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"Sharing Songs: A seaside bar, open music sessions  
and the nuances of a community"

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# Sharing Songs:

A seaside bar, open music sessions and the nuances of a community

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**Argy Rizos, Lizzie Seffer, Maggie Shea. Photographs by Argy Rizos**

*“...one of the guys once said this place is kinda like a church. Instead of going to mass, you come here to exorcise your demons, whether it’s singing a bunch of tunes or confessing something that’s been on your mind, or getting a certain amount of love, or whether it’s, uh, some very expressive art that makes you think about your life, and whatnot...”* –  
(fieldnotes, 22nd February)

Dalriada is ‘*Edinburgh’s Bar on the Beach*’. Located in Portobello – the seaside, north-eastern suburb of Scotland’s capital – it has been hosting weekly open live music sessions for eleven years. The choice of music varies, but it is predominantly within the British Folk tradition of live music played in pubs, whereby host musicians (session leaders) are joined by friends, guests or customers. The initial impression of the bar and its apparent uniqueness sparked interest and intrigue amongst our ethnography group, quickly becoming fertile ground for observation. The openness of the music session and the people that it attracts over time, became our initial focal interests. What we expected to discern – in contrast to other similar sessions in Edinburgh venues – and aim to explore and analyse in this article, is how a niche societal group (or groups, as will be shown) has been formed and evolved throughout the years in this specific locality. In this ethnography we investigate how communities emerge and relationships flourish within wider urban landscapes, as a result of cultural exchange and symbolic rituals within intimate shared spaces. We examine the commonalities, contradictions and conflicts that appear inherent in the process of community-building, evolution and preservation – based on our perspectives that are illuminated by the lived experiences and testimonies of our interlocutors.

Dalriada’s owner provided us his authoritative endorsement from the outset. This allowed us intimate access to the space and introduced us to all the staff and musicians. Following this, we attended weekly music sessions numerous times – individually or collectively – to observe, participate (some of us actively performed), build rapport, carry out interviews (both informal and semi-structured) and to conduct short surveys. These varied methods allowed us to “glean information in different ways” (O’Reilly, 2012: 117). We found that data collection and analysis was influenced by our distinct personalities and positionalities. “Paradigms” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 11) formed through the knowledge and assumptions accumulated by an individual over the course of their life influence how data is interpreted. Therefore, we ensured our presence was evenly spread across the different

sessions, so we could experience the full spectrum of performances and atmospheres and thus achieve a more holistic point of view.

### Community Matters

*“...’the Dal’ is always with me in some way, I think it will always be a part of me...” – (bartender)*

Community studies have received critical attention by social scientists who have often questioned the use of the concept (Stacey, 1969). Particularly, identifying communities in modern cities was considered difficult due to the vast amount of competing interests, interdependencies and geographical distances present. These elements led some, especially Chicago School sociologists, to dismiss older models of community saying that the impermanence and fluidity of modern life and its relationships simply did not allow for tight-knit, familial bonds found in more rural communities – community and modernity became irreconcilable (Cohen, 1993). A chasm formed between the notion of disconnected lives, and the all-embracing “nostalgic quasi-spiritual” (Frith, 2004: 50) conception of “the way things were” (Crow and Allan, 1994: 24) when groups ‘naturally’ converged through interests and space-boundedness.

Nonetheless, the idea of community seemed conceptually appropriate to us as researchers studying a small space where groups of people with some shared interests regularly met. Conversely, “physical proximity does not always lead to the establishment of social relations” (Stacey, 1969: 144), evident in other Edinburgh bars with live open sessions, such as the Royal Oak and Sandy Bells<sup>1</sup> – but not in Dalriada. What interested us in particular was how people balance aspects of urbanity and community. Similar studies, such as Finnegan’s (2007), discovered that local musicians intersect at these two concepts: the study’s musicians’ intensive, regular joint activity allowed relationships to diverge from mere fleeting connections of urban activity, especially as networks were unlikely to be coincidental. Instead of community, she calls these connections “pathways in urban living” (Finnegan, 2007: 297), which allows the continuity of meaning to be achieved. Whilst we found this conception to be relevant for several linkages within Dalriada, many of the relationships present go beyond this.

