



**Rock Goes to School on Screen:  
A model for teaching non-“learned” musics derived from the films  
*School of Rock* (2003) and *Rock School* (2005)<sup>1</sup>**

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What can be learned from two films with ‘rock’ and ‘school’ in their titles, about rock in school and about music and schooling more broadly? Brehony (1998) argues that popular cultural representations of schooling ‘are not neutral reflections of a pre-existing reality but, like all representations, are constructions that are struggled over in an effort to shape the common sense of a particular social order’ (113). Just as schools naturalise our understanding of music (Cook 1998, 107), so popular media portrayals of music teaching shape and confirm our images of music teachers and views of music in the context of education, and circulate these, often quite broadly.

*School of Rock* (2003), a “family comedy,” and *Rock School* (2005), a documentary, provoke a range of questions, ideological and otherwise, surrounding the inclusion of rock in formal instructional programs. This article offers a critique of these films from the position of music teacher-practitioner, beginning by highlighting a tension that emerges in them between understandings of music as process and music as valued cultural object, a significant issue in music education debates surrounding the inclusion of popular music (see Bowman 2004, 43; Cavicchi 2002, 6; Snell 2006, 189). I examine how the films, in different ways, approach this issue through their respective portrayals of the ways the music teacher figure fundamentally conceptualises both music and education.

Through analysis and discussion (touching on the qualities of the music teacher, changing roles of teachers and students and the future music classroom), I draw from the films a model for teaching rock music which I believe has potential implications for how all performance might better be approached in school. I discuss this model—of rock music taught as and through

praxis—in relation to emerging findings of recent research on informalisation and personalisation in music learning applied in school contexts (the kinds of learning practices associated with the transmission of popular and other non-“learned” musics) (see for example, L. Green 2005; L. Green 2006; Musical Futures 2007; Snell 2005; Veblen 2006; Westerlund 2006).

Reflective engagement with popular media portrayals like these allows music educators to scrutinise common sense views (their own and others’) of which musics belong in school and the relationships between specific music styles, who should teach these, and how they are learned and taught. Such reflection and engagement can contribute to positive change. Moreover, as we discover here, popular media portrayals of music educational praxis (even with their own agendas) have the potential to provide genuine insights and even pedagogical innovation. Before turning to such analysis and discussion, I offer a summary of the narrative focus of each film (the viewing of which is critical to tracing the lines of discussion that follow and evaluating the model that, I propose, emerges).

#### THE FILMS

In *School of Rock*, directed by Richard Linklater, egocentric, aspiring rock musician Dewey Finn (played by Jack Black) has been fired from the band he formed, on the eve of a competition he believes will be its breakthrough. He owes his substitute teacher housemate Ned Schneebly several thousand dollars in back rent and is threatened with eviction if he doesn’t pay. Horace Green Elementary School, a local elite prep school, urgently requires a substitute teacher; Finn answers the phone and posing as Schneebly, accepts the position. Opportunistically he forms a rock band with his gifted class and enters it in a local Battle of the Bands contest, hoping to realise his rock star ambitions and collect the \$20,000 prize money. Ultimately, the class band does not win the Battle of the Bands, but it does learn that the rewards of music performance transcend winning.

*Rock School*, a documentary by Don Argott, traces the instruction and activities of students and bands at the Paul Green School of Rock Music in Philadelphia over the course of approximately nine months. Founded in 1998, at the time of filming the school was dedicated to the after school and weekend teaching of over one hundred children between the ages of 9 and

17. The documentary concentrates on Green and the stories of selected students of the school (of various ages, male and female, and with varying skill levels) while providing glimpses of the broader context—performance occasions both local and international—in which the school’s educational goals are put to test. Given the relationship of its subject matter to the commercially successful *School of Rock*, the release of the documentary produced a stream of reviews and interviews with Green, upon which I draw selectively in my analysis.

Paul Green claims that Linklater’s *School of Rock* is based on him and his school in Philadelphia and reviewers detect similarities between Jack Black’s character Dewey in *School of Rock* and Paul Green “playing himself” in *Rock School*.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, *School of Rock* seems to parody many aspects of Green and his school (the focus of the *Rock School* documentary). The films differ radically in genre and purpose yet both depict the teaching and learning of more or less identical kinds of rock music. While they offer contrasting understandings of music, teaching and learning, the depictions of rock teaching and learning in Linklater’s comedy can, I believe, be usefully viewed as extensions, developments and refinements of Green’s ideas as represented in Argott’s documentary.

