

The Lived Experience of the Emerging Contemporary Singer-Songwriter:

A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract

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The singer-songwriter genre is a unique compositional model that requires the musician not only to create the lyrical and musical content of a piece, but also to perform and interpret the original material in an intimately personal manner. Utilizing a coalescence of affecting performance, technical prowess, and confessional narrative song structures, the singer-songwriter holds the ability to conjure a captivating artistic experience—one that has enraptured audiences since its meteoric rise to pop culture prominence during the period of civil unrest that defined America's identity crisis throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In subsequent decades, music critics, scholars, and educators have scrutinized the developmental origins and artistic integrity of this genre, contesting the interplay of what specific elements constitute the identity of an "authentic singer-songwriter." Due to this lack of consensus, further research was warranted to establish an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of singer-songwriters within today's commercial music landscape. The purpose of this study was to explore with five currently practicing singer-songwriters the elemental facets of their lived experience that led them to embrace this vocation and what continues to perpetuate their artistic ambition. Using a triangulation of qualitative data, this interpretative phenomenological inquiry uncovered phenomena that not only illuminate the holistic essence of the contemporary singer-songwriter's lived experience but also highlight the potential cathartic psychological and emotional enlightenment derived from engaging in this particular manner of musical artistry for future generations of songwriters.

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Dedication

To my mother (Valerie): You gave me my voice and my musicality, and you told me to always follow my passion. Every time I sing a tune or put a pen to the page, your voice, your love, and your kindness breathe through each note and word. You taught me never to accept supposed truths at face value; to seek to understand the complexities of our reality rather than merely accept them. I employed those skills when writing this dissertation, and I literally could not have reached this milestone without your endless love and support. Even though you are no longer physically with us, I feel your presence now more than ever before. I love you forever.

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

The singer-songwriter genre is a unique compositional model that requires the musician not only to create the lyrical and musical content of a piece, but also to perform and interpret the original material in an intimately personal manner. While this musical archetype has existed in various forms, from pioneers of the American folk music revival in the 1940s to today's pop-oriented artists, the "singer-songwriter" designation first entered popular vernacular in North America in the 1960s to describe a distinctive new wave of songwriters who embraced idiosyncratic stylistic and thematic conventions, lyrical introspection, confessional songwriting, political protest, subtle musical arrangements, and an understated performing style (Shepherd, 2003). Utilizing this coalescence of intimate emotional disclosure and distinct musical practices (composition, expressive performance, technical prowess), the singer-songwriter holds the ability to conjure a captivating artistic experience. From wildly imaginative to unsparingly authentic, the stories woven by this unique class of composers continue to influence today's youth, piquing the curiosity of novice music students and burgeoning singers and instrumentalists alike (Kratus, 2016).

With the singer-songwriter commanding this significant presence in contemporary musical culture across multiple generations, the question begs to be asked: How do such musicians develop their craft and technical ability? Moreover, why do they perpetuate their artistry? What does the singer-songwriter's lived experience look and feel like? In the decades since the genre has become a fixture in contemporary pop culture, music critics, scholars, curriculum consultants, and educators have extensively scrutinized the developmental origins and artistic integrity of these musicians, contesting the interplay of what specific crucial elements constitute the identity of an authentic "singer-songwriter." Previous explorations of the

instrumental development and artistic process of singer-songwriters have yielded an almost paradoxical perception of the singer-songwriter in popular culture, noting the delicate balance and tension at play among the lyrical, musical, and performative aspects that a singer-songwriter represents (Haworth, 2013). Additionally, prior research exploring the compositional development and unique creative practices utilized by singer-songwriters have found that this distinct form of musical creativity can illuminate a path towards self-knowledge. The effects of such an experience may, in turn, afford an opportunity for self-fulfillment in a manner that realizes a person's full potential as an artist and a human being (Bentley, 2016; Blackburn Miller, 2020; Dirks, 2006; Draves, 2008; Haworth, 2013; Lawrence, 2008; Montanari, 2023).

This intricate amalgam of potential socioemotional advantages derived from singer-songwriter creativity can coalesce more specifically within two central theoretical frameworks: the fulfillment of one's "self-actualization," defined as the desire to become everything that one is capable of becoming (Maslow, 1943); and "authentic artistry," defined as artistic composition that possesses the author's inherent authority of and about its subject, with vulnerability and intimate personal disclosures serving as hallmarks of the work's imaginative expression (Dutton, 2005). The potential to effectuate one's self-actualization and authentic artistry by virtue of the creative practices embodied by the singer-songwriter archetype constituted the impetus for this current study. Moreover, this investigation's research protocol examined the lived experience of "emerging contemporary singer-songwriters," which I defined¹ as singer-songwriters who hold the ambition to achieve mainstream commercial success with their art but have yet to do so. Through the utilization of multiple distinct research procedures, this study attempted to untangle the web of assumptions, intentions, and rationalizations surrounding the emerging contemporary

¹ A more comprehensive definition of the term *Emerging Contemporary Singer-Songwriter* and its associated criteria is provided in Chapter 3.

singer-songwriter's purpose in pursuing this profession, in an effort to decipher the nature of these particular musical artists and their capacity to realize personal potential through the melodies and lyrics conjured from within.

Problem Statement

Within the popular culture sphere of contemporary music, the singer-songwriter genre is a distinct compositional model in that it requires the musician not only to create the lyrical and musical content of a piece, but also to perform and interpret the original material in an intimately personal manner. Since emerging from intimate performance spaces of the early 1960s and onto the national stage of mainstream culture, the singer-songwriter has become a ubiquitous figure in popular music vernacular.

Yet, even with the singer-songwriter's enduring foothold in North American pop culture, and despite recent studies of this genre reporting on the musical, social, and emotional benefits derived from an engagement with contemporary songwriting (Draves, 2008; Fautley, 2005; Hill, 2019; Hopkins, 2015; Jaffurs, 2004; Riley, 2012; Tobias, 2015), little is known about the nature of singer-songwriter compositional processes and how they may serve as a means toward self-actualization, identity development, and authentic artistry.

Therefore, further research is warranted to establish an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of singer-songwriters within today's commercial music landscape. This would shed light on the development of their compositional process and perspectives of the socio-emotional benefits of this distinctive compositional approach that may facilitate a genuine realization of an individual's personal and artistic identity.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the elemental facets of the lived experience of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters and their perceptions of the development of their compositional practice and artistic identity. Furthermore, this study focused on three specific elements of their development: (a) the form of musical training received (formal, autodidactic, or hybrid); (b) the influence of the compositional and performative aspects of this profession as a means towards attaining self-knowledge and fulfillment; and (c) the specific resources, such as emotional and psychological catharsis, mentors, patrons, and economic considerations, that provide the motivation to perpetuate this profession.

Through a triangulation of qualitative data collection methods (semi-structured interviews, observations of singer-songwriters' live performances and corresponding researcher field notes, and video-stimulated recall), this phenomenological inquiry assembled a "configuration of narratives" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 8) that conveys a tangible essence of singer-songwriter artistry and addresses the aforementioned influential elements of their development. Through this "configuration," it becomes possible to understand how the nature of the singer-songwriter may illuminate a path towards one's self-actualization and authentic artistry identity potential. By focusing the research on a particular subset of musicians within this genre (emerging contemporary singer-songwriters), this study provided timely, relevant, and pragmatic insights that reflect the singer-songwriters' current stature in contemporary popular music. To fashion a vivid comprehension of the lived experiences of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters, the following main research question and sub-questions guided this exploration.

Research Questions

How do emerging contemporary singer-songwriters describe the development of their compositional process and artistic identity in relation to the realization of their holistic and personal essence?

- a. In what ways did the manner of their musical training impact their ability to navigate the contextual realities of singer-songwriter composition?
- b. To what degree do they regard their profession as a means for achieving self-actualization and authenticity in their artistry and self-identity consummation?
- c. What are the central motivational elements in the realization of their professional and artistic potential? Moreover, what specific resources feed and perpetuate their determination?

Anticipated Outcomes

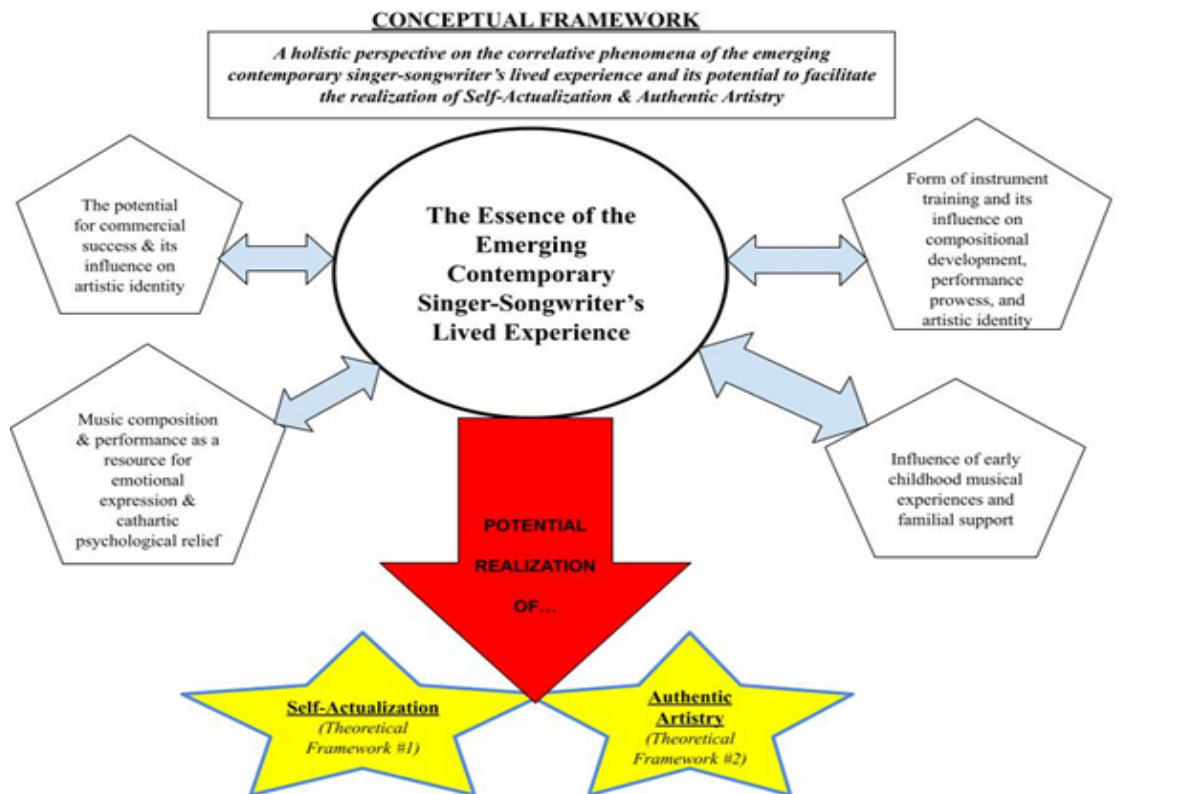
I anticipated the findings of this research initiative would yield insights into the developmental and learning processes of contemporary singer-songwriters, which, in turn, will offer pedagogues potential approaches and strategies for teaching this distinctive style of contemporary composition and effective strategies to engage their students with this practice. Furthermore, by illuminating the vital aspects of singer-songwriter artistry and understanding how they came to fruition, both pedagogues and neophyte singer-songwriters may be able to determine what combination of experience and knowledge can lead to fulfillment and socio-emotional growth when composing music within this idiosyncratic style.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

I designed this study's conceptual framework, presented in Figure 1, to facilitate the creation of my research data collection and analysis protocols. As a navigational guide that helped me capture the phenomenological nature of the contemporary singer-songwriter's lived experience, this conceptual framework contains correlative elements that may contribute to the development of the contemporary singer-songwriter's holistic essence. These experiential influences include the singer-songwriter's development of their instrumental and compositional acumen, the impact of family and community support, the economic considerations of this vocation, and potential socio-emotional benefits and identity realizations that may emerge from engaging in this musical expression.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Furthermore, the psychological theories that constitute the distinct *theoretical* framework of this research initiative are also visualized in Figure 1. These two foundational principles of *Self-Actualization* and *Authentic Artistry* played an invaluable role in the design and purpose of my study to illuminate whether singer-songwriter artistic practices may contribute to the realization of these psychological aspirational needs. Combined, these separate elements featured in Figure 1 shape the veritable fabric of this study's primary research query and its qualitative semi-structured interview protocol.

While the principles of self-actualization and authentic artistry are thoroughly examined in Chapter 2, I present in the next section a brief overview of these two theories and their fundamental attributes. This helps to situate the goal of this study: to explore comprehensively the lived experience of the emerging contemporary singer-songwriter.

Self-Actualization

For singer-songwriter Donald Bohlen (2004), music composition has served as “the primal generator of my existence, the delineator of the self, the definition of living creatively” (p. 2), functioning as an “enrichment of the creator, the participator, the beholder, by supplying the means for increased self-knowledge” (p. 3). Bohlen highlighted how the act of composing music “produces discovery and something more within ourselves” (p. 13). These personal revelations espoused by Bohlen that are achieved through the intimately confessional practice of singer-songwriter composition can lead to one's *self-actualization*. This term was first coined by German psychiatrist Kurt Goldstein and expanded on by American psychologist Abraham Maslow in his groundbreaking 1943 paper “A Theory of Human Motivation,” in which he introduced a psychological concept for human motivation, now referred to as *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*.

Described by Maslow (1943) as “self-fulfillment, namely the tendency for the individual to become actualized in what he is potentially,” self-actualization is considered as “the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (p. 372). Frequently interpreted as “the full realization of one’s potential and of one’s ‘true self’” (Gleitman et al., 2004, p. 54), self-actualization represents the pinnacle of psychological development and personal fulfillment. It is a fundamental human need that can be achieved through the artistically expressive and honest practice of singer-songwriting composition. Hence, this concept served as a guiding principle in my examination of the singer-songwriter participants in this study.

Authentic Artistry

From a philosophical perspective, the term *authenticity* implies an evolving relationship between the self and their surroundings (Mazullo, 1999). Expanding further on this notion, communications theorist Hanno Hardt (1993) offered a conceptualization of authenticity that emanates from

an understanding of the meaning and value of existence and co-existence in a world of powerful and competing interests. At the center remains the question of what it is to be a human being as a concrete way of entering into the world...making one’s existence one’s own, separated from others, instead of surrendering to those powers or interests that manage everyday life. (pp. 49-50)

How these erudite definitions relate to the artistry of the singer-songwriter can be traced back to a common trope discussed across various interpretations of the singer-songwriter genre, specifically regarding the unfettered *authentic artistry* of the genre’s compositions. As Haworth (2013) described, listeners were immediately drawn to the nascent singer-songwriters of the 1960s and 1970s because these specific artists “brought the demand for greater quality, breaking with the banality of corny old songs consistently churned out by record labels” (p. 73). Further

exploring the conceit of authentic artistry within singer-songwriter composition, Bentley (2016) interviewed one of the pioneers of the genre, Jackson Browne, who emphasized how “the authenticity of someone telling their own story” became a vital and captivating characteristic of the singer-songwriter movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In summarizing his inquiry, Bentley (2016) conceded that, while the notion of *authenticity* is one of the most problematized terms of all popular music studies, it has always been, and remains to this day, a central element of the singer-songwriter’s identity. To Bentley, authentic artistry is inherently ingrained in singer-songwriter compositions, for they are not only born from personal experiences but are also sung by the person who lived the experience. Shattering any obstacle between listener and performer, the singer-songwriter’s compositional approach accordingly facilitates a complete and “unmediated experience” (p. 20).

Further testament to the thread of authenticity sewn into notable singer-songwriters’ compositions can be found in Donald Brackett’s (2008) book, *Dark Mirror: The Pathology of the Singer-Songwriter*. In each chapter, Brackett posited that the singer-songwriter’s creative process requires artists to channel the darkest moments of their personal lives. To Brackett, this ability to channel life experiences into a musical product creates “authentic” songs (Bentley, 2016). Moreover, this “pathologized creative process” embodied by the singer-songwriter can yield emotionally compelling songs (Brackett, 2008).

As these findings from previous investigations of the singer-songwriter’s identity revealed, artistic authenticity is a central tenet of this genre’s compositional practice. Therefore, it is imperative for the current investigation to examine the lived experiences of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters through the principal lenses of artistic authenticity *and* self-

actualization. Both theories appear to play vital roles in the artistic intentions and identity interpretation of this idiosyncratic musical artist.

Plan of Research and Methodology Overview

For this study, I utilized a descriptive phenomenological methodology. This approach allowed me to develop knowledge about the human experience of emerging singer-songwriters by examining their descriptions of their lived experiences and life worlds (Roulston, 2020). Further, the phenomenological nature of my research afforded me the opportunity to outline the essence of the phenomenon being examined as the “development of the spiritual self” (p. 45).

The population of interest for this particular study is “Emerging Contemporary Singer-Songwriters.” The following characteristics define musicians within the singer-songwriter genre:

- have published original music on multiple streaming platforms (number of releases not of particular consequence);
- perform regularly (at least once a month) at public music venues (location not necessarily important, i.e., local vs. national);
- are actively composing and/or recording new original material;
- have self-identified as a “singer-songwriter” for at least 3 years; and
- are considered “*emerging*” because they do not yet generate enough income solely through their profession as a singer-songwriter but hold the ambition eventually to be self-sufficient as a professional singer-songwriter (i.e., the profession becomes financially viable in the future).

The specific details of this population are important to delineate for my research goals for multiple reasons: (a) The chance of being granted permission to interview *established* singer-songwriters (i.e., public figures in pop culture) was not necessarily feasible or pragmatic; and

(b) Exploring and gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experience of *emerging* contemporary singer-songwriters afforded me the opportunity to offer insights that were more timely, relevant, and reflective of today's current commercial musical landscape. In designing this study, I envisioned speaking with artists who are still filled with an "inner fire/desire/passion" for their artistry, instead of being more jaded established singer-songwriters who have been a part of the industry for a long period and may have developed a cynical view of the profession.

"Speaking from Experience"

The genesis of my research initiative stemmed directly from my own experience as an emerging contemporary singer-songwriter in New York City from 2007 to present day. Although the realm of higher education academia has occupied the majority of my professional life for the past 7 years, I still consider myself to be, first and foremost, a contemporary singer-songwriter. From the moment I first picked up a guitar at the emotionally tumultuous age of 13, I knew I wanted to write my own songs. Granted, while the narrative of a teenager struggling to navigate adolescence may sound banal and trite, for myself, playing the guitar and writing songs remained one of the only effective remedies while I endured the often capricious and callous nature of teenage life. Furthermore, it was precisely during these formative years when I discovered the awesome and influential emotional power of music performance. Every day after school, I slipped down to the basement of my childhood home, picked up that Fender Squire, turned the amp volume to MAX, brought my lips to the buzzing microphone, and simply *played* until the mental anguish retreated, even if for a fleeting moment.

In these early years of musical practice, I was never sure if what I was doing was "technically correct" or, frankly, even appealing to anyone with a discerning ear, but I was

certain that I could find immediate respite within the distorted twang of clumsily-shaped power chords that I struggled to form on my (rarely in tune) Fender Squire electric guitar. In hindsight, I realize now that those brittle riffs and disjointed rhythms ringing from that guitar in my parents' unfinished basement were my primary lifeline as I navigated the turbulence of teenage life and began constructing my own identity. While it may sound hackneyed, I believe the creative personal expression afforded to me by music performance and songwriting during those restless years undoubtedly saved my life, in more ways than I could have imagined.

Regardless of the shape of emotional turmoil with which I wrestled, whether reeling from devastating heartache after my first romantic relationship dissolved, to caring for my frail mother as the chronic kidney and vascular disease that had afflicted her for literally all of my life deteriorated with each passing month, I found absolute solace in music. It had become a secret hideout from my suffering, and pain could not find its way in. I listened to my idols, the singer-songwriters Elliott Smith, Josh Ritter, Fiona Apple, and Bruce Springsteen, among countless others, singing into my ears about their hardships and losses, their heartache and depression. Their voices, shared with such intimate candor that I felt I knew each of them personally, made me feel less alone in my own pain.

In the intervening years, I self-composed and released five albums of original music, under the moniker "The Corduroy Suit," because my given name, John Schmergel, simply did not scream "rock star status." I never could easily envision it on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine! I self-released my first album in 2007—a collection of formulaic blues-rock tunes that my mother adored but few others did. As I refined my songwriting prowess in subsequent years, I developed my own artistic voice.

No longer relegated to emulating my idols Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan, I started writing songs that sounded unique because I finally felt brave enough to tap into *my* distinctive creative voice. Granted, the music I composed during this period often revolved around common musical tropes of unrequited love, lost connections, and the all-too-prosaic “ennui” of daily life, but I sang about these topics with a newfound command of my vocal ability and confidence in my instrumental technique. In the years following my graduation from New York University, bouncing between various temporary positions to put money in my pocket while I navigated my “next big step” in adult life, I relied on music composition as a necessary and cathartic means of processing emotional turmoil—a way to find inner peace and fulfillment with my adult identity. Through writing and performing my original music during this period, I discovered who I truly was and the value I could offer the world. For the first time, those people in my periphery actually started to listen. Experiencing the joy of knowing that something I *myself* had created actually brought solace or contentment to someone else, even ephemerally, enabled me to view life through a new lens. I was paving a path toward myriad opportunities to share my love of music with as many people as possible.

Just as this astonishing bolt of enlightenment struck my soul, the commercial musical landscape around me metamorphosed in ways with which I could not contend. With the advent of innumerable novel music streaming services emerging almost every week, contemporary singer-songwriters like myself were now required not only to write and perform all of the music, but *additionally* record, release, and publicize our art (with the costs of these efforts now placed on the shoulders of the artist versus the erstwhile custom of record labels defraying overhead). All of these were futile efforts to earn (literally) a *fraction* of a penny for each listen. By the time I released my latest (hopefully, not last) original album in late 2015 (completely self-funded and

received with minimal fanfare, unfortunately), I had grown wary of the commercial music industry and the widening gulf between authentic artistry and financial sustainability wrought by the advent of streaming services. Despite this new reality, I was extremely proud of the albums I released over the past 15 years. I was finally writing music imbued with my idiosyncratic personality in a growing collection of compositions that blurred the lines between country, folk, and alternative rock genres.

Around the same time I released my last album, I matriculated to Teachers College in pursuit of a master's degree in music education. I had pivoted career ambitions from singer-songwriter "rock star" dreams to a more financially stable career in academia. I did not feel like a luddite capitulating to the newfangled gatekeepers of commercial music as I abandoned my artistic aspirations. Rather, I embraced this next step in my musical career as yet another unique opportunity to share my love of music and creative expression with even more curious minds. Since the onset of my graduate work at Teachers College, teaching music has become a new artform for me. It has not replaced my singer-songwriter career intentions but, rather, has advantageously advanced them. Today, because of my shrewd pivot to academia, I am more engrossed in the daily exhilaration of music performance and creation than at any other time in my life. For this alone, I am forever indebted to the beauty of musical creativity.

Summary

This introductory chapter addressed the central aims of my research initiative, the underlying rationale and necessity for this study, the theoretical principles guiding the inquiry, and the anticipated outcomes and potential implications that this qualitative exploration may provide pedagogues and burgeoning singer-songwriters alike.

Chapter 2 next takes a deeper dive into the history and previous research of the singer-songwriter genre, examining the foundational theories and prior studies that informed and influenced the genesis for this current inquiry.

Chapter 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters and their perceptions of the development of their compositional practice and holistic growth of their artistic identity. To conduct a comprehensive qualitative investigation of the phenomenological attributes of these particular musicians, it was imperative, first, to establish a thorough review of relevant literature relating to previous academic research on the subject. This overview laid a credible cornerstone for a cogent data collection methodology, including a meticulous interview protocol that maintained an inductive analysis approach with which I examined the lived experience of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters.

As several foundational elements of the singer-songwriter genre guided this investigation, the following review of literature is presented in three distinct categories. First is the historical perspective of the contemporary singer-songwriter's rise to national notoriety during the 1960s and 1970s. Second is an examination of the musical skills commonly associated with singer-songwriters and how such techniques are typically acquired. Finally, the third category defines this study's central theoretical frameworks (Self-Actualization and Authentic Artistry) within the singer-songwriter context.

The Rise of the Contemporary Singer-Songwriter: A Historical Perspective

The singer-songwriter genre is a unique compositional model in that it requires the musician not only to create the lyrical and musical content of a piece, but also to perform and interpret the original material in an intimately personal manner. This musical archetype has permeated the artistic cultural landscape in various forms across multiple generations, from pioneers of the American folk music revival in the 1940s to today's pop-oriented artists. However, the designation "singer-songwriter" first entered popular vernacular in North America

in the 1960s to describe a distinctive new wave of songwriters who embraced idiosyncratic stylistic and thematic conventions, lyrical introspection, confessional songwriting, political protest, subtle musical arrangements, and an understated performing style (Shepherd, 2003).

As this study's research protocol aimed to address the detailed underpinnings of the lived experience of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters, it is imperative, first, to establish a comprehensive understanding of how this genre rose to mainstream cultural prominence during its nascent stages throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Immediately prior to this watershed period of innovative artistry when the singer-songwriter became a ubiquitous figure in popular culture, various music critics and scholars alike throughout the 1950s opined that a predominance of commercial music released during this period had become increasingly more focused on profits rather than artistry. While this dilution in artistic quality remained extremely lucrative for the record industry throughout the 1950s as it continued marketing substantially derivative musical "products," the larger world was inexorably changing (Haworth, 2013). At the onset of the 1960s, as escalating political and social unrest in the United States and around the world coalesced into formidable cultural movements advocating for civil rights and admonishing race and gender prejudices, people gradually grew an appetite to hear music that was not merely a commodity, but a piece of artistic integrity, written with tangible and meaningful purpose (Haworth, 2013).

Understandably, then, throughout the early 1960s, curious listeners flocked to the novel melodies and confessional narratives expressed in this new style of songwriting embodied by unabashed enthusiasm, as the singer-songwriter's musical approach "brought the demand for greater quality, breaking with the banality of corny old songs churned out by record labels" of the previous decade (Haworth, 2013, p. 73). For the earliest fans of this nascent genre, singer-

songwriter compositions were widely embraced with open arms because they represented a “breath of fresh air” for musical expression. These novel artists imbued their songs with an imaginative and unconventional confessionally personal tack, “free from pomp and circumstance, from the trappings of the grand spectacle, which, like a sauce, mask even the weakest offerings” (p. 73).

Initial patrons of the contemporary singer-songwriter genre at this time became entranced by the almost mythical nature of these obscure artists, for multiple reasons. Chiefly, audiences, who had become disenchanted by the surfeit of increasingly unimaginative offerings of record labels for many prior years, were mystified by this new form of musical expression. This class of avant-garde musicians was actually writing songs for purely personal reasons instead of monetary and often emotionally vacant motivations that recalled many of the previous decade’s commercial offerings (Vernillat & Charpentreau, 1971). It is worth noting that this somewhat unsavory assessment of the music industry during this period should not be construed as a reflection of the full output of popular music offerings prior to the singer-songwriter’s emergence into mainstream culture. Indeed, genuinely creative musicality was prevalent during this period as well, but it needed to evolve in order to reflect the needs of a listening audience living in an increasingly volatile, culture-shifting world. For these cogent reasons, the singer-songwriter genre received rapt attention and warm reception at this pivotal historical juncture in American society.

Furthermore, this newfound appreciation for singer-songwriters was not limited only to North American audiences. In a music journal published in Italy in 1964, arts critic Roberto Galanti addressed the rising popularity of the singer-songwriter genre as follows:

Singer-songwriters are flourishing in Italy; that is, those who are definitively modernizing song, lifting it to elevated artistic and poetic tones. These are their golden years, in which the best, freshest and most spontaneous pieces are being composed. Thanks to the singer-songwriters, the musical field is becoming noticeably wider: there are new themes, new arguments and, above all, an unmistakable style, which, finally, is created from within, not copied from abroad. (p. 14)

During this same period, on the opposite side of the world (specifically, the bohemian enclave of Laurel Canyon in Los Angeles, California), the singer-songwriter genre was also gaining a foothold in pop culture vernacular with the prominent rise of trailblazing artists such as Joni Mitchell, Elton John, Jackson Browne, James Taylor, and Carole King, among many others. In her 2016 dissertation *Los Angeles Troubadours: The Politics of the Singer-Songwriter Movement*, author Christina Bentley chronicled the meteoric rise of the singer-songwriter genre to pop culture phenomena during the 1960s and early 1970s. Charting the evolution of such aforementioned musicians as they disseminated their art to audiences in various underground cafes and bars across the Los Angeles area during this period, Bentley described an almost hypnotic adulation that these young and promising singer-songwriters encountered.

At the heart of her historical investigative narrative, Bentley (2016) unpacked why the popularity of these “new” artists was so sudden and utterly captivating to American audiences. She noted how the singer-songwriter’s “musical aesthetic, which promoted confessional songwriting and self-reflection, encapsulated the rise in individualism that characterized the social movements of the era” (p. vii). Exploring the rise of the singer-songwriter’s popularity through the historical lens of the profoundly influential cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, from the personal politics of women’s rights for self-determination and sexual freedom, the advocacy for universal civil dignity and rejection of racial discrimination, and the evolution of anti-war ideologies borne from the increasingly deadly and unpopular Vietnam war, Bentley expressed how the music of the singer-songwriter genre composed during this period played a

vital role in shaping and galvanizing support for these critical cultural movements. The appeal of these pioneering musical artists grew exponentially during this period not only because of the personal nature of their compositions; they also represented the voices of those who had been silenced for far too long in this country. Their confessional melodic narratives became a platform to raise consciousness to feminist movements, to mirror a new vernacular of dissent among antiwar activists, and, fundamentally, to reshape the discourse of protest in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s (p. iii).

Exactly when, where, and how did the singer-songwriter become this profoundly influential force for a counterculture movement that transformed American politics and society so immutably? According to Bentley (2016), it was only in 1968 that the term *singer-songwriter* became common parlance among music industry figures, who used the designation to describe this coalescence of performers flocking to the artistic and eclectic Los Angeles neighborhood of Laurel Canyon. Around this juncture, the unique attributes of the contemporary singer-songwriter were being recognized and celebrated across a broad spectrum, noting the dual-role as a composer and a performer, as the genre emphasized the “high value the movement placed on authorship and presentation” (p. 15). As its popularity gained more traction into the 1970s, the term *singer-songwriter* began to represent more than simply a musician who writes and performs original music; it represented one who features “layers of meanings based in audience perceptions of intimate performance, story-telling, displays of artist vulnerability, and a sense of immediacy between the listener and the artist’s persona” (p. 17).

This historical perspective of the contemporary singer-songwriter’s defining characteristics and cultural significance would be lacking without addressing the unique environment in which their visceral artistry was firmly established: the performance venue.

Throughout Los Angeles in the 1960s and early 1970s, more and more small-scale nightclubs and coffeehouses were sprouting up across the sprawling city's diverse neighborhoods, providing an amenable space for the singer-songwriter's unique attributes to thrive. Of particular significance to the genre's rise in popularity was a nightclub called The Troubadour in West Hollywood. This venue, originally opened in 1957 as a coffeehouse on La Cienega Boulevard, played a critical role in the singer-songwriter's rise from obscurity to national recognition, helping to establish the careers of acclaimed artists such as James Taylor, Elton John, Jackson Browne, Van Morrison, and Bonnie Raitt (Feldman et al., 2011). As Bentley (2016) described, the Troubadour's intimately sized performance space afforded promising young musical artists the ideal environment for demonstrating their uniquely creative attributes, which then facilitated the singer-songwriter's identity formation and the public's perception of their captivating musical style. With an ambiance and decor to match—best characterized as “shabby-chic” (Bentley, 2016)—the Troubadour was the “place to be” to experience the artistry of these novel performers in such an intimately personal setting.

With the café's tattered red tablecloths and flickering candles set on packed-in wobbly tables, and a dusty loft above the kitchen where even more patrons could squeeze in to view the small stage, the audience was never too far from the performer at the Troubadour. Though seemingly minute details, these unique characteristics of the venue enhanced both the intimate nature of the club's atmosphere *and* the singer-songwriter's deeply personal and confessional songs. Because of the venue's small size that closed the distance between patron and artist, the distinctive details of the performer's style were on full display: sweat beading off their brow, expressive facial gestures while singing certain lyrics, an entrancing physicality as the melodies

moved through them. “Each of these elements brought out the idea of warmth and intimacy crucial to the singer-songwriter identity” (Bentley, 2016, p. 91).

Perhaps one of the most memorable examples of this venue’s indelible influence on the development of the singer-songwriter’s distinctive essence and identity formation was when a young Elton John made his state-side debut to American audiences at the Troubadour in 1970. Unknown to virtually anyone at this point in his career, John performed without a backup band (which would be virtually unheard of at any other juncture in his career). He accompanied himself on the piano to sing for a modest collection of curious guests scattered around various tables in the small room. As the set continued, he began singing what became one of the most legendary songs of his career, “Take Me to the Pilot.” The size of the sparse crowd from the early evening suddenly swelled as eager listeners poured into the performance space from the adjoining bar area. By the time John had completed his set, the room was packed with mesmerized fans, hollering and whistling for an impromptu encore from this (at the time) completely unknown British singer-songwriter.

Further testament to the transcendent evening that Elton John’s debut Troubadour performance signified for the emerging singer-songwriter genre can be found in the laudatory review published the following day in the *Los Angeles Times*:

Rejoice! Rock music, which has been going through a rather uneventful period lately, has a new star. He’s Elton John, a 23-year old Englishman whose United States debut Tuesday night at the Troubadour was, in almost every way, magnificent...there’s no question about John’s talent and potential. Tuesday night at the Troubadour was just the beginning. He’s going to be one of rock’s biggest and most important stars. (Hilburn, 1970, p. D22)

As embodied in the preceding anecdotes, the Troubadour’s eccentric, buoyant atmosphere helped establish the core attributes connected with the singer-songwriter identity for the audience, solidifying the merits of “personal music, authenticity, vulnerability, and intimate

performance as the defining mark of artists deemed singer-songwriters” (Bentley, 2016, p. 136). Furthermore, the captivating narratives and melodies that reverberated off the walls of this iconic club throughout the 1960s and early 1970s encapsulated the public’s appreciation for this genre’s distinct artistry, which had firmly established the identity of singer-songwriter performance with associations of intimacy, immediacy, and vulnerability.

Musical Skills Associated with Singer-Songwriters and How They Are Acquired

What musical skills are most closely associated with singer-songwriters? How do they develop these technical strengths? In attempting to fashion a comprehensive narrative of the lived experience of singer-songwriters, one of the crucial elements addressed with the participants in this study was the instrumental and vocal abilities most commonly correlated with singer-songwriters, and how such proficiencies were mastered (e.g., formal vs. informal musical training and/or hybrid of pedagogical approaches).

This chapter’s historical perspective of the evolution of the singer-songwriter genre as a pop culture phenomenon demonstrates how the singer-songwriter utilizes a combination of intrinsically motivated artistic creativity and instrumental prowess to compose compelling compositions. However, how are these skills developed, from a pedagogical standpoint? How can such a personally idiosyncratic concept of musical creativity be pragmatically taught, especially in conjunction with teaching the technical elements of instrument ability?

This delicate balance between emphasizing the artistic versus the practical skills of musical technique has remained a decades-long controversial issue for pedagogues from disparate backgrounds. In his examination of the development of musical identities and agencies through pedagogy in Western cultures, Lauri Vakeva (2016) noted how, too often, a performer’s technical ability disproportionality defines their recognition as a musician. In such a culture,

Vakeva believed there exists a “danger in seeing music pedagogy as a technical matter of helping the students to produce high-level musical skills...thus avoiding the analysis of how, and in whose interest, musical agency is framed in musico-pedagogical practice” (p. 59).

As this historical perspective of the singer-songwriter’s widespread appeal for audiences has shown, the most effective compositions from this genre are conjured from an extremely personal and intimate vantage point. Thus, in his pedagogical critique of modern music education, Vakeva underscored that it is critical for burgeoning singer-songwriters to place an emphasis on developing a self-confidence in their merit as potential artists, in equal measure with their acquisition of high-performance technical skills.

Similarly, Randles and Sullivan (2013) critiqued the current state of contemporary music pedagogical practices in an effort to determine the most effective teaching strategies when introducing musical composition to their students. From their perspective, of utmost importance when encouraging musical creativity with beginning songwriters is the teacher’s ability to loosen the reins of control and let the student “lead the flow of ideas” (p. 56) when determining how a piece of music should sound. Moreover, the authors posited that imbuing young composers with this sense of creative agency and giving them the time and space to “think in sound” can foster “empowering experiences for the students by allowing them to flex their creative muscles” (p. 55). This pedagogical approach that incorporates composition can ultimately allow students to “express themselves in personally meaningful ways not often explored within the traditionally conceived model of music education” (p. 56). It is precisely the incorporation of this kind of personal and sincere expressivity that fosters the pivotal elements of a singer-songwriter’s artistic identity.

In providing an additional alternative pedagogical perspective on singer-songwriter musical attributes, Garces-Bacsal (2014) presented a narrative of an emerging Filipino singer-songwriter, Noel Cabangon, and his unconventional path to musical talent development. Throughout multiple interviews with Cabangon, the author found that various motivators (both intrinsic and extrinsic) contributed to this artist's creative growth, including an early exposure to "music in the context of daily living, the active role played by the neighborhood and the entire community in nurturing the musical talent, and deliberate practice" (p. 231). Rather than being musically trained within an academically classical tradition, Cabangon's "sociocultural realities, tradition, and heritage shaped the development of his musical talent" (p. 232).

In the multiple in-depth interviews from this study, Cabangon described to Garces-Bacsal how he never attended a formal music school for singing or instrument lessons, yet his childhood was filled with highly influential musical experiences that shaped his own artistic motivation and development. Describing a childhood filled with "singing and jamming" with family members and neighbors alike, Cabangon stated:

I've always wanted to sing. I had cousins who knew how to play the guitar, and I would always be the singer. I would sing Michael Jackson songs, different singers. And when we had visitors, they would always ask me to sing, jamming. We would pretend that our broom was a guitar. I was 4 or 5; we would go on caroling as well that time. (p. 235)

Additionally, Cabangon was exposed to performance at a young age, singing for elders in his community during their nightly drinking sessions, which provided advantageous opportunities for him to rehearse and practice his craft (p. 235). Describing himself as a self-taught musician, Cabangon recalled how he taught himself rudimentary guitar techniques at the age of 10 after being challenged by a female classmate who already knew how to play. With no mentor to teach him musical theory or notation, Cabangon borrowed his neighbor's guitar and

intently listened to the songs he loved on repeat until he was able to transcribe the chords and lyrics on his own (p. 236). Further, Cabangon also attributed his songwriting development to his frequent participation in community-based musical activities throughout his teenage years in Manila, recalling how he would often “visit a schoolmate whose family owned a piano, and they would always have jam sessions in their home. They would sing songs by Crosby, Stills and Nash, and Frank Sinatra, among others” (p. 236).

In examining the motivational factors of Cabangon’s creative maturation as a professional singer-songwriter, Garces-Bacsal noted how “it is clear that both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards influenced his development as a musician. He talked about his love for his music, while sharing demands from his daily life which drove him to deliberate practice and music composition” (p. 238). From an intrinsic perspective, Cabangon emphasized how important music was for him during difficult times, describing how music “became my outlet...it became my form of self-expression. My love of music gave me something really different. It has made me more introspective” (p. 238).