The different groups and their interconnectivities illustrate this. While many of the musicians spoke about a singular community, this seemed to be ideological and constructed through numerous symbolic processes such as musician meetings, house ethics and shared space. The meetings congregate all musicians in one place, which helps create the illusion of a singular musician group. One musician claimed that “it helps everyone feel part of ‘the Dal’ ... there’s nothing to say, but it gets everyone together”. This reveals a desire for flow and naturalness of community (singular), a topic

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<sup>1</sup> . Information from musicians’ interviews that have performed in these bars.

which arose several times. The same musician, at another time, highlighted the importance of a sense of history, tradition and timelessness: “It is supposed to feel like everyone just knows”. Similarly, another musician said that he believes everyone present at sessions inherently feels “part of the thing”, conceptualising an ontological problem. These statements allude to a phenomenon that is found in many communities, where processes of community construction are downplayed to render them invisible. The idea of the ‘natural’ community, in which people integrate and order themselves organically, is appealing (Suttles, 1972). It allows for a romanticised notion of community. Reality, however, tends to be different. The owner himself admitted that the apparent smoothness of operations is only made possible through considerable input and planning “underneath the surface”. The truth is that the communities (plural, as will be shown) at Dalriada came into existence through steady growth.

Within its first year of establishment, the bar did not get many customers. It was only after deciding to run weekly open live music sessions that customers began “trickling in”. Over time, customers became ‘regulars’ and some started coming (and continue to do so) several times a week to their sessions of choice. One musician described how he used to lead Sunday sessions by himself for a long time, before asking friends and others to join him. Eventually, he stopped asking, as he wanted people to make the effort to go on their own accord – again showing a desire for naturalness. At this stage, however, it must be said that we found overwhelming evidence to show that, in the case of musicians and some staff, there are numerous draws beyond wages. Interlocutors told us that many session leaders donate some (or all) of their share to the ‘kitty’ – a pint glass filled with donations intended for musicians’ drinks. Non-lead musicians do not get paid. One musician, who plays at several sessions a week, said that it is due to “routine” and the “family environment” that he regularly attends. Bar staff often come in on their days-off to have a drink, read a book, or hang out with the musicians.

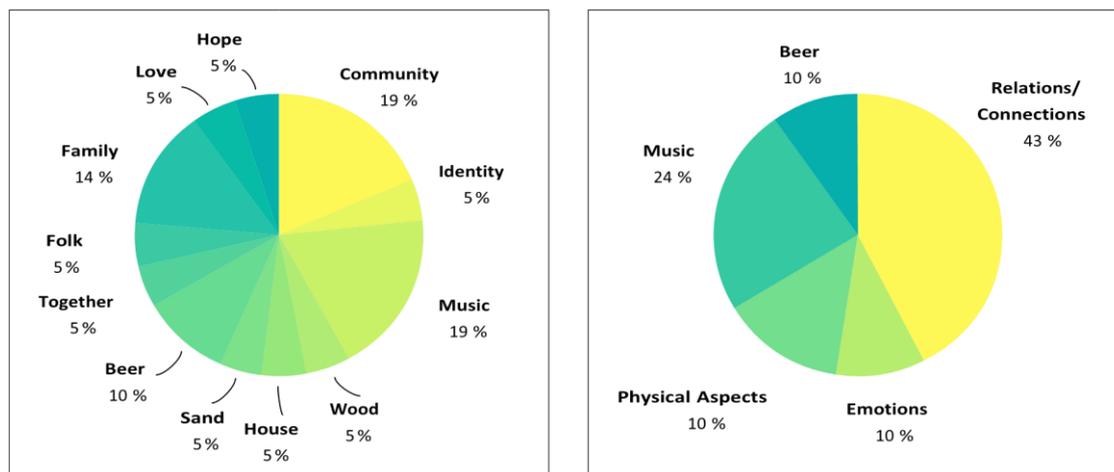
The open sessions, which we believe to be the key binding, and community-fostering element, have merged lives, and transformed social roles. For example, some community members now share holidays or babysit for each other, types of sharing and exchange that have facilitated the transformation of community relations into types of kinship relations. Strikingly, there have been several Dalriada-founded marriages. Numerous couples have incorporated their partners into music sessions. Many of our informants undergo role and status transformations within the space, whether from staff to performer, customer to regular, or stranger to spouse. Some regulars, for example, take on a ‘security guard’ role occasionally, or help staff collect glasses, thereby occupying a liminal role, somewhere between customer and staff member. In summary, it is a polyphonic space. This polyphony, facilitated by the open sessions, allows more role transformations than might usually be possible.

