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## **Electronic Article**

### Nothing New: Lots of Gel?

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## Nothing New: Lots of Gel?

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My “essay review” of *Musical Identities* takes the form of a conversation between myself, a doctoral student, and a colleague, “Dayton” (a pseudonym): a high school music teacher and professional musician. The perspective from which I write (and speak) is one that regards identity research as a significant concern for music education. I approach the book from the standpoint of the pedagogical issues and concerns it raises for me. I hope as well to help bring into focus some of the assumptions that render identity research problematic.

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Karen: *I’m reviewing a book called Musical Identities, by Raymond Macdonald, David Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell. I have rather mixed feelings about it – its title, its assumptions, its cover. . .*

Dayton: You know the old saying, “You can’t judge a book by its cover.”

Karen: *But doesn’t a book’s cover influence who reads it, or suggest who is supposed to read it?*

Dayton: Perhaps. In this case, there’s a picture of a guy holding his Gibson guitar, almost like a gun, pointing it at somebody.

Karen: *Does that draw you into the book?*

Dayton: Yeah. It’s not as stuffy as name Oxford Press might otherwise suggest. The person on the cover has a necklace, a t-shirt with a big hole in the center, and modern looking hair.

Karen: *With lots of gel. And the title’s spelled with different fonts, in different sizes of letters.*

*Taken together, this cover and this title seem to imply several interesting things: that the notion of musical identity is related primarily to playing or performing;*

*that musical identity is relevant primarily to the young; that it's somehow, or primarily, associated with 'pop' phenomena; and that there are many musical identities. My doctoral research is concerned with musicians and identity – the identity conflicts of musicians becoming school teachers – and these weren't things I found in my interviews. In fact, when my subjects spoke of identity, it was always as a unitary, singular thing – not multiple. Musical Identities seems to compartmentalize musical identity: this identity and that identity. What musicians tend to say is that they have just one identity – a global “musician” identity that may secondarily involve performing, conducting, arranging, improvising, composing, and so on. At least, that's what they seem to say.*

Dayton: I've read some of your research about student teachers. I like the story about Joseph, the jazz musician. It really outlines how his identity as a musician was predominant. He just couldn't think of himself as a teacher.

Karen: *Yes. I have written eight short stories about musicians' journeys through teacher education. And Joseph's story is not unusual in that regard.*

Dayton: Did this book change how you conceptualize your project or interpret your findings? Anything new?

Karen: *Not a lot for me. Too bad, because I think researching musical identity is really important. I believe it impacts teacher training in so many ways.*

Dayton: If musicians can't develop teacher identities that are as potent as their musician identities, they'll have trouble becoming successful educators, right?

Karen: *Yes. Look at the two major areas the book's divided into: “developing musical identities,” and “developing identities through music.” These categories strike me as essentialist – they're so constraining, and there's a lot they leave out that ought to be addressed.*

Dayton: Like what?

Karen: *The book explores aspects of musical identities that are socially defined within cultural roles and musical categories, but I think it neglects to address how culture and cultural identity can influence music. It's also missing chapters on how media and technology influences identity. Live musicians are out of work due to technology.*

Dayton: That's for sure.

Karen: *I wanted my research to help musicians create teacher identity. But I found that they had such deep-rooted identities as musicians, they had difficulties integrating teacher identity. The psychological forces of their identity formation were so strong, and they had such loyalty to their musician identity. There's some very interesting music education literature in this area – the work of Brian Roberts, of Steven Paul, and of Hildegard Froehlich for instance.*

Dayton: I understand how you'd be concerned with this issue of musician-teacher identity. I think of myself as a musician who teaches. Teaching is my day job.

Karen: *The professional musicians in my research, especially ones with Master's degrees in performance, seem almost to suffer identity crises as they entered the teaching world.*

Dayton: I've had mature musicians as student teachers. They come with lots of experience and with musical knowledge from many different settings. They often identify primarily as professional musicians.

Karen: *Yes, and becoming a teacher seems to threaten that identity, causing serious turmoil. One of the real strengths of Musical Identities is its recognition that musical identity is deeply embedded.*

Dayton: But the photo on the cover almost makes identity seem trendy, like a fad or something temporary.

Karen: *What I'm finding, in fact, is that a musician's identity is not casual or a trend. It is life lasting. Still, professional musicians can make excellent music teachers. Educator identity should not threaten a musician identity.*

Dayton: But people with professional musician backgrounds have to struggle, sometimes, to get down to the kids' levels.

Karen: *Yes, the act of educating musically actually requires they alter their identities. That's often very difficult.*

Dayton: As a professional musician myself, it's frustrating to see that. Likewise, it's hard for some professional musicians to understand teaching theory.

Karen: *I agree. Another strength of Musical Identities is that it portrays identity as intersubjective and social. Roberts' research investigates musicians' identity formation during their university studies. According to him, as I recall, participating in ensembles with others was especially influential in developing this sense of identity.*

*The subjects of my research identified first and foremost as “musician.” Just one identity. Do you feel you have one identity or many?*

Dayton: I have one identity as a versatile musician. And that’s someone who can cross boundaries, between different musical styles. If someone limits musical identity to saying that person’s a classical musician, country western musician, punk rocker, hip-hop or symphonic classical musician, that’s not going to work.

Karen: *What is the nature of the relationship between identity and talent, do you think? Is talent equivalent to musician-identity?*

Dayton: When I think of a musical student, I think of her or him as having special talent.

Karen: *But doesn’t this way of looking at it suggest that part of a music teacher’s job is distinguishing the ‘haves’ from the ‘have nots’? What about the musical identities and the musical education for non-performers?*

Dayton: I have a performance-oriented program because I feel that performing needs to be a big part of music education. Becoming a music teacher, though, is another matter.