In providing practical advice to music educators, Garces-Bacsal used the insights from his multiple in-depth interviews with Cabangon to emphasize that, indeed, there are artists who can develop comprehensive musical skills without the acquisition of traditional forms of music theory and notation. Moreover, Cabangon’s unconventional musical evolution underscored the significance of designing a music learning curriculum that is personally relevant to each student:

Young musicians should be encouraged to create music that comes from their own realities, reflective of an authenticity that radiates from somewhere true, and not contrived. Last, there should be a continual affirmation of the young artist’s perseverance, resilience, tenacity to learn, and the capacity to overcome life challenges and difficulties through music. (p. 240)

Providing additional insights into the musical skill sets most commonly acquired and embraced by singer-songwriters, Giotta and Kruse (2022) offered a perspective via an instrumental case study chronicling the experiences of high school students who participated in an experimental songwriting class over the course of one semester. Discussing the impetus for their inquiry, the authors described how “creativity is an inherent component of a holistic music education. Students who engage in singing or playing activities have an opportunity to experiment with musical sounds, expressivity, and imagination” (p. 38). Further, the authors highlighted the need for an expanded and culturally relevant music curricula in the 21st century, noting how “songwriting courses are far from mainstream in secondary music settings” (p. 38).

At the conclusion of the experimental songwriting course, Giotta and Kruse suggested that their study’s participants’ sense of self, confidence, and musical instincts dramatically improved during the course of the semester, particularly as the students gradually began to realize their creative potential. Specifically, Giotta and Kruse uncovered the following about their study’s participants:

Students grew from novices who viewed songwriting as a mysterious process to proficient song creators who composed in a variety of styles and became comfortable repositioning musical puzzle pieces. They gradually gained an understanding of standard song structures and the marriage between lyrics and music, which helped to disrupt their assumptions of linear music composition and, instead, reinforced the cyclic and often mercurial nature of songwriting. Consistently, students noted the pervasive yet invigorating tension between knowing what they wanted to do, but not knowing how to accomplish it. (p. 50)

Further, particularly valuable insights were gleaned from the participants’ own commentary when they were interviewed at the end of the semester. Overall, students discussed how their achievements in this experimental songwriting course were greatly supported by their prior music experience, and any songwriting difficulties that the participants encountered during the semester were attributed to “missing elements in their school curriculum” (p. 51). Additionally,

students noted how their compositional approach was strongly influenced by their own perceptions of popular musicians' songwriting processes. This particular finding from the study provided additional support for the intrinsic and personally meaningful motivational factors that are vital to singer-songwriter composition processes.

In summation, as these preceding excerpts from prior literature regarding the particular musical skills embodied by singer-songwriters revealed, there exists a wide spectrum of instrumental and compositional techniques that play a vital role in the development of a singer-songwriter's artistic intent. From intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors, community and family musical exposure and encouragement, and varying degrees of autodidactic musical training, the singer-songwriter relies on myriad distinctive musical skills and influences (from nascent childhood memories to mentoring figures in adulthood) as they refine their compositional process and authentic artistic identity.

“Self-Actualization” and “Authentic Artistry” Within the Singer-Songwriter Context

While the preceding historical context of the contemporary singer-songwriter's modern inception and delineation of technical musical abilities most often associated with them offered a valuable glimpse into the fundamental qualities of their unique creative identity, it is important to develop a comprehensive understanding of the underlying theoretical framework principles that guided this qualitative investigation. In particular is the association of the singer-songwriter's compositional practices as a means of realizing self-actualization and authentic artistry.

These two central theoretical concepts represent the fundamental thread woven into the fabric of this study's primary research query and its corresponding qualitative data collection methodologies (discussed in Chapter 3). Thus, it is vital, first, to explore the true nature of what

these terms symbolize within the context of singer-songwriter identity. Furthermore, this conceptual overview helps to determine the validity and reliability of these holistic theories, as realized through the practice of singer-songwriter composition, and their effect on the motivation of the participants as they navigate the capricious environment of today's music industry while refining their artistic identities. In what follows, I explore the nature of these theoretical principles, their dialogic interplay, and how each one plays a distinctive and vital role in this study's qualitative examination of the lived experience of contemporary singer-songwriters.

Self-Actualization

For singer-songwriter Donald Bohlen (2004), music composition has served as “the primal generator of [his] existence, the delineator of the self, the definition of living creatively” (p. 2), functioning as an “enrichment of the creator, the participator, the beholder, by supplying the means for increased self-knowledge” (p. 3). Bohlen highlighted how the act of composing music “produces discovery and something more within ourselves” (p. 13). These personal revelations espoused by Bohlen that are achieved through the intimately confessional practice of singer-songwriter composition can lead to one's *self-actualization*: a psychological concept for human motivation that aims to realize “the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (Maslow, 1943, p. 372).

Frequently interpreted as “the full realization of one's potential and of one's ‘true self’” (Gleitman et al., 2004), self-actualization represents the pinnacle of psychological development and personal fulfillment—a fundamental human need that can be achieved through the artistically expressive and honest practice of singer-songwriter composition. Hence, this concept is used as a principle to guide me as I examined the lived experience of the singer-songwriters who participated in my study.

To understand the degree of self-actualization fulfillment within the context of singer-songwriter artistry, Montanari (2023) designed a qualitative inquiry that explored this phenomenon via semi-structured interviews with three professional singer-songwriters. Through these expansive interviews, Montanari sought to answer: “What happens to us when we are immersed in the songwriting experience? How will those words and sounds linger in our psyche for years to come? How do they shape and enrich our worldview and emotional vocabulary?” (p. 2).

Montanari’s conversations with these three contemporary singer-songwriters revealed both distinctive and parallel motivations for songwriting and how this practice may enable the fulfillment of one’s personal potential. As one interview participant, Chiara, explained, the songwriting process is often facilitated by images and words that are central to the atmosphere and emotional state she wants to convey. Chiara regarded songwriters as storytellers whose explicit intention is vital in the delivery of their message. Hers is to put a feeling forward: “I care so much about the meaning that I want to convey” (p. 8). Regarding the realization of self-actualization through songwriting, Chiara described the process of lyric composition as having an especially therapeutic benefit for her psyche, as the creative task can yield newfound insights into certain unsettling feelings, as if the act was a “soothing balm that helps bridge contradiction: it gives an emotional ridge of sorts” (p. 7).

Buttressed by her interviews with two additional currently active singer-songwriters, Montanari concluded that, for all three study participants, the song composition process afforded them the opportunity to identify and better understand an unsettling or unclear inner sensation, thus facilitating practices of emotional individuation and edification, which would consequently facilitate one’s self-actualization. Moreover, the act of singer-songwriter composition provided

these professional musicians with a way to emancipate themselves from burdens of the past and gain clarity and confidence in their personal potential—psychological realizations that symbolize the fundamental essence of self-actualization. As Montanari interpreted it, this process of self-actualization via singer-songwriter composition allows the artist to “reclaim their own stories and imagine new roles through the choosing of their own metaphors and sound correlations, a practice that liberates them in narrating and singing their renewed understanding of the self” (p. 14).

Providing ancillary evidence to the notion of singer-songwriter composition in the context of facilitating one’s self-actualization, Montanari concluded that the songs crafted by this particular kind of musician can act as “emotionally charged sonic images that offer enduring emotional training and a bridge between people’s hearts and inner cores” (p. 12). Furthermore, the intimately detailed nature of Montanari’s qualitative interview approach, and the respective responses it yielded from the three study participants, emphasized how this unique compositional practice confers a capacity to better understand oneself, their thoughts and feelings, and, in due course, use such knowledge in planning and directioning one’s life. These actions are necessary to achieve the goal of self-actualization through the vulnerable, sometimes emotionally distressing, yet ultimately rewarding, psychological exploration of one’s unspoken fears and desires when engaging in singer-songwriter composition.

The holistic developmental experience of self-actualization via singer-songwriter artistry has also been explored through alternative inquisitive lenses. Specifically, in his qualitative exploration of creativity in adult learning, Dirkx (2006) noted how the dialogic nature of songwriting can conjure “messengers of the soul,” inviting the singer-songwriters to engage actively with these messengers through one’s imagination and “eventually elaborate their

meaning in one's life" (p. 26). Such contemplative and reflective actions inherent in singer-songwriter composition can thus provide further illumination for one's own path towards self-actualization.

Lawrence (2008) expanded on the interconnected nature of engaging in artistic endeavors such as songwriting as a means to accomplish the realization of one's full potential (thus, achieving self-actualization). Lawrence argued that the creation of art can favor self-potential fulfillment, as these creative acts "activate extra-rational ways of knowing by virtue of the meaning-making conveyed through symbols, images, and emotional expression" (p. 67). In subsequent inquiries of this topic, Lawrence (2012) noted that the act of singer-songwriter composition can facilitate "spiritual renewal; a connection to purpose, or something greater than himself or herself" (p. 477), and such cerebral transcendence may be considered a crucial experience on the path towards one's self-actualization.

Further, in her exploration of the connection between the desire to effectuate one's potential capabilities and creative acts such as songwriting, Blackburn Miller (2020) noted how the emotive nature of artistic creation "supports self-expression, perspective transformation, and a stronger understanding of oneself through the confrontation with difficult emotions that occurs when composing from a place honest vulnerability" (p. 340). Blackburn Miller's findings, similar to the conclusions drawn by Montanari (2023) and Lawrence (2008), clearly demonstrated how the emotionally charged psychological journeys commonly experienced via singer-songwriter composition may illuminate a tangible path leading to the primal goal constituting one's self-actualization.

While the preceding review of literature on the connection between singer-songwriter artistic practices and the potential realization of Maslow's concept of self-actualization helped

facilitate the design and execution of my current study, it is important to note that Maslow's (1943) groundbreaking psychological paper, "The Hierarchy of Needs," that first discussed self-actualization in relation to human motivation, has been well scrutinized in the decades since its publication. Such examination has revealed possible significant shortcomings that may color one's perception of how and why this particular theory of self-actualization is realistically achieved and how it pragmatically benefits the holistic well-being of an individual. Notably, academic scholars and mental health professionals alike have critiqued the pyramid-structure of Maslow's human need hierarchy. At first glance, the figure appears to infer that physiological and love/belonging needs, which rest at the bottom of the pyramid, should be satisfied first before the needs toward the top of the pyramid can be realized and self-actualization occurs.

Such a rigid and linear approach to conceptualizing human motivation and needs remains the central critique of Maslow's Hierarchy and the manner in which self-actualization can be achieved. Noting the psychological growth limitations in Maslow's original hierarchical structure of human needs, modern psychologists conceptualize motivation as pluralistic and non-linear. This suggests that people can experience multiple needs simultaneously rather than one need to achieve one goal before moving on to the next step (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976).

Similarly, contemporary scholars acknowledge the conceptualization that, while universal human needs do exist, they do not necessarily follow such a stringent sequence of human fulfillment, as depicted in Maslow's original pyramid visualization. Rather than regarding self-actualization as just one more achievement to be checked off in a linear trajectory, Tay and Diener's (2011) discovered that, although the most common human needs at the bottom of Maslow's pyramid tend to receive the most attention when unfulfilled, people may still benefit from realizing higher needs within the hierarchy even when lower needs remain unfulfilled.

Further critical reimagining of Maslow’s theory has highlighted how the hierarchical linear process of Maslow’s top-down conceptualization of fundamental human motivation contradicts contemporary perspectives on mental health recovery—namely, that one’s healing process is a more continual and iterative experience (Ridgway, 2001).

In fact, Maslow himself eventually recognized some of these aforementioned limitations in his original 1943 theory and addressed them in subsequent publications. Specifically, Maslow refined his definition of the actual process of meeting human needs within the hierarchical pyramid, acknowledging that one’s realization of self-actualization is neither a linear nor decisive achievement, as if an individual has reached perfection upon reaching the peak of the pyramid (self-actualization). Rather, the pursuit of holistic human ambition represented in Maslow’s original pyramid should be regarded as a perpetual process of human motivation and self-discovery that evolves over time (Maslow, 1970). When I considered the concept of self-actualization within the context of my study, I felt that examining its nuances and potential limitations from disparate scholarly perspectives only strengthened my rationale for using it as a theoretical framework. Moreover, it enabled me to address its potential realization (or a *degree* of its realization, given that the field of psychology regards self-actualization fulfillment as an ongoing process of holistic growth that may never be *wholly* realized) via contemporary singer-songwriter compositional and performative practices.

Authentic Artistry

From a philosophical perspective, the term *authenticity* infers “an evolving relationship between the self and their surroundings” (Mazullo, 1999, p. 7). Expanding further on this notion, communications theorist Hanno Hardt (1993) offered a conceptualization of authenticity that emanates from

an understanding of the meaning and value of existence and co-existence in a world of powerful and competing interests. At the center remains the question of what it is to be a human being as a concrete way of entering into the world...making one's existence one's own, separated from others, instead of surrendering to those powers or interests that manage everyday life. (pp. 49-50)

Based on how these erudite definitions relate to the artistry of the singer-songwriter, one may point out a common trope discussed across various interpretations of the singer-songwriter genre: the unfettered *authentic artistry* of its compositions. As disclosed earlier in this chapter when discussing the historical perspective of the singer-songwriter's rise to national notoriety throughout the 1960s and 1970s, listeners were immediately drawn to this novel form of musical expression throughout this period, predominantly because of the purely unadulterated, often fiercely confessional, and honest (hence, *authentic*) nature of the genre's compositions.

As explored earlier in the historical perspective section of this chapter, audiences almost instantaneously embraced the breath of fresh air that epitomized the burgeoning singer-songwriter genre of the early 1960s. Audiences reflected on not only the personal revelations of the artist, but also the kinetic energy and passion pulsing through the listeners as they reckoned with the titanic cultural and ideological transformations that were redefining the fabric of American society during this period. At once exhilarating, contemplative, intimate, and, most importantly, *relatable* and *empathetic*, the songs crafted by the pioneers of the contemporary singer-songwriter genre were nothing but intoxicating to an audience who was desperately searching for something with which they could emotionally connect. Moreover, because this unconventional group of songwriters mainly wrote songs derived from personal and, thus, *authentic*, intentions, and were largely unmotivated by a desire to satisfy the demands of record labels or even listening patrons, music critics and audiences alike welcomed such imaginative and honest musicality wholeheartedly.

Further exploring this concept of authentic artistry within singer-songwriter composition, Bentley (2016) examined the genre's alluring characteristics from the vantage point of one of its earliest pioneers, Jackson Browne. During an in-depth interview, Browne noted that one of the most important and compelling aspects of the singer-songwriter movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s was precisely its authentic nature—specifically, “the authenticity of someone telling us their own story” (p. 19). While discussing this particular facet of singer-songwriter artistry, Bentley acknowledged that the notion of *authenticity* remains one of the most problematized terms in all popular music studies, rife with potential pitfalls and misinterpretations. However, through her extensive research of the genre's historical origins and influence on American society, Bentley inevitably reached the conclusion that authenticity has been a primal characteristic of the singer-songwriter's identity throughout the history of the tradition. Furthermore, at its most basic level, Bentley's defense of authenticity within the singer-songwriter genre derives from the singer-songwriter's lyrics coming from “personal experiences: that the person singing them is also the person who lived the experience and wrote it into a song,” thus fashioning a truly “unmediated experience” (p. 20).

Additional evidence regarding the role of authenticity within the singer-songwriter's compositional process can be found in Donald Brackett's (2008) book, *Dark Mirror: The Pathology of the Singer-Songwriter*. In every chapter, Brackett posited that the singer-songwriter's creative practice can often involve the artist channeling the darkest moments of their personal lives. To Brackett, the singer-songwriter's ability to cope with traumatic life experiences via musical composition effectively renders the songs authentic. Furthermore, this “pathologized creative process” embodied by the singer-songwriter bears the emotionally compelling songs that audiences yearn for and, ultimately, empathize with (p. xiv).

Analogous to Brackett's suppositions regarding past trauma and the ways in which singer-songwriter composition can be utilized to confront honestly and ultimately reconcile such experiences, Dirkx (2001) described how the emotionally-charged images raised to the surface via singer-songwriter artistry may serve as "gateways to the unconscious, freeing selves, and exposing representing deep-seated issues and concerns" that can help the composer "connect outer experiences with unclear aspects of their inner worlds" (p. 66). Essentially, the emotionally authentic act of singer-songwriter composition allows "the soul to learn through art," thereby creating a "magic moment that transcends rationality and gives a deep meaning to the connection between the self and their world" (Dirkx, 1997, p. 80).

Speaking on the matter of authenticity in composition from a perspective that remains distinct from Dirkx and Brackett, Nagy (2015) attempted to address the rather prodigious question of the source from which musical creativity exactly originates within the mental psyche. Discussing musical composition through the lens of *self-realization*—a term inherently connected to this study's theoretical framework of authentic artistry because it is defined as "the discovery and manifestation of the existence of an authentic self" (p. 72)—Nagy posited that the mind's enactment of meditation and reflection is vital to the authentic creativity. Furthermore, when a singer-songwriter's "emotional disclosures are constructed via the song, music's distinct character is perceived as a musical ritual in terms of self-realization, rather than a mere execution of idiomatically constructed musical sequences" (p. 69), resulting in a creative artifact that is inherently authentic. Nagy concluded that closely analyzing musical creativity through the lens of this psychological and spiritual context may be one of the "best ways of understanding how and why performers and composers have the inner desire to channel their creative energies through sound" (p. 74). Ultimately, Nagy relied on the percipience of psychologist Karl Lange

(1893) when espousing the inherently authentic nature of singer-songwriter artistry, for it represents a psychological process containing a “validity beyond mere subjective perception, and is of the greatest significance for all knowledge, yes, even for our whole spiritual life” (p. 5).

Summary

This chapter explored the nature of the contemporary singer-songwriter identity through three distinct perspectives: the historical context of the genre’s origins in the 1960s and 1970s; the musical skills commonly associated with singer-songwriters and how they are acquired; and the theoretical frameworks of self-actualization and authentic artistry as vital components of singer-songwriter artistry. Self-actualization within the context of the singer-songwriter’s lived experience plays a vital role, not just as a means of creative inspiration but also as a way its associated psychological benefits can fulfill one’s true potential. Furthermore, authentic artistry serves as an equally fundamental characteristic of the singer-songwriter’s identity construction and as a rationale for the genre’s enduring appeal across generations of enamored listeners that has helped to cement the genre’s indelible foothold in contemporary pop culture.

Chapter 3 next outlines the research methodology of this study, as informed by a comprehensive exploration of the fundamental traits of singer-songwriter identity. Furthermore, the literature review in this chapter served as a vital resource that guided my inquiry’s primary objective to illustrate a compelling portrayal of the lived experience of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters.

Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters and their perceptions of the development of their compositional practice and artistic identity. I wanted to build a comprehensive understanding of the holistic growth of this particular class of idiosyncratic musical artists. To do so, I utilized a qualitative research methodology to examine the pivotal experiential elements of each participant's musical development and personal relationship with creative expression in relation to self-fulfillment and honest artistry (two of the fundamental pillars of this study's design: *Self-Actualization* and *Authentic Artistry*). The following elemental facets were:

- the form of musical training the participant engaged with (formal, autodidactic, or hybrid);
- the influence of the compositional and performative aspects of the singer-songwriter profession as a means of attaining self-knowledge and fulfillment; and
- the specific resources, such as emotional and psychological catharsis stimuli, mentors, patrons, and economic considerations, that provide motivation to perpetuate their profession.

These areas of interest within the contemporary singer-songwriter's lived experience were embedded in this study's central research questions, initially discussed in Chapter 1:

How do emerging contemporary singer-songwriters describe the development of their compositional process and artistic identity in relation to the realization of their holistic and personal essence?

- a. In what ways did the manner of their musical training impact their ability to navigate the contextual realities of singer-songwriter composition?

- b. To what degree do they regard their profession as a means for achieving self-actualization and authenticity in their artistry and self-identity consummation?
- c. What are the central motivational elements in the realization of their professional and artistic potential? Moreover, what specific resources feed and perpetuate their determination?

Methodology Overview

Rather than attempt to gather quantifiable data to generate an explicit conclusion about emerging contemporary singer-songwriters, I embraced an inductive strategy to descriptively explore the lived experience of this particular class of contemporary composers. Therefore, I employed a qualitative research approach for this study. Specifically, I relied on the methodological framework of interpretative phenomenology analysis when gathering study data because this research design allowed me to develop detailed knowledge about the human experience of emerging singer-songwriters via how they described their lived perceptions and life worlds (Roulston, 2020). Further, the interpretative phenomenological nature of my research protocol allowed me to convey the essence of the phenomenon being examined as a vivid “development of the spiritual self” (p. 45).

Moreover, in order to answer this inquiry’s principal research question, I needed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the common discernible phenomena shared across my five study participants’ lived experiences as singer-songwriters as well as to explore *why* these influential elements were personally necessary and meaningful within the context of their artistic intentions. Therefore, a qualitative assessment methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis was vital in realizing my research goal to uncover the participants’ lived experience

commonalities that would subsequently answer the primary research question guiding this inquiry.

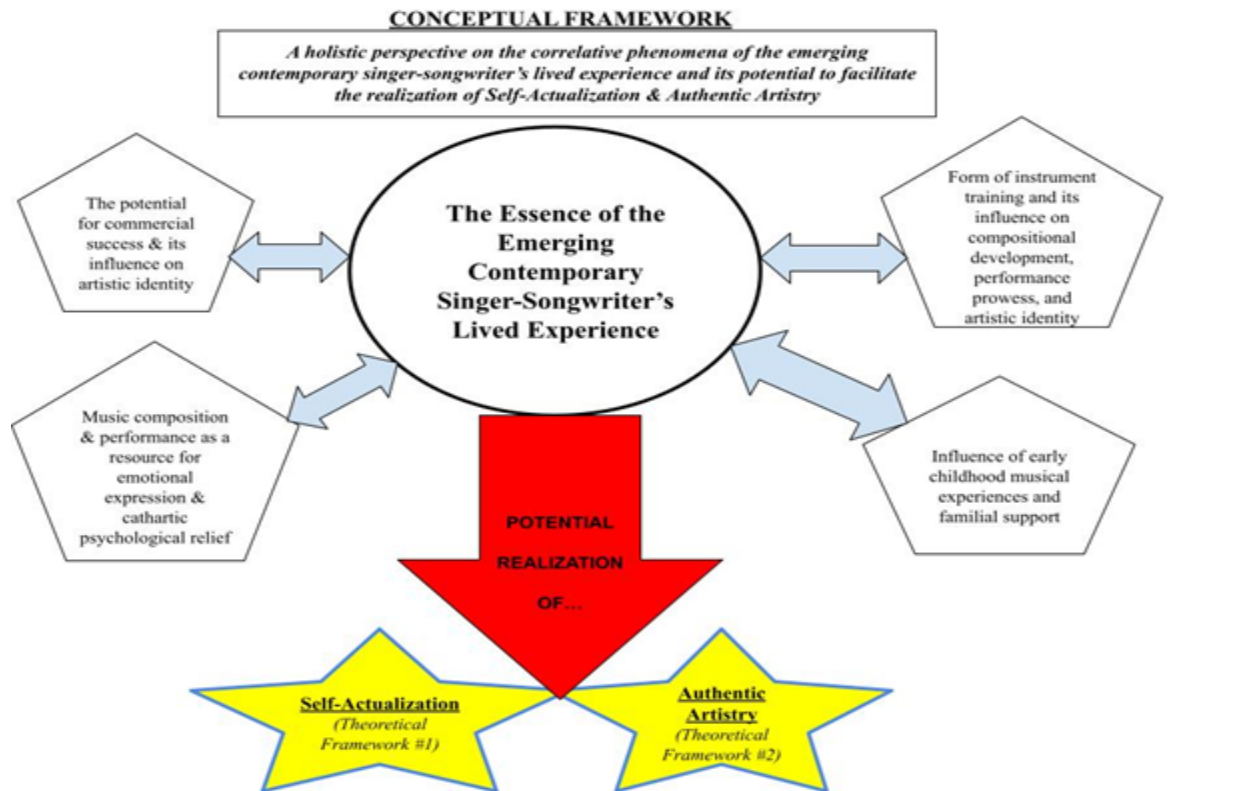
The underlying rationale for incorporating interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in this study was that it enabled me to describe the discovered phenomena that emerged from the data of my participants in vivid and tangible ways. Additionally, in conducting this study via IPA, I subsequently illuminated the underlying essence of the phenomena to understand more deeply the contemporary singer-songwriter's lived experience for the benefit of readers, myself, and the study participants themselves (Husserl, 1964). Furthermore, utilizing this IPA research approach helped me closely examine the participants' lived experiences and "how they make sense of them within the context of their personal and social worlds, with a particular emphasis on personal sense-making" (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Such insights became essential as I formally addressed the study's central research question within the context of its two theoretical frameworks: Self-Actualization and Authentic Artistry.

Once the data were analyzed through the IPA lens, the emerging similarities were synthesized within distinct thematic categories. Each discovered theme represented a critical element of the analogous phenomena of the participants' lived experience as a developing contemporary singer-songwriter. Based on this study's conceptual framework and its two theoretical pillars (self-actualization and authentic artistry) seen through the IPA lens, I was able to realize the predominant salient characteristics of these contemporary composers. For reference, as discussed in Chapter I, the psychological theory of self-actualization was defined as the desire to become everything one is capable of becoming (Maslow, 1943), while authentic artistry referred to an artistic composition that possesses the author's inherent authority of and about its subject, with vulnerability and intimate personal disclosures serving as hallmarks of the

work’s imaginative expression (Dutton, 2005). For reference, the conceptual framework of this study is presented below again.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework



Serving as my “analytical flashlight” in this qualitative exploration, the interconnected web of influential attributes in the above conceptual framework, representing the holistic essence of the emerging contemporary singer-songwriter’s lived experience, supported the rationale behind my experiential theme discovery organization and also facilitated my ability to address the central research question.

In keeping with the IPA nature of this inquiry, the results yielded from my thematic data analysis provide readers with an experience of sharing what is entailed in a “day in the life” of

each singer-songwriter in this study. As Creswell (2016) stated, these results facilitate a vivid understanding of “what it is like for someone to experience” (p. 62) the highs and lows of existence within this specific vocation. Essentially, the IPA research approach provided a novel perspective of *being* an emerging contemporary singer-songwriter. In phenomenological research, this commentary is often referred to as the “essence statement”; I offer such a statement in my last chapter after scrutinizing the emergent phenomenological themes from the data.

As a vital component of the genuine depiction of the participants’ lived experiences, this “essence statement” not only encapsulates the meaning behind *why* these discovered phenomena exist in the first place among these participants; it also helps readers realize the potential holistic rewards and challenges associated with this particular vocation. Furthermore, readers can subsequently use this essence statement as a “jumping-off” point for further qualitative exploration of this class of contemporary composers. This can pave future paths of scholarly inquiry and professional musicianship development within the context of such an engaging and emotionally cathartic style of musical artistry.

Thematic Phenomena Discovery: Making Sense of Participant Data via Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Equipped with the utility of IPA research methodology, I uncovered meaning from hundreds of pages of interview transcript data that I accumulated through interviews with the participants. Before utilizing this approach, however, I first needed to understand the essential purpose and historical context of IPA. Recognized as the principal architect of IPA, Heidegger (1927) fashioned the central tenets of this analytical research stratagem in order to illuminate the phenomena within a particular population. Such phenomena can only emerge from the shadows through a hermeneutic interpretation of the data because one cannot simply “pluck out” meanings from people’s heads (Heidegger, 1927).

Embodying this foundational rationale of IPA within my current study, I gathered the qualitative participant commentary by triangulating various data collection methodologies and then made sense of each participant's nuances and inferences through a local interpretation (Smith & Nizza, 2022) of the phenomena by discovering themes. Moreover, the emergence of these phenomena could only rise to the surface through my own reflexive contemplation of the participants' data and our conscious relationship with it (Vagle, 2018).

In presenting the merits and validity of a phenomenological methodology for an exploratory investigation, Moustakas (1994) explained how phenomenological inquiries allow a researcher to determine the “underlying structures of an experience by interpreting the originally given descriptions of the situation in which it occurs” (p. 12). To execute this method successfully, a researcher must first examine what an experience means for the persons who have lived it. These comprehensive descriptions can be gathered via specific data collection procedures such as semi-structured interviews. Through the critical analysis of these individual accounts, a researcher can derive “universal meanings and the essence of the experience” (p. 13). As Moustakas emphasized, developing this understanding of “meaningful concrete relations implicit in the original description of experience *in the context of a particular situation* is the primary target of phenomenological knowledge” (p. 13). Thus, I was able to express the authentic lived experience of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters in a vivid manner.

IPA also allowed me to convey my study findings via the generation of individual narratives from each participant. As a result, this internal procedure highlighted and connected the commonalities of singer-songwriters' lived experiences. As von Eckartsberg (1986) outlined, the descriptive narratives were constructed together with the study subjects, who were viewed as “co-researchers providing a Protocol Life Text” (p. 27) during the semi-structured interviews.

Once the narratives were fashioned from the interview dialogues, I examined them to reveal their “structure, meaning configuration, coherence, and the circumstances of their occurrence and clustering,” emphasizing the “configuration of meaning involving both the structure of meaning and how it is created” (p. 27).

Role of Researcher: Understanding Through an Interpretative Phenomenological Lens

As with other qualitative methodologies, the researcher plays a crucial role in IPA research. To yield the most veritable and detailed findings when utilizing phenomenology designs, the researcher must engage with participants in a way that can be construed only as “completely open, receptive, and naive in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21). With this strategy, the phenomenological researcher embraces their intuition and imagination when obtaining a “picture of the dynamics that underlay the experience, account for, and provide an understanding of how it is that particular perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and sensual awareness are evoked in consciousness with reference to a specific experience” (p. 22). Furthermore, in summarizing the central tenets of a phenomenological research methodology, Moustakas emphasized how this particular inquiry design was concerned with “wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved” (p. 52). For this reason, I conducted initial *and* follow-up semi-structured interviews with each study participant to uncover the implicit nature of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters.

Another important consideration is that because I am also a contemporary singer-songwriter, this might be viewed as a strong advantage in phenomenological inquiry. Moustakas (1994) highlighted this when describing the distinct nature of interpretative phenomenology,

noting how the researcher holds a “personal interest in whatever he or she seeks to know; the researcher is intimately connected with the phenomenon. The puzzlement is autobiographical, making memory and history essential dimensions of discovery, in the present and extensions into the future” (p. 58). Understandably, then, in accordance with procedural elements of IPA, I acknowledge the implicit bias, informed by my own experiences as a singer-songwriter, that may exist within the design and execution of my procedures, especially in relation to the interview protocol I used with my participants. The specific questions of this protocol, in addition to a comprehensive overview of ancillary data collection procedures used in the study, are delineated later in this chapter.

Further supporting this vital component of IPA methodology, it was imperative for readers’ interpretation of the participants’ narratives that the lens synthesizing these data into vivid portraiture be generated from an implicitly biased source—namely, I as primary researcher was also a professional emerging contemporary singer-songwriter. As noted in Chapter I, I have released six albums under the moniker *The Corduroy Suit*, and from 2007 to 2019, I maintained a rigorous performance schedule (based mainly along the East Coast) before reorienting my professional ambitions toward higher education.

Because the design of this qualitative study relies primarily on the researcher (i.e., myself) as the instrument of data collection, it was ethically sound to disclose my own history as a singer-songwriter when interpreting the following narratives because of potential bias. That said, my subjectivity in this specific research context may have benefited the primary purpose and inductive nature of this study. The possible advantages availed to this study by relying upon my own personal experience as a singer-songwriter to extract the most insightful and genuine commentary from my participants stemmed from previous scholarship that advocated the utility

of the researcher’s bias within the context of these qualitative inquiries. As Peshkin (1988) described, my own subjectivity can be regarded as “virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected” (p. 18). Additionally, postmodernist forms of qualitative research “strive to make both the researcher’s and participants’ subjectivity visible” (Merriam & Tisdell 2016, p. 6).

Participants and Setting

The specific population of musicians participating in this study can be most accurately described as “emerging contemporary singer-songwriters.” To ensure data validity and reliability, I designed an index of required criteria that the potential participants needed to fulfill to be considered an “emerging contemporary singer-songwriter” and thus eligible to participate. This set of criteria was informed by my personal experiences as an emerging contemporary singer-songwriter—from its performative and commercial aspects to the colleagues, allies, and undesirable elements of the career I encountered as I shared my art with public audiences across the country. Table 1 presents an overview of the criteria for selecting the participants.

Table 1

Criteria for Emerging Contemporary Singer-Songwriters

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have published original music on multiple streaming platforms• Perform regularly (at least once a month) at public music venues• Have self-identified as a “singer-songwriter” for a minimum of 3 years• Are considered “emerging” because they do not yet generate enough income through their profession as a singer-songwriter to be self-sufficient but hold the ambition to eventually render their profession financially viable in the future. |
|--|

The explicit characteristics of this participant population were vital for the success of my research goals for multiple reasons: (a) The chance of being granted permission to interview

established singer-songwriters (i.e., notable figures in pop culture) was not necessarily feasible or pragmatic, and (b) Exploring and gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experience of emerging singer-songwriters allowed me to offer insights that were more timely, relevant, and reflective of today's current commercial musical landscape. Ideally, I spoke with artists who still felt the necessary "inner fire/desire/passion" to succeed with their artistry instead of interviewing well-known established singer-songwriters who may have developed a jaded attitude toward the industry in which they have worked for extended periods and perhaps view cynically.

Because an IPA methodology directed the data collection procedures for this research exploration, I conducted individual semi-structured interviews via Zoom with my five study participants. Moreover, the flexible design of this particular interview protocol approach allowed me to develop detailed narratives of each subject's lived experience as a singer-songwriter. Additional data were collected via my own observational field notes of a recent (within the past year) video-recorded live performance from each participant that they willingly provided me.

Procedures for Participant Recruitment and Informed Consent

Prior to my recent vocational shift towards academia, I spent the majority of my professional music career as an actively practicing singer-songwriter, performing at public venues throughout the country and releasing six albums of original material across major streaming platforms for more than a decade. Throughout this period, I crossed paths and befriended many other singer-songwriters with similar professional ambitions. I recruited participants for my study from this group of musicians. Once this study's relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB) and advanced proposal procedures were approved, I contacted potential participant candidates via email, explaining the purpose of my study and whether they would be open to participating.

Once I recruited at least five potential study participants who expressed interest and informally agreed to be a part of this inquiry, I sent them Informed Consent Letters (utilizing the Teachers College IRB template) that descriptively conveyed this study's purpose and rationale. This particular step in the study recruitment process was extremely important as the IRB protocol requires that, for any study involving human subjects, the participants must review and sign an official Informed Consent Letter. Following this protocol, the participants were asked to review and sign it, then email it back to me prior to any data collection.

Furthermore, the participants' acknowledgment and signature of the IRB form indicated that they consented to being recorded during their interviews (and, if applicable, recordings of live performances). Pseudonyms were used in the data analysis and discussion portions of the study to maintain each participant's anonymity. Additionally, during the interim before data collection began, I offered each participant the opportunity to raise relevant questions or address any concerns, via email or phone, that they may have had before participating.

Data Collection Plan

To discover the implicit phenomena within the lived experience of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters, I collected data through the use of multifarious qualitative procedures: semi-structured interviews (initial and potential follow-ups) with each study participant; my observational field notes of participants' video-recorded live performances; and a subsequent video-stimulated recall interview (VSRI) conducted with each research participant, during which we collaboratively viewed and analyzed the live performance. The specific parameters of each distinct data collection procedure are discussed below.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I began collecting initial qualitative data via semi-structured interviews with the five emerging contemporary singer-songwriters who agreed to participate. Ideally, I wanted the participants to represent a diverse population, in terms of gender, ethnicity, cultural background, and age. I chose this particular interview design to yield the most detailed data from each participant that could be synthesized to illustrate vibrant narratives of their respective lived experiences as contemporary singer-songwriters. Previous researchers, such as Roulston (2020), have employed this inquiry method as an ideal vehicle “to pursue further detail concerning topics that arise in discussions with individual participants” (p. 44). Further, the phenomenological nature of this interview approach yielded invaluable data for in-depth analysis because I could develop “knowledge about human experience through examining people’s descriptions of their lived experiences and life worlds” (p. 44).

Regarding the structure of the interview questions, including their specific syntax and diction, my interview protocol relied on an “open” query approach that provided each participant sufficient space to explore and reflect freely on their musical background, artistic influences, and overall experience as an emerging contemporary singer-songwriter. As Roulston (2020) elaborated, utilizing these “open”-style questions that avoid narrowly circumscribed “yes” or “no” responses “call[s] upon participants to respond to question topics using their preferred terms rather than those of the interviewer” (p. 53). Furthermore, this particular interview design has proven to generate “rich, in-depth descriptions, and may be used to elicit detailed stories, or initiate new topics within the interview as a whole” (p. 52).

As Kvale and Brinkman (2018) described, the advantageous design of semi-structured interviews provides the researcher with a tangible path towards “obtaining descriptions of the life

world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (p. 9). Additionally, the flexibility of this data collection method during my respective dialogues with each participant provided an openness to explore further responses, welcome unexpected insights, and seek clarification on various topics of interest (O’Toole & Beckett, 2014). Similarly, Seidman (2006) espoused the benefits of this particular method as being “in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing” (p. 15). According to Seidman, the pliable design framework of semi-structured interviews permitted a way for me to build continually on my participants’ responses to the questions as I explored them (p. 16). Such descriptive data only further buttressed my thematic findings as I conveyed the common phenomena experienced by emerging contemporary singer-songwriters.

Moreover, this “open” interview method was the ideal conduit for the participants’ natural and spontaneous disclosure of personal details, given that they are inherently creative artists with idiosyncratic temperaments “marching to the beat of their own drum,” as the adage goes. In the same way that their singer-songwriter-style composition process allows them to express themselves in an authentically unadulterated manner, I wanted the questions I asked to elicit similarly genuine and vivid expressions of their eccentric personalities, answered freely and on their own terms.

For such an “open” interview method to be successful, I needed to heed Seidman’s (2006) advice—namely that the researcher must develop the subtle tact to “listen more and talk less...for listening is the most important skill in interviewing” (p. 78). Additionally, when conducting these interviews, I needed to listen to my own instincts and not hesitate to ask follow-up questions seeking clarification if I felt unsatisfied with or uncertain of the participant’s initial response. As Seidman cautioned, “sometimes when listening, interviewers begin to feel a vague

question welling up inside them because they sense there is more to the story” (p. 83). At such times, it is especially crucial for the interviewer to ask to hear more from the participant.

Based on the advice of these qualitative researchers, I confidently incorporated semi-structured interviews into my research protocol to yield sufficient insights from each participant that would lead me to draw comprehensive narratives depicting the lived experiences of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters in today’s music industry. Furthermore, to fashion cogency, context, and clarity in each of my five participants’ narratives, I drafted the following example of potential interview questions and their correlation to the study’s research goals to guide me when analyzing the transcripts. Thus, I ensured that the semi-structured nature of my interviews remained focused on the specific goals of this inquiry and facilitated the discovery of common phenomena prevalent within the stories. Table 2 shows the correlation between the research goals (as captured in the research questions) and the interview questions.