Failure to meet adequate behaviours, or particular accepted 'ethics' result to role demotions. As with most communities, there are social norms and codes of conduct that are highlighted as preferable in Dalriada, such as family-friendly behaviour and respect. When these are not met, boundaries become clear as a way of marking outsiders (Cohen, 1993). Another way in which behaviour is regulated is through negotiating participation in the open sessions. Sometimes, some musicians impose unfavourably on the sessions. Tensions exist when this happens. Some musicians insist on remaining inclusive for all, while some, like the owner, prefer them to be "barred", particularly addressing complaints from customers. Musical flow, in a way, can be seen as a mechanism to manage and communicate meanings (Hannerz, 1992). "Barring" happens outside the community sphere, therefore preventing community ideology conflicts. This also highlights the regular customers' desire for certain musical standards. Contrastingly, one musician said that he enjoys the awkwardness caused by bad musicians, as "that's partly what community is about". Similarly, another said that sessions "can go completely wrong but be a complete success, 'cause everyone could burst out laughing".

This conflict between professionalism and amateurism is one way in which wider social structures seem to seep into the community, with certain customer expectations intricately linked to commodity culture. Moreover, there are clear tensions between community building or maintenance, and running a business. There appears to be a somewhat unequal exchange between the "charitable rate" session leaders get paid, and the benefits their work has had for the business itself – and continues to have. Musicians, however, are able to cultivate a community as a result. Hardt and Negri (2001) consider collective and cooperative 'labour' as constructing peoples' 'being-in-common', and thus becomes the basis for a sense of responsibility and solidarity. It becomes a sort of balancing act of spontaneous materialism.

Considering these different elements – such as kinship linkages, interactions between different people, mobilisation of space, and also tensions and inconsistencies – we found that there seem to be different 'core' groups with differing openness (contingent on time and space). Each session tends to stick to a somewhat different musical genre, with slightly "different ethics" which branch out into "various communities", according to one musician. Then there are the staff who seemingly get along well and are "friends". Inevitably, these connections are of different strengths. Connecting these groups is of course the space itself, but also something more than space – connections are made possible by the different actors involved. Some move between the groups (staff member to musician, for example), and thus create a particular flow between active networks. As one employee said: "everyone knows someone through someone", which highlights the interconnectivity of these branching networks. Will (2016) postulates that community should be understood not as a 'thing' that can be made, lost, or found. Rather, social relationships themselves are key. Community exists in

many places, but how it exists depends on the embodied practices and performances by members themselves. Most pertinent among these practices, to us, are the symbolic exchanges and rituals that take place in the space, facilitated within the wider context of the open session. This will be explored in depth in a subsequent section. Another binding element between the core groups was the sharing of interest. All regular customers expressed their appreciation of the music, as did a lot of the staff. Overall, the community in Dalriada appears to be a community-of-interest with smaller groups experiencing ‘communion’ within it [see charts below] – a form of community involving shared sense of identity (Lee and Newby, 1983).



Charts 1 & 2: Analysed results of participant survey answers to the question: “describe Dalriada in three words”

### Inner Spaces

With community being our central focus, investigating how space is utilised by actors, and its influence, was essential. Considering community and space in tandem revealed many crucial interdependencies. While the owner of the bar describes Dalriada’s location in terms of commercial success, citing proximity to the beach as a “big draw” for customers, musicians emphasise the location’s impact on music sessions and community-building: “the location has the biggest effect on who comes”. Indeed, location is a critical feature of many live music venues. Certain spaces are “of critical importance in relation to musical experience” (Bennett and Rogers, 2016: 490). One key factor contributing Dalriada’s community is the bar’s suburban location, which attracts less tourist footfall compared to city-centre bars. The outside of the building is only subtly marked by a small black placard reading “Dalriada”. Even knowing the bar’s address, some members of our ethnography group struggled to find it on our first visit, as it blended into similarly built neighbouring houses. This relative anonymity imparted the impression of a ‘secret’ place. One musician said that “the location’s meant that the right people come”, later elaborating: “[Dalriada is] not the sort of pub that you can get smashed out of your face in, because it’s a family vibe”.

This familial atmosphere is fostered not only by the location, but also by the space's physical features. The bar's placement on the ground floor of a residential building (the owners occupy the upper levels) influences the community spirit and feeling of kinship between bar frequenters. The entryway includes a prominent staircase which leads directly to the owners' home, theoretically meaning unrestricted access to their living space. This staircase is symbolic of trust and a signifier of boundary (although there have been some breaches and occasions of theft). The building retains the closed floor-plan layout common in Victorian homes, rather than knocking down walls to mimic the more common single open-room layout of many city centre bars (FERENCE, 2018). This design, combined with interior features such as open fireplaces and the aforementioned staircase, contribute to this familial ambience of the space as well. As one bartender, observed, this physical house is also a "home for a lot of people".