In North America where both films are produced and set, rock’s status in relation to schooling has long been and continues to be liminal (Hebert & Campbell 2000; Bowman 2004). The films seem content with the assumption that rock is more or less incompatible with formal schooling. Writing from Australia (and with the support of the research referred to above), I take a different view. Rock music has a significant place in the musical ecology of many students and as such warrants curricular inclusion. Further, rock is attractive pedagogically since, as a non-“learned” music it invites student involvement and self-direction in learning. Before examining these pedagogical issues in detail, it is instructive to establish what the films say about music and about education, both more broadly and in the details.

#### MUSIC AS PROCESS, MUSIC AS OBJECT

It is possible to discern a continuum across the two films, from a view of music-as-object-of-study in *Rock School*, to a view in *School of Rock* of music as a vital, imaginative process negotiated among creators, performers and audience. In *Rock School* (hereafter *RS*), student

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performance appears to be restricted to the classical rock canon; in *School of Rock* (hereafter *SR*), Dewey Finn abandons the idea of teaching the class his own ‘material’ and allows them to present in the competition a song they generated themselves. The approach to teaching and learning rock in *RS* tends to be teacher-centred and authority based. *SR* begins this way but gradually shifts toward a more self-directed and discovery-based approach.

A tension between the two views is particularly apparent within *SR*, finding full resolution in the music-as-process final performance, where the class band collectively receives a standing ovation after they perform their original song. In striking contrast is the music-as-object climactic scene in *RS*, where one featured soloist receives kudos for his playing of a canonical work by Zappa. As the credits roll in the closing minutes of *SR*, Dewey and Ned, his new teaching partner, teach the classic AC DC rock song, “It’s a long way to the top if you want to rock and roll” in their new “after school” program. Given that students are jamming, taking turns soloing on the song, this is more music-as-process than as-object. Let us now look more closely at the films’ views of music and schooling.

### **Thinking educationally about music**

Smith (2005) interprets *SR* as a ‘trenchant critique’ of ‘American youth culture, especially the role of the educational system in producing compliant social subjects who possess economically viable job skills’. Early in the film Dewey tears down a classroom chart of rewards and incentives and, appalled by what he learns about the school system, comes to espouse the value of co-operation over competition. At one point in the film he ponders aloud the issue of evaluating musical creativity and achievement: ‘If I was gonna give you a grade, I’d give you an A. But that’s the problem. Rock ain’t about doing things perfect.’

Dewey Finn is quite philosophical about music in the context of learning. A classroom exchange between Finn and his young student band members as they rehearse captures something of what *SR* wants to say about music and education:

Dewey (to Freddie, the drummer): *OK, Freddie, that was awesome. You’re rocking, but it’s a little sloppy-joe. Tighten up the screws, OK?*

Dewey (to Zack, the guitarist): *Zack, dude, what's up with the stiffness, man? You're looking a little robotronic. OK? Let's grease up the hinges, and listen, loosey-goosey, baby, loosey-goosey.*

Zack: *I'm playing it the way you told me.*

Dewey: *I know; it's perfect. But rock is about the passion, man. Where's the joy? You're lead guitarist. We are counting on you for style, brother.*<sup>3</sup>



Dewey believes that while one can learn how to *play* rock, one has to discover for oneself how to really “rock.” Somewhere between tightening up and loosening up, between playing it perfectly—the way you were taught—and discovering and communicating passion, joy and style, lies the pathway out of routine expectations and experience.

It may not be too implausible to speculate that Dewey Finn is the intended namesake of influential twentieth century American philosopher John Dewey. John Dewey held the view that the proper aim of music education was to ‘break through conventionalized and routine consciousness’ (Woodford 2005, 10). Dewey Finn, who claims to have studied with an eminent ‘experimental educationer,’ becomes ever more committed to classroom breakthroughs, all efforts towards which are concentrated in his insistence that above all else music should “rock.” This is a quality of music-as-performed that is parallel to ‘groove.’ In American vernacular musics, notes Farmelo (1997), ‘Groove is synonymous with swing ... pulse, process, vital drive ... feel, ... rock, timing and push’ (2). ‘No matter how elusive groove is,’ he goes on to explain, ‘it refers to a common human experience’, and ‘people in a groove experience a kind of altered state of consciousness’ (1).

SR director Richard Linklater is convinced that ‘daydreaming is a productive activity. Where do you get your ideas from? If you're working all day, that kind of kills a lot. It's also about visualizing your ideal world’ (quoted in Price 2003). In *SR*, involvement with music is like daydreaming: composing and rehearsing rely on knowledge and imagination and require a considerable investment of time and energy yet guarantee no quantifiable outcome.