Observations and Video Recordings of Singer-Songwriter Live Performances

To support my study’s findings and the participant narratives, I subsequently engaged in a meticulous observation of recent (within the past year) video-recorded live performances of each study participant’s original material, which they provided prior to the follow-up VSRI. My observations and field notes of these performances helped me analyze multiple aspects of their performative approach and catalog their potentially valuable behavioral attributes. This additional collection of qualitative data also offered an opportunity to explore ancillary elements of the singer-songwriter’s “lived experience” more critically, such as the reflexive relationship between artist and patron. The field notes collected during these performance observations illuminated how constructs of empathy and the dialogic nature between artist and patron may have been established. Such insights, in turn, effectively yielded vital revelations about the

Table 2

Research Questions and Matching Interview Questions

Research Question	Matching Interview Questions
<p>How do contemporary singer-songwriters develop their composing process, voice, and style?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let’s talk about your background as a musician and composer. Can you tell me about when you began playing your primary instrument and when you started writing songs of your own? • How would you describe the level of support you received from your family and close friends as you developed your musical identity and began composing original material? • In as detailed a manner as possible, could you walk me through your songwriting process, from the earliest melodic kernel conception to the completed and ready-to-perform composition? • As most singer-songwriters spend years developing their own distinct artistic voice and stage presence, I’m curious to hear about how you developed your own unique “voice” and performance style.
<p>To what extent does formal music training facilitate and inform an individual’s evolution as a singer-songwriter?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I want to hear more about your instrumental training and what degree of influence it had on your development as a singer-songwriter. Could you talk to me about how you developed and trained your musical ability? • Would you describe your musical training as formal, informal, or self-taught? Applied studio, private lessons vs. group ensembles, or another form of instruction? • Did you explore songwriting/composition with any of your music teachers? IF YES—Would you describe their engagement with your songwriting as supportive? IF NO—why do you believe they were reticent to explore songwriting with you? • Would you describe your instrumental training as valuable to your development as a singer-songwriter?
<p>What techniques do contemporary singer-songwriters employ to perpetuate and evolve their compositional process and repertoire?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given your years of experience writing original material, does it feel like you’ve developed a particular “formula” that works, or do you regard it as an ever-changing process? • What are your thoughts on “Writers Block”? Have you experienced it yourself, and what tactics do you use to break out of it? • After all of these years of you composing music, I’m curious about what techniques you use to keep your compositional process and the songs you create from feeling stagnant. Tell me more about your thoughts on this. • In what ways do you feel like your voice and performance style have evolved or changed over the years? • Do you consider your identity as a contemporary singer-songwriter as your main profession? • What does the future hold for you as a singer-songwriter? Please elaborate on any future projects you’re working on or plan to begin in the immediate future.
<p>To what degree do contemporary singer-songwriters regard their profession as a means for achieving self-actualization and authenticity in their artistry and self-identity consummation?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I want to hear about your reflections regarding how you use music composition to facilitate your own personal goals. In what ways do you feel like your compositional processes have helped you attain personal potential? • How often do you consider the “authenticity” of your compositions? Is this concern an influential element when composing new material? How often do you consider the “authenticity” of your compositions? Is this concern an influential element when composing new material? • What are your opinions on the relationship between “authentic artistry” and the manner in which you compose and eventually perform your original material in front of a live audience? What degree of concern do you have in portraying yourself as an “authentic” artist in this profession?

specific elements that foster the growth of a singer-songwriter's own self-actualization and authentic artistry.

Furthermore, regarding the rationale behind including this form of data collection in my study, I was reminded of Conway (2020), who posited that “the most effective researchers constantly search for alternative perspectives and explanations, being slow to conclude that they have observed the whole picture” (p. 27). Further, Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that qualitative observations give the researcher firsthand experience with the subject “in their element” (p. 188). Thus, I could record information as it occurred, including any unusual aspects of the participants as they were observed.

Video-Stimulated Recall and Follow-up Interviews

To enhance the data collection, I engaged my participants in a follow-up semi-structured interview after I analyzed our initial conversations and my observations of their live performance. I included the VSRI research tool because, after conducting my first pilot study in the summer of 2022, I realized that one interview simply did not suffice when attempting to render a faithful depiction of the lived experience of this class of musicians. As I analyzed my initial transcripts, I found that many more potentially enlightening questions continued to arise in my mind. Thus, for this formal inquiry, I utilized follow-up interviews with each participant to dig below the surface of their respective relationships with musical experience and took full advantage of the naturally inductive and exploratory essence inherent in this form of qualitative research.

While these follow-up conversations yielded additional insights into the musical life experience of each participant, their purpose was not merely to “clarify and tie up loose ends.” Rather, these secondary meetings also helped me engage in a thoughtful discourse with each

participant on how they approached live performance and perceived its relative value in defining their artistic identity as a singer-songwriter. During each interview, I showed the participants specific clips of their video recording (which I had analyzed beforehand) to assess their own critical reflections on live performance. The multi-pronged objective of this follow-up meeting with my participants constituted the third and final distinctive qualitative data collection method of my study, referred to by the academic research community as VSR.

VSR was first utilized as a research tool in the United States in 1953 by Benjamin Bloom, who espoused the discerning value of this unique qualitative method. By using VSR in qualitative research, Bloom proposed that a subject may be enabled to relive an original situation vividly and accurately if presented with a large number of cues of stimuli that occurred during the original situation (p. 161). This tool for data collection appealed to my research intent because both the participant and I as researcher could review and reflect on their decision-making processes during the videoed event in an act of “co-research.” Such a collaboration would detail the reasons for their actions and the processes surrounding those actions, which then can be discussed in a semi-structured interview.

Crucial to the success of a VSRI was this sense of empowerment instilled in the participant by the researcher. Rowe (2009) advised that VSRI participants should be given the opportunity to view their respective video recordings prior to the interview to facilitate a more productive conversation with the researcher and offer the participants greater confidence in sharing their perspectives on the performative elements they considered significant. Thus, to support this technique, I furnished my participants with access to the video recordings prior to our interviews but also asked them to select two excerpts from the video that *they* wanted to talk

about during our conversation. Allowing them to select imbued them with a greater feeling of ownership over the interview (Rowe, 2009).

As Meissner et al. (2021) discovered when interviewing instrumental students about their expressive performance abilities, VSRI were extremely useful for yielding candid responses, “especially when participants had watched the material prior to the interview, as this provided a rich description of pupils’ perspectives on the instructional strategies used during the research sessions and of their learning of expressive performance” (p. 459). Moreover, that study’s participants indicated during their respective VSRI that watching the video, both before and during the interview, had helped them realize that a particular teaching or practicing approach had been helpful for their learning. When considering the overall utility of VSRI in qualitative research, Meissner et al. noted that the results clearly indicated how “watching and discussing video material of one’s own practicing, learning or teaching activities can provide a valuable tool for self-reflection and feedback for tutors and students alike” (p. 461). As self-reflection is a critical process in the eventual realization of one’s self-actualization (one of the two principal theoretical frameworks guiding the present investigation), including VSRI as a central research tool in my protocol seemed imperative. This analytical technique enhanced my goal to depict and understand the lived experiences of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters in faithful narratives.

As Meissner et al. (2021) found, prior research utilizing VSR in qualitative data collection methodologies has also elicited an extremely candid dialogue in the participant-researcher interview. This empowers participants to express what was important to them about the performance and divulge more emotional or reflective responses about their artistic practice (Paskins et al., 2017). Further, Schön (1983) discussed the advantageous nature of this research

technique, coining the term *Reflective Practice*. This can be described as the ability to reflect on one's actions to take a critical stance or attitude towards one's own practice and that of one's peers, thereby engaging in a process of continuous adaptation and learning (Schön, 1983).

Essentially, a critical rationale for reflective practice is that experience alone does not necessarily lead to self-improvement and artistic growth, for a deliberate reflection on the experience, afforded via the VSR research tool, may be essential for meaningful personal growth and self-actualization to occur within the singer-songwriter.

Fundamentally, the inclusion of VSRI within this study's data collection methodology allowed me to perform a more in-depth investigation of each participant's activities, motives, and feelings, thereby providing me with details and nuances that ultimately served as vital components needed to fashion vibrant and genuine phenomenological narratives of my participants' lived experience as emerging singer-songwriters.

Data Analysis Plan

To conduct a cogent analysis of the various forms of data gathered during this study, I utilized multiple qualitative assessment techniques known as a "configuration of narratives" (Polkinghorne, 1995). This particular method of qualitative analysis was most closely aligned with my goal to draw out the rich and detailed narratives of each participant that preserved the unique features of their individual stories (Roulston, 2020, p. 56). Because these narratives were generated from a set of varied qualitative data collection techniques (as discussed in the previous section), readers can receive a tangibly realistic and lucid portrayal of the emerging singer-songwriter's lived experience as well as a carefully triangulated analysis that leaves "no stone unturned," as the saying goes. Furthermore, as previous qualitative researchers have attested, the

advantage of utilizing this narrative analysis approach serves to fashion unique interpretations of the participants' life experiences, facilitating the reader's ability to

move away from facts and toward meanings; away from idolizing categorical thought and abstracted theory and toward embracing the values of irony, emotionality, and activism...toward assuming the posture of a feeling, embodied and vulnerable observer; away from writing essays and toward telling stories. (Bochner, 2001, pp. 134-135)

This analytic approach is not without its own potential tribulations, though. The method's success in fostering thought-provoking discussion and inference is only realized if each narrative "generates a sense of reality and draws the reader in, allowing them to consider the phenomenon from their own experience and from imagining the situation vicariously, creating an emotional connection between the reader and the participant's narrative" (Robinson, 2020, p. 132).

Furthermore, as this study's data collection process accrued during two distinct interviews with each participant (via the initial "Musical Background" interview *and* the subsequent post-performance VSR conversation), I decided to present these comprehensive findings across two distinct chapters. Chapter 4 presents each participant's musical life story via narrative interpretation, while Chapter 5 enhances the portraiture of these artists' lived experiences by addressing their unique reactions to the VSRI research protocol explored during the subsequent interview with each participant.

The purpose for utilizing this multifaceted qualitative phenomenological inquiry design (via two distinct interviews with each participant and thematic analysis of their responses) was to pave a comprehensive pathway that adequately addressed this study's research questions and maintained the integrity of its two central theoretical framework pillars (the potential realization of Self-Actualization and Authentic Artistry via singer-songwriter musicality). Once the vividly dynamic musical life stories of my participants and the indelible bond they share with musical artistry and performance are conveyed across Chapters 4 and 5, I then analyze these

phenomenological data in Chapter 6 to discover which cogent themes emerge across the narratives of these professional contemporary singer-songwriters.

The common thematic tropes unearthed through this qualitative scrutiny afford readers multiple perspectives and avenues to engage thoughtfully with the findings within their own professional contexts. Readers may be pedagogues interested in incorporating contemporary singer-songwriter composition practices into their own respective academic contexts to encourage creative expression among their students. They may be creative souls seeking guidance as they explore their own artistic aspirations. It is my hope that all readers ultimately benefit from the findings by inferring meaning from the many creative practices discussed by the participants as they revealed the essence of contemporary singer-songwriter artistry. With these revelations come potential for personal growth and enlightenment that can flourish from this distinct form of music composition.

Table 3 presents an interpretation of how each form of data collection and its corresponding plan of analysis addressed the research questions of this study.

Pilot Study Findings

In the summer of 2023, I designed and implemented a pilot study that involved conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews with three musicians who considered themselves “emerging contemporary singer-songwriters.” After analyzing those interview transcripts, I developed individual narratives for each of the three study participants that conveyed a comprehensive account of their respective lived experiences as singer-songwriters. Subsequently, I performed a theme analysis of the narratives to determine commonalities and discrepancies that existed across their perceptions of their journeys as singer-songwriters thus far.

This close analysis of the participants’ qualitative interview data allowed me to discover common themes that were suffused within the subtext of each conversation. While the participants may have offered varying perspectives on their experience as singer-songwriters, the following five primary themes were prominently featured within the participants’ responses.

Table 3

Research Questions Corresponding to Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Research Question	Data Collection Method and Analysis Procedure
How do emerging contemporary singer-songwriters describe the development of their compositional process and artistic identity in relation to the realization of their holistic and personal essence?	<p>Method: Semi-structured interviews (and follow-up interviews)</p> <p>Analysis Procedure: “Configuration of Narratives” and “Theme discovery via analysis of Narratives”</p>
In what ways did the manner of their musical training impact their ability to navigate the contextual realities of singer-songwriter composition?	<p>Method: Semi-structured interviews (and follow-up interviews); Live performance observation & field notes; VSR</p> <p>Analysis Procedure: “Configuration of Narratives”; “Theme discovery via analysis of Narratives, Recorded Performance and Field Notes, and VSR Interview Transcripts”</p>
To what degree do they regard their profession as a means for achieving self-actualization and authenticity in their artistry and self-identity consummation?	<p>Method: Semi-structured interviews (and follow-up interviews)</p> <p>Analysis Procedure: “Configuration of Narratives”; “Theme discovery via analysis of Narratives”</p>
What are the central motivational elements in the realization of their professional and artistic potential? Moreover, what specific resources feed and perpetuate this dogged determination?	<p>Method: Semi-structured interviews (and follow-up interviews); Live performance observation & field notes; VSR</p> <p>Analysis Procedure: “Configuration of Narratives”; “Theme discovery via analysis of Narratives, Recorded Performance and Field Notes, and VSR Interview Transcripts”</p>

- **Childhood:** Each participant positively described their family’s reception and support of their musical endeavors, never enforcing strict rules regarding the participants’ instrumental practice or performance participation. This finding suggested a deep *intrinsic motivation* within each participant to learn and perform music—most likely due to the positive association the participants shared regarding the musicality of their family members and appreciation for the exuberant musical experiences celebrated in each household.
- **Self-taught:** Each participant taught themselves one of the primary instruments that eventually became vital to their compositional process. Again, this *intrinsic motivation* to learn their respective instruments was ubiquitous across their life stories, as no teacher or family member ever “forced” (i.e., *extrinsic motivation*) the participants to engage with their respective musical instruments. To the contrary, each participant began playing their respective instrument because of a self-derived curiosity and desire.
- **College/Mentors/Formal Training:** While consistently possessing a degree of intrinsic motivation, all three participants also found a source of compositional and performative inspiration and support within the relationships they developed with seasoned musicians outside of the classroom and music instructors within academic environments (i.e., their mentors) throughout young adulthood.
- **Prolific Period (Compositional Process, Voice, Style):** Throughout their 20s, all three participants noted a surge in creative output and self-discovery of musical identity, yet the compositional processes discussed in the interviews were unique for each participant. Further, transcript data from the individual interviews showed that

every participant found it difficult to define their songwriting process concisely and articulate the sources of their artistic inspiration, inferring that the compositional technique of singer-songwriters remains an idiosyncratic and elusive practice, even to the artists themselves.

- **Techniques of Evolution (natural) and Perpetuation (purposeful):** Each participant described various methods to maintain their artistic ambitions as they aged and avoid the atrophy of their creative muscles. From espousing purposeful and regimented techniques, to adopting more of a *laissez-faire* approach, the three participants offered widely disparate opinions on what methods they considered were most useful when discussing the perpetuation of their artistry.

In sum, the process of conducting this pilot study provided an opportunity to recognize potential flaws in my research protocol and how particular modifications to my dissertation study methodology could prove incredibly advantageous to my central research goals. Some of the most consequential methodology refinements stemming from the implementation of this pilot study emerged as I was initially analyzing the pilot study data. The relatively small amount of data that I gathered during the pilot study led me to realize that any future investigations on this subject would benefit from additional, and varied, types of data.

For example, after conducting the pilot study, I recognized that the inclusion of qualitative observations of my study's participants performing their original material in front of a live audience would yield even more tangible evidence to understand the genuine lived experiences of singer-songwriters. These additional data may render each participant narrative even more realistically and compellingly. Further, I discovered that my study would benefit from the inclusion of follow-up interviews with participants, as many pertinent questions arose only

after I concluded my interviews with the pilot study's three participants. A bounty of enlightening data could be discovered from follow-up interviews that considered the data thus far and served as an excellent investigative tool to uncover any additional creative forces resting just below the surface level of the singer-songwriter. Additionally, since the pilot study's participants engaged in both formal and informal (i.e., self-taught) instrument training, I could discern how illuminating it would be to compare these two forms of musical instruction for their influence on compositional development; hence, I included this particular topic in my latest draft of this study's research questions.

Overall, the evaluation of this pilot study was profoundly informative when designing this current large-scale research inquiry. The invaluable insights gleaned from its findings guided my development of effective research strategies to unpack the true nature of artistic creativity. Moreover, to become fully acquainted with the nuances of the VSRI protocol, I recently conducted a second pilot study that utilized this specific research methodology in conjunction with semi-structured interviews with emerging contemporary singer-songwriters. The implementation and analysis of this secondary pilot study provided supplementary pragmatic guidance for the eventual triangulation of the distinct data collection methods I used in this dissertation inquiry.

Validity and Reliability

Validity for this research methodology was established through the evaluation of potential study participants to ensure that they met the criteria to be considered an "emerging contemporary singer-songwriter," as defined earlier in this chapter (see Table 1). Furthermore, the validity of this study's research protocol was maintained via the triangulation of multiple and robust methods of data collection.

Reliability for this study was demonstrated via the audio transcript recordings of the participants' unedited responses during their respective semi-structured qualitative interviews. To strengthen data reliability, these interview transcripts were shared with each participant prior to their analysis to ensure the accuracy of the recorded responses. Moreover, the reliability of this study's data was corroborated via the triangulation of additional disparate data collection procedures, including researcher observations and correlated video recordings, field notes, and VSRI.

Summary

This chapter presented the foundational research methodology that guided this study's data collection protocol and my rationale for its utilization in order to address the central research questions of this inquiry. Moreover, this chapter's literature review of applicable data collection and analysis procedures and my description of previously conducted pilot studies further buttressed the efficacy of my research protocol. Thus, I ensured that this study's primary goal for illuminating the shared phenomenological nature of the emerging contemporary singer-songwriter's lived experience was sufficiently explored. Furthermore, by using the IPA methodology, I was able to dive more deeply below the surface of my participants' shared peripheral phenomena. This procedure illuminated their insights sufficiently to address this study's central research questions while also revealing a deeper understanding of *why* these common phenomena are vitally meaningful to the singer-songwriter's lived experience.

Chapter 4: STUDY FINDINGS, PART 1

As Chapter 3 conveyed, participant data for this study were collected via three distinct but interrelated methodologies: initial background semi-structured qualitative interviews, critical observations of participants' live performance excerpts, and subsequent cumulative Video-Stimulated Recall Interviews (VSRI) with the study participants. Because these distinct procedures yielded a plethora of revelations about the veritable lived experience of the participants, the findings will be presented across two chapters. In Chapter 4, the findings from the initial semi-structured interviews with each study participant are conveyed via narrative interpretation. In Chapter 5, the qualitative findings gleaned from the VSRI with the singer-songwriters are discussed. By developing multiple chapters to examine the data, readers will be able to discern the most salient details of the professional singer-songwriter's lived experience.

Narrative Interpretation: A Tool for Conveying Lived Experience Phenomena

After analyzing the nuanced details from my initial interviews with each participant, I synthesized lived experience portraits of these five emerging contemporary singer-songwriters. The portraits explore: the influence of personal and familial relationships on their artistic endeavors; memories of their earliest interactions with music performance; the methodology of developing their instrumental prowess; and the way the amalgam of these creative elements facilitated their ambition to pursue singer-songwriter artistry. Also known as a "configuration of narratives" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 8), this distinctive narrative-based "storytelling" approach provided me with the opportunity to paint rich and genuine stories of each participant, highlighting the unique features of their individual experiences (Roulston, 2020, p. 56).

Moreover, by utilizing narrative portraiture, I ensured the validity of my participants' experiential perspectives as conveyed through their distinct voices while also maintaining the

reliability of the interpretative phenomenological research design. As discussed in Chapter 3, the essence of interpretative phenomenology requires a careful exploration of each participant's life-long experience with musical practice to establish a comprehensive foundation for understanding the meaning of phenomena that may be shared among this class of contemporary composers (Peoples, 2021). Accordingly, the following five narratives captured vivid portrayals of each participant's unique life experience as a contemporary singer-songwriter, enabling common themes and patterns to emerge naturally via dialogic interplay with a fellow musician (me, the researcher). The end result of this specific narrative-focused portrayal is engaging portraits of each artist that "draws the reader in, allowing them to consider the phenomenon from their own experience and from imagining the situation vicariously, creating an emotional connection between the reader and the participant's narrative" (Robinson, 2020, p. 132).

Further, these narratives are configured within distinct subheadings that are directly correlated to the conceptual framework of this study and its primary elements that have the potential to realize the two principal theoretical frameworks (Self-Actualization and Authentic Artistry) that prompted this inquiry's objective.

To underscore the reticular relationship of influential elements that constitute the essence of the emerging contemporary singer-songwriter's lived experience, the foundational conceptual framework of this study is presented once more below in Figure 3.

Essentially, the following narratives provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary singer-songwriter's lived experience as they navigate today's music industry environment. They also facilitate the emergence of shared phenomena among these five artists who are ultimately reaching towards a common ambition of creating personally meaningful artistry within the boundaries of the contemporary singer-songwriter genre.

Figure 3

Conceptual Framework

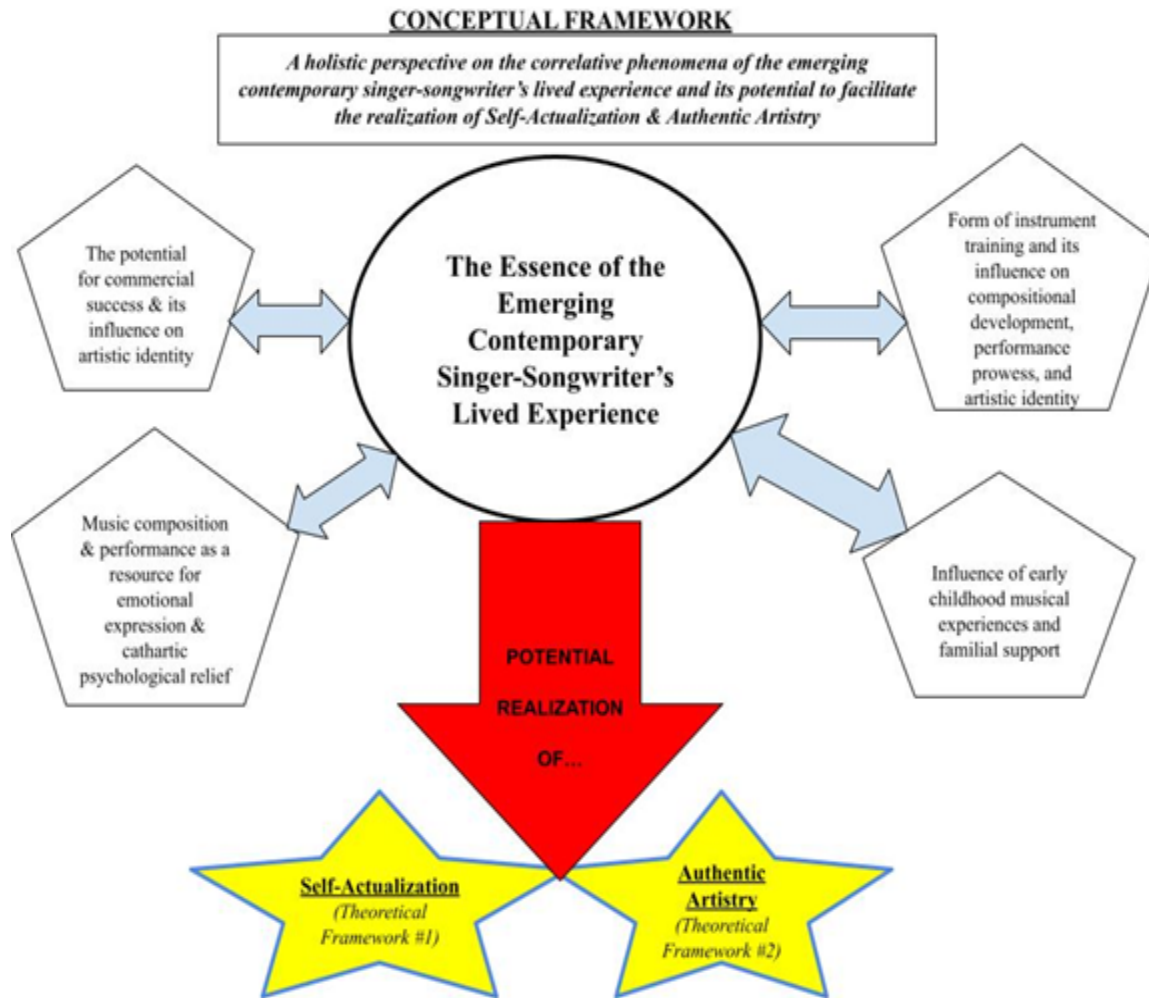


Table 4 presents the participants' preliminary background demographic information as a prelude to reading their narratives. Note that all names of participants have been replaced by pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

Table 4*Participant Demographics*

Name	Gender	Age	Primary and Secondary Instrument	Years as a Professional Musician	Number of Published Original Material Releases	Current Number of Spotify Monthly Listeners	Need for an Additional Source of Income?
Helen	Female	31	Voice; piano	10 years	13	20,588	No
Matthew	Male	29	Piano; voice	11 years	3	340	Yes; lessons instructor
Dylan	Male	45	Voice; guitar	27 years	14	480,000	No
Kyla	Female	28	Voice; guitar	12 years	9	2,600	Yes; gardener
Sophie	Female	26	Voice; guitar	7 years	9	4,800	Yes; lessons instructor

Role of Researcher

As the following narratives attest, my role as researcher, and the potential biases I may hold as a fellow singer-songwriter in the same echelon as my study’s participants, may yield an advantage for this inquiry’s data analysis. My familiarity with the genre helped to create an open interview environment throughout my conversations with each participant. As I was an insider to this field of practice, participants knew they were conversing with someone who was intimately familiar with the trials and tribulations of an emerging professional musician.

This unique researcher-participant dynamic resulted in extensive and extremely detailed dialogues, as I perceived the participants experienced minimal judgment as they disclosed the challenges and hardships of their profession. Moreover, an ancillary consequence of the semi-structured nature of the researcher-participant interplay in this study was that no singular portrait

was conveyed in the same manner. Just as every participant's life experience as a singer-songwriter was unique, so were their disclosures about personally sensitive topics.

For this reason, the tone and length of each narrative varied, just as the experience of engaging with each participant was uniquely distinct from one another. Some questions were eschewed with certain participants, while other questions were improvised in the moment as a natural reaction to responses from other participants. The open and proximate conversation created the necessary space for wide-ranging dialogues rich in meaning, which, in turn, facilitated my own ability to fashion honest and vivid life stories of each participant.

Helen

When I'm composing, it feels like I'm untangling this long, twisted knot, and I'm never sure what it may look like until I've untangled it all...sometimes I can't even finish untangling, but in the times that I can do it, and all those beautiful threads unravel before me...wow, it just hits.

In a manner akin to her songwriting process, Helen's story of how she became a professional singer-songwriter is circuitous. Growing up in a small town in northern Virginia, Helen spent her formative teenage years yearning to escape to an environment saturated with the same captivating melodies and experiential music catharsis that consumed her attention. Fittingly, and not at all to her family's surprise, Helen moved to New York after graduating high school to attend Sarah Lawrence College.

After college, Helen remained in New York with a dogged determination to pursue her life-long ambition of being a successful professional musician, and she dedicated every ounce of moxie and charisma toward this goal. Nearly 10 years after her bold and slightly terrifying (as she described it) decision to call New York City her home, Helen now finds herself in a position of contentment, gratitude, and palpable excitement for what the future holds.

After chatting for nearly 2 hours during our initial interview, it is understandable why Helen's resolute career optimism is so transparent: In many ways, Helen has already "made it" as a notable solo artist within a notoriously unforgiving profession and did so in one of the most fiercely competitive artistic cities in the world. Humble, droll, and enthusiastic all at once, Helen proudly described the character of her original music as unique: an artistic expression that is not confined within any one musical context, but "straddles the line" between her favorite genres of musical theater and singer-songwriter artistry.

Over the past decade, Helen's creativity has manifested in multiple professional achievements, from co-writing the 2018 nationally acclaimed musical podcast *36 Questions*, which featured the renowned Broadway star, Jonathan Groff; to performing with multiple regionally touring bands over the past 7 years; and finding time to collaborate on multiple productions at several of the most notable theater organizations in New York City (New York Theatre Workshop, Ars Nova, Pipeline Theatre Co.).

In 2018, after achieving a significant modicum of success as an independent "gig musician/composer," Helen began to reorient her professional ambitions back towards her original passion of singer-songwriter artistry. Under the moniker Helen Winter, she debuted her first LP in 2020, and she has self-composed and released several singles and EPs in the interim. As of April 2024, Helen was preparing to release her second formal LP later that month to her loyal fanbase of over 20,000 listeners. Helen described these latest pieces as a collection of some of the most intensely personal and serious compositions she has ever written; yet to hear the album is to realize that Helen holds the singular artistic ability to balance deftly on the narrow tightrope between maudlin and sincerity, imbuing each song with a balance of honesty, humor, regret, fear, depression, and optimism.

In uncovering the “warts and all” details of her music career, Helen described her early days in New York City playing cover sets on rickety (and “inexplicably sticky,” she wryly added) pianos at sparsely filled cabaret clubs in the West Village at virtually any hour—2 a.m. on a Tuesday night or 4 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon. She said “yes” literally to *any* musical opportunity available, and still does to the present day, when Helen regularly garners over two *million* plays for *one* of her original compositions. Her journey has been anything but prosaic.

Helen’s Music Learning Development

Helen described her initial interest in music as entirely self-motivated, as neither of her parents were musically inclined, but they were consistently supportive (and still are) of her innate curiosity with musical sounds. She recalled an early memory of her mother taking her to a local music store when she was 5 years old, where she banged on the various pianos and synthesizers on the showroom floor. With fragmented melodies and warped synth chimes reverberating from her little fingertips, Helen’s immediate reaction to these novel sounds was simply: “This shit rocks! I am IN.”

Given her exhilaration from discovering creative expression on the keys, and after *many* repeated trips to that local music store for several months so Helen could test out nearly every sound featured on each keyboard, her parents bought her a keyboard and signed her up for voice lessons. Neither parent could ignore the innate musicality brimming from their daughter.

As she reminisced about these early musical memories, Helen recognized the instrumental role of her parents’ unwavering encouragement as she first began exploring creative pursuits, despite her parents’ lack of musical inclination. Helen added that this vital advocacy has yet to wane because her parents continue to provide her with emotional *and* financial support while she carves out an enduring professional music career. Helen candidly noted how

I just simply wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing without my folks' support, and I think it's important to be transparent about that, because this industry really isn't *only* about working hard. Unfortunately, it also comes down to random luck, and I was lucky enough to be born into a family where my parents could give me some financial help and emotional support too.

Equally influential in Helen's musical journey was her voice teacher, with whom she studied various elements of music for more than a decade before attending Sarah Lawrence College. Consistently bolstering her creative confidence as they explored the intricacies of the piano and singing voice, Helen's instructor served as one of her earliest mentors by demonstrating how the piano could buttress the unlimited potential of her singing voice. Each week, the two would collaborate to demystify how songs are pieced together, beginning with melodic fragments Helen had been conjuring ever since the age of 5. Helen's teacher, in effect, was teaching her the fundamental elements of music theory, demonstrating how the mini-melodies that Helen bounced around the room could be transformed into harmonies, which then could shape the verses that lead to refrains, tied all together by a bridge. Helen was transfixed by the songwriting process and could not wait to learn more about its idiosyncrasies every week with her voice teacher, whom she referred to as her greatest mentor in revealing the true potential of the music experience.

During her tenure at Sarah Lawrence, Helen continued her music performance and composition studies, further refining her creative prowess by enjoying every curricular opportunity the institution offered. Enrolling in courses that ranged from playwriting, music composition, vocal performance, private piano lessons, jazz & blues performance ensembles, electronic music workshops, *and* a variety of social science classes, Helen synthesized a unique baccalaureate curriculum from disparate subjects that mattered to her—knowledge that would

not be tossed away once the diploma was handed out, but would facilitate her life-long ambition to be a professional musician.

***Benevolent Confidants, Intrinsic Motivation, a Dash of Moxie:
How Helen Began Writing Songs***

In exploring the origins and evolution of her compositional practice, Helen once again highlighted the profoundly influential and encouraging impact of her music teachers on her development as a composing musician. All of her instructors (from primary school through college) consistently offered sage knowledge, encouragement, and constructive feedback whenever Helen wanted to explore songwriting. To this end, Helen eagerly shared an anecdote of how she came to write her first “complete” song. She humorously rolled her eyes as she lamented the clichéd inspiration for the tune: a boy on whom she had a devastating crush. Helen acknowledged the conspicuous banality of this particular artistic influence, but after laughing, her tone turns serious as she reflected on the context of the song’s composition:

I remember just feeling so proud that I *made something*...and it remains such a significant memory of this sense of simultaneous vulnerability and accomplishment...like I had written this incredibly enlightening declaration about love. I was glad I put it out there into the world, no matter how absurd the whole thing probably sounded.

Even though Helen’s recollection of this tune was initially flippant, it revealed a fateful moment in her evolution as a songwriter: This was the first unadulterated sensation of catharsis that Helen experienced via music composition. This feeling indelibly captured her creative curiosity and influenced future explorations in singer-songwriter composition.

Composition Outside of Convention: Confident, Curious, and Torn Between Genres

As a teenager, Helen became obsessed with both the singer-songwriter and musical theater genres, and she strove to incorporate the endearing characteristics of these two disparate genres into her own composition process. Helen refined these performance goals with renewed

zeal when she matriculated to college. Within this diverse artistic environment, she fell in love with contemporary rock-themed musicals such as *Rent* and *Spring Awakening*, which represented a consummate marriage of separate genres—namely, the confessional, guitar-laden elements of singer-songwriter composition and the compelling narrative and character-driven aspects of musical theater. Helen’s expanded interest in musical theater culminated during her senior year: “I was simultaneously studying Greek mythology *and* composing personal song cycles when this lightbulb went off in my head, and I realized, ‘Wait a second...I think I’m actually trying to write a musical here!’”

Thus, for her senior thesis, Helen wrote a full-length musical. Though it never was performed, Helen was proud of what she had composed. It was heavily inspired by the pop hook-filled motifs of the previously mentioned contemporary musicals she could not stop listening to: “I was infatuated with this novel concept of taking contemporary music and infusing it with an attention-grabbing narrative...and I’m still fascinated by this genre-blurring form of composition.”

Following her graduation from Sarah Lawrence, and now officially a New York City resident, Helen evolved her compositional approach via exposure to novel writing methodologies and collaborations with a wide variety of contemporary artists. As she took full advantage of the plethora of music performance opportunities in the city, from joining creative teams at local playhouses to performing in a chamber-pop rock outfit that toured regionally, Helen finally began to feel truly “at home” identifying as a professional musician.

To Be Singer-Songwriter or Musical Theater Composer: A Balancing Act

With both musical theater and singer-songwriter genres now influencing her career trajectory in tangible manifestations, including the hit musical podcast she co-wrote starring

Broadway's coveted leading man, Jonathan Groff, Helen found herself at a critical professional crossroads: Should she focus on musical theater projects more than her own singer-songwriter material? Which endeavor was more personally fulfilling but also financially viable?

Helen soon found this a difficult quandary to reconcile; devoting sufficient attention to balance so many disparate projects simultaneously turned unsustainable, resulting in harmful effects on both her creative and mental health. Several years into her New York City residency, Helen made peace with the fact that she was not a good multi-tasker. If she wanted her original music to elicit genuinely affecting emotional reactions for the listener as well as herself, she needed to focus on only one project at a time.

Justifying this decision, Helen astutely noted, "If the song I labor over for god knows how long ends up feeling meaningless to me, why even bother putting in all of that effort in the first place?" This pragmatic revelation led Helen to reorient her compositional focus towards her growing singer-songwriter repertoire that had long laid dormant; she had been refining these songs for more than a decade but had never professionally recorded or released them. After 10 years of living in New York City, Helen wondered why such a clearly talented and creative person would wait so long to release art that was personally meaningful to her. By spring 2018, Helen decided she had waited long enough to record these songs. It was time to introduce them to the world.

Confidence: The Main Ingredient to Captivate the Singer-Songwriter Repertoire

Helen admitted her procrastination in recording and releasing her singer-songwriter material because she simply lacked the confidence to share the delicate, often distressing vulnerability suffused within these brutally honest and confessional songs. The many layers of irony within this admission were evident as emotional sensitivity and confessional disclosure are

critical aspects of singer-songwriter repertoire that distinguish this form of music expression from other contemporary genres.

Despite her various accolades, her notoriety in the New York City music scene, and myriad accomplishments as a professional musician, Helen admitted her surprise to how she simply lacked the self-assurance to release art to which she herself felt so connected. This was ironic in that she noted how during the nascent stages of her career, she devoted most of her creative energy to collaborating with others specifically to avoid the emotionally wrought experiences that inspired her singer-songwriter material. She could not figure out how to transition from the “performance-focused” realm of musical theater to the humbling “isolation” of refining and recording solo compositions completely on her own.

However, after the release of her wildly successful musical podcast with Jonathan Groff that was consistently praised for its musical ingenuity, Helen ruminated on the commercial potential of the deeply personal singer-songwriter repertoire she had kept “secret” for so long. She realized:

If I don't put this music out already, I *could* end up spending my days as a professional musician playing the same tired cabaret rooms and the same Broadway standards over and over until I keel over on the piano bench...and really, what's holding me back from tackling this repertoire? It's just me, and it always has been.

Terrifying Vulnerability Meets Mainstream Success

“I wanted to make sure that these songs actually had an entry point to let the listener *in*.” This was how Helen explained the recording process of her debut singer-songwriter LP. She described the compositional process for this record as a way to mentally process episodes of emotional trauma she endured as a teenager, so, understandably, she felt extremely connected to the music but also knew the raw emotions in these songs required refinement to appeal to public audiences. With assistance from a handful of her closest musical confidants, Helen spent the next

2 years recording these 10 songs that constituted her debut singer-songwriter LP. While it was an arduous process, Helen confidently declared: “Man, it was so worth it.”

Helen knows she has every reason to be proud of her debut singer-songwriter release. On Spotify alone, each of the album’s 10 tracks have a *minimum* of 23,000 plays, two of which hold more than 100,000 streams. Even more impressive, the only promotional single from the record accrued an astonishing 2.3 *million* plays in less than a year. Clearly, the songs deserved the light of day, and all Helen needed was a little push and a *lot* of moxie to unlock her expressive voice that had hid in secret for so long. With her debut album, Helen cemented her position in the emerging contemporary singer-songwriter genre. By revealing the vulnerable, introspective, and brutally honest side of her personality to the world—one not hidden behind the quirks of her fictional musical theater characters—Helen placed a tremendous emotional bet worth the risk.

Emotional Catharsis via Singer-Songwriter Composition

The 2020 press release for Helen’s debut singer-songwriter LP described its songs as a “glittered-Fueled Indie-Pop Celebration of Self-Acceptance and Actualization.” This quote happens to reference explicitly reference one of the primary theoretical frameworks guiding this study: Self-Actualization and its potential realization via singer-songwriter practices. As Helen reflected on this quote that she had not seen in nearly 5 years, she began to explain what Self-Actualization personally meant to her. After quiet deliberation, she discussed how the songs composed for her debut LP reflected an emotional and holistic evolution within herself as she reckoned with deep-rooted feelings of guilt and shame haunting her for most of her adult life. In one way, the production of this album consummated self-acceptance and actualization with these unnerving emotions. Helen described how she initially did not enjoy writing some of the songs featured on this record, but, as the compositions (and her emotional acceptance) evolved over the

years, the writing process triggered an epiphany for her: “Oh, wait, I actually *am* capable of not letting these undesirable feelings control my life. It’s possible to accept their existence *and* also move on from them.”

