

Musical care and resistance for people of marginalised genders in London

This ethnographic research (a PhD thesis) explores how collaborative music making is created by, and can create, spaces and practices of collective care and resistance for people of marginalised genders, which protect from and challenge harmful power structures. It brings together two different but connected sites in London: a grassroots music charity and a queer-feminist band, of which I am a member.

The piece I'm sharing here is personal and reflective, and I'm experimenting with how to bring music into my writing. My aim is that this will ultimately sit in my thesis alongside fieldwork data and analysis, as well as theoretical connections and reflections. I'll be writing about the music charity and its music making projects with young people, as well as band rehearsals, gigs and residencies.

I undertook participatory observation fieldwork between 2023 and 2025, and interviewed bandmembers; music charity staff, volunteers and project participants; and wider music industry musicians and workers operating at the intersection of music and gender.

Beginnings and Endings

The Beginning

We each have different memories of how the band started. This is mine:

[play audio: Bones, to listen while reading (if that works for you!)]

It's an autumn evening in 2014. We are at a birthday party – mine and Alex's – on a Dutch barge moored at Albert Embankment, gently rocking on the waves of the Thames. It's a lively occasion; party guests are dancing and laughing. They sip beer from red party cups, dolled up in 90s fancy dress – ravers and Riot Grrls; Cher and Di, Hulk Hogan in drag. The lower deck is dimly yet warmly bathed in a red glow, and strung up fairy lights trace the surrounding windows, their twinkly reflections dancing on the lapping waves outside. Looking out through the glass we see a classic London skyline: Big Ben; Lambeth Bridge; London Eye.

We hear music from a band in the corner, huddled below metal beams and creaking floorboards overhead. They are playing 90s covers, and at that moment, Rage Against the Machine, a special request from Alex, for me. She gives me a woodblock so I can join in. While watching them I feel joy, nostalgia, and, if I'm really honest, a little envy.

I am dancing with Alex and Jem, a musician friend we know through work. We listen as the band approaches its final number, when Jem says (or was it Alex?) 'we could do this'. We smile at each other, a shared excitement building.

Once the live music wraps up we talk excitedly over Basement Jaxx about starting our own band, that we could play mash-ups of tunes we love from our youth. It's one of those conversations you have – or at least I do – that usually come to nothing. But this came to something, really something.

I don't know it at the time, but this is the moment for me, the 'birth of the band' that we will come back to again and again and again over the decade to come. And in the here and now, amidst the fog of my undoubtedly mutating and fragmented remembrance, feeling its way clumsily over the red cups and the fairy lights and the woodblock, I think that back then, somehow I did know that this was a vital moment: And I clocked it, I felt it, I savoured it.

The Middle

What follows is an ethnography on music's power to connect, to enable self-expression, engender community. It's about my band, Glorybox, with whom I've played for the past 10 years, and our wider community of musicians and music making centred around a music charity that runs music projects for girls, women and trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming people.



For Glorybox, it centres on the ways that we care for each other – both alongside and through our music making. How do we create a safer space for ourselves and for each other? In what way is the - often deeply personal - music that we write together a part of creating this care and safety? And how do these practices enable us to take up space onstage together, to be brave, to resist? It's been 10 years and in that time our lives have changed substantially; we've moved, married, started jobs, left jobs, come out, loved, lost, grieved. We've grown and we've been through it all together.



In my thesis I touch on themes of love, connection, community and queer world-building as resistance against systems of harm and oppression, and then finally, we come to this, the end of this story.

The End

[play audio: Shadows – to listen while reading if that works for you!]/

It's April 2025. We are huddled around the kitchen table of Jem's flat in Peckham. I'm sipping on tea, and around us sit the vivid and varied green house plants that Jem loves so much. Lamplight softly fills the room. It's quiet, an awkward tension in the air. A sense of foreboding, a nervousness that feels unusual for us. Alex and I know what's coming, or at least I do.

Jem: 'I don't want to put off what I need to say, I don't want you to have to wait and wonder.' Here it comes. 'I've decided to leave Glorybox.'

Everything reels.

She says it as if somehow we would carry on without her. Neither Alex nor I need to say it, though we do: 'that means the end. The end of Glorybox.'

There's no band break-up map with which I can navigate this - this loss, this grief; no script for friends and family or prescribed acts of comfort and consolation that can help me here, help me heal.

This relationship, this partnership, has been one of the most meaningful in my life – it's brought me love, connection, queer joy and community, a space of pride and honest self-expression. Euphoria - a space to be me, which I don't think I'd really been before. So much of myself was – and still is – in this band. But by reckoning with what it is I think that I've lost, it throws a burning light on what is so vital about coming together to make something. To find our identity, belonging, a home. To love. To find joy and connection amidst this hard, hard world; and to resist that world, or the way that it has been led – to subvert, reject, push back, together – to find a different way of being, of loving.