When Dewey’s housemate Ned and his girlfriend Patty prod Dewey to seek useful employment so he can pay off his debts, he explodes, ‘Dude, I service society by rocking. I’m out there in the front lines liberating people with my music. Rocking ain’t no walk in the park, lady.’ For Dewey music making is vital; it transcends work which is mundane by comparison. In the classroom Dewey cautions that his proposed rock band project ‘may sound easy, but nothing

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could be harder,' thus reinforcing his belief that learning music requires a particular kind of focus and commitment, that music is not simply something you either can or can't do. While Dewey states clearly that making music is sheer hard work, through his rich imagination and ability to improvise or "wing it" in various situations, he often makes it appear easy.

### **Thinking canonically**

In contrast, Paul Green's thinking about music learning is in many ways quite basic and practical. For him rock music is inseparable from his approach to learning it: one concentrates on paradigmatic works and while doing so one internalises the music's "grammar" or rules. Hence, in Green's mind, music can be summed up as repertoire and performance. 'I choose my music academically,' he explains. 'When you're studying philosophy, the teacher doesn't say, "Okay, what philosophers do you guys like?" He says "Here's Plato, here's Descartes," that's how you start' (Davis 2004). Similarly, Green proclaims: 'You want to learn how to play rock music? Learn the first three Black Sabbath albums and the first five Led Zeppelin albums. That's where everything comes from' (Davis 2004).

In *RS* Green offers no overt explanation of his educational purposes or expected outcomes. The statement of aims on his school website is vague: "to help our students realize their potential as artists, to put them on stage in front of as many people as possible and to help foster a new generation of incredible musicians," it reads (P. Green n.d.). Green's broad focus seems to be on music learning as a context for self-discovery and personal motivation. In an interview (Sessa 2006) he explains, 'For the average kid who comes into my school, we're teaching them that if you pick up the guitar and practice, you'll find something on that instrument to express yourself with,' and 'if you work hard and are honest and get over your fear, you can do amazing things.'

Green holds the view that once a music form evolves stylistically, that is, once it has developed a recognised canon and can be understood in terms of periodisation, it has earned educational legitimacy. As he explains in an interview, 'Rock music is getting to the point where it can be looked at in an educational way, and, for me, Zeppelin and Zappa are Plato and

Descartes. If I can get the kids to listen to Zeppelin, I try to push them back even further, to Robert Johnson' (Dretzka 2005).

Nowhere in *RS*, however, does Green expose his students to early blues innovators like Johnson. In fact, there is very little Black music at all in Green's or Dewey's canon. Instructionally, they concentrate almost entirely on two rock music substyles: early 1970s heavy or "classic" metal (the music of British bands Black Sabbath, Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin), with the 'distorted guitar riff and the powerchord' as its defining components (Borthwick & Moy 2004, 138); and progressive or "prog" rock of the same period, again, mostly by British bands including Yes, Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull, and King Crimson (Green also prioritises American modernist rock iconoclast, Frank Zappa).

Borthwick and Moy's technical description of progressive rock style allows us to better comprehend Green's (and Dewey's) strategies, conscious or not, toward legitimising rock schooling. As they explain it, progressive rock has very little connection to the idioms of American soul or blues, instead taking

[f]rom jazz and the avant-garde, [...] both virtuosity and experimentation in atonality and *musique concrete*. From folk, it took timbres, some lyrical concerns and the use of pre-classical modes and note intervals. From the Western classical tradition, it took extended structures, complex and shifting time signatures, and formal concepts such as counterpoint, recapitulation, the tone poem and the fugue .... Literary and artistic genres such as gothic and the pastoral also had an influence, particularly upon instrumentation, lyrics and implied identity (Borthwick & Moy 2004, 63).

Such a description assists in identifying potential biases behind the inclusion and exclusion of particular rock substyles in Green's and Dewey's school curricula. Black music (Little Richard, Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, James Brown or Sly Stone, for example) is notably absent from their selective history of rock music and canon of rock as instructional material. Jimi Hendrix, that 'polymath of various American idioms (filtered through a British pop/psychedelic frame),' appears to be the only exception (Borthwick & Moy 2004, 64). Dewey makes some effort to redress the balance, both stylistically and in terms of gender. A montage in his "appreciation" component (itself evidence of canonical thinking) for example, includes jazz clips

of Art Blakey as well as Ed Shaughnessy and Buddy Rich. In another scene Dewey auditions Tomika, a shy student who sings Aretha Franklin's Soul hit, "Chain of Fools".