Helen expanded further on the cathartic experience of writing her debut album as she discussed the genesis of the album’s most popular track, a song that represents how she unburdened herself of things that became more detrimental than helpful to her mental health—what she called the “demons” that everyone contends with at one point or another: “When I finished recording that song, these notions of self-acceptance and self-actualization just began to bubble up, helping me come to terms with the ugliness of unfavorable emotions...even *accepting* them rather than trying to *expel* them.” Helen added that the cathartic recording of this song helped her realize how these feelings that once haunted her could actually reside within her without shame and regret.

Moreover, Helen's most popular song to date, which has accrued more than two million plays on Spotify alone, represents yet another artifact of the holistic maturation and self-actualization Helen experienced during this album’s production. As she said:

Writing that song helped me stop obsessing over self-degrading feelings that had played on a loop in my head forever, like, ‘Why am I not confident? Why do I care so much whether or not people like me?’ Well, after five years of therapy, I realized that it actually is super *fucking human* to feel that way!

In effect, composing this piece afforded Helen the emotional space to love and accept this notion, ending years of continual self-torment and obsession over why these feelings of self-doubt existed in the first place.

Ultimately, when describing how she came to title her debut album, Helen once more referred to these illuminating experiences of self-acceptance and actualization facilitated via the LP’s production:

I remember reading somewhere how, because of human beings' perpetual cell regeneration, we biologically are sort of outfitted with, in a sense, a 'new' body every seven years or so. And, for me, at least, that *is* self-actualization: to be able to, quite literally, have a completely different body every seven years...and, given that it's taken about that long to finally put these songs out into the world, I realized that I'm a totally new version of myself compared to when I first planted this seed...and, because this was my debut album, these songs felt like a culmination of my identity as a singer-songwriter. Having the opportunity to release this album allowed me to publicly declare, "Look at me! This is who I am! I am putting myself out there and, well, yeah...of course I'm afraid to do it, but I'm going to do it anyway!"

Breakups, Humility, and More Self-Actualization: Helen's Evolving Compositional Process

Helen considered the strategies she utilizes to evolve her compositional process in a way that maintains the catharsis she experienced when recording her debut LP while simultaneously pushing her artistic craft towards innovative sonic explorations. She noted how this very question has been on her mind a *lot* recently; at the time of this interview, Helen was putting finishing touches on her second singer-songwriter LP, slated for release in the summer of 2024.

Comparing the ambient vibe of this new collection of songs to those on her first LP, Helen smiled wryly and said, "This new album feels *so* different; thankfully because, this time, I didn't wait eight fucking years to actually release it! It *only* took four years!"

When asked about how this new LP came to fruition and whether she used any novel compositional tactics during the writing process, Helen revealed that she did not purposefully modify her composing methodology when creating these new songs—it did not even cross her mind to do so. In fact, Helen bluntly stated she felt compelled to write this LP *after* the rupture of a long-term relationship: "It's a cliché, but yup, it was a guy. He dumped me. I was devastated. And then, well, I ended up writing this record." Further describing the production of these new songs, Helen emphasized how the cumulative experience of writing and recording each piece indeed helped her grieve the relationship and process its emotional trauma: "It *definitely* helped

me process the breakup...writing these songs just put me in a better mental place with everything that happened.”

Whether intentional or not, Helen’s compositional approach evolved while writing this new LP, as she was determined from the start of production *not* to compose a prototypical maudlin “breakup record.” Rather, she chose to take the concept of a stereotypical breakup song and flip the derivative trope on its head, imbuing the album with a surprising sense of joy and vitality. Helen wholly embraced such a wildly innovative compositional approach, continually asking herself throughout the writing process:

What’s the most absurd synth sample I can use here? What ridiculously extravagant textures can I layer into the mix that will actually *make* me want to work on this song that, quite frankly, was incredibly difficult for me to write and get through and, eventually, even be able to perform it live?

The use of this technique facilitated not only the album’s production, but also Helen’s confrontation of her trauma without fear. Instead, she felt a sense of pride that both survived the gut-wrenching experience and created captivating art from it.

Further exemplifying the liberating evolution of her songwriting approach, Helen emphasized how different her two singer-songwriter albums sound in comparison, adding that, compared to the production of her first LP, she did not obsess over *every* minute aspect of each song, noting the pointed nature of the LP:

It’s a very deliberate snapshot of this specific moment in my life. Writing the first album felt very, you know, just, “all-encompassing,” in a way; when writing this new album...I just had a different goal in mind.

Requirements for Artistic Growth: Time, Space, and Embracing the Unknown

Helen admitted that she initially had her scruples writing songs that addressed such a sensitive and painful experience, especially early on in her grief: “I had to sit with each of these songs and the feelings and catharsis that they gave me before even considering sharing them with

others.... I spent hours and days living in these songs, and the feeling of moving through it.”

Helen described how, early in the grieving period, she attempted to write a song expressing her acceptance of the loss, and, frankly, “It was *not* good. I mean, I couldn’t even finish the song because it was just too soon...and then I had this moment of clarity and realized, ‘No wonder you can’t finish the song, bitch; you ain’t fucking over it yet!’”

Adopting a new approach, Helen took a step away from composition and allowed the grief to work naturally through her system. In fact, this tactic was the precise remedy she needed finally to write about her experience, and she churned out dozens of melodies at the piano just a few months later. This time, instead of composing a song of defiance amidst heartbreak, she adopted a simpler yet poignant tack: “I ended up writing a song about missing doing taxes and laundry with the person you loved so much....know, like, the little things about our relationship that I missed...and *that* was when I realized what I really wanted to write about.” This compositional breakthrough was a watershed moment for Helen’s creative identity. Embracing this novel creative approach, the songs began to pour out, affording Helen the ability to mourn the relationship earnestly and move *through* the pain. Eventually, Helen found herself standing upright on the other side of this traumatic loss, holding onto a record that represented the tangible manifestation of the joy that can grow from sorrow.

Helen’s Verdict: No Single “Recipe for Success”

As the subtext of this portrait of composing her first two singer-songwriter albums revealed, Helen clearly did not rely on a particular “formula” for musical composition. As her quote at the opening of her portrait revealed, Helen’s writing process often feels like “untangling” an enigmatic knot of emotions and experiences, with threads of indeterminate length and texture until they are laid out before her. When elaborating on this shrewd metaphor,

Helen noted how her composition approach is constantly evolving because there exist so many “different entry points into a song, and it’s extremely variable based on whatever the project is.”

For example, when discussing the writing process for the songs comprising her upcoming LP, Helen described how many of them emerged in unexpected ways: “I was literally just banging on the kitchen table one evening, and this melody suddenly started around my head...” Helen took that earworm and sang it to an old chord progression that was originally written for one of her musical theater compositions, but she then “re-claimed” it for her singer-songwriter repertoire. This idiosyncratic approach that Helen embraced in her compositional process, in which she essentially compartmentalizes creative ideas into various “chests” of motifs and harmonies (one for musical theater projects, the other for her singer-songwriter venture), revealed how even the smallest morsel of a creative idea can eventually be use effectively.

For this reason, Helen holds onto nearly every original melodic and harmonic idea that comes to her, knowing that it could potentially be advantageous in some iteration:

Everything is additive; even if I pick it up and put it back down for years. And, if I happen to forget the hook or chord progression, I guess it wasn’t really worth remembering in the first place! But, if I *do* remember it, even years later, I feel like there must be a reason why.

In addition to providing herself with sufficient time to reside in a creative space while composing, Helen added that the actual *physical* space in which she composes tremendously influences her artistic output:

I need to be in a comfortable, safe place, like my home. And the lighting in the room is also super important. I don’t like to have any screens in front of me or fluorescent lights beating down...I need to just let the physical space breathe with me; calmly and purposefully.

Last, and perhaps equally important to these elements of Helen’s songwriting technique, is the value of soliciting constructive feedback from impartial listeners throughout the process: “I feel

like this aspect is *so* crucial when composing from such a personal perspective.... I simply cannot make the music that is released under my name from an isolated vacuum.”

As these preceding insights into her compositional process revealed, Helen does *not* follow a prescribed methodology when composing, nor does she recognize any value in self-imposed deadlines or admonishing herself if one song requires months to realize fully. For Helen, the most important element of music composition, whether within the musical theater or the singer-songwriter realm, is that the creative idea *must* seize her curiosity and so assertively that she cannot let it go until she can render meaning from it.

Greasing the Creative Wheels...and Paying the Bills

When discussing how she navigates the financial uncertainty that is an unfortunate ingredient of this artistic vocation, Helen acknowledged that, because of her parents’ support, she can live comfortably without worrying about how to pay the next month’s bills. Helen does not take this financial positioning for granted; rather, she makes the most of this unique lot in life, pouring her heart, energy, and creativity into every project to which she is committed

Ultimately, Helen’s story revealed how the banal trope of the “starving artist” clawing their way to eventual success has nothing to do with how many zeros are in a bank account. In fact, Helen’s success in the music industry thus far demonstrates that the path to financial stability in this business is forged not from struggle for material notoriety, but from arresting creative expression that an artist dares to conjure from within.

Matthew

That’s why I love songwriting. I mean, I could just talk and talk for hours but actually say very little. When I’m writing a song, though, every lyric I create holds this chance to be a part of something really meaningful, and I always want to seize that opportunity, especially when it can feel so fleeting.

Context: Passion and Potential

Matthew, a 29-year-old multi-instrumentalist originally from upstate New York, has identified with the singer-songwriter moniker for over 15 years. Although closely associating himself with this genre for more than half of his life, Matthew's website biography offers more nuance to his artistry, describing a progressive musical style that is equal parts storyteller and songwriter, expressed from a "theatrical perspective with a powerful voice and piano rock edge." These details are a glimpse into the idiosyncratic complexity of Matthew's creative identity—one akin to the cryptic creative process he described in his opening quote that delicately balances the line between singer-songwriting and musical theater repertoire. In his initial interview, Matthew exuded an even-tempered demeanor at once humble and passionate as he described his musical journey.

Matthew has many accolades ranging from an undergraduate degree in studio composition from SUNY Purchase College, a postgraduate degree in performance from NYU Steinhardt, and an artistic residency at multiple BMI songwriting workshops. With more than a decade of classical training that began at a young age, Matthew called the piano his primary instrument and his singing voice secondary, even though he is also proficient with various stringed instruments. Matthew currently resides in New York City, where he has lived since 2020, and despite not yet achieving sustained financial stability through his artistry, he makes ends meet by teaching applied voice, piano, and songwriting lessons while he continues to compose in the singer-songwriter and musical theater genres.

Like the other participants in this study, Matthew's story is far from pedestrian, and he spared few details when recounting the winding journey of his life as a musical artist. He developed a passion for songwriting, experienced the highs and lows that accompany such an

unpredictable vocation, and uses dogged determination to continue exploring a creative path that he soberly recognized may lead to obscurity and financial uncertainty. However, he also has realized the potential for intangible joy and personal fulfillment that exceeds his wildest expectations.

Artistic Parents and an Early Love of Music: Opening the Floodgates

Matthew described his home environment growing up in the Hudson Valley as extremely musical, and mainly because he was surrounded by musicians. His mother was an accomplished classical pianist, vocalist, and musical theater composer; his father was a proficient multi-instrumentalist with a preference for guitar and trumpet; his older brother, despite being born with a severe hearing impairment, overcame tremendous obstacles to become a talented drummer. This proclivity for music essentially saturated Matthew's DNA.

Throughout his childhood, Matthew was also innately curious about musical sounds. He recalled one of his earliest interactions with music around age 4, when he heard his parents rehearse in a modest recording studio space rigged up in the basement of their family home. When his parents took a break from rehearsal, Matthew would come in and say hi. As his mother stepped away from the piano, Matthew climbed up on the bench and noodled away on the high octave keys, trying to imitate the melodies and hand movements that he witnessed from her. Observing this curiosity, Matthew's mother positively reinforced his improvisations and encouraged him to tap away on the keys. As he increasingly absorbed his parents' musicality, Matthew eventually visited the basement studio by himself and try to recreate the melodies of his favorite theme songs from TV and video games.

Matthew's mother gradually taught him some foundational techniques of piano performance, but he lamented that those initial attempts were "downright disastrous," as he could not fathom a "student-instructor" dynamic with his own mother:

I admit that I was a difficult student just because of her (and me) struggling to reconcile, or I suppose, distinguish the mother-son relationship from the teacher-student relationship...and I was just a brat about the whole thing. It began to feel like work instead of this open-ended fun and creative activity.

Despite these unsuccessful efforts, Matthew emphasized how, overall, his parents' advocacy for his artistic ambitions, both emotionally and financially, has been unwavering: "I look back on those days with such appreciation now. My family has consistently been total and absolute in their support, from the beginning."

"All I Know Is Formal Instrument Training"

Following some unsuccessful forays in other extracurricular activities, including multiple "absolutely horrendously embarrassing" attempts at soccer, Matthew personally chose to return to the piano and resume formal lessons around age 12. Imbued with renewed enthusiasm and "determination to never step foot on a soccer field *ever* again," Matthew fondly recalled his reacquaintance with the piano. He attributed his appreciation for these lessons to his new piano instructor, who introduced him to the brilliant repertoire of classical composers such as Bach and Chopin. In this "watershed moment" of his instrument training experience, Matthew particularly adored a variety of classical forms, especially Bach's fugues and their idiosyncratic structure. Matthew marveled at the harmonies within Chopin's preludes and dedicated himself to mastering piece after piece until he committed them to memory. From these significant recollections, it becomes clear that Matthew's transformed attitude towards musical practice rekindled an intrinsic attraction that had initially drawn him to music as a young boy.

When asked if his classical teacher ever broached the topic of composition technique during their lessons, Matthew proudly emphasized that his curiosity for contemporary composition technique was derived from personal desire. He also credited his piano instructor for encouraging these early creative explorations, which involved the two of them tearing apart and repurposing some of Matthew's favorite fugues and etudes:

I have to give my [classical piano] teacher *some* recognition, because, as much as she would cry, 'Never do that to Bach or Chopin; that is sheer blasphemy!' when I'd show her my classical 're-mixes,' I suppose you could call them, she *did* recognize and appreciate my interest in songwriting, when she could have easily just ignored it.

As contemporary composition development was not this instructor's strong suit, Matthew began studying jazz piano technique with a new teacher when he was 15. Exposed now to two stylistically distinct piano pedagogues, Matthew developed a multifaceted "musical toolbelt" that facilitated multiple avenues of creative growth and fulfillment to satisfy his innate musical curiosity. Moreover, Matthew highlighted how significant his two piano instructors were in his performance and compositional development: "I simply just wouldn't have any of the songwriting techniques that I rely on so much, even to this day...everything I have, I credit to this, at times, completely exhausting, but totally worthwhile, form of instrument training."

While Matthew primarily discussed his work with the piano, he also had other stories to relate about his equally impressive vocal technique, one rich in dynamic subtleties, strong forward resonance, and warm tone. While his technique suggests he has spent decades cultivating a disciplined methodology, Matthew admitted that he has "never taken a *formal* voice lesson in my whole life! I'd say the closest thing to 'vocal training' that I received as a child was when I would sing in the shower and mom would shout from across the house, 'don't forget to lift your soft palate, honey!'"

As his mother was a professionally trained pianist, singer, and composer in the theater realm, Matthew embraced the very informal guidance she offered as he became more entrenched in musical experience. Outside of the shower, Matthew coyly noted she casually offered tips on breath control and posture, among other rudimentary techniques. Matthew almost interrupted his own narration to express surprise at how much he has mentioned his parents:

I don't mean to go back to talking about my folks *yet again*, but I just can't overstate their influence enough. I mean, when you are quite literally surrounded by music *all* the time, there's nothing you can do but just, kind of, inadvertently absorb the elements. It's as if I soaked in all this music knowledge just through osmosis!

As these anecdotes from the early years of his musical development reveal, Matthew's creative curiosity, nurtured by his musical family's influence and guidance, helped him establish an invaluable complementary skill to accompany his formidable piano ability—a skill that would lead him to the accomplished singer-songwriter identity he wholeheartedly embraces today.

The Early Days of Matthew's Songwriting

One of Matthew's statements—"I loved learning about all the 'rules' of music composition...what I loved even more was breaking them!"—is an insight into his success as an artist. From the age of 12, as Matthew began showing his first piano teacher variations of classical pieces that he tinkered with and chopped up ("remixes" of Bach's fugues and Chopin's etudes that initially shocked his teacher), these early attempts at music composition represent a crucial moment in his artistic journey that opened the door to songwriting. In fact, his teacher's warnings that flippantly tinkering with masterpieces of these Western music titans verged on "sacrilegious" only "motivated me more to mess around with these works." As Matthew astutely noted, virtually *any time* an adult derided him for "breaking the rules," it simply prompted him to push that limit even further.

Matthew described his jazz instructor as an invaluable mentor who helped him develop a foundational comprehension of musical improvisation, which, in turn, led Matthew to write original works for the first time. For example, he learned how to chart out solos and connect the lines so they both complemented *and* facilitated the underlying chords of the tune and its harmonic direction. Most importantly, though, was the fact that as much as Matthew's classical piano teacher discouraged chord substitutions and re-harmonizations, his jazz teacher celebrated innovative sonic explorations:

My jazz teacher er taught me everything about re-harmonizing, and that's what helped me the most when composing on my own...he actually *encouraged* me to test out these little experiments of mine, providing me with all these tips and tricks for *how* to easily do it too!

Beyond merely teaching him rudimentary compositional techniques, Matthew's jazz teacher utilized a uniquely effective pedagogical approach that introduced the guidelines of songwriting as "neat tips and shortcuts," rather than strident rules to follow. To this end, the jazz teacher framed a songwriting discussion as "Okay, here's a way to make this sound super cool, real fast...here's a way to get to this chord easily, et cetera, et cetera." This teaching style clicked with Matthew because

it would take me *forever* to try to hear the harmonic direction of the tune on my own...but the way [the teacher] explained to me what I was essentially already hearing just allowed me to sort of skip over all of that 'feeling in the dark' aspect of composition and head straight towards what I wanted to hear.

Through the various teaching styles and extensive musical knowledge of his piano instructors and parents, Matthew developed a unique opinion of the "rules" of music composition. He emphasized how he loved learning these so-called "songwriting 'rules,' ... knowing what the rule is, because then, that new knowledge allowed me to break it!" Matthew acknowledged that his perspective may sound contrarian—being interested in rules but also

eager to break them. To clarify on why two such polar-opposite sentiments can co-exist, Matthew explained that he loved learning about “rules” simply so he could then explore the *sound* of breaking them. Thus, the songwriting principles he was exposed to provided him with novel avenues to experiment with his creative ideas.

As his musical acumen matured, Matthew realized that songwriting is no different than any other form of art, especially as there are no “set-in-stone ‘rules’ of any kind with art.” Moreover, if learning some arcane “rule” does inspire him and facilitates songwriting in a meaningful way, Matthew embraces it wholeheartedly because it offers him an opportunity for more creativity. Breaking rules leads him to “create something that sounds cool and unique, and, well, just sounds like me, you know? Like, the real, most authentic version of me can emerge from that process.”

Matthew’s infatuation with music performance and composition clearly emanated from this amalgam of disparate, yet equally influential, elements: from his personal curiosity to observe and imitate his parents’ creative endeavors, to experimenting with rearrangements of pre-existing repertoire, and to eventually composing his own original pieces based on lessons from classical and jazz teachers. Together, these distinct pieces form Matthew’s portrait as an emerging contemporary singer-songwriter: “Receiving that formal training through my piano lessons, while also being able to explore songwriting and get feedback from my family all of the time...it just created this perfectly balanced combination of freedom and structure.”

Composition, Evolved: Being Obligated to Inspiration and Spontaneous Creativity

Considering the technical and emotional tools he relied on as his artistic technique evolved over the years, Matthew is quick to address that one of his most inspirational facets of music composition originated from the close bond he shares with his older brother, Nate

(pseudonym). Growing up, Matthew watched his Nate struggle with a rare hearing impairment that had afflicted him since birth. Nate overcame adversity and eventually developed communication abilities no one thought were possible. He went on to graduate from college, get married, and purchase a home for his own family.

The influence of Nate's unique life experience on Matthew's personal and professional endeavors was palpable in the interview: Matthew became emotional, his voice breaking as he paused to compose himself as he talked about Nate. He not only impacted Matthew's song composition but inspired him to live life to its fullest potential. Matthew described how, when they were growing up together,

I felt a great degree of guilt about Nate's situation, but I also tried to help him as best I could, to be his wingman, whenever he needed it, and we still have a great relationship to this day...Nate symbolizes this incredible success story for me, and I just love that....and a lot of the songs that I wrote were undoubtedly influenced by him.

Because of his brother, Matthew learned to view music, art, and life in general, with fearlessness. He realized that seemingly immovable obstacles cannot prevent anyone from "doing what you love and achieving your dreams," a philosophy that Matthew admitted was "saccharine, I know, but you get the idea."

To this end, one of the first times when Matthew felt the cathartic and joyful effects of his own songwriting emerged from the experience of composing a song for his brother. Echoing the quote that began this narrative, Matthew described his composition process with a sense of awe: "Wow, I'm really giving something here. I'm writing something important. And since then, I've always felt a sense of importance and implicit responsibility with my songwriting." From this initial compositional experience, Matthew realized how artistic expression represents an opportunity to say something meaningful. This is why he feels a "strong degree of pride and sense of self whenever I finish a song and can play it to the person for whom I wrote it."

Within this vein of catharsis, emotional bonding, and meaning construction, Matthew finds inspiration to compose, as long as he remains open to embracing the “spontaneous nature of human creativity” throughout the process. Virtually *anything*, Matthew advocated, can serve as the seed of a new song. It may be a simple melodic motif that suddenly pops into his head, and he cannot stop humming it until he renders the impulse phrases to notation on the piano. Moreover, Matthew emphasized how “you may have no idea where that little melody came from, or why it’s bouncing around inside your head so much, but in those moments, you just *know* it could be the bones of something cool.” For Matthew, this is the essence of music composition at its best: natural, organic, uncompromised by outside influences, and, most of all, unpredictable.

When asked to elaborate on the evolution of his compositional approach, Matthew responded in a strikingly unique way: He played a new song *during* the interview itself. In the interest of respecting Matthew’s comfort level, I stressed that he did not need to play a song on the spot, but he dismissed my concern, explaining that it was “easier to just show you rather than explain it all.” He pivoted towards the piano and played a verse and chorus from a recent composition that he wrote during the pandemic when much of the city had shut down. When he finished playing, I commended his exceptional vocal melody and chord progression. He explained that those were the reasons he wanted to play it in the first place: “I had to show you this little snippet because, initially when writing the song, I started out with this rather unmemorable vocal melody, really nothing special at all, but when I sang it on top of this minor V chord, then it just opened the floodgates.” He then played the song again, this time describing how he loved this song’s “happy melody in vox, but it’s married to this almost somber, dark undertone of harmonics.”

Matthew also proudly detailed how the song he just played for me represents a perfect example of how fruitful organic and spontaneous music composition truly can be:

I find that, with my favorite compositions, the first kernel of creativity emerges from a melodic phrase, and then the harmony is added in afterwards. I feel like that's just the most organic and downright human thing that anyone can do when composing, you know? Just to utilize a little ditty that happens to be bouncing around your head, and then you come up with chords that, surprisingly, sound pretty cool underneath it!

When asked if his current compositional approach mostly eschews the customs of composers he had studied with his instructors, Matthew noted:

I definitely continue to respect their traditions, because I just feel like an intriguing song still needs to contain a little bit of the conventional in order for that surprise chord or motif to be effective; if you're trying to making *everything* in a song sound surprising, then nothing is a surprise.

The Tools of Constructive Criticism, Collaboration, and Listening More Than Playing

Referring to his compositional tack and its evolution over the years, Matthew described how, early in his career, he used to be more of a “perfectionist cave person” who hesitated showing original work to anyone unless he believed it to be finished. He relied on this habit to avoid a feeling he described only as “absolute devastation,” when someone did not enjoy a song of his, especially considering the time he had lavished on it during stretches of self-enforced isolation. More recently, however, Matthew appreciates the benefit of constructive criticism when he performs “works in progress” for confidants. Reflecting the creative mindset of a seasoned professional musician, Matthew prudently observed how a composer must develop the confidence to play an original piece in its

halfway state...and if you can't do that, it must mean you're afraid of it; afraid of the weaknesses that may be exposed...but, if you can't even consider knowing about the possible deficits within the tune, you definitely cannot exploit its strengths.

Further espousing the compositional benefits of sharing songs-in-progress, Matthew noted, “You have to bare your soul when writing in this vein, right? To me, that's really showing off your

authenticity; when you can show something that isn't even finished, but you believe in it, and you *want* to show it, even if it is still rough around the edges." Matthew buttressed his argument by referencing advice he once heard from novelist Stephen King: "He said that, when you share your work with somebody, you have to be careful about how many times you share it with the same person, because, if you're not careful, *their* ego may end up getting wrapped up into *your own* work."

Considering how much his songwriting acumen has developed over the years, Matthew now approaches singer-songwriter composition with an evolved desire to embrace the organic nature of creative experience, however long it takes to materialize a finished song:

I just want to *enjoy* the writing process and build an emotional connection with my listeners. Ultimately, it's always going to be a more rewarding experience, because you know that you took the clippers and forged a path through the forest all by yourself; nobody helped you.

A Tightrope Dance Between Singer-Songwriter and Musical Theater Genres

Reflecting on his incipient songwriting journeys, Matthew described a feeling of having to steady himself along this "creative tightrope" between the singer-songwriter and musical theater genres when composing his own material. During this period, Matthew vowed to *never* follow in his parents' footsteps by working in the musical theater realm, adding that he, in some ways, initially began writing within the singer-songwriter context to simply "get away from my folks, in a manner of speaking." Ironically, though, Matthew currently finds himself writing more musical theater repertoire than before. He candidly admitted that, without his musical theater composition projects and performance gigs, he could not afford living in New York City, adding "I found the path towards becoming financially self-sufficient as a singer-songwriter exclusively to be, well, virtually impossible!"

After years of compartmentalizing his singer-songwriter and musical theater compositional approaches, Matthew is better able to avoid being distracted by trivial genre designations when composing. This novel creative attitude has allowed Matthew to become “really interested with writing more ambitious, large-scale narratives within my songs.” No longer hyper-critical of the frivolous genre designation attributed to his songs, Matthew is more comfortable than living within this “genre hybrid” creative space.

Despite his confidence composing within either genre, Matthew did distinguish a crucial element of writing within the two genres: “Since I’ve been doing more musical theater work recently, the writing has, obviously, been much less focused on myself.” Because musical theater composition does not require him to self-reflect or engage with the additional therapeutic benefits of singer-songwriter artistry, Matthew misses having a creative space “where you just can just let out the things you need to say so you can process them in a healthy manner.” Whether emotional strife, personal struggles, or simply any experience to reconcile with, Matthew greatly appreciates how holistically healing singer-songwriter compositional practice can be. Moreover, engaging in singer-songwriter composition provides Matthew with an essential emotional outlet for him to reconcile his personal identity, creative desires, and professional ambitions as he navigates the increasing complexities of adulthood.

Ultimately, to reconcile this dilemma of feeling torn between disparate genres, Matthew now regards his approach to musical composition as completely experimental since “I’m not specifically thinking about [writing within] a particular reference or genre.” More specifically, when Matthew stumbles upon interesting melodies these days, “I like to be in an altered flow

state,”¹ which he described as a creative experience that allows him to “simply hear the music and feel around the (proverbial) darkness.” In doing this, he attempts to discover where the primordial elements of a new song may lead him, instead of forcing the direction of a piece based on arbitrary or self-imposed banalities.

A “Starving Artist” and Authenticity: How Matthew Interprets His Identity on His Own Terms

When he hears the term *singer-songwriter*, Matthew inevitably imagines the prototypical “starving artist.” While he has no desire to be aligned with such a cliché, he also recognizes the image exudes an undeniable authenticity that cannot be found in other genres:

It simply takes a tremendous amount of courage to go out on a limb and keep at it, even though you’re fully aware of all of its uncertainties. I mean, why else would you take such a risk if you didn’t feel in your heart of hearts that there was *nothing* else you could do in your life that could give you such satisfaction.

Ultimately, Matthew chose this unique professional path because it affords him the ability to “speak my own truth. And yeah, at times I am exhausted from the plight of the ‘starving artist,’ but in my mind, it’s still a very respectable career choice.” Indeed, as Matthew’s narrative has revealed, the lived experience of the contemporary singer-songwriter may not be easy or glamorous, but he has a more important motivation. When one strives to fulfill personal potential and realize the authentic essence of one’s very existence, ease and comfort are no longer crucial elements of the equation.

¹ Defined by the American Psychological Association as a “cerebral experience characterized by a loss of self-consciousness, a distorted sense of time's passage, and the merging of action and awareness” (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2018, p. 202).

Sophie

Songs are loyal to themselves.

Context: Young, Ambitious, Realistic

Having recently turned 27 years old, Sophie is the youngest of this study's five participants, and her youthfulness was distinctly evident during our initial conversation. As she answered each question, Sophie exuded confidence discussing her prowess as a professional singer-songwriter, but she was also realistic about the probability (or lack) of achieving sustained professional success in this career against the backdrop of today's progressively mercurial music industry landscape. For this reason, ever since moving to New York City 3 years ago to "make it" as a professional musician after she graduated from Yale University, Sophie shrewdly stitched together a tapestry of multiple recurring freelance gigs so she could maintain a comfortable lifestyle while pursuing her artistic ambitions.

Between managing afterschool programs teaching kindergartners ukulele technique, organizing collaborative songwriting workshops for at-risk city youths, and serving as a leading member of an NYC-based community outreach program called the Gaia Music Collective that connects like-minded creative artists, Sophie surrounds herself with musical experiences every day, even if they do not always pertain to her singer-songwriter career. She is the epitome of today's 21st century professional musician: a D.I.Y. "Teaching Artist" who composes original material and shares it with as many people as she can reach, while simultaneously maintaining alternative pragmatic career paths—just in case those whimsical "rock star" dreams do not come to fruition.

Sophie revealed an interesting approach to songwriting which differed from that of the other participants in that she does not feel the *need* to compose exclusively for the purpose of

mental catharsis or processing past emotional trauma. When discussing her compositional approach and general rationale for embracing the singer-songwriter professional identity, Sophie espoused a personal philosophy that she uses to remind herself whenever her artistic ambitions feel arduous or aimless: “Songs are loyal to themselves.” Essentially, Sophie believes that her identity as a contemporary singer-songwriter does not require her to imbue her songs with personal trials and tribulations. Sophie is confident that her repertoire can stand on its own and *still* remain authentic and affecting, even without the archetypal confessional approach often associated with it. To this end, Sophie often challenges herself to compose narrative-based compositions that specifically avoid any reference to her personal life. Thus, she believes that as long as the story is conveyed within the tune, captures the listener’s attention, and provokes thoughtful consideration, her artistic goal is satisfied.

With more than 5,000 monthly Spotify listeners, Sophie augments this fanbase by continually adding to her recorded repertoire, which already features multiple EPs, singles, and two full-length LPs released since 2020. As of April 2024, Sophie was preparing to co-headline a regional tour in the Northeast with a dear friend of hers who is also an emergent singer-songwriter. Sophie plans to use these gigs to test out material for her latest upcoming LP that she described as “nearly complete” (it was, in fact, released in November 2024). Soft-spoken and demure, yet also inquisitive and fastidious, Sophie exuded a palpable sense of maturity and resolve as she described her professional ambitions while navigating today’s fickle music industry. Appropriately, her lived experience narrative portrait is equally nuanced, as a look into Sophie’s musical past and rationale for choosing this vocation revealed.

Intrinsically Motivated: Sophie's Earliest Memories of Musical Exploration

While Sophie considers her singing voice as her primary instrument, her earliest musical memories are associated with the piano. Her mother was an amateur pianist who practiced sporadically, but Sophie's interest was piqued at a young age as she listened to those tones from the ivory keys reverberating throughout the house. Understandably, then, as soon as 4-year-old Sophie could scale the daunting height of the family's antique piano bench, she banged away at the keys, emulating her mother's movements. Even though Sophie's mother never pressured her to take piano lessons or even demonstrated any "off-the-cuff" techniques while experimenting with octaves, Sophie was filled with an intrinsic motivation to create any melodic fragment via their grand piano.

By the age of 6, Sophie was so confident in her piano prowess that she once interrupted her elementary school's instrumental recitals to jump on stage and reach the piano before the next scheduled performer. To Sophie's delight and her mother's embarrassment, Sophie even introduced herself to the audience before performing an impromptu, completely improvised, original collection of fragmented melodies ranging from the lowest to the highest octave that her arm could reach. The shocking experience lasted 2 minutes, and the audience politely applauded. Nevertheless, Sophie bowed before jumping off the piano bench following her "first, and last, flash mob performance," as she humorously described it. Meanwhile, the scheduled performer stood awkwardly, paralyzed with confusion about Sophie's impromptu performance. Sophie's mother was upset with her daughter's brash defiance, but she came to realize that Sophie was eager to learn as much as she could about instrumental technique. The next day, Sophie's mother made some calls, and by the end of the week, Sophie was taking formal piano lessons.

Instrument Training: Formal and Autodidactic, with Mentors

Over the next 2 years, Sophie struggled to engage with the piano lessons because she actually abhorred the repetitive, emotionally devoid exercises from her beginner practice book. Furthermore, when Sophie did demonstrate intrinsic curious creativity at the piano during a lesson and show off new melodies, the teacher immediately shut the piano cover until Sophie was “ready to focus,” as she sarcastically recounted. Sophie’s mother eventually found a new teacher who incorporated a combination of voice and piano instruction during lessons, and Sophie was relieved with the change.

Serving as a stark contrast to her first instructor, the new teacher quickly recognized Sophie’s passion for singing and creative exploration and seamlessly wove theory pedagogy into the context of improvisatory melodic explorations and healthy vocal technique instruction. Now finally working with a teacher who recognized her agency and conscientiously supported her idiosyncratic musical interests, Sophie felt a renewed sense of purpose with her instrumental studies. As this new instructor was also interested in composition pedagogy, he encouraged her to combine all of these melodic fragments into fully realized songs, explaining that Sophie had all of the “bones” of the tune laid out before her and just needed to rearrange the pieces.

Throughout these lessons during her middle school years, Sophie and her new teacher formed an indelible bond, to the point that she would deviate from the learning goals of the lessons were to just compose together:

I remember writing a choral piece with him because I was *so* much more interested in writing songs than practicing the piano...and I admit that I kind of distracted him from whatever learning goals he had set forth for a lesson, but he never seemed to mind. I would just say, “Hey! Let’s work on this funky motif,” instead of the things that I was supposed to, but, of course, forgot to really practice.

As her compositional ability grew along with her creative confidence, Sophie brought more and more fully realized original songs to each lesson, and the two would pull them apart, flip them upside-down, and refine the endless musical ideas tumbling out. This teacher's attention and nurturing bolstered Sophie's compositional prowess and security in an enduring manner that she continues to rely on even today.

Familial Support: Present, But Not Necessarily Reliable

When describing the family dynamic in her household during these foundational years of musical development, Sophie noted that she cannot truly identify with the concept of a "musical household," unlike other study participants could. For example, her father was a supportive and loving parent, but appeared indifferent to music, usually turning on the stereo only when they were in the car inching through rush-hour Washington, DC, traffic. While not surprising as her dad did not play any instruments, Sophie noted that her own mother—who Sophie still considers an excellent and "way better" pianist than herself—lost interest in performance once she began focusing on raising a family. Of course, if Sophie asked a music theory or technical question now and again, her mother was helpful and supportive, but her disconnect from the piano affected her excitement for her own daughter's musical aptitude.

Nevertheless, Sophie pointed out that to this day, her parents still encourage her professional efforts and attend shows wherever they can. Furthermore, Sophie noted that, throughout secondary school, both parents exerted pressure on Sophie to maintain a rigorously diligent practice schedule. Unfortunately, Sophie construed this enforcement as a criticism of her musical ability: "All that tangible pressure would often make me wonder, 'Oh, I guess I really am not a talented music student,'" or, 'If I had only practiced piano more, I would be better,' ... it just made me feel like they wanted me to do something that I wasn't following through with." In

short, Sophie concluded her thoughts on this by emphasizing how much she loves her parents, and although the household dynamic was not so musically influential, her parents never reprimanded any lack of practicing nor did they verbalize disappointment with her artistic endeavors: “Look, they’re my parents. They are *certainly* not perfect, but they did support me and continue to be there for me as I continue following this unpredictable path, even as I’m approaching 30; my god I’m old!”

Sophie’s Compositional Process and Development: Always Refining, Changing

During this immensely influential interim period of musical learning throughout high school, Sophie began experimenting with the guitar, applying to it the music theory knowledge gleaned from her piano-voice lessons. While she has never taken formal guitar lessons, Sophie had enough intrinsic motivation and foundational music knowledge to teach herself a variety of guitar techniques such as complex strumming patterns, classical-style fingerpicking, and alternative esoteric open tunings. Eventually, Sophie became more comfortable composing songs on the guitar than the piano, and by the time she matriculated to Yale, her original repertoire was written exclusively with guitar. Now equipped with a burgeoning coffer of original tunes, Sophie eagerly performed these new pieces when any opportunity presented itself on campus, from open-mics to impromptu jamboree circles. Not only was she advancing her guitar and compositional acumen, but Sophie was also developing a vital component of her singer-songwriter identity: live performance and a confident, comfortable stage presence as she leaned into her refined and personally unique vocal approach with moxie and ease.

While Sophie had been composing original full-length songs as early as middle school, she credited a composition class she took in her first year at Yale as profoundly enlightening; it “triggered a spark” that fed her artistic professional ambitions and led her to declare her major in

music composition: “Ah! I was in love with that class, and they gave out so many cool compositional tasks, like this nine-minute minimalist piece I worked on *forever*, but it was so cool to be exposed to so many different approaches to writing a song!” Moreover, this particular course completely altered her career trajectory by helping her realize the professional potential of her artistic endeavors:

Before that class, I always felt like I was writing songs just for me, and I did it in such a way that I wasn’t even thinking of it as a possible profession. It was just what I naturally would do with my spare time without even second-guessing it...but then, as I started performing more with other like-minded singer-songwriters, I realized, “Oh, if there’s an artistic discipline that fits my style, *this* is where it lives.”

An additional advantageous practice that enhanced Sophie’s compositional “tool belt” during her nascent days of singer-songwriter artistry was her devotion to learning how to play her favorite artists’ songs. Not only did these exploratory analyses of her most cherished compositions contribute to her wealth of music theory and song structure aptitude, but they also bolstered her own confidence in writing from a place of sincerity, tapping into that unadulterated joy inherent within genuine music performative experience.

As an example of how this manner of practice profoundly informed her own songwriting ability, Sophie described a revelatory moment in her self-led guitar technique development that was born directly entangling with a song written by one of her favorite female artists, Brandi Carlile:

I remember it so well, this ‘lightbulb moment’ of inspiration back in the summer of 2018. I was struggling to figure out how Brandi was strumming her guitar in this epic song, and after a million listens and combing through videos of her performing it live, I realized that she wasn’t strumming the guitar, but was actually using this cool finger-picking technique! I had never tried it before; I was always just that lazy “strummer” kind of guitarist...but when I learned about this “fingerpicking” approach as an alternative to basic strumming, that just opened up the floodgates for me.

The floodgates in turn served to mature Sophie's own songwriting conceptions. Nowadays, and particularly because of this *one* moment in 2018, Sophie prefers fingerpicking over strumming because it offers many more varied layers of sonic texture, nuance, and timbre.

A Typical Songwriting Experience: Sophie's "Formula"

Unlike other participants who generally espoused a more natural and spontaneous approach to their songwriting endeavors, Sophie relies upon and always attempts to improve a particular "formula" when engaging in music composition. While her singer-songwriter contemporaries in this study tended to eschew a specific daily "creativity quota" to avoid songwriting "just for writing's sake," Sophie firmly believes that her own composition methodology is, in fact, not only pragmatic but also actively inspires her to write as much as she can, every day.

