Strat Masters*, 1993) and was glad when the original went back on. This reflection speaks not only to Gallagher’s deep attunement to his instrument but also to the affective and sonic specificity of materials—a theme central to material culture studies (Stewart, 1999; Ingold, 2010). The neck here becomes more than a structural component: it is a conduit of feeling and embodied sound.

Over the years, Gallagher made numerous modifications to keep the neck playable: replacing nuts, frets, and tuners, and adding another string tree to improve tuning stability. While the guitar ended up with five Sperzel tuners, the low E string has a Gotoh tuner instead, added quickly as a stopgap but never replaced. This seemingly minor detail speaks volumes about both Gallagher’s pragmatism and the stratified material biography of the guitar, where provisional fixes become permanent features (Henare et al., 2007). When we examined the headstock ourselves, we also noticed the Fender logo reduced to a faint outline—a ghost of branding long effaced by touch.

In interviews, Gallagher often joked that the guitar was now “super-glued together” (*Borderline*, 1988), but insisted it remained his “lucky charm” (Minhinnett, 1995). Standing before it, we could sense how its accumulated wear and repair work reflected the intense physical demands of performance and the ethic of maintenance and improvisation that defined Gallagher’s relationship with his instrument. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) reminds us, care is not always neat or restorative; sometimes it is messy, improvised, and deeply entangled with decay.

Steve Clarke

Steve Clarke

Another notable feature of Gallagher's guitar is the absence of a tremolo arm. While other prominent Stratocaster users—Hank Marvin being a particularly iconic example—embraced the use of the tremolo to shape their signature sounds, Gallagher rejected it early on (*Strat Masters*, 1993). Instead, he created a comparable sonic effect by bending the strings behind the nut—a technique he used with striking effectiveness in his 1975 Madrid performance of 'Cradle Rock'. In fact, shortly after acquiring the guitar, he physically blocked off the tremolo mechanism with a small piece of wood (Rory Gallagher official website, 2025). This act of "deliberate immobilisation" (Owen, 2022) represents an early instance of Gallagher reshaping the materiality of the instrument to suit his embodied playing style.

Other internal modifications, such as rewiring the tone controls (disconnecting the middle tone knob, setting the bottom knob as a master tone, and retaining the master volume), and replacing the vintage 3-way selector switch with a 5-way to increase the number of pickup combinations and alter the guitar's tone—speak to a form of material authorship. While none of these changes are visible without opening up the guitar, they are no less performative. In fact, we argue they exemplify what Holmes (2020) refers to as "invisible leaking"—the way internal, unseen alterations in objects can still "leak" into affective and auditory registers. Gallagher's reconfigured tone control system, for example, enabled him to adjust the sound with his little finger mid-performance, introducing vamping effects that were sonically distinctive and visually expressive (Fitzpatrick, 2024).

We, therefore, view these "under-the-surface" changes as indicative of how Gallagher's Stratocaster was continuously rescripted (cf. Akrich, 1992) through everyday use and experimentation. The guitar functioned not merely as a tool of expression, but as a site of improvisatory material practice—an instrument literally shaped by, and shaping, his musical identity.