### **Borrowing paradigms**

Green borrows ideas from several older instructional paradigms as he institutionalises rock music. Cycling through a fixed canonical repertoire, the Paul Green School of Rock Music recalls the European specialist conservatory model for training musicians, with its origins in the late eighteenth century. For Green, "classic metal" and progressive rock are rock's "classical" and hence "serious" musics. Thus he embraces an ideological position where music is valued for its perceived 'complex' and 'original' properties, a view widely held by advocates of the place of classical or art music in music education (L. Green 2003, 6). Paul Green delights in his student ensembles impressing audiences as they negotiate the often arcane music of Frank Zappa and others, feats that will, for some, validate the educational status of his programs. 'If you can play Zappa, you can play anything' is Green's mantra (quoted in Levy 2005).

His program emphasises instrumental dexterity and virtuosity, known features of the heavy metal and progressive rock styles he favours. In this aspect, *RS* contains resonances of the virtuoso cult extending back to Liszt and Paganini (see Walser 1993). The scenes prominently featuring young electric guitar prodigy, CJ Tywoniak—the school's prize student and 'major talent'—provide the film's key musical focus and interest. In its closing sequences (a scenario I referred to above), *RS* follows the All Star band (which features Tywoniak) to Germany where it performs at an annual outdoor festival celebrating the music of Frank Zappa. Former Zappa band mate Napoleon Murphy Brock (who, with colleague Ike Willis, coaches Green's students in the film) leads the large crowd in mock worship of the skills of young CJ.

Green alternates the individual tuition associated with classical music training and the group rehearsal approach of the vintage high school and college jazz big band model. His school's website informs:

Students receive 45 minute private lessons on the instrument of their choice. Students also participate in weekly 3 hour supervised rehearsals to prepare them for the main event, THE SHOW! (P. Green n.d., emphasis in original)

On his school's website Green refers to the way he links repertoire, pedagogy and performance through the 'show': 'Shows are picked for their educational merit and content ... Queen to learn about harmony, Punk to develop performance and stage presence, Zappa for a crash course in musicianship' (P. Green 2006). Translated to the stage, rock concept albums—The Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," Pink Floyd's "The Wall," Queen's "A Night at the Opera"—serve as ready-made concert programs and provide actual rock music as an alternative to more standard pedagogical material (that is, music constructed for learners).

A rock enthusiast, Green expends considerable energy attempting to imbue his programs with the elusive "rock experience." Yet some critics find his curriculum 'ossified' (Lim 2005). One reviewer notices that '[t]eaching the kids technique comes at the expense of allowing them to express themselves, which is why people are usually drawn to music in the first place' (Cavagna n.d.). In the documentary, Green's students often seem constrained if not daunted by the discipline required to faithfully reproduce 1970s progressive rock classics. Perhaps it is this music-as-object approach that led critic Hornaday (2003) to observe that 'until the last 20 minutes or so of "Rock School," the actual playing, while often startlingly good, is kind of boring'.

While he claims he is not training rock stars or cover band professionals (Davis 2004), it is unclear how (or if) Green expects that his students will make the transition from competent performers to creators of new music. Another critic concludes that 'since there's no evidence in the film that Green teaches his students how to compose, improvise or experiment with the music, presumably the next wave will come from somewhere else' (Lacy 2005). Here we encounter critics who believe that, by and large, music (or, at least, rock music) is a creative process, and that overlooking this reality has consequences.

With Green recast as Dewey in *SR* (following my suggestion above that we see Dewey as a more developed, refined version of Green), he/they come to promote the kind of garage band collective approach of learning to play and compose rock music by jamming (which often becomes more formalised rehearsing). In *SR*, contrasting understandings of music (and the shift in views from music as valued cultural object to music as ongoing process) are encapsulated in the young musicians moving from studying Rodrigo with their school music teacher to studying

rock with Dewey. The former involves the intensely focused study of a musical score under a conductor, the latter gradually allows a more improvisatory experience where the students compose their own music and take turns soloing.

We have seen how, for Dewey and his students, music becomes an open-ended process, and how, despite his sometimes limited vision, Green's informed enthusiasm leads him to forge pathways to the "real world" for his students. We have also noted (earlier) that Green is realistic enough to understand that not all of his students will want to become professional musicians. But he hopes they will all become "practising," and hence in this broader sense, "real" musicians. Having scrutinised their views of music and ideas about education, we are ready to consider how Green and Dewey, even given their utopian, retro values (Smith 2005), might offer a model for the teaching and learning of rock music in formalised settings.