Karen: *Interesting. As I say, most of my subjects did not consider teaching part of their musician identity. Performing seems the defining characteristic of “a musician,” even those that teach.*

Dayton: Well, I think I’ve covered those boundaries – conductor, performer, teacher, improviser, arranger. I think it all stems from one central musician identity.

Karen: *The section in the book that focuses on music developing aspects of individual identities is extremely relevant. Music is a powerful influence on identity. But I wished it mentioned other aspects. My subjects said that music also develops emotional sensitivity, competition, performer behaviors, and perfectionism. What about those aspects?*

Dayton: I agree: music is such a powerful influence on identity.

Karen: *There is a chapter that explores gender identity and music. Do you think gender is related to musician identity?*

Dayton: No, musicians actually break a lot of boundaries. Traditionally, there have been more men involved with jazz but if you look in pop scenes, there are a lot of girl bands.

- Karen: *Why do some musical venues seem to be compatible with women's identities while others do not? For example, why are women tolerated on the pop scene and not others? Doesn't gender influence musician identity?*
- Dayton: I don't think so, unless you talk about singers. There are might be a few more women singers than men. But nothing else.
- Karen: *That's a pretty controversial claim. I think we'll have to agree to differ on that.*
- Dayton: *Perhaps so. . . gender and identity are touchy issues.*
- Karen: *The section "developing identities through music" made some good points, I thought. Students' musical identities are extensively shaped by music curricula.*
- Dayton: That depends. Only if they are good at music. I imagine there's conflicting research on this: research suggesting musical identity can be nurtured in children, and other studies suggesting some kids will never develop a sense of rhythm or pitch. From my perspective working with students and being involved with music for the last thirty-nine years, I've encountered students that are never going to develop a sense of pitch or rhythm or both. Some are not musically inclined. These would not develop an identity through music: not a positive identity anyway.
- Karen: *What do you mean? A negative identity is still an identity, after all. Are you saying that only a "musician identity" is a truly musical identity?*
- Dayton: I guess that's what I mean.
- Karen: *One chapter talks about developing a child's identity as a musician. It discusses family scripts to developing children's musician identities.*
- Dayton: Well, I have three children. You really have to expose them to music. And some say from the womb. You have to expose them to different kinds of good music. To build that identity, you take them to concerts and let them develop at an early age. The idea of listening to music is enjoyable. You need a positive spin on it. You don't want to listen to music and say isn't that terrible? I made sure when my children were young, I took them to a large number of different concerts, orchestras, musical shows, and seeing Gloria Estefan, and Natalie Cole, though they might have been the only kids in the audience. They really developed musically because of this kind of thing.

Karen: *So you wanted them to be professional musicians? Or did you just want them to be involved with music?*

Dayton: I just wanted them to be exposed to good music. Two out of three have stayed in music. The middle child has does some things related to music but is more into theatre. She developed into a pianist, percussionist, and a singer though.

Karen: *And your other two?*

Dayton: The oldest one formed her own band, has written many songs and hopes to make it big as a pop singer. And the youngest is into musical theatre and starts a university music program this fall. She's really into vocal, piano, and percussion too.

Karen: *So you have shaped them musically. Would they say they identify as musicians?*

Dayton: The oldest one does. It's hard to know what age people identify themselves as something. My eighteen year old, if asked what she considered herself to be, I don't know if she would say "musician," even though that is her strongest subject.

Karen: *That's interesting. How do you suppose it is that she can be outstanding at music and not have that be central to her identity? I have heard musicians say they first feel their identity as a musician when they get paid to perform. I guess they equate identity as a musician as being shaped through professional musical involvements?*

Dayton: Yes.

Karen: *That's the point in your life you considered yourself a musician?*

Dayton: I think so. If I was asked in my first or second year university, what is your identity, I would probably have said a music student. Later on, I'd say I'm a trumpet player but it took playing professionally before I really found that identity.

Karen: *Something about getting paid.*

Dayton: Yes.

Karen: *The book has many merits. I like that it problematizes 'identity.' But I am interested in exploring different forms of research and wish the text had been*

*presented in another forms. Traditional representation of research seems limiting.*

Dayton: Well, I have found academic books difficult to read. If you don't have the terminology, it can be difficult.

Karen: *I want my research to be read by all members in the music education community not just by academics. And I hope the findings from my research will help the curriculum of music teacher training programs.*

Dayton: How?

Karen: *I've concluded two things on the basis of my research. First that professional musicians, ones with deeply rooted performer identities, need mentorship from music educators who are also professional musicians. Or like you, musicians who also teach. This seems to help them overcome their crisis.*

Dayton: Interesting.

Karen: *Yes, professional musicians seemed to relate better to professional musicians. I also found that when musicians were involved with my research, and participating in the plot of their stories, they overcame their struggle. They were actually interested in becoming a hero in their story.*

Dayton: Did most overcome their struggles?

Karen: *The ones not mentored by professional musicians who were also music educators had difficulties. All they could see was that becoming a teacher meant letting go of being a musician. Helping student teachers develop teacher identity is critical to music teacher education.*

*Despite my reservations, I'm glad these authors compiled the information they did to highlight identity issues. I plan to further my research in this area because both music performance and music education greatly influence a musician's identity.*

Dayton: Look at that cover again: that guy's hair is something else...

### ***Biographical Information***

Karen V. Lee is a Doctoral Candidate, Faculty Advisor, and co-founder of the Teaching Initiative for Music Educators cohort (TIME) at the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. Canada. Her research interests include issues of

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musician identity, teacher identity, teacher education, and arts-based approaches to qualitative research. She is currently completing her dissertation, *Musicians: Riffs of Change*, a book of short stories about musicians exploring teacher education in a university program.