Elaborating further, Sophie noted that she indeed holds a personal goal of composing, "even if it's for just 25 or 30 minutes" every single day. This process usually begins with her "showing up," an experience she details as "sitting down with my guitar and simply closing my eyes and listening to what I'm feeling in that moment of quiet; what's on my mind and what emotions bubble up when I start playing." Diving into the specifics underlying her artistry, Sophie described how the potential song's melody and lyrics are usually conceived in tandem, but not necessarily in that order: "Maybe I'll have a little snippet of a melody first or lyric fragment ahead of that, but once they stick together, I commit to following them as *one* idea, and hope it doesn't fall off the rails from there. That's pretty much my process."

While initially sounding overly simplistic when describing what is usually regarded as an almost sacred practice of personal meaning discovery, Sophie's songs do not reflect such a superficial tone. Sophie was simply answering in a straightforward and cogent manner, as she is

not one for “musing” about a topic. Sophie also emphasized that she is always tinkering with her “process” and remains open to novel creative approaches. She adds that her aforementioned “songwriting formula” does not always yield results, and so she holds other resources in her compositional tool belt to conjure melodies, lyrics, or harmonic progressions: “I’ll draw from collecting little phrases on my phone notes, ideas floating around my head, or just improvising on piano or guitar until I’ve found something that I like, and then I play it *over and over* until some vocal melodies come to mind.”

Ironically, despite being the youngest of this study’s five participants, Sophie discussed her career and artistic undertakings with unparalleled gravitas, especially when describing the evolution of her songwriting approach. She pays particular attention to this aspect of her profession to ensure that any creative stagnancy is merely ephemeral. To avoid musical complacency, Sophie continually conceives of novel “game/challenge” structures to compose within. For example, she described her latest compositional “game” (one that has yielded nearly *all* the songs from her new LP): “I have to admit that I am absolutely addicted to that ‘wordle’ game...it’s a problem.” Sophie recognized the unhealthy amount of screentime she was devoting to this frivolous game (an online variation of Scrabble), and she had an epiphany: “Rather than just cycle through puzzle after puzzle, I would use the discovered words from the game to write a verse, or sometimes, the entire story of a song, inspired completely from those guessed words from that silly game.”

Sophie detailed how this experimental compositional “formula” resulted in some of her best work yet. Elaborating further, she explained that such an idiosyncratic approach to songwriting forced her to be so specific in her diction and syntax that it yielded some of her most poignant lyrical content; she claimed she had no other option but to seek out meaningful and

tangible relationships between the unrelated words randomly provided. In describing another game-like approach to songwriting she recently adopted, Sophie utilized the “36 Questions: How to Fall in Love” interactive article that the *New York Times* printed last year to inspire herself when sitting for hours with her guitar and not being productive. Elaborating on this unique compositional process, Sophie explained how she would examine a new question from the article each week and utilize it as a foundational framework for writing a love song.

This distinctively original songwriting methodology yielded even more compositions that she is eager to share with her audiences as she prepares for her upcoming regional tour and album release. Sophie is clearly *not* fond of creative stagnation, and these creative, fun, and innovative compositional processes represent other valuable tools she relied on to ensure that her artistry evolves, even though discipline may be sometimes required. For Sophie, the endearing songs conjured from these idiosyncratic methodologies are well worth the effort. Moreover, these preceding compositional approaches reinforce Sophie’s opening quote of her narrative: “Songs are loyal to themselves.” This statement reverberated throughout her narrative, providing evidence that she simply does not want to write about herself all the time; rather, she wants to challenge her artistic muscles to conjure up something genuinely refreshing. By following this road, then, Sophie gleans greater perspective about her own personal identity and potential.

Songwriting: A Complicated Relationship

As more details of Sophie’s artistic identity, musical development, and compositional processes emerged during the interview, some critical elements of her lived experience as an emerging singer-songwriter remained opaque. For example, what was Sophie’s opinion of her vocation’s ability to facilitate emotional catharsis, trauma relief, and self-reflection potential, and what degree of vulnerability is required to realize these holistic benefits?

As early as high school, when she began composing her first singer-songwriter compositions in earnest and performed them at monthly open mic gigs, Sophie experienced the visceral sensations of psychological stirrings derived from sharing her art with others: “Especially during my teenage years, songwriting allowed me to take situations or feelings that felt overwhelming and complex and transform them into something less daunting, and letting me hold those feelings without sacrificing any nuance.”

Furthermore, around this time, Sophie first perceived singer-songwriter composition as a tangible tool to process emotions, feelings, and events that otherwise would have felt unbearable to shoulder. Sophie added how even her initial stumbling forays within the complex practice of songwriting were advantageous to her mental well-being: “Looking back now, I can really appreciate how just moving words around on the page, and composing in general, regardless of the content, was a really helpful tool for helping my brain settle down and be present in the moment.”

Regarding her opinion on the degree of shared vulnerability required of composers to create emotionally affective art in the singer-songwriter genre, Sophie commented that some amount of disclosed vulnerability needs to be present in a song so an audience can identify with it. However, if the composer wants that song to linger with the listener hours after they hear it, the song should exude some self-vulnerability. That said, Sophie remarked how “there are so many different ways to make music that connects with people, and I don’t believe it *has* to require speaking in such a confessional tone about your own experiences directly or talking about things that are taboo or just difficult to discuss, necessarily.” Whether a song is fictional or derived from personal experience, the mere act of writing a composition that “says something about what you believe in *does* require sharing your vulnerability with others.”

This correlation between the singer-songwriter genre and artist vulnerability inevitably leads to an inquiry about the authenticity of Sophie's repertoire and if she is actively cognizant of this element while composing. She herself asked how one can tend to conflate the significance of authenticity when creating any form of art: "When I'm writing, authenticity isn't this necessary 'goal' that I'm striving for what to strive for...*but*, I do believe it's important to consider 'what work is authentic to *you*.'" Echoing her personal philosophy on her art's purpose and allure, Sophie added the crucial caveat that effectively expressing authenticity or vulnerability within a song doesn't require "plunking" oneself into a tune for arbitrary reasons. In doing so, the artist may be losing the opportunity to express "so many kinds of excitingly beautiful abstractions and nuances within a song that can convey the same genuine sense of the composer's vulnerable authenticity."

Ultimately, Sophie's portrait of her lived experience as a singer-songwriter thus far conveyed a sense of pragmatism and efficiency, especially as she reminded that *any* artist can excessively worry about how outsiders are perceiving their creative works or if the works are authentic, innovative, or sufficiently vulnerable. This anxiety can tear an artist up inside, as Sophie knows well; thus, she reminds herself to "take a deep breath and *relax*. If you're truly dedicated to your craft, the work will be automatically imbued with your authentic self because *you* are writing and performing it! So, relax; it'll be okay." This vital element represents the cornerstone of Sophie's artistic philosophy that fuels her uphill climb towards sustainable success as a 21st century singer-songwriter.

Kyla

My identity as a singer-songwriter is my reason for being alive. It means everything to me. I guess that's why it feels so easy to talk about; because it's just who I am.

Context: A Singer-Songwriter Unfazed by Industry Standards or Commercial Success

My initial interview with Kyla lasted far longer than my conversations with any other participants, nearly 3 uninterrupted hours of dialogue about her choice to pursue the singer-songwriter profession and what perpetuates her motivation to continue this uphill climb.

Throughout our dynamic, subject-bouncing, and brutally honest conversation, Kyla explained how she considers her original repertoire within the “gothic folk singer-songwriter” genre, a relatively unknown classification. By the end of the interview, however, Kyla had explained by her sub-genre declaration and painted her portrait with a range of idiosyncratic details.

Kyla called for the interview from her rustic cabin home in Salem, New York, a 4-hour drive north from New York City. She explained that while she has technically lived in New York for 3 years, she has only been in Salem for 1 year, struggling to find her footing and a healthy emotional balance after living 2 years within the city limits: “My husband and I had to move up here because I just cannot handle the city; the energy is too frantic and overwhelming, and I just end up spiraling.” Salem offers a better fit for Kyla, with its quiet lake community and bucolic setting, verdant valleys and lush greenery—while also being not too far from the city: “It’s a great location, because I easily get to the city by train when I am up for handling it; only in small doses at this point, though.”

Despite such an ideal community to call home, Kyla’s only grievance was that “I’m very isolated; I really just don’t have any friends here. I mean, I have my husband, who is a musician too, so we play music together all the time, but overall, I haven’t been able to ‘tap’ into the

musician community around here, so that makes it tricky.” When feeling reclusive, Kyla reminds herself that the trade-off was worth it for her mental health: “I can at least enjoy some peace up here; something I could *never* say about living in New York City.”

Prior to the interview, Kyla had just emerged from her basement studio where she and her husband have been refining the master tracks of her upcoming LP. When discussing her underlying inspiration and intent for this new output of songs, Kyla described the collection as a concept album; while each individual track stands on its own. An underlying narrative thematic thread connects the disparate compositions so that, when the album is played in its entirety, a vivid original tale is told to the listener. Relying heavily on metaphorical interpretation, Kyla composed the LP in an emotionally cathartic release, providing her the ideal vehicle for artistically confronting repressed feelings associated with her experience as a victim of sexual assault by a boyfriend a decade before. “I really believed he was the love of my life,” Kyla described tentatively, adding how the shock of this traumatic event had haunted her for years until she finally consciously chose to address this weight on her psyche through her singer-songwriter artistry.

As Kyla expanded further on the conceptualization of this new record, she revealed that *all* of these extremely personal and revelatory insights about her horrifying sexual assault were also bluntly described in the album’s press release. In sharing such intimate details with public audiences via this album, Kyla evoked the same indispensable characteristics of the early singer-songwriters who helped bring this contemporary genre to mainstream notoriety decades ago. Akin to these pioneering solo artists, Kyla boldly wears her heart on her sleeve via musical artistry. Moreover, with this latest LP serving as testament, Kyla is not afraid to use her compositional acumen to communicate raw genuine emotion and lived experience, as disturbing

and shocking as it may be, to her listeners. For example, Kyla described how she has suffered from chronic depression almost her entire life, eventually being diagnosed with bipolar disorder several years ago. While a continually evolving cocktail of anti-psychotic medication and talk therapy has mitigated some of her symptoms from these various mental illnesses and trauma, music experience and songwriting have remained the only consistent occupations that have quieted the cacophony of voices in her mind, providing Kyla (if only, ephemeral) shelter from the storm always brewing in her psyche.

Learning about these salient aspects of Kyla's lifelong history of mental illness and emotional and physical trauma emphasizes the significance of why being a singer-songwriter is so meaningful to her personal identity and life purpose. Kyla simply *must* engage in singer-songwriter composition and performance to perpetuate her very existence, as the opening quote to this narrative supports. This is one of the distinguishing characteristics of her artistic identity and self-expression. Through music, Kyla found a reliable outlet to process her lifelong mental and emotional turmoil. This invaluable attribute of her singer-songwriter identity has helped her realize her artistic potential and, equally important, genuinely accept and appreciate her veritable human nature: imperfect, scarred, and resilient.

Of the five study participants, no one was as transparent and unafraid to reveal *everything* about their true self, blemishes and all, as Kyla was. She also repeatedly emphasized her existential *need* to be a singer-songwriter, declaring that she *never* chose this profession for its potential material success and commercial fame. Rather, Kyla is a professional singer-songwriter because it is the only vocation that feeds her soul and propels her forward when life caves in around her. Moreover, Kyla composes her repertoire and refines her artistic identity with definitive purpose. As her narrative discloses, nearly every song and album that Kyla has ever

released (five full-length LPs at the time of this study) features a unique theme, connection, and purpose, never betraying her dedication to genuine emotional expression and personal catharsis. While modest compared to other professional contemporary songwriters, Kyla's dedicated fan base of nearly 3,000 monthly Spotify listeners has steadily grown over the years, serving as additional evidence that curious ears are drawn to the palpable confessional nature embedded within each composition.

Kyla's Foundational Pillars for a Life Suffused with Art

The number of instruments that Kyla plays is impressive. Classically trained as a cellist (she took formal lessons at the amazing age of 3), Kyla is also a consummate vocalist with a unique operatic cadence, an adept guitarist across disparate styles, and a proficient upright bassist. Noticing a pattern as she lists off these instruments, Kyla wryly added, "I can pretty much navigate my way around any stringed instrument and get some music out of it." These days, Kyla composes almost exclusively on the guitar and omnichord, adding layer upon layer of ethereal haunting vocals via loop pedals. This range of talents begs the question: How did Kyla develop this unique musical ability, and why?

Well, both of my parents play music. While they were working their way through medical school (where they first met), my mother was also seriously pursuing opera as a vocalist, and she could play the violin. My father was more of an amateur, playing guitar in random bands to burn off steam.

Inevitably, Kyla's parents abandoned their fanciful artistic ambitions once they completed medical school—her mother a nurse and her father a neurosurgeon. In general, Kyla was reserved when discussing her parents, but she acknowledged how influential it was on her own artistic pursuits to have *both* parents be musically inclined. Kyla can still recall childhood memories of watching her parents play music together and hearing her mother's operatic voice resonate throughout their entire home whenever she showered. These impactful recollections of

early experiences with musical expression explain why she began playing cello formally at such a young age:

I remember attending one of my mom's opera performances, and I was entranced just looking at the orchestra pit and all the different instruments layered on top of each other; and I saw so many cellos and I was like, "Okay, I want to play that!" and...yeah, I was really annoying about it for a while and eventually, my parents relented and got me into the lessons.

Describing the intense rigor of this early instrument training, Kyla lamented how these private cello lessons occupied "the entirety of my life, basically" up until college. Although the austerity of the lessons and performances throughout secondary school exacted a toll on her mental health, Kyla nonetheless recognized how advantageous her classical instrument training was in helping her develop her own artistic identity. From performance, composition, and overall appreciation about musical instruments and arrangements, "those lessons taught me so much about music, and I certainly wouldn't be the composer I am today without them."

Ironically, though, when asked if she ever explored songwriting in earnest with her music teachers while growing up, Kyla emphatically shouted, "Oh, hell no! Songwriting is, like, this sacred thing for me, and I don't want *anyone* to fuck with what that I'm doing." She added that, even though she never received formal training specifically focused on music composition, "It's the only thing in my life that I truly feel confident about for some reason."

When asked how supportive her parents were of her ongoing musical pursuits through college, even briefly attending the Berkeley School of Music in Boston before dropping out, Kyla described a capricious degree of varying emotional encouragement from them:

It was kind of weird because, as I was studying cello growing up, they both kept saying what a famous cellist I was going to be one day, but then when I began focusing more on guitar and voice in college, they had kind of changed their tune and were like, "Oh no! What have we done! We created some unemployable arty-musician!"

Despite their personal passions for musical performance and composition, Kyla's parents inevitably shifted toward a more pragmatic career in medicine, and their commitment to musical artistry gradually dissipated—and so did their emotional support for Kyla's musical interests. Essentially, “My parents just changed their tune, and that actually lit a fire under my arse and made me want to keep playing music even more often!” Much to her pleasure and her parents' disappointment, Kyla defiantly declared to her parents after dropping out of college: “Folks, I'm a musician, and that's the thing that I'm doing with my life. That's all I got here.”

Kyla's Songwriting Process: An Evolving “Formula” with Malleable Parameters

Only after dropping out of college did Kyla dedicate her musical practice wholly to original composition, initially collaborating with other like-minded artists in a handful of local Massachusetts-based bands and bolstering her compositional prowess before eventually breaking out on her own solo venture into the imaginative unknown. Kyla's songwriting approach, even in its primordial attempts, was always suffused with purpose. She composes stories of emotional catharsis via idiosyncratic musical arrangements because it represents one of the few nonjudgmental and immediate cathartic outlets to untangle the emotionally complex layers of her mental health in a manner that she alone commands.

In describing her compositional methodology, Kyla emphasized how, throughout the duration of her singer-songwriter career thus far, she has discovered that every dive into a creative unknown is a unique experience, and she is never sure what musical artifact will surface. Kyla elaborated on the distinction between her works, depending on the concept she aims to capture: “It's always different, based on whatever feeling or experience I'm trying to convey, because I want to all fit together seamlessly.” In general, though, the genesis of most of her songs emerges from either “guitar or omnichord harmonic progressions on a loop, and then I'll

next attempt to layer vocal loops within those spaces.” As she is a multi-instrumentalist, Kyla’s approach to instrumentation and arrangement within her pieces is also extremely malleable: It “really depends on what vibe I’m going for. I know now that my choice of instrument in that moment of inspiration really can alter the piece,” sending it off in surprising directions.

Moreover, if any consistent “formula” is evident across her songwriting experiences, it is both the physical and mental space in which she must reside to connect authentically with whatever feeling or story she is trying to convey:

I need to start with feeling something, anything, *really* strongly, and then I need some safe physical space, like our attic, where I can go and not be disturbed. All the instruments are set up, and I enter that space and just sit down with that feeling, really letting it soak in.

By allowing herself the physical space and extended time to be viscerally present with the particular feeling or experience, Kyla can then communicate the scene in her mind via musical sounds. Once a reliable grounding element holds down the harmonic structure, often playing on continuously via her looper pedal, more melodies are layered on top, and, as she intently listens to the repeated sonic atmosphere, “that’s when I’ll sit down to write accompanying lyrics.”

Discussing these fundamental elements of her compositional approach in such vivid detail affords Kyla the opportunity to recognize potential obstacles that may impede her artistic maturation and evolution. “I’m a *very* impatient songwriter,” Kyla conceded, confirming that her need to quell quickly whatever mental anguish may be simmering inside her via songwriting sometimes results in a hastily conceived song that would likely benefit from revisions and constructive feedback from other musician confidants in her life. It is almost as if, once she has hurriedly recorded the voice memo and expelled the burden, she is reluctant to revisit the song because then she must revisit the negative feeling she was trying to purge in the first place.

Emotional Catharsis and Healing via Singer-Songwriter Artistry

As more layers fill out the canvas of Kyla's portrait, it becomes clear how she needs to always be engaged in songwriting because it represents a critical coping mechanism for safely navigating her mental illnesses to facilitate that necessary healing of emotional catharsis. To this end, literally every single, EP, or LP that Kyla has ever publicly released was conceived with a specific intention. For example, Kyla decided that her first singer-songwriter release should not be one album, but *four* distinct collections of songs all conceptually related to each other. Together, this four-album project conveyed the visceral experience of enduring a severe migraine. With each of the four albums tilted toward the progressive stages of a migraine headache, Kyla referred to the cumulative imaginative sonic experience of all four albums as "The Migraine in Four Parts." In the collection's press release, the four albums are described as "covering a variety of sonic worlds including ambient, electronic, doom metal, art pop, and freak folk in order to mirror the specific feelings of the different stages of a migraine."

How did Kyla conceive of such an esoteric topic to address as her singer-songwriter debut release? Characteristic of the singer-songwriter persona, the idea was born from personal experience:

My mom suffered from really bad migraines when I was a kid, and it was just awful to witness her suffering so often all the time, so as a teenager, I would stay up late and research what exactly is happening during a migraine, and that's how I stumbled upon these "four stages of the migraine" theory.

This theory is now widely accepted by the medical community today. Inspired by this illuminating discovery, Kyla was determined to write four albums, each one dedicated to conveying the tangible experience of specific symptoms from each stage of the migraine via sonic experimentation: "Each phase of the migraine has such a distinct character, so I knew that I needed four distinct sounding albums that capture the feeling each phase to tell my story."

Adding another layer of complexity to this collection's composition process was the fact that, while composing the albums. Kyla was first diagnosed with bipolar disorder, which, understandably, profoundly impacted her compositional focus and ability:

As I was writing these songs, I increasingly developed this paralyzing fear that *I* was going to be just like my mom and be plagued by these dreaded migraines for the rest of my life too. Add that to the bipolar diagnosis, along with the fact that I had also just learned that my uncle was a schizophrenic.... Well, I wasn't feeling too great about my genetic disposition at that time!

Essentially, Kyla had become entrapped by fear; like a tightening noose around her neck as panic and anxiety exponentially increased.

To her relief, however, by channeling this fear directly into the compositions of these four albums, Kyla found an outlet to work through her angst and dread, adopting an almost spiritual mindset: "I started to become more comfortable within my own identity, even as I was discovering how batshit crazy it was!" The composition process of these four albums occupied Kyla's creative space for the better part of 3 years, but reflecting on that experience now, she is grateful that she devoted such effort to creating a work that brought her solace, peace, and understanding during such a challenging period in her family's life.

Kyla spiraled into a deeper depression following the release of the Migraine Series, even though it was critically well received by independent labels and listeners alike. She eventually realized that the healing catharsis she began to feel from composing the Migraine Series needed to be explored further so she could healthily process and purge feelings of guilt and shame associated with the trauma of being raped at the age of 19 by someone she had believed would care for and protect her. This is when she conceived of her follow-up record. With a tone of defiant confidence, Kyla described the writing process of this album as tremendously beneficial

to her mental well-being, fashioning a path towards acceptance and self-reconciliation of an experience that she had buried in her psyche for almost a decade.

After avoiding this subject in her compositions for nearly 10 years, Kyla realized that banishing this trauma, which was now becoming the sad essence of her personal identity, needed to address the mental wounds via the only effective therapeutic practice she had: song composition. Kyla expressed her gratitude for taking such a brazen, psychologically terrifying, creative leap. By confronting these past traumas head on with this new material, Kyla could ultimately compartmentalize her trauma and process it in a restorative, cathartic manner.

When the album's production was completed in early 2024, Kyla was so proud of her creative moxie and the results it yielded with these new songs that she invested a considerable amount of her own savings to produce vinyl copies of the album. She wanted vinyl so she could literally hold the tangible manifestation of her efforts:

I wanted to be able to hold something physical, so I could actually see the experience was now finally outside of my own rattled mind. It felt so cool to be able to embrace a physical form of this compartmentalized trauma as if it was a sliver of one of those scarred maple trees.

Reflecting on the immensely cathartic and purging experience of recording of the album, Kyla described how the album now serves as an enduring reminder that, “even in my darkest moments, there is beauty waiting to be uncovered in the spirit of perseverance.”

Why Kyla Continues Her Artistic Journey, and What Lies Ahead

Kyla continues to pursue recognition as a professional singer-songwriter because she simply *needs* to engage in artistic creation daily in order to balance out the wearied, vexing emotions that continually weigh on her psyche. Kyla's description of this need suggests that this vocation is as elemental to her survival as food and water. To this end, Kyla noted that she actually debates this exact topic with her musician husband nearly every day:

Both of us are struggling to turn this passion that we share into an actually sustainable profession, and it always leads to the same prosaic existential bullshit questions, like, “Why am I alive and why am I still doing this? How do I find fulfillment as an artist or measure my success?” Personally, I feel like I’m still working out the answers to these questions, and once I do, I think I’ll be able to answer yours!

Regarding future singer-songwriter endeavors that she is considering now that the album is being publicly released, Kyla quickly answered while laughing, “Jesus, I just want to write a lighthearted song one of these days! Everything I create is so emotionally, just, fucking heavy. So, yeah, I’ll write something like a Carly Rae Jepsen tune, rake in millions in royalties, and take it from there.” Kyla envisioned her next album as conveying a new perspective of her personality that she has yet to share with her fanbase:

I want to show everyone that I’m not defined exclusively by my mental illness and past trauma with this next album. I want it to sound fun and actually have songs that you could maybe even dance to! I want to try my hand at writing frivolous pop songs, because, why the hell not? It’ll be a fun challenge.

Until she writes that chart-topping generic pop tune, Kyla will continue promoting her new album on her own while pitching it to every independent record label she encounters. In between these pursuits, Kyla disclosed that she does in fact enjoy her day job that pays the bills on her rustic cabin because she can be outside on most days: “I’m a gardener, actually, and I purposefully arranged my life in a way that is pragmatic and freeing at the same time.” Kyla admitted, though, that it has taken much effort to reach this balance of “how do I make *just* enough money to pay the rent and still have the sufficient time to practice and write.”

Describing a typical workday, Kyla detailed how she gardens from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m., while she works on the musical project of the moment from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. every day. Her need to maintain this daily musical practice routine balances her mental mindset and gives it purpose. She did concede that as wonderful as this daily schedule sounds, it may not be sustainable, and she is starkly reminded of that every day:

It is a bit of a fantasy life. I don't make a lot of money, and that is really stressful, both personally and in my marriage. Sometimes I even wonder about the 9-to-5 life, thinking how nice it must be to have a decent, reliable paycheck and health insurance and all the good stuff, but I then knock myself back to reality, knowing that such a life would prevent me from pursuing my original music with the effort I put into it currently.

“Adulthood” is hard, Kyla lamented, adding that she has realized over the past few years there is always a trade-off in life, and perhaps no one is ever wholly satisfied with their choices. As Kyla's lived experience portrait exemplified, her singer-songwriter identity has perpetuated her very existence, affording her no option but to continue pursuing this unique vocation with passion and determination. Moreover, her musical history reveals an unambiguous, insatiable *necessity* to continue her musical pursuits, if for no other reason than the healing emotional catharsis they afford her. As Kyla slowly heals from past trauma and reconciles the contentious inner voices of mental illness, singer-songwriter composition and performance will always serve as her life preserver when life seems to spin out of control. The looper pedal Kyla loves so much will remain idle under her heel, emitting a hum of static electricity until Kyla readies to step down on it again and compose her next sonic landscape.

Dylan

I'm always trying to find sounds that fit with the pictures in my head.

Context: A Nomad's Life

When he phoned me for his first interview, Dylan spoke in a reserved whispering tone, explaining he was calling from his mother's kitchen in Boulder, Colorado, and did not want to wake her. He has been living with mom for the past 7 weeks, and while grateful for the hospitality, he already realized she was not a morning person—hence the whisper.

Dylan is the lead singer of a wildly popular, genre-bending “future folk” musical group that boasts a dedicated fan base of nearly 500,000 monthly Spotify listeners and has regularly

performed at 20,000-seat venues spanning five continents. At the time of the interview, Dylan was personifying the paradoxical existence of the 21st century independent musical artist: one who achieves that elusive “rock star eminence” while also being unable to afford a place to call home. “Well, my band is in between tours and recording sessions now, so mom let me crash with her for a bit.... I’ll probably hop back in the van next week and find another spot.” The “van” Dylan referred to is not just a means of transportation; when necessary, it is his residence. “A queen mattress fits perfectly in the back,” Dylan quipped with a smile, and added, “What can I tell you, my dude? I am living the nomad life, and I love it!”

This somewhat surreal early morning call with Dylan offered a cursory yet intriguing, glimpse into his lived experience as a professional singer-songwriter. He is a 45-year-old singer-guitarist currently killing time in between tours and recording sessions with his band; more curiously, he does not own a computer in 2024 or a permanent home yet is totally unperturbed by any of it. Throughout his decades as a touring musician, he has accrued a rolodex of supportive and hospitable friends and family across the country who will happily host him. Wherever he is, he is confident about finding a comfortable bed somewhere. It becomes increasingly clear that Dylan has *chosen* this nomadic lifestyle, and his cadence exudes a true sense of tranquility and contentment. He feels satisfied that he is meant to be at this exact moment in his life.

By about 20 years, Dylan was the oldest of this study’s five participants. His most recent musical project that he helped form and was primary songwriter for is the most successful artistic venture in his nearly 3 decades of work in the music industry. The group has received the adulation of thousands of fans since its inception 3 years ago. His music has been featured in multiple mainstream films and television programs, and he has performed in months-long, globe-spanning tours at renowned sold-out locales such as Coachella and Red Rocks (their most recent

overseas tour concluded with a headlining performance at the Envision Festival in Costa Rica before 11,000 adoring fans), Dylan is finally enjoying the (clearly, non-monetary) spoils culminating from a lifetime of fervent dedication to his artistry.

Based even on this cursory glimpse of his lived experience, it is obvious that several crucial elements distinguish Dylan from the other participants in this study. Aside from his older and the fact that, by some assessments, he may no longer be considered an “emerging” artist (performance before 11,000 people may validate that he has “made it” in this industry), Dylan was actually hesitant to align himself with the singer-songwriter persona exclusively. He emphasized how the singer-songwriter identity has never truly resonated with him, despite being the sole composer of a number of works released under various monikers and by different musical groups over the years. Moreover, his songs exude an undeniably confessional essence that defines the singer-songwriter repertoire. Why, then, does Dylan try to eschew an association with singer-songwriter artistry?

The Nomadic Musician-Preacher: An Artistic Identity Shaped by Difficulty

Given his admitted hesitation to regard himself as a singer-songwriter, he offered to clarify his commentary. Dylan has always perceived of the “singer-songwriter” as an artist who composes in isolation almost exclusively and prefers to perform solo versus with a band. Such a solitary relationship with music experience simply does not “jive” with his artistic principles and the primary reason he developed a passion for music in the first place. For Dylan, musical expression is not an insulated experience but a communal one. The genuine beauty of music, and its boundless potential for fostering creative and affecting meaning in life, can only be revealed in the context of a shared performative listening experience with other souls. Thus, while Dylan appreciates the cathartic and confessional attributes of singer-songwriter artistry, he prefers to

share the experience in the company of others. At this juncture, Dylan introduced his artistic conception of being a “musical preacher” of sorts for his “congregation,” similar to the vital role that music plays in religious settings as the “glue” that brings people together in shared cathartic exultation. During the interview, Dylan repeatedly referred to his “preacher” persona, expanding on the concept with glee as described the inexplicable “energy of love and community” that is created via shared musical experiences.

Expanding on his infatuation for this congregational aspect of music, Dylan admitted that he only needs to stand in front of a crowd, just like a preacher, for his musical efforts to evoke genuine meaning (both for him and his audience). At the same time, Dylan acknowledged that he generally chooses to compose repertoire alone (an essential characteristic of any singer-songwriter), but he prefers to do the arranging and performing of the music as a community or “as a family.” Having clarified his meaning, Dylan proceeded to describe how he came to develop his sense of joy through musical express.

An Unconventional Path Towards Musical Acumen: Family, Isolation, Tragedy

Dylan grew up in a small Iowa town with a population of just over 2,000 people. Describing his childhood there, he used the word “isolating” often as he recounted his first interactions with music. Dylan has no memory of his biological father and referred to the man his mother married as the only paternal figure he and his sister had growing up. Though technically his stepfather, Dylan referred to him as “Dad,” emphasizing the tremendous musical influence he exerted on Dylan’s relationship with the artform. An accomplished musician in his own right, Dad was a tremendously versatile pianist, and Dylan recalled how much he loved watching him play the ivories, often with friends who came over and joined in a “jamboree” of

sorts. Describing his household as “extremely musical,” Dylan highlighted how songs were always sung throughout the home at all hours of the day.

Living in such an artistic environment where musician friends of his parents would visit, Dylan began developing his unique conceptualization of musical experiences, reveling in the palpable “energy gathering,” as he referred to it, conveyed through communal performance. Furthermore, since his mother was always singing “some diddy or other phrase on repeat” and his Dad was often at the piano, Dylan was not surprised that he and his sister developed a love for music early in life. This passion was reinforced by weekly visits to the local nursing home where his mother took both children throughout their childhood. As their mother passed out biblical pamphlets, Dylan and his sister smilingly entertained the assisted-living residents with a capella renditions of standard tunes and harmonies. At these moments, Dylan realized his singing voice was his true primary instrument. He loved to sing and in any context—harmonizing with his sister, improvising melodic fragments, or singing along to his Dad’s piano.

To this end, Dylan took up the guitar lessons at age 7 so he could eventually accompany his strengthening singing voice, but the private lessons had little influence on his instrumental development because he never connected with his instructor. After a year, he stopped attending the lessons as he found that he learned more musically just by watching and playing along with his father. While learning musical ability in a very unstructured and informal way, Dylan could not help but experience a tangible “musical energy” flowing through the house every time he sat next to his dad at the piano. Thanks to this unconventional approach to instrumental learning, Dylan fell in love with the unadulterated “mood” fostered during musical performance; he noted, that “mood has always been a spiritual thing for me; it allowed me to find a balance in my body when singing, and I couldn’t help but feel this spiritual undertone all the time.”

Elaborating further on these almost indescribable feelings, Dylan described his underlying motivation as he grew up:

It was as if I was seeking this balance of communication within myself...you know? It always came from a place of wanting to get my own songs across, so I eventually picked up the guitar again and used it just to support my singing voice, which was the primary vehicle for my artistic expression.

He added that, while he revisited the guitar with a strictly self-taught mindset, he also took formal voice lessons in high school, which he credited as having a modicum of influence on the unique quality of his vocal approach. Motivated to revisit the guitar again and begin writing his own songs, Dylan wryly added, “I was just about to turn 14, so I gotta admit to you: I really also did pick up the guitar again so I could impress chicks!”

His congenial mood turned starkly serious as Dylan progressed through memories of his teenage years. Initially hesitant, Dylan eventually summoned the composure to reveal that, when he was just 15 years old, he was involved in a tragic car accident with Dad. While Dylan escaped the mangled wreck of metal and glass relatively unscathed, his stepfather succumbed to his injuries the following day. The solemn mood lingered for several minutes as Dylan became lost in the memory of this tragedy, and then said nothing more about it.

Early Days of Performance and a New Voice

While losing his beloved Dad in such a violent way exacted an enormous emotional toll on Dylan’s mental well-being, the fateful accident also became the primary impetus to devote himself wholly to music composition and performance: “It was after his death that I really when dove headfirst into performing. Grunge was becoming so popular at that time, and it was the perfect remedy for how shitty I was feeling.” That emotional relief of “literally screaming into these disgusting microphones at biker bars and random basement shows” helped Dylan cope with his unbearable grief. Not surprisingly, it was also around this time when Dylan turned to

writing poetry, which eventually formed the bones of later compositions, along with developing a pernicious affinity for alcohol and illicit drugs. Essentially, with this “soup of booze, women, drugs, and grief that kick-started my songwriting endeavors,...looking back, I definitely went overboard...”

Without the aid of professional grief counselors (his mother was too devastated to focus on caring for her son), this dangerous cocktail of substance abuse combined with the highs derived from raucous live performances represented the only coping mechanisms Dylan possessed to process the trauma. The one silver lining that emerged from this dark period in his life was the love of live performance. Dylan poured his grief into dented microphones in unsavory performance spaces: “As I did with the drugs and booze, I got hooked on gigging. I just loved this energy of worship that the experience created.”

With growing audiences actually listening to his strengthening and more confident voice—a combination of unique inflection and raspy Rod Stewart-esque vocal cadence, Dylan definitively realized the potential that singing could wield:

[My voice] started to feel like this powerful tool that I had wielded myself, and the fact that I command a room’s attention with it was even more intriguing...I would write a song, my friends would actually sing along! I know that doesn’t happen to everybody who tries their hand at this game, but I’m humbled that it happened for me from the very beginning, almost instantaneously.

Dylan’s Songwriting Process: What It Needs, How It Has Changed, Where It Is Going

When asked what a “typical” songwriting experience resembles for him these days, Dylan sidestepped the question and recalled an influential memory of witnessing his Dad work on an original song for months: “I was in awe, because he was so meticulous about this *one* tune, to make it perfect, and I always thought that was interesting because I could never reach his skill level...but he always was so encouraging whenever I tried to emulate him.” This single memory

of witnessing a methodical compositional approach has served as Dylan's primary source for his own songwriting inspiration to this day. When asked if he holds himself to similar standards as his Dad did, Dylan admitted that his personal process deviates slightly. He strives to maintain a degree of mental repose when writing his own material, refusing to chide himself if he does not meet a quota of original tunes within an arbitrarily decreed amount of time. Rather, for Dylan, what is most important to his songwriting acumen is his ability to "live my life in flow."

Dylan quickly clarified: By living in "flow," he was referring to this ideal of living in the present moment as much as possible; free from regrets about the past or worries about the future. As long as he maintains this "flow" state, the music "just comes out of me...and after doing this for decades at this point, I realized that the music is always just there, waiting for me. All I have to do is listen closely and write it down." Dylan jumped to add:

Yes, yes, I have always noticed that distinction between me and my dad.... His approach was much more mathematical, and for me, songwriting has always just felt like another manner of preaching; of saying things with conviction as they come to me, rather than me chasing it.

Recalling a recent extremely advantageous compositional experience which had yielded almost an entire album's worth of original material, Dylan discussed a solo trip to the California redwood forest he took the previous year. Equipped with only his thoughts, an acoustic guitar, and his reliable van, Dylan stayed in the forest alone for nearly a month with no connection to the civilized world. During this sojourn, Dylan adopted a process that was more methodical than at any other point in his songwriting career:

Every morning, I would lay there on the ground and just hum to myself without any idea or anything like that. Eventually, I'd just press record on my voice memo app and see what happens. Then, every night, I'd listen to the voice memos from that day and write down any good ideas that were buried there. Some evenings, I wrote down pages of ideas, and other nights, nothing.

Dylan added that, throughout this deeply enlightening trip, he never forced himself to just “sit and write.... I knew already that that approach leads me nowhere, to just put that immense pressure on yourself.” Rather, he approached each potential song idea as if it were a living, breathing thing: “I’d just let it grow like an organism, and instead of obsessively straining to tell the song what to do, what direction to go in, et cetera, I instead let the song tell me where to guide it, wherever it wanted to go.” This brilliantly innovative mindset about composition facilitated a fresh creative methodology that not only yielded dozens of songs, but “just became part of my musical practice, even after leaving the forest. Every morning, first thing I do before anything is have a cup of coffee mind roam for an hour or so, letting it travel wherever it wants to that day.”

If inspiration happens to strike, Dylan grabs his voice recorder to capture any morsel of melody or lyric that might initiate something special. He admitted that this almost meditative process was *definitely* easier to achieve alone in the redwood forest. However, he also noted that his most significant breakthrough in this evolution of his compositional approach was his newfound appreciation for time when composing—to be unencumbered by deadlines or appointments, and just having time to think.

I think it’s *so* important allow yourself that space to write...*that* is the epitome of creativity...and whatever art emerges from the time represents the difference between people noticing versus you trying to steer a ship that’s almost unsteerable (i.e., dictating the song’s path)...you’re following the ship instead of the ship following you...but, *time*. You can only get to this mental place if you give yourself the time.

Songwriting as Catharsis, Evolved: Listen to Your Muse!

Dylan’s lived experience narrative revealed the powerfully healing cathartic mental relief that music composition can provide, epitomized by his own profound grieving process after his Dad died. Even though decades have passed since that accident, Dylan continues to experience

the same solace and emotional catharsis when he composes today? “Oh, totally, without a doubt!” He described how he attempted to achieve those stereotypical “rock star dreams” while living in New York City from 2014 to 2019. Instead of finding tangible success, despite performing in multiple rock groups during this time, Dylan ended up developing an acute panic attack disorder as his drinking and drug use essentially controlled his life: “Those last few months in NYC were such an awful blur, I don’t even want to remember, and I’m thankful I don’t.”

Luckily, Dylan’s sister drove to New York and pulled him out of the drug-filled environment that would likely have killed him if he had stayed. Back in North Carolina at his sister’s house, Dylan committed himself to sobriety—not an easy task:

I remember, when I got to my sister’s house, I was so thankful that she rescued me, but then I proceeded to just outright *sob* for a month straight, not even knowing why I was crying so hard for so long. I was 40 years old at this point, and I had a real decision to make. I didn’t know what else to do with my life, because, frankly, I had done nothing but music up until now.