#### TOWARD A MODEL FROM THE FILMS

Green's and Dewey's model for teaching and learning rock music might be summarised this way: "Rock music as praxis, learned and understood through praxis, taught by informed enthusiast practitioners." The key components of the model are practice and practitioners—that is, (a) actual rock music actually played (and composed), and (b) musician-instructors who are current or former rock musicians and learners, who wish to become rock musicians. There is also a goal (sometimes articulated) which is "to rock": a surge of communal exuberance brought about by a musically "tight" band performance, that must be achieved in a specific context—the live performance event. Finally, there is the conviction that rocking transcends winning (in the conventional sense). Let us examine each of these components in turn.

#### **Practice**

On one hand, a critic reminds us that in *RS* there are no scenes 'showing [Green] actually teaching his students to play a guitar. Not a single musical note is discussed. No voice lessons' (Ebert 2005). Another records that 'Green plays guitar only once in the documentary, showing himself to be an accomplished musician but no Frank Zappa and surely no Andres Segovia. I

wish they'd have shown the [man] actually teaching. Does he go over the G<sup>7</sup> chord? How does he teach vibrato?' (Karten 2000).

On the other hand, we have already seen how Green builds performance practice into his music programs. 'Teach by performing' is his stated pedagogical ideal (Davis 2004). Green works hard to ensure that his rock shows feature student musicians onstage, actually playing in (often major) rock venues, including bars, cafes, clubs, and significant rock festivals. The live performance is the culmination of Green's learning sequence. '[T]here are no final exams, no assessments. By way of graduation, the students get to present their own gig in front of a paying audience' (ibid.). Green explains in an interview, 'I realised that when you teach guitar in the abstract, the kids are just doing exercises. There's nothing to teach them how to interact with each other, or to play in a band' (ibid.).

In contrast, and as Smith (2005) points out, inverting the 'tropes typically associated with the cinematic representation of teachers,' *SR* depicts Dewey actually teaching. While Finn appears to work haphazardly and spontaneously, a close examination of his instructional sequence reveals that his pedagogy is rich and comprehensive, drawing on deep experience with the music. Reconstructed, Dewey's teaching approach is fluid, evolving in relation to the ways his students respond to his enthusiastic instruction:

- He sets up instruments (guitars and keyboard) and, in order to establish a connection between his own and his students' musicianship, he plays the guitar as students enter the class.
- Teaching class members to play sections of rock music "classics," he introduces, in a natural yet systematic way, foundational instrumental skills and music processes: riffs and hooks to Zack the guitarist, beats to Freddie the drummer, grooves to Katie the bass guitarist, and later, vocal harmonies to Michelle and Eleni, the singers. He integrates some basic theory (triads, intervals, octaves) into his teaching at this stage. Conversant with music notation, Dewey offers sheet music to keyboardist Lawrence, since it is a mode of learning with which he is familiar.
- He negotiates the Rock Band project with the class, immediately linking the classroom with the "real world" outside its walls.
- He sets a schedule: rock history, rock appreciation and theory, rock practice (There is no particular evidence in the film that the "appreciation" component is dominated by canonical thinking, although Dewey is clearly "progist").
- He models the rock compositional process with a song of his own. At this stage he also demonstrates the crucial role of the imagination in performance—the ability to idealise oneself as a performer.

- He rehearses the class band instructing them on finer points of musicianship—the elusive ‘tightness’ and ‘looseness’ that makes the music ‘rock’—and he points evocatively to ‘passion,’ ‘joy’ and ‘style’ as expressive qualities.
- He assigns individually relevant listening tasks both for inspiration (students are meant to copy these in the mode of learning associated with jazz and popular musicians) and so students gain familiarity with the music’s history.
- He takes the class through the rock song writing process as they compose a song as a group. He prompts class members to spontaneously offer ideas and he fluently weaves these together.
- He introduces (through video clips, slides, and a chalkboard rock genealogy chart) the historical study of rock (with some jazz antecedents) thus grounding practice. He also demonstrates dance moves to the backing singers.
- He discovers that Zack has written a song and gets him to teach it to the class band. This song replaces Dewey’s own as the contest performance piece.
- The project is assessed when students compete as a band.
- He provides a context for the ongoing development and expression of technical and expressive skills and musical fluency, one from which great satisfaction is derived, through the after school jam session.

