

# ...with Raymond MacDonald

Professor of Music Psychology and Improvisation

## One moment that changed the course of your career

Playing a Javanese gamelan with children who have learning disabilities. I was working as a very inexperienced community musician when, at one session, the penny dropped and I saw tangible links between my work as a musician and the psychology I had studied in a somewhat blasé fashion as an undergrad.

## One proud moment

Six months ago I played a gig with Edwyn Collins, and backing him on songs that helped define my adolescence felt like getting the chance to finally play for Celtic.

## One therapeutic application of music

Daniel Barenboim in his BBC Reith Lecture series claimed that musical improvisation is the highest form of art. Around the same time Willie Wonka (Johnny Depp incarnation) called improvisation a parlour trick

that anyone can do. While both conceptions are flawed, I am closer to Wonka than Barenboim in my belief that improvisation is a fundamental life process that, when utilised in appropriate contexts, can have life-changing effects. It can also facilitate exploration of personal and group creativity in quite startling and revelatory ways, regardless of musical experience. Paradoxically many very experienced and highly trained musicians feel that they cannot improvise and so it is an underused and misunderstood process. However, this is slowly changing, and I believe that improvisation is a process whose time has come; musically, therapeutically, aesthetically and psychologically.

## One book

*How Musical is Man* by John Blacking. Concise, accessible and way ahead of its time in terms of the assertions regarding the innate capacities



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of humans for musical communication and the stifling influence of Western constructions of musical ability. We now have the evidence he lacked to support his assertions.

## One challenge

Unchaining our consistent musical underachieving to help maximise the potential of musical participation in all its manifestations. Even if musical talent is normally distributed within the general population it is undoubtedly distributed around a mean that is much higher than received wisdom suggests. For example, our work has shown how those with learning difficulties or mental health problems can learn to play a musical instrument and that there are resultant psychological benefits. We also need to address why many adolescents lose interest in formal music education around the time

music becomes their most important recreational activity.

## One nugget of advice

As Chet Baker and John Irvine both said, 'get obsessed and stay obsessed'.

## One more thought

The concept of universal musicality is no longer a vague utopian ideal – there is evidence from just about every branch of psychology to support this claim. Music is so completely meshed into our lives that it provides an excellent site for the study of basic psychological processes that constitute the grand subdisciplines of psychology (cognitive, developmental, neuro, social, personality, clinical, etc.). We are all musical. Every human being has a biological and social guarantee of musicianship.

More online at [www.thepsychologist.org.uk](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk)

## resource

MacDonald, R.A.R., Miell, D. & Hargreaves, D.J. (eds) (2002). *Musical identities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

'I have learned a lot from working with David and Dorothy and this was the project that started our collaboration.'

## coming soon

A special issue on social inclusion, and much more...

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