Several weeks later, as the toxins left his system, Dylan reached an epiphany: “I am going to just concentrate on...not necessarily being a ‘singer-songwriter’ or a ‘rock star’ per se, but I’m gonna concentrate on ‘the art of writing songs.’” After a month of this focused practice, his music composition ability returned, and in a “very pleasurable way, as if the universe really supported my decision.” Whether the universe did indeed collaborate is not entirely clear, but Dylan called this time his “reckoning,” and more and more opportunities suddenly appeared for him. Most significantly, his good friend David Bock (who is also a member of Dylan’s current musical project) invited him to live together in Santa Cruz, California with another musician friend. Dylan regarded this invitation as sent directly by the universe and could not ignore it. He moved

to California a week later, bought that reliable and cherished van, and began conceiving what would become his current (and, very successful) musical project with his new roommates.

Clean and sober, as were his roommates, Dylan started doing yoga and meditation each morning, followed by a bike ride through the same redwood forest that eventually was the location of Dylan's aforementioned song cycle breakthrough a few years later. At this professional juncture, Dylan began listening for what he called his Muse: "She just started showing up in the forest every day with me, and it sounds ridiculous, but this muse helped remind me that my artistic potential wasn't empty; it was actually brimming over the top!" From here, Dylan's writing approach became more natural; instead of chasing a song morsel or steering a unsteerable ship, he simply waited for his muse—and she always arrived, as long as he demonstrated the patience to wait as long as necessary.

Dylan's Philosophy on the Spiritual Value of Genuine Musical Experiences

Dylan's lived experience narrative is far from finished, especially with his latest musical project, just beginning to reach worldwide notoriety. However, one aspect of Dylan's approach to music has not changed over the years. He remains steadfast in believing music is best appreciated as a shared, communal experience, and he preaches this belief every time he walks out on stage to face thousands of fans or traverse the fertile terrain of the redwood forest. At his mature age, he no longer seeks validation from others or material "rockstar" status. Instead, each morning, as he completes his coffee and meditation and seeks

the thing that makes me happy. And from the beginning, for me at least, that search has always centered on the vibe that you discover as an artist; and to ensure that be the most beautiful experience you surround yourself and loved ones within.

Suffused within Dylan's musical (and life) philosophy is his distinct conviction that spirituality and music experience are inextricably tied together. Eschewing the dogma of any

particular organized religion, Dylan simply holds onto the faith that he will continue to write and share musical works as long as he remains present in life:

Songwriting is just the most interesting artform to me. You can't actually tangibly hold a song as if you could with a piece of art or a book, and that's what separates it, and what makes it such a rewarding artform. It's not a product that I'm creating, but more like a spiritual pursuit.

Dylan astutely concluded the interview with the revelation that just because one is a good musician does not translate into one is a good songwriter: "Listen, I'm around great musicians all the time, but half of them can't write for shit! Because it's not a musical thing; it's more akin to a spiritual practice." Furthermore, by being present within any given and releasing the worries of the future and the ghosts of the past, one can recognize the present more clearly than ever before. As Dylan summed it up, "look for things that make you pay attention to life, whether that's a butterfly on a flower or something else.

While not conspicuous to the eye, Dylan's sources of inspiration and beauty appear before him and help him think:

Oh, man. I'm doing this crazy thing called life, and *that* is what songs are capable of at their best. Those are the songs that appeal to me. Those are the songs that I want to write; the ones that you can't outrun, because there is no way to outsmart a great tune, you know what I mean?

With perfect timing at the end of the interview, Dylan's mom emerged from her slumber, and he rushed to hang up as her footsteps approached. Had he stayed on, he would have realized how his nomadic memories had helped me embrace his melodic sermon, as it would anyone whose heart and mind were open to its potential.

Chapter 5: STUDY FINDINGS, PART 2

In this chapter, I present findings from the secondary Video-Stimulated Recall Interviews (VSRI) conducted with each of the five participants. In contrast to the narrative configuration research approach utilized to provide individual portraits of the singer-songwriters' lived experiences in Chapter 4, the qualitative data gleaned from the VSRI enhanced these lived experiences. This was a necessary step towards more thoroughly comprehending the elemental phenomena within this distinct class of contemporary composers. Looking at these data through various lenses revealed the underlying phenomena of the emerging singer-songwriters and captured fundamental aspects that constitute this class of contemporary composers.

The Advantageous Potential of VSRI

While Chapter 4 presented story-like narratives documenting each participant's lived experiences as a singer-songwriter, this chapter presents the data through a series of distinct thematic categories that have naturally emerged from analysis using this unique research protocol. In tandem with the portraits presented in Chapter 4, the yield from the VSRI offers potentially rewarding realizations that are discussed and analyzed via phenomenological theme discovery. Ideally, the VSRI provide additional germane details of the contemporary singer-songwriters' lived experiences, further illuminating any underlying phenomena that may be shared among these five musicians.

Overall, conducting these VSRI was akin to a real-time experiential journey for me and each participant, and neither of us was completely sure of where the path would lead. Therefore, because of this marked distinction between how the initial interviews were conducted compared to the VSRI experience, I embraced a disparate and appropriate data presentation methodology

that reflected the illuminating revelations yielded from this somewhat unconventional approach to qualitative interviews.

Anticipated Goals

While the general protocol for conducting VSRI in a qualitative research inquiry was discussed in detail in Chapter 3, I present a brief recap now of critical steps necessary for the successful execution of this esoteric interview approach.

To implement the VSRI protocol successfully, I asked all five participants to provide me with a video recording of a recent (within 1 year) performance at least 2 weeks prior to their VSRI, as I needed time to analyze the performance myself and design a list of distinct observations and performer attributes that would shape participant-specific questions. These attributes included but were not limited to performer eccentricities, audience reactions, and performer-audience dialogic interplay. I would then use these observations as a “jumping off” point for our dialogues during the VSRI itself. Furthermore, at the beginning of every VSRI interview, each participant was provided “co-host” status on Zoom, which enabled them to control video playback and reinforce my concerted effort to help the participant derive an equitable sense of influence and power as a researcher. Thus, the participant could decide what clips we watched together during the interview and could stop, pause, fast forward, or rewind the video at their discretion.

Based on the interviewee’s time availability, we watched two or three clips from each performance before engaging in a general conversation about their opinions on performing original repertoire before a live audience. Usually during this secondary section of the interview, I noted some of the participant’s unique elements observed when I watched the videos prior to our interview. Utilizing this combination of a structured and more colloquial style for the

participant-researcher conversation, I intended to create a comfortable, nonjudgmental interview environment similar to the relaxed, unpretentious, yet candid rapport achieved during our initial dialogues.

Utilizing the VSRI methodology, I intended to ascertain how the five participants genuinely perceive live performance and determine the degree of influence it exerts on their artistic identity and purpose. Moreover, an ancillary research goal here was to garner the participants' candid opinion of their engagement with VSR and whether they considered this cooperative viewing experience constructive in facilitating novel insights that may advance their musical performance acumen.

Furthermore, the consummate goal of incorporating VSRI into my research protocol was to uphold a more holistic understanding of these five contemporary singer-songwriters' respective lived experiences which, in turn, were meant to facilitate the discovery of common phenomena existing in this distinct class of contemporary composers. The following sections present anecdotal evidence from the five participants who engaged in VSRI to illuminate whether live performance played an influential role in the singer-songwriter's lived experience and if it contributed to a personal realization of the two pillars of this study's theoretical framework: self-actualization and authentic artistry.

VSR Category #1: Perception of Live Performance and Its Value

Overall, do the participants enjoy performing their original music in front of a live audience, or do they regard it as an inconvenient, yet necessary, chore for the 21st century independent musician if they are to realize tangible success as a professional singer-songwriter?

The following VSRI excerpts from my participants addressed this question directly. Just as every participant conveyed a unique perspective on their musical and songwriting

development and artistic inspirations in Chapter 4, their VSR interviews also yielded a wide variety of opinions on live performance and how it influences the singer-songwriter's lived experience.

The Chapter 4 narratives underscored how each singer-songwriter approaches their artistry individualistically because uniquely personal life events have inspired their decision to embrace this particular vocation and impacted the repertoire they create as well as how they convey that creation in a live performance setting. Thus, it was not surprising to realize that, based on my personal observations of the live performance recordings and subsequent VSRI, every musician participant uses live performance to distinguish their artistic identity in a disparate manner. This realization was particularly significant as the participants and I watched the recordings and witnessed how each musician adopted a unique "stage persona" when performing in front of a live audience.

As I combed through the hours of recorded performances from our five participants and discussed my observations with them during their VSRI, it also became abundantly clear that each participant held a personally distinctive perspective of the act of live performance in general: from attributes as minor as wardrobe decisions, stage lighting, and the intensity of stomping their feet onstage without distracting the audience; to more significant performative elements such as repertoire choices and setlist order, communicating a song's personal significance to an unfamiliar, occasionally skeptical crowd, and the degree of audience-performer interaction needed to enrapt everyone in the room for the whole show.

These varied concerns regarding live performance led us to wonder together: Can the singer-songwriter exude affecting artistry merely through eye contact with audience members? Do they need a rehearsed collection of droll anecdotes for the audience while tuning instruments

between songs? Do they need to engage in “playful banter” with the audience throughout the set? Most significantly, how much do they genuinely enjoy performing their original material for a live audience, especially when their repertoire is often lined with deeply sensitive and confessional elements, as expected of this genre? In general, do the participants walk off stage filled with jubilation or fraught with self-doubt after a performance? These sweeping inquiries represent a fraction of the many illuminating topics that emerged from our VSRI. As the following sections reveal, nearly every participant held an emphatic opinion on each point.

For clarity, in each participant’s section, I provide the specific performance context (venue name and location, audience attendance metrics, song titles, date of performance) of the recorded excerpts, followed by a discussion of insights culled from our commentary.

Helen

During my VSR Interview with Helen, we viewed performance excerpts from two different shows that occurred over the previous year. The first clip featured a song from her latest LP and was filmed at an intimately sized 150-person capacity performance venue, C’mon Everybody, located in Brooklyn, New York, in February of 2024. The second performance excerpt took place at a Sofar Sounds¹ gig at an undisclosed location on the Lower East Side of New York City in September of 2023.

During our interview, before we began watching these performance excerpts or asked a single question, Helen initiated our dialogue with musings about her excitement for this second interview, especially because of its focus on live performance. She described how it took several years of practice and stage presence development to feel as comfortable on stage as she currently

¹ Sofar Sounds is a music events company that hosts intimate concerts in unique spaces. Each show is typically small, with three diverse acts and no headliner (<https://www.sofarsounds.com/about>).

does. She attributed this to the fact that, before embarking on her singer-songwriter project in earnest, she had played with so many regional touring bands whenever the opportunity arose, and only because of this relentless schedule of 25 shows a month did she realize live music performance stands in a category of its own, completely unique in purpose and execution from her recorded repertoire.

Because of this distinction, live performance requires continual refinement and maturation, regardless of years spent playing in front of audiences. Helen emphasized how it was only because of these years of frequent touring that she finally “cracked the code” for what a good concert should constitute:

A good, I mean, really good, attention-grabbing, “can’t take your eyes off the stage for even a moment” kind of concert is more like a piece of theater than anything else. You want to tell a story with your concert, just as you would in musical theater. That’s how you grab an audience’s attention, and I love the experience so much when everything clicks and I get them wrapped around my finger, waiting to hear what happens next in the story.

Moreover, Helen regarded live performance as an absolute necessity for her meticulously curated artistic image as well as an invaluable resource for her personal confidence and identity development. From Helen’s perspective, live performance creates a unique opportunity to connect meaningfully with an audience in an even more visceral and lasting manner than her recordings could ever manifest. To this point, Helen returned once more to her love of musical theater and its profound influence on her approach to live performance, noting how she loves the experience of feeling “a story within the concert, whether or not there’s really a tangible conversation between the performer and the audience.” This anecdotal evidence from Helen’s VSRI demonstrated her genuine appreciation for live performance and how significant she considers it as a defining characteristic of her singer-songwriter identity and ambition.

Matthew

Offering a slightly more equivocal opinion on the matter, Matthew revealed during his VSRI that, because of the complex piano and vocal arrangements of his singer-songwriter repertoire, performing live can occasionally feel more like an albatross rather than the unadulterated joyful experience Helen described. Nonetheless, Matthew still recognized the value of live performance as a vehicle for demonstrating his creative prowess as a musical artist and the diversity of his original material. Generally, he uses live performance to show his fanbase that he is not a prototypical singer-songwriter, and he takes advantage of every setlist to emphasize this point by seamlessly incorporating his singer-songwriter and musical theater repertoire into one cohesive and engaging performance.

Matthew added that, because he is a solo performer, and thus does not need to coordinate setlists and arrangements with ancillary band members, he is free to take his live show in various directions with every performance. This is pointedly exemplified in the performance recording he provided for the VSRI. During his October 2023 set at an intimate acoustic venue, Rockwood Music Hall, located in the East Village of New York City, Matthew bounced from the piano to the ukulele multiple times, exhibiting the multi-genre approach of his artistry that he believes facilitates his distinction in an already crowded contemporary music genre. In particular, he loved each time he played a song requiring the ukulele because it freed him from the “shackles” of the piano bench and iPad sheet music application. When playing songs that only require the ukulele to accompany his voice, he can soak in the cathartic joy of live performance with an appreciative crowd. Discussing the performance further, Matthew added:

I felt really connected to the songs that night, especially the ukulele ones. I don't have to worry about reading sheet music as I do with my piano-focused repertoire, and I think that's a valuable aspect of live performance, as it allows me to focus on the experience of the moment without nuisance distractions.

When performing these specific songs, Matthew captures that exuberant, yet fleeting, feeling of shared emotionally affecting musical experience with his listeners, allowing him to bond seamlessly with his subtle vocal inflections, instrument dynamics, lyrical content, and the overall atmosphere of the performance space. Most importantly for Matthew, these performance instances afford him an invaluable opportunity to make eye contact with the audience and forge a connection during the song's duration. As he elaborated on how it feels when he is on stage with only his ukulele: Matthew described the relief and contentment of not having to “worry about music theory and what needs to be there for the harmonic pull. I just think about what sounds good.” While he emphasized he holds no disdain for the piano-focused repertoire of his live performance—after all, it is still his primary and most comfortable instrument—the ukulele-composed songs allow him to soak more easily into ideal sensations of live performance, suffused with creative musicality and audience engagement.

Kyla

For our VSRI, Kyla shared a video recording of her August 2023 performance at The Rockwell, a 203-seat capacity multi-use venue in Somerville, Massachusetts. Before we watched her selected excerpts, Kyla expressed an ambiguity, similar to Matthew's, when asked about her perspective on the significance of live performance within the context of her artistic intent. Kyla seized the opportunity to lament how she has always had an eccentric relationship with live performance, for as long as she can remember. Kyla attributed this strong conviction to live performance to the deleterious effects of a relentless classical cello performance schedule that her parents “strongly encouraged” throughout childhood. Recalling memories from even 7 years of age, Kyla described how peers often criticized her for the “weird” faces she made when performing classical repertoire onstage, leading to an unhealthy focus on her fragile self-image and confidence as a young musician. These feelings of self-doubt were exacerbated by classical

band teachers who enforced this “perfectionism mindset being a cellist,” which inevitably resulted in her coming to dread any classical performance with the instrument.

This apprehension towards live performance carried into her adult years, even after Kyla eliminated classical cello training from her musical ambitions, but it still took years to shake the self-deprecating sentiments of “I’m not good enough,” even when performing original material with only her guitar and voice. While she has overall defeated this pernicious mindset when performing original repertoire today, Kyla admitted that she still can fall into a trap of nerves and tension before a performance, plagued by deep-seated fears derived from childhood classical cello performance competitions where she would miss a beat here, a punctuation there, and fall apart in front of an unforgiving audience.

Thankfully, Kyla acknowledged that, despite the trauma endured from years of imposed classical performances, she has finally come to appreciate the naturally derived joy of live performance, much as Matthew and Helen espoused about the unknown excitement that can be born from sharing one’s art with a roomful of engaged listeners. Kyla also candidly pointed out that the number of gigs when she genuinely experiences the “ecstasy of live performance” is few and far between:

It’s incredibly hard to perform; I have to take beta blockers, et cetera, just to keep my shit together...but those rare times when I feel that ecstasy on stage...it’s worth it because I feel like I did something important. People actually listened to what I had to say, and because of that payoff, I keep performing, even though it’s so difficult for me to do.

Despite her reservations about live performance, Kyla recognized how that “ecstasy” derived from sharing her art with others is a special experience that is hard to replicate in almost any other profession: “In my mind, I ideally attempt to think about it as this one-of-a-kind ritual that we’re all a part of.” Further, Kyla relishes the sense of control and authority she feels when

performing: “It’s like I gain this ‘artist superpower’ when I’m up there, and I get to cast a ‘spell’ on everyone in the room. It’s a power trip, for sure, but it’s pretty cool.”

Even with all her doubts and struggles pertaining to live performance, Kyla declared that the performance recording she provided for the VSRI is one she is proud of and attributes this satisfaction to the fact that she prepared “a lot” for this performance. Admitting that she does not consistently rehearse enough before shows, Kyla described this specific gig as a “turning point” in her career because she realized that only because of endless hours spent refining her setlist and running it over repeatedly was she was able to experience such an “ecstasy of performance” sensation. Kyla added that this show reminded her that the old adage, “practice makes perfect,” a banal yet undeniably true phrase when considering musical acumen. She must remind herself of this show when preparing for future performances; the more she prepares for a gig, the greater the emotional payoff.

Kyla’s comments during the VSRI oscillated between musing over the “ecstasy” of the performance and lamenting how anxiety-inducing it can be. It ultimately became apparent that she genuinely does love performing—a palpable feeling when describing her mental mindset during one of the set’s most rousing numbers. She described it as an “insanely powerful moment” as she sang the final refrain:

It’s like I’m saying the words of this spell that “I know is true and it feels good to perform it”...but something about this performance in particular, and I think it’s due to how much I practiced beforehand...it just helped me feel so comfortable on stage. I was in my element, and that’s the only way I can realize the “ecstasy of performing.”

When asked what methods she can use in the future to maintain the unadulterated joy of live performance more consistently, Kyla remarked how, since this recorded performance, she has been rehearsing more often:

I'm trying to practice as much as I can these days, so maybe I can have live in that, that moment again, and I need to feel it more because it was nights like this show that reminded me that there is no doubt in my mind that I'm doing what I was always meant to do. I'm a performer, and this show solidifies that. This is what I need to be doing because it did give me such a good fucking feeling. It'll happen again, I'm sure...but I just don't know when.

Dylan

For our VSRI, Dylan shared a recording from March 2023 of his current musical group performing a headlining set at the Envision Festival in Costa Rica in front of more than 10,000 people. Before diving into the viewing experience, though, Dylan shared with me some of his principal convictions regarding live performance. Adopting that familiar “nomadic musical preacher” style of prose that pervaded our first interview, Dylan expressed an ardent admiration for the stage and its communally holistic influence on him and his listeners. To this end, Dylan frequently mentioned a “spirituality” aspect of live music performance that holds the potential to unlock something within human souls that mere words can never truly capture. It is a metaphysical and divine awakening that both musicians and listeners share in the collective experience of live performance. When onstage, Dylan becomes so “lost in the moment” of musical expression that he struggled to recall his performance methodology. Further, he generally eschews watching recordings of his performances, so he admitted a slight apprehension about this VSR experience: “I’m a terribly self-conscious person, so I *never* watch this stuff.”

While celebrating the spiritual elation of the act while also expressing palpable ambiguity about the necessity to perform as “just another part of the job,” Dylan wryly noted, “Listen, I mean I do voluntarily get up on stage in front of thousands of people, but it definitely can feel like something I just have to deal with...I certainly wouldn't call it a ‘perk’ of the job.” He added that some musicians revel in the limelight of live performance, but for Dylan, “It’s always felt like a burden of sorts...and I do want to enjoy the experience more. Even watching this video

together today and seeing so many people enjoying it is *very* cool...but I've tried to keep myself somewhat removed from it, because I don't want to hog the spotlight; it's just not in my nature."

These sentiments of humility and introversion suffusing Dylan's comments were equally balanced with an advocacy for the potential euphoria derived from live performance. To achieve this stability, though, Dylan relies on a specific set of reliable performance tactics that he has worked years to master. For example, unlike the other study participants, Dylan chooses to sing exclusively during live shows, even though he composes the material himself with a guitar: "I'll be honest, I don't love playing instruments on stage, because there's just too much already going on in the moment...I would just prefer to have a mic in my hand, because the instrument adds unneeded stress to the performance." As the oldest participant in this study, Dylan holds a unique perspective on live performance, given his extensive musical history, and he is all too familiar with the fickle variables of stage shows that are beyond his control—from poor audio backlines and equipment breakdowns to audience apathy and constant efforts to maintain engagements.

For this reason, over the past few years, Dylan has attempted to embrace his "lost in the music" mindset when performing. To this end, his current musical outfit features many duets of Dylan sharing the vocal performance equitably with his female bandmate, Kat. Together, especially in the recorded performance excerpt we examined in our VSRI, Kat and Dylan sang the repertoire as if they were holding an intimate conversation with no one else around (even though in this performance, the band was headlining set before 10,000 fans). Throughout, the two bandmates faced each other more often than cheating out to the audience, and this deliberate staging arrangement helped Dylan stay in the immediacy of the musical moment, allowing him to "ride the wave" of harmonies while they engaged in a quasi-choreographed dance throughout the set and locked eyes while singing to each other in a conversational tack.

Another tool that Dylan relies upon to enhance his focused presence in the immediate moment of a song is another physical manifestation that seems to be his “signature move”: bending down, almost to his knees, during climatic moments of songs, swinging his arms like a pendulum while embodying the “grooving rhythm” of the band’s creations. In the manner of a zealous preacher who passionately emphasizes critical aspects of their sermon, Dylan dug into the stage floor on his knees, holding the mic close as he sings a song’s refrain. This sensation represented an aspect of live performance that Dylan treasures the most, when both he and the audience can collectively “get lost for a little while...out of your body and mind,” even if the moment is ephemeral. Dylan’s rather opaque perspective on his live performance approach is a tenuous dance, physically and metaphorically, between indescribable jubilation and disquieting tension, a delicate balancing act with many risks but even more potential rewards.

Sophie

For our VSRI, Sophie shared a recording of her most recent live performance in March 2024 at The Bitter End, located in the West Village of New York City. Before viewing the performance excerpts together, Sophie offered a perspective of her relationship with live performance, one that was markedly distinct from those of her fellow participants. In unequivocal terms, Sophie expressed a genuine endearment for nearly any performance opportunity, regardless of the size of the venue or audience. Similar to her calculated and meticulous compositional approach, Sophie tended to focus on the tangible and pragmatic benefits derived from live performance. In her opinion, live performance, even when its execution is imperfect or unappreciated, always contains a morsel of wisdom to glean from the experience and can serve to improve her performative prowess. In particular, Sophie appreciates live performance because it allows her to test out and refine new songs before committing them

to a future record. She believes the live performance of imperfect material provides her with novel insights about what she herself wants to express with a particular composition:

Sophie emphasized this admirable element of live shows, adding how she learns so much about the songs by playing them live...just by playing them in different places, in front of different crowds, with different musicians...it helps me hone in on the valuable parts of the song, so I know what I want when I eventually take it to the recording studio.

This focused and thoughtful analytical approach with which Sophie regards live performance echoed her dedication to her artistic craft that was so palpable in her narrative portrait. Thus, there is tangible evidence for the high aspirations Sophie holds for her artistic vocation.

VSR Category #2: The Artist-Patron Relationship in a Live Performance Setting

One of the most interesting elements revealed during VSR protocol was seeing how often the participants interacted with the audience during the performance. As this section discusses, some participants preferred to engage with the audience (either via dialogue or eye contact) more than others. Of paramount importance, though, was deciphering the underlying rationale of why these five musicians chose to (or did not) interact with their audience. In certain circumstances, a participant's decision to engage an audience may have emerged from a necessity to simply "kill time" while tuning an instrument or adjusting a microphone stand. In other instances, though, the musician's motive for interacting with the audience was more enigmatic, and equally revelatory to illuminate the potential of realizing self-actualization and authentic artistry via singer-songwriter practices, as the following commentary shows.

Helen

For Helen, a "successful" live performance is not possible without making a concerted effort to engage with the audience throughout a show. When considering her performance technique, Helen cannot help but factor in how she will include the audience's participation

during particular songs because she recognizes the value of a shared artistic experience—a time when both artist and patron are equal benefactors of the music’s revelry. When she can afford the extra cost, Helen will even go as far as hiring a stage choreographer for particularly important gigs, like the one she shared for our VSRI. The epitome of Helen’s attention to the audience’s enjoyment of her show was exquisitely captured in the recorded excerpt of her original song she provided for our interview. During the clip of this rousing post-breakup pop anthem, Helen shouted the song’s refrain to the mystified audience packed like sardines in this Brooklyn general admission performance space: “Don’t you fucking text me on my birthday! Don’t you fucking call me on my birthday!”

With the audience moving in sync to the fast-paced pounding bass drum, Helen leapt from the stage into the audience, mic in hand, and danced her way through the crowd, fist-pumping high into the air with her free hand as she encouraged listeners to sing along, even if many were hearing for the first time (thus was the track’s live debut). Within seconds, Helen had roused 150 people in the audience to scream out, “Just don’t you fucking call me on my birthday!” As the audience hooted, hollered, and rapturously applauded Helen as she climbed back onstage after the final refrain, the euphoria swirling around the room was contagious and thick. This performance excerpt, without doubt, was an utterly captivating and joyous performance, a snapshot of unadulterated collective catharsis between performer and listener that few musical artists are capable of conjuring. Helen later revealed that this moment in the set, which I had assumed was improvised, was actually meticulously choreographed with a professional stage assistant prior to the show. Helen had always planned on jumping into the crowd during the song’s refrain, but how the audience embraced this calculated risk emphatically blew away Helen’s own wildest aspirations.

More importantly, the response reaffirmed her artistic conviction that engagement with an audience is a crucial element of a successful live performance. Any song can be performed perfectly, but if audience members are not invited by the performer to bask in cathartic jubilation, the central purpose of the collective revelry is lost. From Helen's perspective, the audience is as essential to live performance as a tuned guitar or balanced soundboard. Moreover, this excerpt represented the essence of why Helen continues her journey as a professional singer-songwriter. This finding was emphasized by Helen's own commentary on the clip that she offered after our viewing: "It is my absolute favorite thing to sing with other people...the experience of getting to go into the crowd and jump around with friends and people I didn't even know...and that insane energy of the moment...it was just awesome."

Matthew

Matthew also recognized that the enjoyment and appreciation of his musical repertoire can be enhanced via concerted efforts to build a strong rapport with his audience during live performances. Emphasizing the advantageous nature of such a connection, Matthew explained during his VSRI that this unique dialogic relationship with an audience is a crucial attribute of his performance acumen because he has learned the hard way that if he does not pay sufficient attention to his patrons throughout a set, the integrity of his performance will suffer. To this end, Matthew reminds himself at the onset of each performance not only to build a rapport with the audience via recognition (i.e., sustained eye contact and affirming facial expressions) but also by consistently speaking directly to members of the crowd throughout a show.

As the video recording of a recent performance that he provided for the VSRI demonstrated, Matthew enjoys fashioning this performer-patron connection by reflecting with the audience about the inspiration and significance underlying each song that he is about to play

for them. By providing his patrons with such intimate details of how his songs came into existence, he believes he is “letting them in on a little secret,” one shared only between him and those lucky enough to be in the same room. The audience, in turn, experiences a tangible connection with Matthew as they listen to the song with a newfound appreciation, built on the illuminating emotional insights he has just shared with them.

The divulgence of such personally revealing details that offer a unique glimpse into the genuine purpose of Matthew’s artistry was exhibited beautifully during a particularly emotional moment from this recorded performance. While he spent most of the performance behind the piano for a number of original songs, about midway through the set, Matthew popped up from the piano bench and stood at the edge of the stage. He strapped a ukulele around his shoulders and brought the microphone close to his lips as he plugged in a quarter-inch cable from the ukulele into the venue’s sound system (via a direct input box, AKA D.I. box). Partially to fill the void of awkward silence as he adjusted the voice-ukulele balances with the sound technician in the booth above him, Matthew seamlessly chatted with the audience about the song they were going to hear next, diving into vivid details of its personal significance and compositional origins.

In a very elegant and poignant tone, Matthew described that he was inspired to write the featured song as a tribute to his hearing-impaired older brother, who, to this day, remains a tremendous source of motivation and encouragement. Matthew affectedly described his brother’s ailment and how he has continually defied the limited developmental expectations of doctors and specialists alike throughout life. Such perseverance, Matthew explained to the audience as his voice broke with emotion, was the “roadmap for me as I navigate life and all of its complexities. It reminds me to keep doing exactly what you want to do, regardless of whatever anyone else is

gonna tell you.” The audience broke out in rapturous applause, before a single string on that ukulele was even plucked.

Pausing playback at this poignant moment in the recording, I asked Matthew if engaging with the audience so vulnerably was an emotionally wrought experience for him, especially because he was close to breaking into tears before an audience of strangers. Matthew coyly replied, “To be honest, I’ve been performing this song for almost seven years now, so I’ve become very comfortable with talking about my brother with all kinds of audiences.” In conveying such an affecting subject to his audience with consummate grace and eloquence, Matthew exuded the air of a true professional performer, one who is resolute and confident when expressing personally challenging experiences to his listeners without becoming overwhelmed with the emotion himself. Noting how often Matthew did converse with his audience throughout this performance recording, I was curious whether such anecdotes and droll quips to the patrons were rehearsed or improvised. Matthew wryly smiled as he explained that how he does not necessarily rehearse his audience rapport, “but maybe I should!” He added more seriously that he feels the improvisatory nature of the dialogues enhance the authenticity of his artistry: “If I started rehearsing material like some standup comic, I feel like it would kill the spontaneity and significance of the moment.”

While not explicitly rehearsing his conversation topics before a performance, Matthew does enjoy “setting the scene, if you will” for his audience prior to playing a new song. Expanding further, Matthew described how he adopted this technique from his musician mother, who he recalled engaged in similar rapport with the audience before beginning a song. As a child, he once asked his mother why she relied on this tactic so often, and she responded with advice that he continues to embrace in every performance:

I remember her telling me, “Matthew, it’s a really good thing to make sure that people are tuned into the world of your song before you play it for them, even if it’s not a specific scene; even if it’s just an emotion, make sure that they’re thinking about it from the right mindset, because that will almost always guarantee you an engaged listener and emotional reaction.”

Kyla

Offering a different opinion on the topic of patron-performer rapport, Kyla candidly admitted early in her VSRI that she does not enjoy having to “chat up” the audience during a performance; she would rather simply let her music and artistic intention speak for themselves. Kyla also elaborated on her disdain for this specific manner of performer-audience interaction, mainly because she believes it diminishes the listener’s own interpretation and appreciation of her art. She simply does not waste precious performance time “spelling out the whole story and meaning of the tune before even playing it,” as if she is too easily providing the audience a distinct interpretation for “how *I* want them to perceive the song, versus them forming their own opinion. I want the music to be meaningful for them through their own interpretation of it, and I’m not really sure how to describe these songs without coloring it with my biases.” Moreover, Kyla astutely noted that these interactions with the audience would threaten to interrupt the overall vibe of the setlist’s curated arrangement that she expended considerable effort to fashion:

I’m very particular about how the songs flow into each other. I try to carefully plan out the flow of the entire setlist, considering when I need to tune or switch instruments; I think about it all in advance, and working up the crowd here and there during the show would just diminish my intentions.

As Kyla and I discussed the artist-audience dialogic relationship within the context of live performance, she eventually realized why she so purposefully chose to minimize both chatting and engaging in eye contact with her listening audience. Reflecting on her earliest experiences with live performance, she recalled how all those years of being forced to participate

in solo classical cello performances throughout her childhood exacted a profound effect on her ability to connect openly with an audience.

Much to the dismay of her classically trained instructors, during these performances, Kyla unintentionally neglected the “etiquette of classical performance protocol” by closing her eyes and swaying to the music’s rhythm and emotional affect with an impassioned facial expression. Kyla noted how she was repeatedly scolded by her parents and instructors after a performance for these “antics” that were considered, at least in the classical music realm, to be highly disrespectful: “I can still vividly remember my folks telling me, ‘You need to *stop* making those ridiculous faces’ when you are on stage,’ and hearing them say that so often made me feel so self-conscious when performing.” This childhood trauma with live performance eventually became ingrained in her, to the point that now she finds it extremely difficult to evolve her performance approach and reconfigure how she regards live performance and general interactions with the audience.

After sharing these potentially illuminating reasons for her why her relationship with live performance is so tense, Kyla emphasized that her comments should not be construed as apathy for the audience’s experience at her shows. To the contrary, Kyla strives to provide her audience with an enduring and affecting musical experience; however, she would prefer to accomplish this goal by letting her instruments do more of the “talking” than her own in-between-song banter.

Though not immediately perceptible, Kyla emphasized that she considers her relationship with the audience an invaluable aspect of her live performance approach, a unique opportunity to transport her listeners to a new and exciting mental space, using her compositions to guide them gently along a novel metaphysical journey; ideally, this journey facilitates the listeners’ ability to interpret and explore her repertoire’s purpose in their own personally meaningful way: “I want

people to stay in that introspective space throughout the set.... I want you to experience your own emotional reaction to the music in a truly authentic manner, with as few distractions as possible.” Hence, Kyla is determined to maintain in-between song dialogue with the audience to an absolute minimum.

Dylan

Regarding the artist-patron connection with the context of live performance, Dylan expressed an ambivalent opinion on its significance to the efficacy of his artistic intentions, noting how he is truly “not a big fan of talking to the audience” because it too often takes them out of that “lost in the music” aura that he strives so carefully to curate during a live performance. Similar to Kyla’s perspective, Dylan believes that talking to the audience in between songs can inevitably sap the emotional energy from this uniquely fashioned moment of collective visceral contemplation. Speaking from his self-curated “musician-preacher” identity, Dylan described how “I just always want to help steer the performance in a positive and natural way so everyone in the audience can feel that sense of ‘togetherness,’ and when we’re all locked into that same sensation, all 10,000 people, fuck, it is just an amazing experience.” To this end, whatever the setting of Dylan’s performance space may be, whether outside under the stars in a Brazilian rainforest with 10,000 fans or in a living room with a handful of dear friends, Dylan attempts to use his music consistently to bring people together in some shared spiritual happening. If he has done his job right, people will leave his concert feeling as if they have participated in a collective religious experience. Dylan added that such an ambitious effort requires years of refinement and continual focused attention to his patrons because, after all, as the main singer and songwriter of his current band, the onus to conjure this transformative

experience rests solely on his shoulders; only he can “summon the spirit” and feel that unmistakable radiant energy beaming from the crowd.

Sophie

Once again, Sophie’s perspective on this particular aspect of singer-songwriter performance technique was markedly distinct from those of her study colleagues. As Sophie and I watch her recorded performance during our VSRI, it became undeniably clear how much she enjoys performing in front of and interacting with a live audience; she was relaxed yet confident on stage. Moreover, Sophie not only appreciates but also continually nurtures the artist-listener connection for the duration of her performances. During the discussion portion of our VSRI, Sophie explained how it took her literally years to reach this level of performance acumen and poise, building her credence that such aplomb and geniality enhanced a reciprocal sense of communal entertainment between her and her audience. To this end, Sophie expanded on the topic, detailing that she genuinely enjoys conversing with an audience between songs, but her rationale for fostering this relationship is both equally pragmatic as it is convivial.

First addressing the pragmatic reasons for audience engagement advocacy, Sophie discussed how her adoration for utilizing alternative guitar tunings within her repertoire also means that, when performing such material in a live setting, she needs to adjust the guitar tuning frequently or immediately following virtually every song in the setlist. Hence, Sophie relies on reliable and playful banter with the audience to fill in what would otherwise be awkward periods of silence between each song. Sometimes, these necessary tune-ups can occupy several minutes of set time, and while she uses this time efficiently, cracking droll jokes and delivering various “stories from the road” with ease to engage the crowd, Sophie also utilizes these moments to provide the audience with insightful context for the song she is about to perform. Akin to

Matthew's performance approach, Sophie feels that the audience can appreciate her original material in a more captivating and enduring manner if they first understand why she was inspired to compose that song in the first place.

Regarding how much of this charming stage banter is improvised versus rehearsed, Sophie noted how "It's generally quite impromptu, but the more I do perform, the more the previous shows become rehearsals for future ones." Moreover, Sophie was confident that her continually reinforced engagement with the audience ultimately facilitates the development of an enduring personal connection between her artistic identity and the listener. Distinguishing herself even further from the majority opinion of the other participants, Sophie strives to enhance this personal connection with her audiences by making direct eye contact with nearly every individual of the crowd throughout a performance. This was especially apparent in the recording that Sophie provided for the VSRI, during which I repeatedly observed her scanning the room with intent focus and smiling as she locked eyes with each enchanted face in the crowd.

VSR Category #3: Determining the Efficacy of VSR Research

My intent for incorporating the VSRI research protocol into this study's data collection methodology was to uncover additional fundamental elements of the singer-songwriters' lived experiences. These findings would subsequently be used, in triangulation with previously gathered participant data, to facilitate the discovery of phenomenological themes shared across this specific class of contemporary composers. Ideally, these emergent phenomena would then enable me to address the degree to which the idiosyncratic nature of singer-songwriter practice may advance the realization of the two central theoretical frameworks that guided this study's research protocol from the outset: self-actualization and authentic artistry.

To this end, it was of paramount importance to ascertain each study participant's general perception of the VSR interview experience and if the collaborative nature of this research protocol's performance analysis helped to illuminate any constructive insights regarding artistic identity, purpose, and creative potential. In essence, engaging in this specific research methodology allowed me to establish whether VSRI could be used as an advantageous tool to enhance the evolution of artistic intentions. As the participants' anecdotes have thus far revealed, attempting to determine a cogent consensus among these five unique singer-songwriters may be futile to some degree, but such a distinct variety of singer-songwriter perspectives regarding the purpose and value of live performance may still prove invaluable in addressing this study's primary goal of illuminating the genuine nature of the contemporary singer-songwriter's lived experience in the 21st century.

In general, the participants regarded the VSR experience as a constructive and useful tool for facilitating self-reflection. Moreover, several participants noted how watching the clips with me yielded a far more optimistic and positive reaction regarding any performance notes to keep in mind for the future. When they initially watched the clips on their own, they tended to adopt a more cynical and self-deprecating attitude about their performance acumen, but my presence seemed to force them to view the clips from a different vantage point—one cognizant of the changes that needed to be made, but realizing that self-flogging was not beneficial for anyone, especially the performer.

As Helen herself noted after watching a particular performance excerpt, "Watching the clip again today with you, I actually think my vocals weren't as bad as I had originally thought!" Compared to the isolated vacuum in which Helen had reviewed this performance previously, when she could not help but adopt a more self-deprecating assessment without others around to

prevent the “spiraling” mindset to loop incessantly, her VSR experience with me allowed her to review this clip through a new lens and discern myriad positive elements within the performance. Perhaps facilitated by my own favorable, yet unbiased, commentary of the performance, Helen saw, for the first time, that her song was executed very successfully, especially considering all of the novel aspects (performing for the first time in a long interim; singing along to a backing track rather than her customary piano, etc.) she was contending with that evening.

Similarly, Dylan found the VSR experience to be constructive, noting specifically how watching the recording with me helped him analyze the excerpt from a more positive mindset. His comments revealed that my role as researcher and “co-pilot” on this VSR journey afforded him the chance to see aspects of his performance technique that he had never noticed before, but only now recognized their significance because I brought them to his attention. Dylan’s comments further buttressed the inference that this VSR research methodology can yield extremely useful and constructive recommendations when considering how to enhance one’s performance technique. Overall, the VSR experience was received positively by my participants because it opened their minds to novel perspectives and pragmatic performance tactics that they can now apply toward future performances.