This reconstruction suggests a tidy, linear teaching and learning progression, whereas in reality the film conveys the impression that Dewey works much less sequentially and systematically, in fact almost haphazardly, an approach more consistent with how rock musicians tend to work.<sup>4</sup>



### Practitioners

Both Finn and (less overtly) Green recall the old joke of the music teacher as a “failed musician.” ‘I wanted life as a rock star in 1972,’ Green reminisces in *RS*. In *SR* Dewey spins this tale to his new teacher colleagues:

Oh, yeah. I was this close to getting a chair on the Polish Philharmonic, and I nailed the audish, but I didn’t get it. Guess who did? Yo-Yo Ma’s cousin, little ‘Nepotis.’ Anyway, I just decided to give up and become a teacher, because those that can’t do teach.

Linklater is having some fun here, challenging both pervasive ideologies of musical significance and widespread views (internalised by teachers themselves) that teaching is something musicians “fall back on,” an inferior but often necessary alternative to “real” music making (see Mills 2005).

Green and Dewey are “informed enthusiast practitioners,” that is, active (or recently active) rock musicians. Finn’s and Green’s general position in their respective stories are better understood in the wider context of the so-called ‘Merriam paradigm’ (Cottrell 2004, 30). Merriam’s cross cultural assessment of the social position and behaviour of musicians (largely confirmed by Cottrell in his recent study of professional musicians in London) revealed a general pattern of ‘low social rank, high importance, and deviant behaviour subsequently capitalized upon’ (Cottrell 2004, 193). Due to the informal nature of their musical learning and the general perception of their lifestyle patterns, the Merriam paradigm seems to accurately sum up the situation of rock musicians.

Neither Green nor Dewey is portrayed as an ideal role model. In *RS*, Green projects himself as much a rock renegade as an affable family man, although he is partly playing to the camera. Dewey is equally antiestablishment in his behaviour at first. For example, he becomes a teacher fraudulently, by assuming his housemate’s identity and qualifications, and he begins teaching by telling fifth grade class he has a hangover and that they can do what they like. Further, he proposes that one of the girls be the class band’s groupie.

Nevertheless (and despite these humourous parodies) it is these characters’ direct and sustained experience of rock, and their enthusiasm for the music, that suits them ideally to guide others in its instruction. Through his industry connections, Green has successfully forged alliances with key figures of rock music’s past: Alice Cooper, Adrian Belew of King Crimson and Frank Zappa’s band, Ian Gillan from Deep Purple, Jon Anderson from Yes and Billy Idol have all connected with Green and his school and many of these and other musicians have coached and performed with his students.

Green extends his “real” (and “real world”) approach to becoming a rock musician to the *RS* soundtrack. On nine of the twelve songs, a member of the band that produced the original recording is featured together with Green’s students. For example, former drummer of the Police, Stewart Copeland, plays drums on Green’s students’ version of the 1980s Police hit, ‘Don’t Stand So Close to Me’ (Rock School 2005). ‘The addition of the star-power assists on the songs,’ writes one journalist, ‘push [*sic*] them up to a level that sounds like cover songs’ and several songs even ‘sound like updated re-recordings’ (Bloom 2005).

This downplaying of the status differential between professional rock musicians and students is also a significant mark of the Green-Dewey model. Both teachers, and as we have seen, numerous professional musicians, perform side by side with the student aspirants, urging them on to higher levels of musical commitment, involvement and achievement. In this approach, every serious student is considered a musician already, not simply someone who is learning to play music and someone who will one day become a musician.

It is significant that the Paul Green School of Rock Music is an “after school” or extracurricular program, and that by the end of *SR*, Dewey Finn’s Rock School also ends up off-timetable (and looking rather like Green’s school). Green’s school is clearly meeting a need, providing youth with what school music programs are rejecting or ignoring. Smith (2005) concludes that Dewey’s after-hours school of rock represents for youth a ‘safe alternative to the structures of school and family’. In their symbolic exclusion of rock from school, the films convey that schooling has not yet worked out how to accommodate rock to its benefit. Implicit in Smith’s observation is the notion that in order to derive true advantage from involvement in expressive culture more broadly, youth need room to direct their own learning.

Here, the films point toward ideas and developments suggested by current educational research relating to the changing roles of teacher and student and the future school classroom. Loader (2007) asks, for example, ‘Why do we always have to treat students as though they’re a group of twenty or thirty?’ and argues for a new concept of school:

The notion of being able to gather students together differently—and not necessarily in large groups—will always be what we will call school ... I don’t think we necessarily have to have a place. I don’t think it necessarily has to have an external “captain” or principal ... “Tomorrow” we’re looking at a situation ... what I would call a network school, where one creates the network, one creates the community, and lives within it ... The metaphor [for school] we have at present ... is a factory type image. What about if we take up different metaphors—have a studio-type experience for learning, or have a home experience, or a shopping mall experience, or maybe even the notion of a game ... that you participate [in]?” (Loader 2007).