Chapter Summary

As the preceding insights from my secondary VSRI with the five participants of this study revealed, these contemporary singer-songwriters regarded live performance within the context of their artistic identity and professional ambition with varying degrees of significance. Some participants emphatically conveyed that live performance was a vital element of their singer-songwriter artistry: from its use as an auxiliary compositional tool to refining original works in progress, as a means of disseminating their artistry and bolstering their fanbase, or as a

resource to buttress their creative confidence and justify their continued dedication to this competitive, often capricious profession. The participants expressed a number of invaluable and different revelations about their dedication to and genuine enjoyment of live performance. Moreover, as our participants offered many evocative and confessional insights into the role of live performance within the context of their profession as singer-songwriters, I believe that such illuminating disclosures would not have been uncovered without the assistance of the VSRI protocol methodology.

The next chapter explores the overarching phenomenological themes gleaned from the close analysis of this study's multifaceted research methodology. The synthesis of these varied and nuanced insights expressed by each study participant will ideally provide a more comprehensive understanding of the fundamental elements that have helped to define the lived experience of today's emerging professional singer-songwriter. Further, the common phenomena shared by the study participants will subsequently be utilized to address this study's central research questions and, ultimately, assess whether the two fundamental theoretical framework pillars of my inquiry—self-actualization and authentic artistry—can be realized via singer-songwriter artistic practices.

Chapter 6: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I return to the primary research question that initiated this phenomenological exploration of five study participants through a triangulation of multiple inductive research strategies. The principal research question (and its three ancillary questions) are presented once again:

How do emerging contemporary singer-songwriters describe the development of their compositional process and artistic identity in relation to the realization of their holistic and personal essence?

- a. In what ways did the manner of their musical training impact their ability to navigate the contextual realities of singer-songwriter composition?
- b. To what degree do they regard their profession as a means for achieving self-actualization and authenticity in their artistry and self-identity consummation?
- c. What are the central motivational elements in the realization of their professional and artistic potential? Moreover, what specific resources feed and perpetuate their determination?

Theme Discovery, Prior Scholarship, and Holistic Phenomena Interpretation

To answer this inquiry's principal research question of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters, I needed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the common discernible phenomena shared across my five study participants' lived experiences as singer-songwriters as well as to explore why these influential elements were personally necessary and meaningful within the context of their artistic intentions. Therefore, as initially described in Chapter 3, I relied on the qualitative assessment methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis

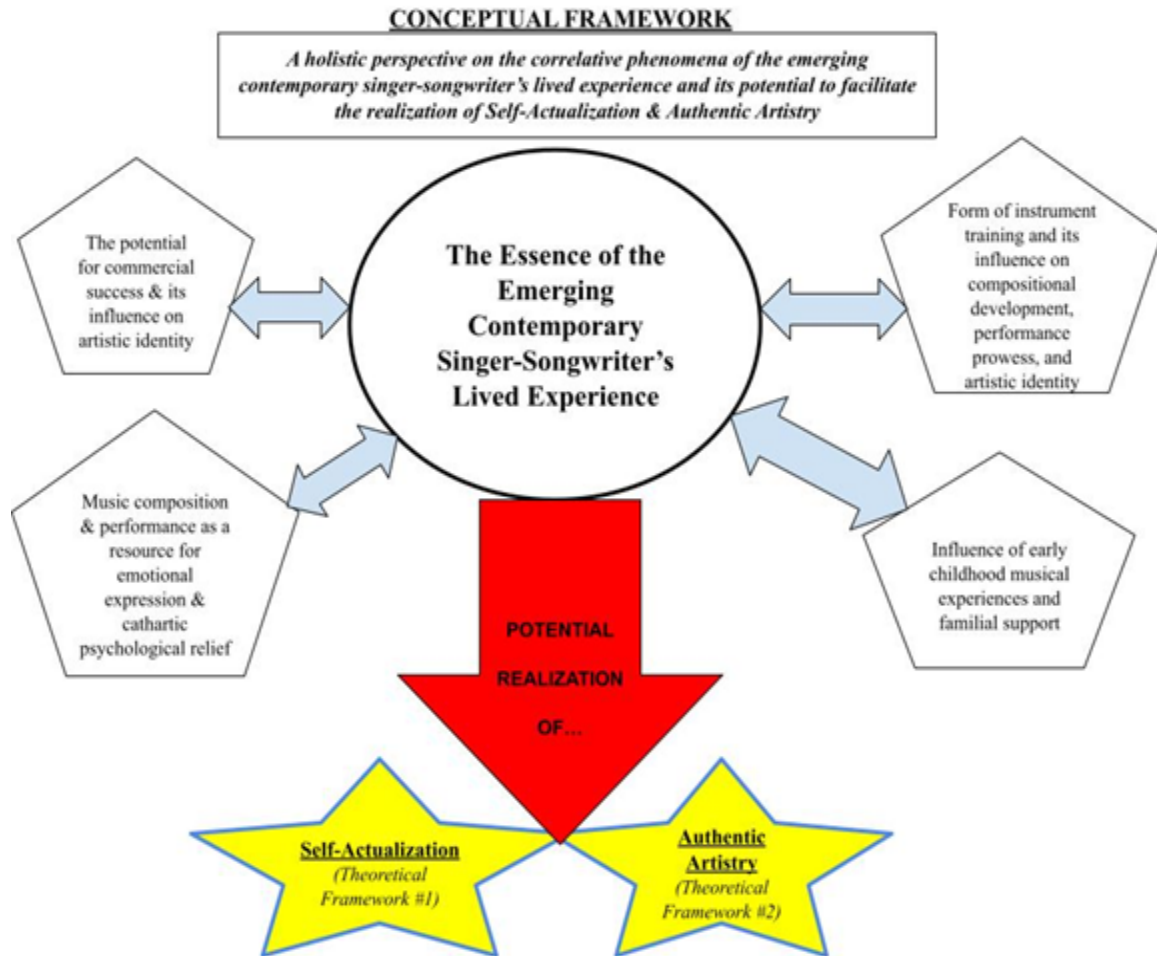
(IPA) to uncover commonalities in the participants' lived experience that would subsequently be used to address the fundamental research question that spurred the genesis of this inquiry.

As I reviewed the rich details of the participants' commentaries through the lens of IPA, the similarities that emerged were synthesized within distinct thematic categories, with each theme representing a critical element of the analogous phenomena of the lived experiences of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters. Relying on this study's conceptual framework and its two parallel theoretical conceptual pillars (self-actualization and authentic artistry) within the context of IPA, I realized the predominant salient characteristics of this class of contemporary composers. For reference, as defined in Chapter 1, the psychological theory of self-actualization is the desire to become everything one is capable of becoming (Maslow, 1943), while authentic artistry refers to an artistic composition that possesses the author's inherent authority of and about its subject, with vulnerability and intimate personal disclosures serving as hallmarks of the work's imaginative expression (Dutton, 2005). For easy reference, the conceptual framework of this study is presented once more (see Figure 4).

Serving as my "analytical flashlight" throughout this qualitative exploration, the interconnected web of influential attributes within the conceptual framework (representing the holistic essence of the emerging contemporary singer-songwriter's lived experience) not only buttressed the rationale behind my experiential theme discovery. It also, in tandem with the fundamental elements of IPA methodology, facilitated my ability to address the central research questions and develop the critical essence statement that encapsulates why these shared phenomena are so meaningful to my participants' lived experience as contemporary singer-songwriters. Both considerations are addressed in this cumulative chapter.

Figure 4

Conceptual Framework



A Realization of Phenomena via Thematic Discovery: Making Sense of Participant Data

In keeping with the traditions of IPA methodology, I sought to uncover meaning from the hundreds of pages of participant interview transcript data accumulated during this study. Embodying this rationale for the use of IPA within the study's context, I equipped myself with the insightful findings from a triangulation of different methodologies to make sense of these data through a local interpretation (Smith & Nizza, 2022) of the phenomena via theme discovery.

I uncovered four distinct thematic categories woven into the lived experiences of my five participants.

As the Chapter 4 narrative portraits distinctly conveyed, the five participants approached singer-songwriter artistry in their own unique manners; however, four phenomenological themes can be interpreted as common threads tying these heterogeneous lived experiences into a single tapestry. While the five participants have never crossed paths, despite residing in the same contemporary music genre, the following four thematic categories revealed how the experiential events and motivational elements that led them to embrace this particular vocation represent an undeniably similar harmonic essence that propels each one forward in their pursuit of captivating authentic artistry.

Theme 1: Beginnings

May your hands always be busy
 May your feet always be swift
 May you have a strong foundation
 When the winds of changes shift
 May your heart always be joyful
 May your song always be sung
 And may you stay forever young
 (Bob Dylan, “Forever Young”)

Innate Curiosity in Musical Sounds, Family Dynamics, and Development of Instrumental and Compositional Prowess. While each study participant described the evolution of their passion for musical expression in distinct contexts, particular elements of their upbringing—whether dissimilar or congruent—remained consistently influential as they first began exploring music performance and composition. Because of the richly detailed nature of this theme, its most salient elements are first explored individually, beginning with the

participants' recollections of their earliest interactions with music and the degree of influence that their family dynamic exerted on their eventual decision to become a singer-songwriter.

Growing up Musical (Sometimes). While each participant offered varied recollections of their upbringing and family dynamics and the degree of influence these elements had on their burgeoning interest in music creation, every “member of the tribe” emphasized the significance of their childhood environment in deciding to pursue singer-songwriter artistry, with both positive and negative attitudes. Dylan, for example, spoke of the advantageous nature of his household environment, describing how his musician stepfather played a tremendous role in his own music development; its significance became even more predominant for Dylan following the tragic car accident that killed his stepfather and nearly killed him as well. Watching his “idol,” as Dylan called his stepfather, jam with friends into the early hours of countless weekend nights utterly fascinated Dylan; he snuck out of bed to watch the amateur musicians revel in rambunctious singalongs. Watching these weekly “jamborees” built Dylan’s profound emotional connection to music and the unadulterated joy derived from shared communal music experiences. As a result, he often referred to himself as a musical “preacher” who would grow up to revel in similar jubilations with his audiences.

Matthew also enjoyed having musicians as parents, recalling from an early age how he would sit at the top of the basement stairs to observe his parents trade off solos as they improvised riffs and refrains that naturally emerged from “experimental jam sessions.” At 6 years of age, Matthew’s innate musical curiosity led him to tiptoe downstairs during his parents’ respites from performance to recreate the catchy melodies his mother effortlessly spun from her fingertips. He wanted to play the keys and sing with abandon as she did, and he continues refining his (already tremendous) piano prowess to this day to realize that goal.

Straddling the fence between positive and negative influence, Sophie's mother was an accomplished pianist in her own right and steadfastly supported her daughter's pursuit of creative endeavors. Anytime Sophie had a music theory-related question or sought advice for stylistic nuances in her own work, her mother quickly offered constructive support. At the same time, though, Sophie's parents enforced a strident practice regimen to their young child. In hindsight, Sophie acknowledged that her parents' intentions when setting strict rehearsal schedules were not malicious because they believed they were helping her achieve a goal she was passionate about. Unfortunately, 7-year-old Sophie did not have such intuition and construed her parents' regimen as a criticism of her musical ability: "All that tangible pressure would often make me wonder, 'Oh, I guess I really am not a talented music student' or 'If I had only practiced piano more, I would be better,'... it just made me feel like they wanted me to do something that I wasn't following through with."

Unlike the other participants, Kyla's musically inclined parents served mainly as a hindrance to her musical development and overall enjoyment of the artistic practice. Discussing their influence in a negative light, Kyla detailed how her parents' classical music acumen and general approach to performance and practice carried over to their daughter's instrument training process, and not positively. Instead, Kyla was forced to study classical cello performance from an extremely young age and required to play countless competitions that stunted her enjoyment of live performance; her parents' pressure often felt too overwhelming to enjoy even a modicum of her technical ability and refined expressiveness with such a challenging instrument.

Kyla also noted the deleterious effect of her parents' criticism on her passionate facial expressions while performing in these competitions. This left her wanting to avoid musical performance altogether in the years that followed. She had become overly self-conscious of her

stage presence because of her parents' derogatory remarks. Furthermore, in a tragically ironic turn of events, her parents' enforcement of classical instrument studies did not carry over into college since both her mother and father (at this point abandoning their own musical ambitions to enter the field of medicine) palpably grimaced when Kyla announced she wanted to go to a music-focused college rather than prepare for a "real job." Kyla utilized her parents' disapproval of her vocational choice as inspiration to prove them wrong, and she continued her artistic pursuit with even greater determination.

Helen's parents, while not musically inclined, were always supportive of her intrinsic curiosity with music; her mother would drive her 4-year-old girl to the music store every week so she could experiment with melodies in her head on the many synthesizers and keyboards lining the shop walls. To this day, and unlike any other participants' reflections, Helen noted how lucky she felt to be standing in this particular junction in her career, candidly crediting her parents' unwavering support (both emotionally *and* financially) of her professional ambitions all these years. As a result, she has reached an advantageous position allowing her to focus on the evolution of her artistry while exponentially augmenting her fanbase with each new release.

The influence of childhood environment and parental support on the participants' decisions to pursue a career in music was also a dominating factor in past scholarly explorations of the holistic journey of singer-songwriters. Prior research revealed how both social *and* family contexts can significantly shape how and why a child is motivated to explore musical creativity from an early age (Bennet & Hertzog, 2004). Of particular consequence for a child's musical development was the degree of sustained family support and engagement with their nascent creative curiosities, which, ultimately, can influence whether such endeavors materialize as tangible artifacts of creative success or an abandonment of artistic practice (Runco & Albert,

2005). While a sensitive and encouraging family environment may contribute towards a child's initial creative musical explorations, an additional element of support that must be considered when assessing the earliest motivational factors of a child's musical development is whether the family can feasibly financially support their instrument training throughout childhood (Oreck et al., 2000). When examining the talent development of 23 urban children at three distinct stages of youth, Oreck et al. (2000) concluded that a vast majority of children who were able to develop musical instrument acumen successfully were "born into a family who both valued their talents and had the financial means to support their development" (p. xi).

While a nurturing and financially benevolent familial environment may play a vital role in an individual's musical maturation and eventual artistic realization, Garces-Bacsal's (2014) qualitative narrative study of the emerging Filipino singer-songwriter, Noel Cabangon, suggested that the surrounding community context in which the child resides can exact an equally pivotal influence on their decision to pursue a career in music. Throughout multiple interviews with Cabangon, the author found that various motivators (both intrinsic and extrinsic) contributed to this artist's creative growth, including an early exposure to "music in the context of daily living, the active role played by the neighborhood and the entire community in nurturing the musical talent, and deliberate practice" (p. 231) as well as a childhood filled with highly influential musical experiences that shaped his own artistic motivation and development. Regularly "singing and jamming" with family members and neighbors alike, Cabangon expressed how these jam sessions were incredibly helpful in his musical development as he always "wanted to sing," and whenever the family entertained guests, "they would always ask me to sing and jam along with them" (p. 235).

How the Development of Musical Acumen and Mentorship Facilitated the Life-Altering Decision to Pursue Singer-Songwriter Composition and Performance. With the exception of Dylan, every participant of this inquiry engaged in nearly a decade's worth of formal instrument training, mostly in the form of one-on-one private studio lessons beginning in elementary school and lasting through their college years, when the participants would, more often than not, step out of the private studio lesson environment and enhance their instrumental prowess via focused music compositional courses and performance ensembles. As prior findings from the data conveyed, the perceived "outlier" of the participant group, Dylan, engaged in formal guitar lessons for only a handful of months as a child, mainly because the regimented nature of formal private instrument training shared virtually no resemblance to the jubilant jamboree nights of his stepfather and friends that sparked his musical curiosity in the first place. Hence, Dylan decided to abandon the formal lesson environment and carefully observe his stepfather's approach to music learning, specifically referencing a period when his stepfather worked for almost an entire year on one original song.

While certainly informal, Dylan's musical training approach of sitting next to his stepfather on the piano bench exacted a tremendously positive influence on his own musical pursuits. There simply was tangible "musical energy" flowing through the house every time Dylan sat next to his stepfather at the piano. The pure joyous mood the two shared planted seeds for Dylan's own impassioned approach to music experience, noting how that love and bonding during these early years "became a spiritual thing for me; it allowed me to find a balance in my body when singing, and I couldn't help but feel this spiritual undertone all the time."

When Dylan eventually returned to the guitar as a teenager, he admitted that the decision was solely influenced by desire to impress girls at his high school. Reflecting on his self-taught

approach to guitar the second time around, Dylan described how he just wanted to find a way to accompany the instrument he was always drawn to, with or without the prospect of meeting women. He decided to use his singing voice:

It was as if I was seeking this balance of communication within myself...you know? It always came from a place of wanting to get my own songs across, so I eventually picked up the guitar again and used it just as a means to support my singing, which was the primary vehicle for my artistic expression.

On the opposite end of the musical learning spectrum, the four other participants engaged in rigorous formal instrumental training, but, mainly reflected on these experiences in a positive light, specifically when describing how invaluable their teachers were in mentoring and nurturing their intrinsic desire to create art from their evolving technical ability. For example, Matthew discussed how influential and supportive his jazz piano teacher was in encouraging his creative pursuits. Instead of reorienting Matthew's focus to a repertoire they were technically supposed to work on, the teacher strayed from the regimented lesson and showed him songwriting techniques in more relaxed and improvisational styles. Learning compositional techniques in this context expanded Matthew's creative curiosities because it seemed strict rules did not need to be followed when composing. By contrast, these nascent songwriting lessons were joyfully exploratory as Matthew's teacher showed him creative "shortcuts" to develop song structure and harmonic progressions. This caring mentorship helped Matthew feel that songwriting was a natural and easy experience: "I simply would not be a songwriter today if it weren't for that teacher. He was such an influential figure in my songwriting ability, and I still use those 'shortcuts' he showed me almost 15 years ago to this day when I sit down to write."

Similarly, Helen's voice teacher served as one of her earliest musical advocates and helped her realize the piano could support the unlimited potential of her singing voice. Helen was mystified by the songwriting process and could not wait to learn more about its idiosyncrasies

every week with her voice teacher, whom she referred to as her greatest mentor. Just like Matthew's teacher, Helen's instructor recognized her student's innate curiosity in creative musical exploration and devoted significant lesson time during every meeting to analyze songs and figure out how they were pieced together. She often used the melodic fragments that Helen had conjured up since she was 5 years old as examples for how natural the composing process could be.

Meanwhile, in providing yet another ambiguous response to one interview topic, Kyla lamented about the strident circumstances in which she developed her cello performance ability, describing the mental anguish often experienced following a lesson. Simultaneously, though, Kyla affirmed how advantageous becoming a classically trained musician was for her artistic development. From performance, composition, and overall appreciation about musical instruments and arrangements, "those lessons taught me so much about music, and I certainly wouldn't be the composer I am today without them." Ironically, though, when asked if she ever explored songwriting in earnest with her music teachers growing up, Kyla shouted, "Oh, hell no! Songwriting is, like, this sacred thing for me, and I don't want *anyone* to fuck with what that I'm doing." She added that, while she never received any formal training focused on music composition, "It's the only thing in my life that I truly feel confident about for some reason."

Similar to Helen's and Matthew's instrumental training, who enjoyed learning under the tutelage of a creative and flexible pedagogue, Randles and Sullivan (2013) noted how, when encouraging musical creativity with beginning songwriters, it is absolutely crucial for a teacher to "loosen the reins of control and let the student lead the flow of ideas" (p. 56). This pedagogical approach paralleled the learning experiences of Matthew and Helen, as their teachers also fostered "empowering experiences for the students by allowing them to flex their

creative muscles” (p. 55). In Randles and Sullivan’s final advocacy for this particular methodology of composition pedagogy, the teacher needs to convey music instruction to the students as means to “express themselves in personally meaningful ways not often explored within the traditionally conceived model of music education” (p. 56). It is precisely the incorporation of this kind of personal and sincere expressivity that fosters the pivotal elements of a singer-songwriter’s artistic identity, as it did with Helen and Matthew.

Giotta and Kruse (2022) also offered an analogous perspective via their own instrumental case study, during which they chronicled the experiences of high school students who participated in an experimental songwriting class over one semester. Discussing the impetus for their inquiry, the authors described how “creativity is an inherent component of a holistic music education. Students who engage in singing or playing activities have an opportunity to experiment with musical sounds, expressivity, and imagination” (p. 38). More importantly, their findings concluded that the music teacher’s advocacy for intrinsic and personally meaningful motivational factors within the classroom were vital to singer-songwriter composition processes, further buttressing the beneficial nature of musical learning context within which Matthew and Helen flourished.

On the other end of the spectrum, prior studies exploring the incorporation of creativity within instrument instruction conveyed how learning environments like those facilitating Matthew’s and Helen’s compositional development are rare experiences, particularly within private lesson learning spaces. As Vakeva (2016) discovered in his own examination of musical identity development via western culture pedagogy, all too often a performer’s technical ability disproportionality defines their recognition as a musician. In such a myopic culture, Vakeva concluded that there exists a “danger in seeing music pedagogy as a technical matter of helping

the students to produce high-level musical skills...thus avoiding the analysis of how, and in whose interest, musical agency is framed in musico-pedagogical practice” (p. 59).

Stepping outside of the “formal learning environment,” Garces-Bacsal (2014) concluded that formal instrument training is not absolutely necessary when facilitating one’s compositional prowess, as evident in the manner that Dylan’s instrumental learning experience was self-motivated. Garces-Bacsal’s narrative analysis of the songwriting evolution of the Filipino singer-songwriter, Noel Cabangon, draws multiple parallels to Dylan’s music learning journey, as Cabangon was also primarily self-taught on guitar. Rather than being musically trained within an academically classical tradition, Cabangon’s “sociocultural realities, tradition, and heritage shaped the development of his musical talent” (p. 232).

Furthermore, just as Dylan was exposed to music creativity’s potential for jubilation and euphoria organically and naturally, simply by spending time with his stepfather and friends during raucous weekend jamborees and singing for senior citizens at the local nursing home with his sister, Cabangon was also exposed to performance early in life, as he sang for elders, albeit in his community park during their nightly drinking sessions; nonetheless, these performances provided advantageous opportunities for him to rehearse and practice his vocal craft (p. 235). In another striking similarity to Dylan’s musical development narrative, the opposite sex jolted Cabangon’s desire to learn guitar, as he recalled how he taught himself rudimentary techniques at the age of 10 only after being challenged by a female classmate who already knew how to play. With no mentor to teach him musical theory or notation, Cabangon borrowed his neighbor’s guitar and intently listened to the songs he loved on repeat until he was able to transcribe the chords and lyrics on his own (p. 236).

Similar to the discoveries drawn from this study's participant narratives and how they developed their musical and compositional prowess, prior literature also noted that a wide spectrum of instrumental and compositional techniques play a vital role in the development of a singer-songwriter's artistic intent. Furthermore, in parallel with the participants' lived experiences, scholars have emphasized the significant roles that intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors, community and family musical exposure and encouragement, and varying degrees of autodidactic musical training play within the singer-songwriter's evolution. These factors rely on myriad distinctive musical skills and influences (from nascent childhood memories to mentoring figures in adulthood) to refine the compositional process and authentic artistic identity.

Theme 2: Identity

Oh, identity
Your milk white shadow
Just try something that you wouldn't do
And it's always one step ahead of you
(Father John Misty, "Mental Health")

Defining Characteristics of the Contemporary Singer-Songwriter's Artistic Approach

From the motivational factors that inspire them to write songs, including how and why they embark on these compositional endeavors, to the tactics they utilize to perpetuate their creative output, each participant's perspective shared a connecting experiential thread within their respective lived experiences. Nevertheless, nuanced variances in the singer-songwriters' artistic approaches are perceptible upon a closer analysis of not only the personal disclosures of these participants, but also the connections to the qualitative findings from relevant prior scholarship on this genre.

Songwriting Approaches (Natural or Systematic) and Tactics to Evolve Artistic

Intent. From the onset of this study, one question lingered: How do these five singer-songwriters actually write their songs? In other words, is a “songwriting formula” ever utilized, or do participants patiently wait for compositional inspiration to bubble to the surface? Sifting through the subtle details in the participants’ transcripts, it became apparent that no succinct consensus prevails across their respective songwriting methodologies, as each singer-songwriter utilizes evolving tactics when composing original repertoire. Blurring the subject a little more, each participant described the fundamental nature of their artistry in such personal and idiosyncratic contexts that it is difficult to distill each compositional approach into any single “formula.”

Overall, the participants described compositional experiences that often shared little or no similarity within the creative process itself. Sometimes, the entire melodic contour and harmonic structure of a tune organically emerged within a single day; other songs required months to complete. Parallel to these findings, prior scholarship exploring this subject attested to the overall mercurial nature of singer-songwriter compositional practice. If anything, attempting to determine congruency or any kind of reliable “formula” within the context of singer-songwriter artistry can be futile, as Nagy (2015) discovered in his qualitative examination of where musical creativity originates within the mental psyche. Nagy’s findings suggested that consistency in music compositional practice is essentially paradoxical, as the creative mind must engage in self-reflection and mediation in reaction to disparate experiential events to create original art. In essence, the singer-songwriter’s eventual composition is derived from distinct “emotional disclosures rather than a mere execution of idiomatically constructed musical sequences” (p. 69).

Reaching a similar conclusion when examining the processes of singer-songwriter composition, Dirx (1997) reasoned that singer-songwriter artistry is inherently derived from

emotion rather than trained convention or prosaic technical ability. Furthermore, when a song does emerge from the singer-songwriter, the path that led to its inception is ineffable, as the very act of song creation transcends technical music theory verbiage. Rather, original song composition is more akin to a supernatural, otherworldly experience. Moreover, attempting to analyze empirically such an uncanny experience within a procedural context strips the art of that magical moment of musical creativity; one that “transcends rationality and gives a deep meaning to the connection between the self and their world” (p. 80).

Similar to these scholarly findings, the participants also believed that no “singer-songwriter compositional formula” exists for them, nor should it, as such a myopic and hackneyed distillation of singer-songwriter artistry would strip the genre of its fundamentally endearing nature. While the participants’ musical acumen is formidable enough to churn out ternary pieces at a moment’s notice, the very purpose and essence of the song would be devoid of the confessional and personally meaningful attributes that comprise a singer-songwriter repertoire. Moreover, as the following insights from the participants clearly convey, there is no single or reliable approach to singer-songwriter composition to rely on, and for good reason: The unadulterated joy that one experiences when engaging in singer-songwriter artistry is derived, in part, from a necessary mysterious journey that leads them to a tangible artifact of their creative expression. Still, while all five participants walk this sibylline path towards sincere musical composition, each individual navigates a uniquely drawn map towards its realization.

Kyla, for example, prefers to sit down with her instrument without any preconceived “goal” in mind, as she knows herself too well to apply such self-pressure. Instead, she just pushes the record button on her phone’s voice memo app and sees where the melodic fragments in her head take her. Similarly, Dylan “knows the [songwriting] muse is always there” and

prefers to not be bothered with predetermined song goals, as if it were a homework assignment. He also utilizes the voice memo recording app when composing, letting the “tape” roll as he enters an almost meditative state when extracting song elements from his subconscious. While they eschew the concept of a songwriting “formula,” both Kyla and Dylan follow a pattern of compositional practice in which they revisit the recorded voice memo the following day, pen in hand, and write down useful kernels of lyrics, melodies, or chord progressions they find endearing. These voice memos may end up being hours long, but they need to listen to the entirety of the recording, for one mere 10-second fragment could represent an essential seed to grow a wonderful composition.

Matthew and Helen also believe in the organic nature of songwriting, knowing that anything feeling “forced” or “contrived” to them will also elicit similar reactions from their listeners. In a departure from others’ commentary, Matthew discussed his compositional process in more technical terms, describing music theory strategies such as “borrowing the V of the V chord” and relying on jazz-focused music theoretical concepts to explore a song’s path to realization. While Matthew often relies on musical theory concepts to initiate his songwriting journey, what is significant is that he incorporates these long-established compositional practices in a transformative manner, turning the traditional structure or means of composition upside down; this leads both him and the listener to unique and surprising sonic destinations. Helen, meanwhile, did not speak about her process in a meticulous and technical manner, but espoused her conviction that she simply needs a provocative story, feeling, or memory (either from her life or imagination) to spin the songwriting wheels. Similarly, Giotta and Kruse (2022) conducted a semester-long contemporary songwriting course with secondary school students, all of whom were considered novice musicians who held little to no experience in musical composition. Upon

completing the pilot course, the researchers interviewed their participants to gain insights into whether the pilot had altered their perceptions of contemporary songwriting techniques. Overall, the participants found the compositional process, at times, mysteriously impenetrable, but, ultimately, a creatively worthwhile endeavor:

Students grew from novices who viewed songwriting as a mysterious process to proficient song creators who composed in a variety of styles and became comfortable repositioning musical puzzle pieces. They gradually gained an understanding of standard song structures and the marriage between lyrics and music, which helped to disrupt their assumptions of linear music composition and, instead, reinforced the cyclic and often mercurial nature of songwriting. Consistently, students noted the pervasive yet invigorating tension between knowing what they wanted to do, but not knowing how to accomplish it. (p. 50)

Representing a slight departure from the other four participants of the present study, Sophie actually does appreciate a more regimented approach to artistic creativity. Unlike her peers, Sophie prefers to set specific goals for herself when composing. Whether it is to finish a song within a particular timeframe or write every day for 30 minutes, Sophie is a more productive songwriter when holding herself accountable to a specific regimen. Further distinguishing herself from her peers who expressed preference for a more “natural” approach to songwriting that is not bound by distinct parameters or quantifiable goals, Sophie finds this method to be ineffective because the idea of ruminating idly by her instrument until the songwriting muse arrives can create more anxiety for her than any worthy song material.

Currently, Sophie is more meticulous than before with her songwriting craft as she described her latest compositional regimen, one which facilitates a prodigious output of new material. For 3 months, for example, Sophie composed dozens of compositions by utilizing words from a daily “Wordle” crossword puzzle game to conceive a story and connect it to an accompanying chord progression that she believes will enhance a narrative she concocted from a handful of random terms hidden in the puzzle. While her compositional approach may run

counter to the techniques espoused by her peers and related literature on the topic, Sophie's goal-oriented mindset towards music composition is similar to creative tactics embraced by the students who participated in Giotta and Kruse's (2022) pilot songwriting course. In their post-course interviews with the researchers, several students discussed the benefit of approaching songwriting within the parameters of a specific task-oriented context: "Many participants' songwriting processes incorporated goal-setting, which was varied and contingent on students' level of comfort within the creative process" (p. 45).

While these different approaches to singer-songwriter composition reflected the unique personalities of our five participants, one aspect frequently discussed among all of them (except Sophie) were two invaluable elements: time and physical space. When discussing their songwriting process, they repeatedly mentioned the need for periods of uninterrupted time in a physical space that is at once quiet, comfortable, familiar, and hidden from daily distractions. For Kyla, this ideal writing space was in the attic of her upstate home, while Dylan preferred his space to be in the redwood forests of northern California, alone with his acoustic guitar near his van and away from town or people for miles in any direction. Dylan described this practice in a ritualistic sense, as he believes that songwriting, at its best, is a spiritual experience that viscerally envelopes him and directs the song's journey, not releasing its grip until the creation is realized.

Dylan noted that he prefers to view songwriting in this manner versus past approaches in which he attempted to "steer the ship" of where the song will lead. He does not want to control the song's development, as this contradicts his general philosophy of unmediated and pure musical experience. The compositional process guides him to the song's discovery instead of him guiding the exploration. Expressing a nearly verbatim sentiment regarding the connection

between one's mental state and musical creativity, Nagy (2015) similarly posited that the mind's engagement with meditation and self-reflection remains a vital component in the fundamental nature of authentic artistry. Akin to Dylan's commentary on effective compositional approaches, Nagy also regarded songwriting as a meditative and spiritual experience. Furthermore, Nagy posited that truly authentic and honest artistry (two characteristics essential to the singer-songwriter identity since the genre's inception) is synonymous with "emotional disclosures constructed via song," especially when the artist perceives creation as a "musical ritual in terms of self-realization" (p. 69). Nagy concluded his inquiry advocating for singer-songwriters to perceive original composition from a mindset similar to what Dylan imbues into his own artistic approach. Espousing the inherent advantageous nature of this creative tack even further, Nagy championed the holistic benefits afforded to musicians who create through this particular lens of psychological and spiritual conception, as it "may be one of the best ways of understanding how and why performers and composers have the inner desire to channel their creative energies through sound" (p. 74).

Returning again to the phenomenological thread shared across the compositional tactics of this study's participants, the evolving nature of their writing approach also comes into focus, as none of them inferred that their creative energy has stagnated in any way. While each participant recognized the evolutionary transformation of their creative approach and the repertoire emerging from it, the specific strategies they utilized to "keep the creative wheels spinning" vary. For example, while Sophie utilized self-made regimented practices such as the "wordle challenge" or the "love song a day challenge" each February, Matthew perpetuated his repertoire output by picking apart songs from his favorite artists, and through this analytical practice of breaking down others' works, he can visualize the salient puzzle pieces that made the

song so captivating in the first place; thus, he facilitates his own compositional output. This systematic “breakdown” of another artist’s repertoire reliably provides Matthew with novel and invaluable compositional tactics that he can add to his growing “songwriting toolbox,” as he called it. Such a resource is useful for Matthew, as whenever he senses an impending slowdown in spinning his creative wheels, he only needs to reach into that “toolbox” for inspiration.

Singer-Songwriter Composition as a Reactionary and Reflective Practice.

Another common trait frequently discussed among all five participants when exploring their compositional approaches was that, more often than not, the songs “easiest” to compose were simply derived from their own respective lived experiences. Moreover, the original songs they are most proud of came into existence by happenstance, as opposed to following an explicit self-imposed goal like “I’m writing a song today.” This “happy accident syndrome,” as I colloquially termed the process, refers to participant anecdotes in which they described a song’s genesis as an unintended reaction to some event or feeling that arrested their mindset and ability to function and be fully present in daily life.

Whether the song was born from a reaction to a severely debilitating traumatic event, such as the car accident that killed Dylan’s stepfather (and nearly killed him as well) when he was a teenager, or the sexual abuse that Kyla endured from someone she deeply loved and trusted, these participants relied on their songwriting prowess to process emotionally the violent and almost unfathomable experiences haunting them for days, months, even years afterwards. Likening this songwriting approach to a “purging,” one that facilitates the release of negative feelings or imagery that clouds their mental health and ability to appreciate life, these specific participants found that the songs resulting from revisits to such awful memories were ultimately positive experiences because they not only rid themselves of the mental anguish associated with

the trauma, but in the process also created some of their most captivating repertoire. Similarly, Bohlen (2004) highlighted the healing nature of this form of music composition. When engaging in the mental processing of traumatic events, as described in Dylan's and Kyla's lived experience narratives, such self-reflection facilitates the ability to compose music that is captivating and therapeutic to both the listener and the artist, as the creative act "produces discovery and something more within ourselves" (p. 13).

Furthermore, this tactic of "reactive songwriting" and its tangible merits was also explored with Matthew and Helen. Matthew wrote multiple songs about the severe hearing impairment his brother suffered since birth, reflecting upon and reacting via song composition to the devastating diagnosis that affected the family. Furthermore, watching his older brother mature, get married, have a family, and buy a home indelibly imprinted Matthew's life perspective. He realized that ruminating over mundane daily annoyances yields nothing positive, and when life does surprise him with seemingly insurmountable obstacle, he remembers his brother's defiant ability to not let his ailment define his identity. In Helen's case, she reacted to the sudden and devastating fracture of a long-term relationship by writing an entire album about it, relying on her artistic acumen to process conflicting feelings of sadness, mourning, rage, and confusion. The artifact that emerged from confronting these emotional conflicts via songwriting not only released the weight on her mental health, but also generated a new collection of songs that Helen deemed to be her most exciting and meaningful yet.

The preceding anecdotes from the five study participants detailing their songwriting approach and artistic identity as singer-songwriters revealed an undeniably tangible connection to the primal definition of the singer-songwriter genre and why audiences were originally so captivated by this form of musical expression when it first emerged in North America nearly

70 years ago. In describing their artistic approach, the participants reinforced the crucial characteristics of the artists who contributed to the genre's inception, as their commentary reflected the same "idiosyncratic stylistic and thematic conventions, lyrical introspection, confessional songwriting, subtle musical arrangements" (Shepherd, 2003, p. 20) that were originally recognized as the hallmarks of the earliest singer-songwriters who broke away from traditional contemporary popular music idioms.

When the singer-songwriter genre first gained notoriety in the early 1960s, audiences were desperate to hear music that featured the same honest and vulnerable characteristics that the five participants now espouse. Listeners wanted music that was not a conspicuous commodity, but a piece of artistic integrity, written with tangible and meaningful purpose (Haworth, 2013). The participants strive for that same sense of determined resolve when composing their own repertoire. In her historical exploration of the singer-songwriter genre, Haworth (2013) described how these "new" artists of the singer-songwriter genre were embraced with open arms by audiences around the world because of this particular artistic identity that the five participants also embody. Haworth added that the singer-songwriter's "musical aesthetic, which promoted confessional songwriting and self-reflection, encapsulated the rise in individualism that characterized the social movements of the era" (p. vii). This same relatable nature of singer-songwriter artistry has helped our five participants find tangible success and garner thousands of listeners so early in their respective careers.

Furthermore, as analyzed in Chapter 5, the dialogic interplay between audiences and the singer-songwriter contributed to the genre's immediate appeal when breakthrough artists such as Bob Dylan and Jackson Browne broke out onto the scene and into pop culture vernacular. These "layers of meanings based in audience perceptions of intimate performance, story-telling,

displays of artist vulnerability, and a sense of immediacy between the listener and the artist's persona" (Haworth, 2013, p. 17) was similarly recognized by both myself and most participants as we collaboratively analyzed their performance recordings during the VSRI experience.

Moreover, this tangible intimate connection forged between the listener and singer-songwriter, as witnessed in the VSRI, almost exactly paralleled the defining characteristics of the genre, as fostered by an

eccentric, buoyant atmosphere that helped to establish the core attributes connected with the singer-songwriter identity for the audience, solidifying the merits of "personal music, authenticity, vulnerability, and intimate performance as the defining mark of artists deemed singer-songwriters. (Bentley, 2016, p. 136)

Though separated by more than half a century, these undeniable parallels between this study's participants and the foremost pioneers of the singer-songwriter genre reinforce why this style of music became so meaningful, to both the listener and artist alike.

Theme 3: Artistic Aspirations versus Reality

The headlights heading southbound
The loser's exodus
That's where you'll find me in Las Vegas
Doing my greatest hits
Me and Dixie, we had ourselves a ball
I followed my dreams
And my dreams said to crawl
(Father John Misty, "I Guess Time Just Makes Fools of Us All")

The Irreconcilable Nature of the "Gig Economy" and the Ambitions of the Contemporary Singer-Songwriter. As a defining characteristic of phenomenological inquiry requires the examination of various elements contributing to the essence of the population under study, I must reflect on the five participants' perspectives of navigating the often fickle world of today's music industry. This phenomenological theme emerged after I had concluded my data collection; as I sifted through the transcripts, I could not ignore how all five participants

repeatedly mentioned the financial pressures that continually weighed on their psyches and ability to focus on their singer-songwriter professional ambitions. Thus, I had to conduct a supplementary literature review of prior scholarship on this specific facet of the professional musician's lived experience—a topic that was absent from my initial literature review in Chapter 2. For the readers' edification, this section includes references to qualitative literature that have not been previously examined but are necessary to discuss within the context of this emergent thematic category so that I could effectively compare my findings with those of other researchers.