Clearly, Green’s and Dewey’s music schools fit with Loader’s notion of ‘when two or three come together to learn’ and his school-as-studio metaphor (Loader, 2007). Green and Dewey are

still kinds of ‘captains,’ of course, but by the end of *SR*, Dewey is as much adult collaborator with his students as he is their authoritative instructor.

Dewey’s new after-hours school is a business partnership with his housemate, Ned Schneebly. Here we see the formally trained educator (who is also a rock musician, having played in the band Maggot Death with Finn) and the self-taught rock musician working together closely to provide quality instruction. For a fascinating glimpse of the complex layers involved in constructing the portrayal of rock music teaching and learning in *SR*, the extra features menu of the DVD version of the film contains footage of the film’s music consultant, experimental American rock musician Jim O’Rourke, training the young actor-musicians (see ‘Lessons Learned in the School of Rock’ in *School of Rock 2004*). Such footage, a kind of “real world” aside to the film, reinforces the eclectic approach to expertise exemplified in Green’s and Dewey’s model.

### **The event**

We have already discussed the high value Green attributes to the rock performance event. Similarly, in *SR*, music’s value is measured expressively, in its ability to move an audience. *SR* advocates an approach to music that engenders feeling through participation in performance (Charles Keil, cited in Farnelo 1997, 2-3). ‘Now, this is serious business here. We’ve got a mission,’ Finn reminds his student musicians. In a humorous allusion to Woodstock, he explains, ‘Putting on a great show is the most important thing. One great rock show can change the world. Do you understand me?’ Like Green, Dewey promotes music performance and especially the ‘show’ as the site where meaning may be experienced, through collective participation and feeling.

Participation in rock is not about being graded and neither is it about winning competitions. Still another “real world” aside to *SR* is included as a feature on the DVD version. This is a short clip where director Richard Linklater films, in a performance venue, Jack Black (who plays Dewey Finn in the film) and 1000 screaming rock fans imploring Led Zeppelin, who are known for not licensing their music, to release their song ‘Immigrant Song’ for use in the film (see ‘Jack Black’s Pitch to Led Zeppelin’ in *School of Rock 2004*). The clip (which Led

Zeppelin apparently found convincing) emphasises the exuberant communalism of rock audiences.

Let us now briefly compare the Green-Dewey model with some findings of recent music education research on informal music learning. This allows us better to evaluate the potential of this model by holding it up to emerging music educational practice. I will not at this point attempt to summarise this growing body of research in any detail; rather I will refer to some principles guiding some of the research, by focussing on the work of a single researcher.

### **Recent research on informal music learning**

For at least a decade, Lucy Green has been researching the learning habits and practices of popular musicians. This research is documented in detail in book form (L. Green 2001) and the application of these research findings to school contexts is the subject of a number of subsequent publications (L. Green 2004; L. Green 2005; L. Green 2006; L. Green & Walmsley 2006).

In relation to the Musical Futures research project in Hertfordshire, United Kingdom, Green & Walmsley (2006, 2) succinctly set out a kind of model for informal music learning in the classroom that incorporates and builds upon five principles (not necessarily all, but at least two of these, at a given time):

1. Learning music that students choose, like and identify with;
2. Learning by listening and copying recordings;
3. Learning with friends;
4. Personal, often haphazard learning without structured guidance;
5. Integration of listening, performing, improvising and composing.

The role of the teacher in the informal music classroom is summarized: to ‘set the task going, stand back, observe, diagnose, guide, suggest, model, take on pupils’ perspectives, [and to] help pupils achieve the objectives they set for themselves’ (ibid., 3).

Further, Green and Walmsley detail a seven stage research project based on this model (ibid., 7-10), which I condense as follows:

Students emulate the learning practices of beginner popular musicians by listening, discussing, selecting, aurally-copying, rehearsing, arranging and performing, pieces of music. At first, they select the music themselves; later, they apply the process to a set

song. Later still, they apply it to selected pieces of classical music from TV advertisements and then to a piece of classical music drawn from the classical canon. In friendship groups, students determine their own route through learning, individually and collectively.

Positive results in terms of measurable educational gains are indicated in video footage of interviews with students and teachers (and documented in other ways) on the Musical Futures website (<http://www.musicalfutures.org.uk/>).

How does the Green-Dewey model from *RS* and *SR* compare with this model from the current and emerging music education literature? Certainly it is not as “systematic,” although Dewey hardly sets out with the intention of advancing institutional practice in music education. In many aspects however, Green-as-Dewey arrives at the same place as Lucy Green’s research. While Dewey is ultimately reluctant to relinquish all control over the teaching-learning process, his intense, high-energy investment in the apparently haphazard, trial-and-error approach to playing rock exemplifies the kind of personalized, process-orientation to learning rock music built in to Lucy Green’s model.

The Green-Dewey model could of course be applied to other musics besides rock music (as has the Lucy Green model). The first principle of Lucy Green’s model should still apply, where students exercise their preferences in the specific music selection process. The Green-Dewey model similarly relies on student motivation; however with informed enthusiast instructors and a degree of autonomy in the learning process students still rise to musical challenges (see the discussion surrounding the application of Lucy Green’s model to classical music: Section 7.6 in Green & Walmsley 2006). In *SR*, Dewey himself successfully creates a bridge for his students between different kinds of music. Upon witnessing the class orchestra rehearsing Rodrigo’s *Concierto de Aranjuez*, he begins to devise ways to translate their classical music skills and knowledge into rock skills.

#### CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued that the portrayals of music and schooling in the films *SR* and *RS* provide a context in which music educator-practitioners might usefully reflect on aspects of their own theory and practice. While not wishing to over-idealise these film’s approaches to music

teaching and learning (nor to be unnecessarily condemnatory of them), I have suggested that the films offer a kind of model for the “teaching” of non-“learned” musics like rock, a model of learning music as and through practice.

To some extent, it seems, the films arise from a desire (indeed, a need) to address common adult agendas that often inhibit or impede genuinely musical education. In his analysis of *SR* Smith characterises several of these:

- ‘intellectual bullying’ (music practice comes only after the study of so-called academic subjects);
- ‘careerism’ (academic achievement is a surer path to success than social acceptance and personal expression through music participation); and
- ‘rigid dogmatism’ (a school must be a highly structured system, thoroughly ordered in its approach to education—there is no place for ‘unusual methods’<sup>5</sup>).



Of course, neither *SR* nor *RS* offers completely unproblematic alternatives to these ideological stances. When Dewey brings rock, an informally learned music, into school it is unsettling since it robs time from school routines and allows students to visualise their own ideal worlds and reorder their priorities (if only temporarily). Educationist David Loader, whom I quoted above, argues for a shift to the idea that schooling is about ‘individual students [and] individual pathways’ (Loader 2007). Certainly, Green’s and Dewey’s model for learning rock music moves in this direction, a move supported in recent research (including that of Lucy Green) on personalisation in music learning.

The films also emphasise the need for teachers who are themselves not only committed and skilled performers in the idioms they are teaching (or at very least, enthusiastic fellow learners with students), but also energetic student motivators. By representing rock music as having an awkward relationship with school, the films prompt thinking about new models of classroom and communities of students, or again, the need for creative thinking about how to adapt existing facilities and schedules to support improved educational process.

Certainly, the Green-Dewey model construes music as ‘primarily something you *do* (but not necessarily know how you do),’ and represents a significant move away from paradigms where music is ‘something you *know* (but not necessarily do)’ (Cook 1998, 107). While both films seem to emphasise the evolution of rock style through commitment to classic works (and by the significant gaps in their canon emphasise the need for an accurate, inclusive history), by

Webb, M. (2007) “Rock Goes to School on Screen: A model for teaching non-“learned” musics derived from the films *School of Rock* (2003) and *Rock School* (2005)” *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 6/3: [http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Webb6\\_3.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Webb6_3.pdf)

the end of *SR*, we are given to understand that lasting satisfaction and ongoing motivation follows best from instructional approaches that construe music as a fundamentally collective process.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am most grateful to the ACT Journal's anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments and suggestions, which have guided and clarified my thinking in the revision process.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Dretzka (2005).

<sup>3</sup> All quotes from the film script are my own transcriptions. I consulted SergeiK (n.d.) for corroboration.

<sup>4</sup> The documentary film, *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster* (Berlinger & Sinofsky, 2004) on heavy rock band Metallica, is instructive in relation to this point.

<sup>5</sup> At one point in the film *Miss Mullins*, the Principal of Horace Green Elementary School, says to Dewey skeptically: 'I must say I find your methods of teaching unusual.'

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