Given the increasing prevalence of online streaming platforms as the primary source for artists to share their music, effectively transitioning its dissemination from a physical to a digital format over the past 2 decades, contemporary record labels serve little practical purpose today and are on the verge of extinction. Because of these transformations, the “era of the ‘traditional’ record release, with advertisement and physical sale and distribution, seems long gone. As they saw their profits plummet vertiginously, musicians have been the most affected of all” (Guerra & Lamontagne, 2023, p. 1). This seismic shift in how music is consumed has rendered the artform—a once profitable, physical commodity—now freely available, effectively distilling the musician's profession from an actual vocation to a mere hobby. While working musicians have long sought recognition in society to be considered equal to other professionals, little progress has been made to advance their place in the economy, as their work is simply “not being regarded as ‘proper’ work because its practitioners are evidently enjoying themselves” (Cloonan & Williamson, 2023, p. 358).

Because of this continued disrespect to which working musicians have been subjected, which has also been exponentially exacerbated by the rising popularity of online streaming

services, the professional musician has become increasingly reliant on the “gig economy.” Cloonan and Williamson (2023) defined “gig economy” as an “employment model dominated by various elements of self-employment or temporary employment on a subcontracted basis” (p. 357). The characteristics of this employment include “insecure working conditions, lack of ‘benefits’ such as holiday pay, sick pay, paternity rights, pension contributions, etc.” (p. 357).

The inherently tenuous nature of today’s gig economy is related to the lived experience of the five contemporary singer-songwriters of this current study. This can be distilled to the essential fact that, not only is today’s contemporary singer-songwriters expected to compose and perform original repertoire, and record, release, and promote their creative efforts, but they must also seek temporary employment in the gig economy because their original artistry is expected to be offered virtually for no compensation. This multitude of varied responsibilities that the professional musical artist must assume in order to receive a modicum of reliable income has, unfortunately, been considered a common characteristic of the independent musician’s identity; an attribute that forces the musician to wear multiple “professional hats,” as defined by the British Musician’s Union:

There is no such thing as a typical musician. The blend of roles, patterns of paid employment status and working hours vary across musicians and across different periods in their careers. Developing a portfolio career, made up of a number of different jobs, is a necessary characteristic of many musicians’ careers; this invariably involves developing non-music skills such as business, marketing, teaching and community engagement. (DHA Communications, 2023, p. 5)

The urgent question, then, is: How do the five study participants manage such a wide spectrum of responsibilities while simultaneously attempting to advance their singer-songwriter careers and evolve their artistic identity? As the following commentary from the participants suggested, the multifaceted professional nature of today’s working musician is fraught with anxiety and chaos. Nevertheless, they pursue this seemingly herculean task out of sheer necessity

and an intrinsic motivation to share their passion for the art of music with as many people as possible.

Except for Dylan, who is farther along in his singer-songwriter career compared to the other four participants, one consistent theme ran through each interview: This is a hard vocation to sustain, and virtually no compensation is awarded for their singer-songwriter endeavors. Because of this, many professional musicians today need to be well-versed in composing and performing within multiple genres to be considered for “one-off” gigs. Matthew and Helen, for example, both compose musical theater repertoire for local community theater companies as needed whenever the opportunity arises.

Furthermore, one of the “multiple hats” working musicians need to wear today, as referenced in the aforementioned British Musician’s Union text is that of music instructor. As participants candidly described, the temporary music instructor position is the main source of income for the majority of this study’s participants: Matthew, Helen, and Sophie all teach music to supplement their singer-songwriter ambitions. Whether in the private lesson studio context or working with larger group ensembles, they seize any such opportunity that presents itself. Only Kyla eschewed this adornment of “multiple musical hats,” choosing to be outside gardening when she is not composing or performing. But, as she admitted, being a professional gardener is not lucrative either, and she expressed anxiety nearly every month when new bills pile up, and she and her husband struggle to make ends meet.

It should also be noted that, even though Dylan steers clear of these “side gigs,” one should not assume he is “rolling in the big bucks,” even though he regularly performs before thousands of people with his current musical outfit. To the contrary, Dylan does not even have a place to call home, and he relies on the kindness of friends and family across the country to live

with for 1-2 month stretches before heading back on the road with his band. As he humbly clarified, whenever he cannot find a roof over his head, he resorts to sleeping in his van. Thankfully, Dylan is unfazed by this nomadic lifestyle and even appears to relish that he is not “tied down” by any one city, person, or lifestyle. While at times it is a lonely existence, he is grateful to be playing and composing music full-time, regardless of how many (or how few) zeroes are on his bank account statement.

These vital insights into the economic factor of the participants’ lived experiences inform not only of the passion and determination these five musicians possess in order to maintain their artistic ambitions; they also lead one to wonder how much longer any of them can continue this pursuit of financial stability while simultaneously evolving their authentic singer-songwriter identity and promoting their original repertoire. Inevitably, each artist reaches an inflection point in their career, when they must decide whether to continue this arduous endeavor or abandon the ambition, as many like-minded musicians before them have been forced to do.

While hardly a source of comfort, the five participants do not seem to be alone in their struggle to balance the gig economy with their singer-songwriter ambitions, as prior scholarship has also explored this tenuous profession. Alacovska (2021) bluntly described the current state of the professional musicians’ career with two simple words: a “wageless life” (p. 674). Additionally, Guerra and Lamontagne (2023) determined that the professional career of today’s musician is best characterized by “multiple strategies of ‘getting by’ in a field, that is, at best, not easy, especially for indie musicians who cannot make a living from music without having one or more side jobs to make ends meet” (p. 3). While these insights from previous scholarship on the topic may not provide much solace to the five participants—or any burgeoning professional musicians seeking justifiable compensation for their artistic talents—the inference is that the

contemporary singer-songwriters are expected to reconcile their creative passions with the unforgiving realities of today's gig economy. This represents a shared phenomenological thread that is prevalent across the lived experiences of the participants, shaping both the present and future ambitions of their musical artistry and personal identity.

Theme 4: Personal Potential and Authenticity

Oh, insanity
Babe, it's indispensable
For the true endeavor of your soul
To find the edge and baby, go, go, go.
(Father John Misty, "Mental Health")

Participants' Perspectives on Their Vocation's Ability to Facilitate the Realization of Self-Actualization and Authentic Artistry. From the earliest stages of this study's inception and research protocol development, two theoretical frameworks served as foundational pillars guiding every aspect of the inquiry, from its qualitative phenomenological methodology to the questions asked during each interview: the psychological theories of Self-Actualization and Authentic Artistry. At first glance, the relationship between singer-songwriter artistry and these two developmental theories may appear tenuous, but, after extensively researching the underlying philosophies of self-actualization and authentic artistry in preparation for this inquiry, I became fascinated with whether my five participants believed that either theory could be practically realized via their lived experiences as contemporary singer-songwriters.

While it was difficult to navigate how I would address these obscure psychological concepts with my participants in a natural way, especially since our interview rapport came so easily, it seemed rather forced and off-topic to ask bluntly, "Do you think your artistry helps facilitate this theory that you may never even heard of?" Nevertheless, I was able to ascertain their opinions on this crucial aspect of the study by phrasing my questions with specific syntax

that refrained from direct use of the terms “self-actualization” and “authentic artistry,” and this method proved advantageous for our thematic analysis.

***The Unique Attributes of the Singer-Songwriter
in Relation to Self-Actualization and Authentic Artistry***

In its most fundamental sense, self-actualization can be thought of as a tangible realization of one’s full potential, both personally and artistically. It is important to recall that this goal can only be achieved through frequent and dedicated self-reflection, because, without thoughtfully considering actions and artistry in a reflective manner, how is it possible to appraise what we wish to achieve in life that genuinely feeds our souls and provides lasting contentment? How is it possible to know what “full potential” possibly is without engaging in self-reflection first? Through this lens of asking the participants to reflect on their art and how they convey it (both via recordings and live performances), we began to unravel this complex question.

Because the theories of self-actualization and authentic artistry overlap when exploring their potential for singer-songwriter practices, both theories are discussed in tandem in relation to the participants’ perspectives of such vital elements.

***Emotional Catharsis via Singer-Songwriter Artistry and
Its Relationship to Self-Actualization and Authentic Artistry***

As self-reflection is a crucial stepping-stone towards realizing self-actualization and authentic artistry, I first explore it from the vantage point of after the song has been written and the consequences that result from composing music in a vulnerable and confessional manner. When discussing their songwriting approach, all five participants emphasized how engaging in this particular form of contemporary music composition, in which they reveal intimate details of their lived experience and bare their soul to the listener, often resulted in a visceral sensation of emotional catharsis and psychological relief from the pain or trauma they were reconciling by

composing the song. For Kyla, the feeling of emotional respite she experienced after composing an entire album specifically addressing her sexual assault experience 10 years earlier was unlike any other remedy she had engaged in before. She even described how she needed to make a vinyl copy of the record so she could create a physical artifact of the trauma and see and hold it outside of herself for the first time. This traumatic event that had defined and haunted her for years was now a physical object to separate herself from it. The emotional catharsis yielded by reflecting on this awful event and writing about it so intently and honestly also provided Kyla a sense of empowerment over the experience and its associated feelings and memories. She now controlled the narrative of the event, after more than a decade of it controlling her.

By confronting this deep-seated trauma via singer-songwriter composition, Kyla engaged in both a realization of self-actualization and authentic artistry. The psychological relief she experienced during the album's writing process required her to engage in self-reflection, which then afforded her the ability to redefine the traumatic experience on her own terms. Further, the engagement of self-reflection that was needed to create this work facilitated a degree of personally meaningful self-actualization. Moreover, as Kyla engaged in the cathartic experience of exorcising painful feelings via her powerful operatic voice and stirring ethereal soundscapes in these new compositions, an authentic piece of art was born that became tangible evidence to fulfill her authentic artistry.

There are parallels between Kyla's cathartic journey when writing her album and prior scholarship on the subject of artistic endeavors to facilitate self-reflection and the summative experience of self-actualization. For example, Lawrence (2008) explored the interconnected nature of engaging in artistic endeavors like songwriting as a means to accomplish the realization of one's full potential (thus, achieving self-actualization). Lawrence argued that the creation of

art can favor self-potential fulfillment, as these creative acts “activate extra-rational ways of knowing by virtue of the meaning-making conveyed through symbols, images, and emotional expression” (p. 67). In subsequent inquiries on this topic, Lawrence (2012) noted that the act of singer-songwriter composition can facilitate “spiritual renewal; a connection to purpose, or something greater than himself or herself” (p. 477). Such cerebral transcendence may be considered a crucial experience on the path towards one’s self-actualization.

Further buttressing the connection between the desire to effectuate one’s potential capabilities and creative acts such as the songwriting experience that Kyla described when writing her latest album, Blackburn Miller (2020) noted how the emotive nature of artistic creation “supports self-expression, perspective transformation, and a stronger understanding of oneself through the confrontation with difficult emotions that occurs when composing from a place of honest vulnerability” (p. 340). Kyla’s latest compositional endeavor and subsequent sensations of psychological relief echoed the same transformative experiences espoused by Blackburn Miller when engaging in personally meaningful artistic expression.

Similarly, Helen relied on her compositional prowess to cathartically process and ultimately regain dominance over the deleterious ruminations that seized her psyche following the acrimonious dissolution of a decade-long relationship. By engaging in self-reflection and acceptance via singer-songwriter composition, Helen eventually found herself with a collection of surprisingly jubilant pop anthems and a feeling of renewed empowerment and self-confidence. These revelatory and healing sensations that Helen experienced when making this record facilitated a tangible realization of her self-potential and the essence of her own self-actualization.

Comparing Kyla and Helen’s enlightening compositional experiences with the findings of prior scholarship on the attributes of self-actualization and authentic artistry, several parallels are revealed that buttress the potential for unadulterated euphoria and contentment when these two psychological theories are realized. As singer-songwriter Donald Bohlen (2004) discovered through his own self-revelatory creative endeavors, music composition facilitates the “primal generator of my existence, the delineator of the self, the definition of living creatively” (p. 2), functioning as an “enrichment of the creator, the participator, the beholder, by supplying the means for increased self-knowledge” (p. 3). Bohlen’s personal revelations directly parallel those of this study’s participants, as this powerful sensation of self-acknowledgment, achieved through the intimately confessional practice of authentic singer-songwriter composition, “produces discovery and something more within ourselves” (p. 13), and facilitates a path towards realizing self-actualization. Furthermore, “the full realization of one’s potential and of one’s ‘true self’” (Gleitman et al., 2004) via self-actualization not only represents the pinnacle of psychological development and personal fulfillment. It is, in short, a fundamental human need that can be achieved through the artistically expressive and honest practice of singer-songwriting composition, as the participants clearly espoused.

Highlighting the findings of this study with additional prior research, Montanari (2023) designed a qualitative inquiry that explored the potential for self-actualization fulfillment within the context of singer-songwriter artistry by interviewing three professional singer-songwriters. Through these expansive interviews, Montanari sought to answer: “What happens to us when we are immersed in the songwriting experience?” (p. 2). Congruent with this study’s findings, Montanari also discovered the healing, self-reflective, and empowering nature of singer-songwriter composition. Through her participant disclosures, Montanari concluded that the

singer-songwriter compositional process afforded musicians the opportunity to identify and better understand an unsettling or unclear inner sensation, thus facilitating practices of emotional individuation and edification, which would consequently facilitate one's self-actualization.

Moreover, the act of singer-songwriter composition provided these professional musicians a way to emancipate themselves from past burdens and gain clarity and confidence in their personal potential. These psychological realizations that Kyla and Helen viscerally experienced as they wrote their reflective albums symbolized the fundamental essence of self-actualization. As Montanari (2023) interpreted it, this process of self-actualization via singer-songwriter composition allows the artist to “reclaim their own stories and imagine new roles through the choosing of their own metaphors and sound correlations, a practice that liberates them in narrating and singing their renewed understanding of the self” (p. 14). Similarly, Helen's and Kyla's accounts of their most recent songwriting experiences echoed these liberating notions of self-empowerment and “taking back ownership” of their feelings by confronting emotionally wrought experiences.

Drawing another parallel between the participants' self-realizing experiences of authentic artistry and fulfilling one's potential with prior scholarship, Brackett (2008) also connected his own reconciliation of past trauma and singer-songwriter artistry. Specifically, he noted the invaluable nature of the singer-songwriter's ability to cope with traumatic life experiences via musical composition. This act in and of itself effectively renders them authentic. As Brackett explicated further, this “pathologized creative process” embodied by the singer-songwriter bears the emotionally compelling songs that audiences yearn for and ultimately can empathize with (p. xiv).

Dirkx (2001) described how the emotionally charged images raised to the surface via singer-songwriter artistry can serve as “gateways to the unconscious, freeing selves, and exposing representing deep-seated issues and concerns” that can help the composer “connect outer experiences with unclear aspects of their inner worlds” (p. 66). Essentially, the emotionally authentic act of singer-songwriter composition allows “the soul to learn through art,” thereby creating a “magic moment that transcends rationality and gives a deep meaning to the connection between the self and their world” (Dirkx, 1997, p. 80).

Summary

As these analogous insights derived from prior scholarship showed in parallel connection to this study’s findings, an undeniable and emotionally charged healing characteristic exists within the nature of singer-songwriter artistry. This healing reveals to both the composer and the listener previously unknown pathways towards profound catharsis, empowerment, and novel perspectives on what an individual is capable of achieving. However, they must dig deeply enough and be willing to search through the darkness of buried trauma to discover the luminescence of self-understanding. In the following final chapter, I utilize this chapter’s thematic development of the findings to answer the central research questions. Their answers facilitated the creation of a phenomenological essence statement. There is also a final reflection on the insights from this qualitative investigation to address implications for future research in this domain of musical creativity. Future research initiatives may further illuminate relevant dynamics of the contemporary singer-songwriter’s lived experience and the potential holistic benefits derived from engaging in this unique form of artistic expression.

Chapter 7: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of emerging contemporary singer-songwriters and their perceptions of the development of their compositional practice and artistic identity. Through the research lens of interpretative phenomenology, this inquiry examined the fundamental elements that contributed to the musical and creative development of five emerging contemporary singer-songwriters. A set of emergent areas led to greater attention on each participant's manner of instrument training (formal, autodidactic, or hybrid); the influence of childhood and family dynamics, professional mentorship, and artist-listener dialogic connections; and the potential holistic advantages of personal reflection and growth, emotional catharsis, and psychological healing that may be derived from engaging in singer-songwriter artistry.

Utilizing this interconnected web of predominant experiential factors as the foundation of this qualitative exploration, I sought to illuminate the central motivations that perpetuate the professional ambitions of these five singer-songwriters. I also aimed to uncover the inherent phenomenological essence of what it genuinely feels like to be an emerging contemporary singer-songwriter in today's commercial music landscape.

This study utilized a triangulation of different qualitative data collection methods (semi-structured interviews, observations of live performances, corresponding researcher field notes, and video-stimulated recall interviews) to assemble a "configuration of narratives" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 8). The subsequent thematic analysis of the qualitative participant data not only facilitated the development of a tangible existential sense of singer-songwriter artistry; it also afforded an opportunity to address two thematic frameworks guiding this inquiry: self-actualization and authentic artistry. Moreover, it was important to determine the degree to which

singer-songwriter artistic practices may illuminate a path towards the realization of these two psychological theories. By focusing the research on a particular subset of musicians within this genre (emerging contemporary singer-songwriters), this study provided timely, relevant, and pragmatic insights that musical pedagogues and emerging professional artists alike can rely on to enhance efficacy and appreciation within the context of their respective vocations.

Originally presented in Chapter 1, the following research questions served as a guiding light to execute this exploratory qualitative inquiry.

How do emerging contemporary singer-songwriters describe the development of their compositional process and artistic identity in relation to the realization of their holistic and personal essence?

- a. In what ways did the manner of their musical training impact their ability to navigate the contextual realities of singer-songwriter composition?
- b. To what degree do they regard their profession as a means for achieving self-actualization and authenticity in their artistry and self-identity consummation?
- c. What are the central motivational elements in the realization of their professional and artistic potential? Moreover, what specific resources feed and perpetuate their determination?

Finally, I employed the holistic realizations derived from the implications of the findings to offer recommendations for future research initiatives within the domain of contemporary musical creativity. Ideally, these scholarly recommendations for potential untraveled routes of qualitative music education research may further illuminate our understanding of singer-songwriter creativity and the holistic merits derived from engaging with this specific archetype of contemporary musical expression.

Research Question Discussion

Question 1: How do emerging contemporary singer-songwriters describe the development of their compositional process and artistic identity in relation to the realization of their holistic and personal essence?

Serving as the catalyst for our inquiry, this primary research question essentially encapsulated the aggregate of my intention to elucidate the underlying shared phenomenological essence of the five participants' lived experiences as contemporary singer-songwriters.

To address this main research question and its three ancillary subqueries methodically, I rely on the four phenomena theme categories uncovered in Chapter 6's data analysis discussion. These represent the shared phenomenological experiential essence of our participants' singer-songwriter identities to provide tangible evidence of the qualitative inferences inferred from this multifaceted research protocol.

Question 1a: In what ways did the manner of their musical training impact their ability to navigate the contextual realities of singer-songwriter composition?

Formative childhood years exerted a tremendous influence on each individual's subsequent decision to self-immense into the world of professional singer-songwriter artistry. Whether developed via formal private studio lessons, autodidactic approaches, performance ensembles, or a hybrid of other musical pedagogies, each participant's respective musical instrument learning experience profoundly affected the advancement of their technical proficiency. Further, it also transformed their perspective on the holistic purpose and emotional effect of musical experiences. More specifically, by using a combination of personally advantageous instrumental learning strategies and continuous encouragement from confidence-boosting supportive instructor-mentors throughout childhood, these five participants were guided

precisely to the proverbial doorway of affecting musical expression. All they had to do at this point was open the door and see the myriad creative possibilities available to them via their newfound musical acuity. Luckily, as their current self-designation of being a “professional musician” served as testament, not only did all five participants eventually turn the handle of that transcendental door and step through the doorway; they also never turned back.

In summation, the study data inferred—somewhat unambiguously—that each participant’s instrumental learning experience played a crucially influential role in their respective choices to embrace their professional identity as an emerging contemporary singer-songwriter. Moreover, this answer to Question 1a was corroborated by anecdotal evidence that led to the discovery of Chapter 6’s vital phenomenological theme, “How the Development of Musical Acumen and Mentorship Facilitated the Life-Altering Decision to Pursue Singer-Songwriter Composition and Performance.”

As this theme’s phenomenological nature suggests, I once more emphasize the significance of the finding that, regardless of how the five participants developed their instrumental prowess, all of them emphatically espoused the influential and indelible connection between their instrument learning experience and eventual compositional approach.

Interestingly, Dylan was the sole member of the participant group to not receive consistent formal instrument training; ironically, he was also the most “successful” (determined by number of monthly listeners and the scope of live performance audiences) of all five participants. As is often the case with interpretative phenomenological studies, the small sample size (five participants) limits the ability to determine whether Dylan’s larger audience base was correlated to the autodidactic nature of his instrument learning experience. However, perhaps it

is a fascinating thought that the manner of instrument training received does not necessarily lead to a more advantageous creative output.

Additionally, every participant emphasized how important it was to receive positive, encouraging, and constructive feedback on creative endeavors when learning their primary instrument. As the participants noted across various interviews, they remain eternally indebted to their instructors (or, in Dylan's case, his supportive listening community) for the steadfast creative support and inspiration they received throughout their instrument training. Without this enlightening encouragement, they may never have engaged in singer-songwriter composition and realized their potential as authentic musical artists.

Question 1b: To what degree do they regard their profession as a means for achieving self-actualization and authenticity in their artistry and self-identity consummation?

Self-actualization and authentic artistry are esoteric concepts to most people outside of the philosophical and research-oriented fields of academia. As my dialogues with each participant progressed throughout the data collection process, I recognized how this calm, non-judgmental atmosphere within the interview setting was a vital component of the research methodology, as it was yielding vividly candid, honest, and vulnerable responses from the participants. This kind of qualitative data was not only helpful for my personal aims for this study, but was also precisely the data (natural, sincere, and extemporaneous) that are essential for interpretive phenomenological research. These data facilitated my ability to uncover the true essence of the contemporary singer-songwriter's lived experience.

Thus, to maintain the validity and reliability of this research methodology, I made a concerted effort to "cloak" my curiosity around the participants' perceptions on self-actualization

and authentic artistry within ancillary questions across the two semi-structured interviews. For example, as self-reflection is a crucial stepping-stone towards achieving self-actualization, I asked my participants multiple questions about self-reflection within the context of their lived experience as an emerging contemporary singer-songwriter, including whether they believed that their lived experience as a singer-songwriter could lead to the ultimate realization of achieving one's full potential (self-actualization) and producing art that is unequivocally genuine and personally meaningful to the individual (authentic artistry).

As the psychological healing processes of self-reflection and emotional catharsis represent necessary stepping-stones with the potential to realize both self-actualization and authentic artistry, commonalities overlapped when it came to answering this question. For this reason, both theoretical concepts are discussed in tandem as I unpack the singer-songwriter's lived experience in relation to achieving these holistic milestones. While the intricate nature of this crucial research question cannot be sufficiently addressed with simplistic binary terminology, the consensus of participant data suggested that, overall, self-actualization and authentic artistry may be realized via singer-songwriter practices, especially when considering both the compositional and performative aspects of this vocation. As conveyed by the participants' lived experience portraits and VSR commentary, engaging with singer-songwriter artistry can lead to self-reflection and, subsequently, an enlightened and transformative reconceptualization of one's self worth, purpose, and artistic legitimacy.

Furthermore, the fundamental creative practices and traits that have always been present in singer-songwriter artistry from its inception, and continue to persist among today's contemporary singer-songwriters, ultimately require musicians to engage consistently in self-reflection, confessional narrative expression, tangible vulnerability, and emotional catharsis to

create the compelling and genuine songs that listeners of the genre have been drawn to for more than half a century. Ironically, the data also suggested that my five participants may not have even been consciously aware that they were bringing to fruition the holistic goals associated with self-actualization and authentic artistry whenever they wrote a new song or performed for a live audience. Nevertheless, every participant has undoubtedly experienced the galvanizing emotional and psychological healing sensations that result from the realization of these two philosophical theories—despite not knowing it.

As previously mentioned, my data analysis also uncovered discernible nuances regarding how each participant experienced this holistic fulfillment of self-actualization and authentic artistry. For example, Kyla achieved a degree of self-actualization and authentic artistry via the singer-songwriter style of musical composition. In composing an entire album that explicitly addressed the scarring traumatic sexual assault she suffered 10 years prior by someone whom she believed was the love of her life and protector, Kyla confronted and, ultimately, regained emotional control of the immense residual trauma that she had unsuccessfully attempted to bury deep within her psyche for far too long, exacerbating her mental health. Though writing this album was an emotionally exhausting compositional experience, Kyla ultimately benefited from her efforts. When the LP was eventually released to the public, Kyla not only realized her potential as a person and artist (self-actualization) but also created a collection of songs that she proudly regards as some of her most captivating and mature soundscapes that once seemed beyond her ability to create. As I listened to the songs, I immediately heard the catharsis emoting from her voice. I could feel the sensation of tortuous memories dissipating into the ether after releasing their grip on her fundamental self-identity. Moreover, because Kyla bravely engaged with this traumatic event via the highly confessional and genuine nature of singer-songwriter

composition, she now enjoys a newfound sense of command over her emotions instead of being controlled by them.

Not every participant experienced the realization (or a degree of it) via singer-songwriter composition. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Dylan described similar feelings associated with self-actualization and authentic artistry via live performance rather than song composition. He described the experience this way: “It literally felt like a dream come true. Like when you’re a kid and you dream of walking on the moon, and the one day, you’re on the fucking moon! I dreamt for so long of moments like this one, and it’s just surreal to be watching it in reality!” In watching his recording together during our VSRI, I also felt I could genuinely *see* the physical manifestation of Dylan’s personal self-actualization and authentic artistry occurring in real time. Dylan too recognized the immense significance of this transformative realization of his full potential as an artist and human being. The “Nomadic Preacher,” as I colloquially called him once I analyzed his interview transcripts, finally conjured his dream of sharing his musical sermon with the masses. The reality of this experience seems to have exceeded even his own wildest imaginations.

In sum, the heterogeneous perspectives of the five participants strongly suggested that the realization of self-actualization and authentic artistry can be achieved via the unique practice of singer-songwriter artistry. Some detractors may challenge this inference by stating that multiple genres of popular music can lead to similar revelatory personal transformations. Perhaps this is true, but only further research examining a wide range of contemporary music genres can determine that. For now, however, it is clear that singer-songwriter compositional and performative practices, which uniquely require the musician to create as well as interpret their

art to the masses in an extremely intimate and confessional manner, reveal a path towards the lofty existential goal of attaining personal self-fulfillment and authentic artistic experiences.

Question 1c: What are the central motivational elements in the realization of their professional and artistic potential? Moreover, what specific resources feed and perpetuate their determination?

This question addressed the specific routines that the five participants engage in to advance their professional career and evolve their artistic ambitions. While most adults would eschew the tenuously volatile nature of the singer-songwriter's profession for a more stable and potentially lucrative career, these participants chose to pursue lofty artistic goals, even after years of receiving little to no encouragement or tangible achievements to justify their persistence. How do these singer-songwriters remain resolute in their artistic ambitions, especially within the context of today's commercial music landscape?

Essentially, the dogged determination evident in all five participants' lived experiences as singer-songwriters revealed how an innate intrinsic motivation resides in each of them—the very same motivational factor that piqued their musical curiosity from their earliest childhood memories. This persistent *need* to create art and conjure a shared communal musical experience of unadulterated jubilation perpetuates their precarious pursuit of professional stability via singer-songwriter artistry.

As the uncovered “Identity” phenomena across all five participants' lived experiences from Chapter 6 revealed, each one of the singer-songwriters continued this vocational pursuit for purely self-derived reasons. Nearly all composed personally meaningful music, often filled with entrancing narrative arcs or relatable emotional tribulations, to make sense of the world around them. Once more, the psychological and emotional healing catharsis that can result from

engaging in singer-songwriter composition provides enough justification to continue this vocation. Some participants, like Sophie, needed to create regimented songwriting challenges and goals to help them continue their artistic ambition. Other participants, like Dylan and Helen, preferred to wait patiently for the creative muse to tap them on the shoulder with the kernel of a song idea. Matthew's songwriting approach and artistic motivation lay somewhere in between the lived experiences of Dylan and Sophie, as he tended to vacillate between needing to fulfill a self-imposed strict songwriting quota within a specified timeframe to being content with letting weeks elapse without producing a single melody or lyric.

In sum, while the particular details of the motivational factor varied across the five participants' lived experiences as singer-songwriters, what was undoubtedly apparent was the fact that all of them continued walking a serpentine vocational path only for themselves. Extrinsic motivation did not seem to exist in the vocabulary of these five determined singer-songwriters. Furthermore, there may never have been a logical rationale behind their motivation. Perhaps driving their artistic ambitions is something only they know and feel. Just as they use original compositions to convey stories, emotions, and beliefs that they find challenging to describe in conventional conversation, perhaps the motivating factor that perpetuates their artistry also cannot be manifested with specific syntax or diction. Moreover, this lack of a clear answer for this question reveals yet another quintessential characteristic of the contemporary singer-songwriter: an aura of mystery that surrounds them. One certainty is that audiences will continue to listen, even if only for the futile desire to glimpse what constitutes the singer-songwriter's artistic identity.

One More Question...

Having addressed the three ancillary research questions, I draw the reader back to the overarching question that initiated this qualitative inquiry 3 years ago: How do emerging contemporary singer-songwriters describe the development of their compositional process and artistic identity in relation to the realization of their holistic and personal essence?

As this comprehensive question distills meaning from the emerging contemporary singer-songwriter's lived experience, it is necessary to provide a phenomenological Essence Statement that can convey my personal interpretation of the shared phenomena underlying these participants' lived experiences. Returning to the rationale for choosing this particular research methodology to illuminate insights about the contemporary singer-songwriter, it is crucial to remember that phenomenology is a useful research tool in qualitative studies because it describes the phenomenon in question with rich detail while also utilizing vivid lived experience portraits of said phenomenon that may contribute to an understanding of its existential meaning (Husserl, 1964; Van Manen, 1990). Moreover, the *phenomenological essence statement* represents a description of the universal essence of a phenomenon and is fashioned by analyzing and synthesizing the experiences of people who have experienced the phenomena (Randles, 2012).

Applying this particular research methodology to my own interpretation of the holistic significance of the four discovered phenomenological themes shared across the five participants' lived experiences as contemporary singer-songwriters, I have crafted the following essence statement that encapsulates the universal meaning of the common phenomena experienced by the five singer-songwriters who participated in this qualitative inquiry.

Essence Statement

A qualitative examination of the lived experiences of five emerging contemporary singer-songwriters resulted in the discovery of four phenomenological themes that were commonly shared across their respective experiential narrative portraits:

1. Childhood experiences, family dynamics, and the development of musical acumen: the influence of three disparate elements on the singer-songwriter's compositional approach;
2. Artistic identity development in relation to how the participants compose personally meaningful original repertoire;
3. The economy of the singer-songwriter profession: reconciling artistic ambitions amidst irreconcilable realities of today's music industry; and
4. Singer-songwriter artistic practices as the means of realizing self-actualization and authentic artistry.

These four phenomenological themes emerged frequently during the analysis of the lived experiences of the five singer-songwriter participants, with each thematic category representing a commonly shared influential element that not only explains why these individuals originally chose to become professional singer-songwriters but also illuminates the fundamental compositional and performative practices they utilize to create captivating musical artistry. Furthermore, these four shared themes constitute the essence of the contemporary singer-songwriter's artistic identity and why these artists continue to pursue this vocation. Beyond the superficial aspirations of money, fame, and celebrity, these five professional musicians engage in singer-songwriter artistry simply because they *need* to.

They use the confessional and personally interpreted nature of the singer-songwriter genre to make sense of the world around them, as a kind of catharsis to reconcile emotional turmoil and psychological ailments and the experiences that have shaped their fundamental identities. This is the pure phenomenological *essence* of the contemporary singer-songwriter. For these five study participants, singer-songwriter artistry provides them with a sense of purpose, emotional catharsis, and (when they hit the right notes) a feeling of unadulterated jubilation that they can share in solidarity with any listener who identifies with the stories of their lives.

Implications of Study Findings

This study's qualitative findings revealed the distinctly unique musical attributes and artistic intentions shared by contemporary singer-songwriters. Unlike other contemporary popular music genres, the singer-songwriter genre stands alone in how its repertoire is both created and interpreted by the same individual. Furthermore, as buttressed by the participants' commentary on their primary motivations to engage in this specific manner of musical composition which is suffused with intimately personal disclosures from their lived experiences, the singer-songwriter's repertoire tends to be deeply confessional. This fundamental element of their artistic identity further enhances the mystifying allure of this contemporary artist.

The musicians who choose to engage with singer-songwriter artistry and its distinct compositional practices are afforded a plethora of personally meaningful creative paths—namely, captivating tales woven from lived experience, imagination, or both fiction and autobiographical perspectives. Further, singer-songwriters can utilize their musical expression as a means to process emotional or psychological hardships in a healthy and cathartic manner. The holistic emotional and psychological benefits derived from engaging in singer-songwriter artistry remain limitless. The only barrier standing in the way of experiencing the authentic musical

expression of singer-songwriter composition is the composer himself—one who is reticent to take creative risks and share intimate details of their lived experiences. Musicians who *are* willing to bare their souls as the singer-songwriter composition requires will enter the realm of cathartic artistic expression, revelatory self-discovery, and potential shared euphoria that knows no bounds.

Recommendations for Future Research

As is often the case with studies utilizing phenomenological research methodology, one shortcoming is a small participant pool. Because only five participants were examined in this inquiry, it is difficult to draw reliable conclusions without a larger and more diverse (in age, gender, race, and cultural background) group of participants. Further, as this inquiry's findings have somewhat prompted more questions than answered them, future research initiatives on this topic would benefit from a focused exploration of how music pedagogues, across varied academic settings, could advantageously incorporate the findings from this inquiry to design an engaging contemporary compositional pedagogy that reflects the relevant curiosities and interests of today's burgeoning musicians.

This design could then be used as the foundation for a pilot contemporary songwriting course to be implemented in a future study. This course would assess the efficacy of compositional pedagogy that embraces salient creative strategies espoused by this study's participants. The feedback gleaned from students who engage in this potential pilot contemporary songwriting course may reveal even more potential qualitative inquiries that could provide additional compositional pedagogies for music teachers at various academic levels to implement as a way to enhance the creative curiosities of their own students. The heterogeneity of these future inquiries reveals a number of potentially illuminating inquiries that may be

explored to better understand the unique compositional processes and influential factors that shape the artistic identity of contemporary songwriters. As well, the development of practical songwriting tactics can benefit future generations of musical artists seeking to express their inherent creativity via personally meaningful and emotionally cathartic repertoire.

An additional future route of research derived from these findings could explore the complex web of industry and societal-driven elements that constitute today's "gig economy" in direct correlation to the professional and artistic ambitions of contemporary singer-songwriters. A study could examine how singer-songwriters effectively navigate the capricious nature of today's music industry, a point these five participants raised multiple times during the interviews. The economic uncertainty associated with the contemporary singer-songwriters' lived experience is an issue of significant consequence that would benefit from future scholarly inquiry. As both the findings of this study and prior scholarship suggested, the pernicious effect on emerging professional musical artists by the tenuous and volatile nature of this vocation could be mitigated by constructive and pragmatic recommendations from future research initiatives. For example, it would be interesting to conduct a study focused on this specific aspect of the singer-songwriter's lived experience, as the findings may offer musical artists an economically viable path towards financial stability without sacrificing the necessary time and patience required to create captivating singer-songwriter compositions.

Lastly, when considering how a music teacher at the secondary or undergraduate level could utilize the insights gleaned from this study, it seems that a useful future research initiative could involve a pilot study designed around the positive formal lesson training experiences that the majority of these five participants enjoyed so much. They frequently espoused the invaluable

positive influence that their learner-centered instructors had on their eventual decision to explore singer-songwriter exploration.

Using these insights as a platform for the pilot study, a future research initiative could conduct a pilot course on instrumental instruction within the private studio environment that dedicates equal time towards the student's creative interests and the development of their technical abilities. Perhaps such a pilot study could culminate in a required songwriting project, during which the student demonstrates both technical and compositional skills developed over the course of their musical tutelage. This would provide tangible evidence of self-discovery and meaningful creative expression that emerges from this innovative approach to studio lesson instruction. Diving even more deeply into the pedagogical realm of potential research initiatives derived from the present findings could involve conducting a pilot course at the secondary academic level that examines the relationship between adolescent well-being and contemporary songwriting practices such as those utilized by the participants. As an individual's holistic well-being is often at its most delicate and precarious state during adolescence, it would be interesting to determine to what degree one's mental well-being is affected when a burgeoning teenage musician engages in singer-songwriter composition and performance. Moreover, what holistic benefits may be derived from this particular age group by immersing in singer-songwriter musical practices?

Final Reflections

As I reflect on the past 3 years since I first conceived of this idea for my dissertation study, it feels surreal to think it is now concluding. I am feeling a tinge of nostalgia about the time I spent with my five participants and the hundreds of hours listening to their interview transcripts and re-watching their recorded live performances. With the cadence of their voices

still ringing in my ears, I feel I have become friends with five strangers as I designed and executed this study. Perhaps this is a fortuitous sign, though, especially considering the phenomenological nature of my study.

As I reflect on some of my conversations with the participants, I now recognize this extended time with each person was ultimately advantageous to my data analysis and theme development approach. When I first met with each participant, I informed them of my own past experience as a performing singer-songwriter trying to realize his fantastical “rock star” dreams in New York City and playing across the five boroughs at any room that would let me in. Sometimes I played for 90 people, other times for five (bartender included). I believe that my dual role as researcher and singer-songwriter facilitated the vividly detailed responses that my participants offered.

Their overall candor and comfortable demeanor put both of us at ease during our conversations, resulting in an honest rapport as if two friends were chatting about the usual highs and lows of “making it” as a singer-songwriter in today’s short-attention-span musical environment of 60-second TikTok videos and Instagram recommended-feed aggregates that we must navigate deftly if we seek success as an original artist today.

Moreover, at our final interview, several participants noted how much they enjoyed chatting with me about their careers and music. Matthew, for instance, noted that “it was a true pleasure talking to a brother in the fight,” and Helen added how she felt so comfortable talking to me about this profession “because you just get it. You’ve been there, so you know what I’m talking about.” This candid participant commentary inferred that my identity as a singer-songwriter elicited genuinely authentic and unadulterated responses that were integral to the purpose of interpretative phenomenological research. These participants felt comfortable enough

to let their guard down and be vulnerable during our interviews because I was just another “brother in the fight,” with whom they could empathize about the positives and negatives of the contemporary singer-songwriter’s lived experience.

Ultimately, I hope future readers of this dissertation will gain some pragmatic resources to apply towards their own vocation, whether as a musical pedagogue or a professional musician. As the lived-experience explorations of these five emerging singer-songwriters have conveyed, engagement with singer-songwriter artistry can be an arduous, emotionally draining experience. Nevertheless, it is a holistically rewarding one.

Moreover, the shared phenomenological threads discovered during this qualitative inquiry vividly revealed the complex tapestry constituting artistic lived experiences within today’s capricious media landscape. As their narrative portraits candidly conveyed, these five participants pour their essence into each new composition, knowing well that this creative risk may never yield material accolades or adoration. Yet, they continue traversing this enigmatic path towards emotional catharsis and enlightened self-knowledge. The sensation is visceral and fleeting, yet always leads them back to where the beginning, instrument in hand, ever curious for a future of wondrous creative potential.

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