Yet, it is the utilisation of Dalriada's space, rather than the physical aspects of the space itself, that is pivotal in establishing community. The atmosphere during open sessions is different to other times – such as the quiet evenings we experienced before some sessions start. Our fieldnotes include observations such as: "...tonight however, the action seems to be subdued" or "...a glance at the fireplace confirms the fire's out, the room is as cold as the atmosphere feels without live music...". Customers and staff alike seemed to dwell in their 'habitat' and be more introverted compared to the times of the open session, when movement between the spaces becomes frequent. This relates to both physical movement and psychological movement, or exchange, facilitated by things such as the announcement session leaders make during sessions, like: "everyone is welcome to join us here". Thus, the space is being opened, and possibilities of movements arise. The higher number of frequenters at the sessions means that space is often shared by otherwise unrelated individuals. The shape of the main room itself takes a circular form due to the placement of chairs and tables, creating a feeling of openness and connectivity [*see floor-plan*].

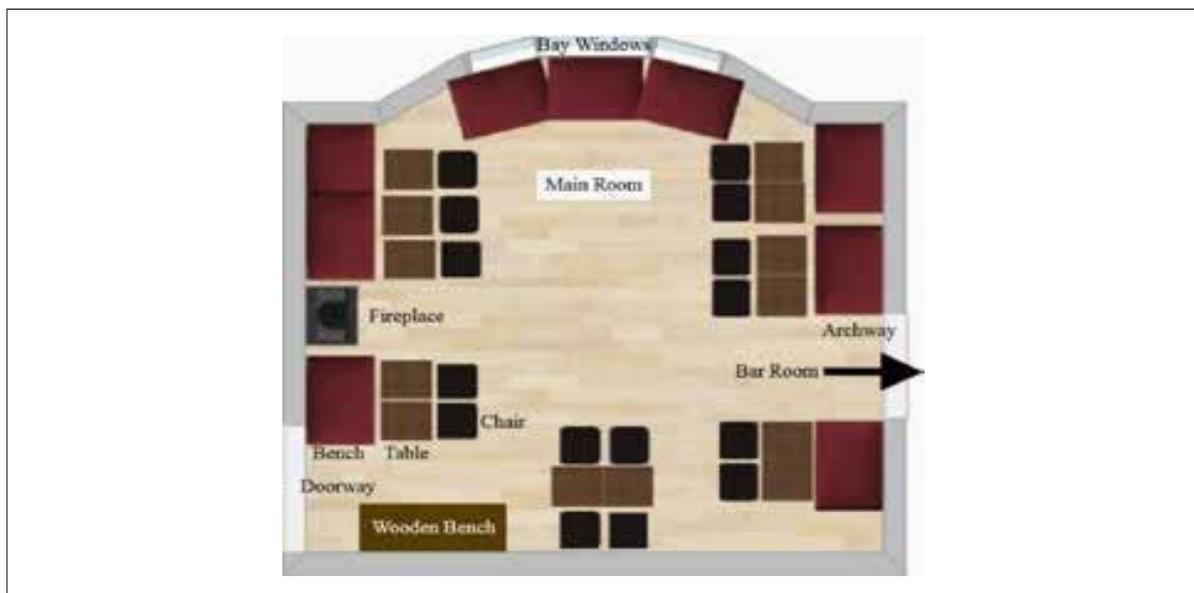


Chart 3: Floorplan

During music sessions, musicians and their audiences form a circle, with the musicians' backs to the bay windows and audience members lining the other three sides of the room. One session leader remarks, "we're not turning our backs on anyone. Even the people in the back, if they're not really listening... they're still part of the whole thing". Later, this musician reveals that this physical inclusion is mirrored by social inclusion: "because it's so community-based it's just really important not just to be inclusive, but also actively include people who aren't playing any music". Another musician reflects this sentiment of social inclusion as well, noting that his goal is "community-building... [to] include everybody". Further processes signifying this inclusion are explored later. However, this supposed inclusivity is not unrestricted by any means. With the main room being a small space (a capacity of around 50, with only eight tables – excluding the ones used by the musicians), there is an inevitable spatial limit, which furthermore translates into a community limit. We observed instances where, for example, a large group of musicians (around a dozen) were present. This meant they had to arrange their seating in a way in which half the group was facing their backs to the audience. Unlike with typical open sessions, no one from the wider clientele was explicitly invited to join the group musically. When asked about this in an interview, the session leader admitted that when a certain number is reached, inclusion can become "tricky" as playing time needs to be divided between inner-circle musicians. It might therefore become harder for an outsider to join, but to him: "anyone who wants in can make the effort", before quickly correcting himself: "well not, in", realising that this could be construed as exclusive. This highlights the tension between inclusivity and exclusivity created by spatial constraints.

## Rituals, Tradition and Resistance

Having identified the openness of the music session and the performance space as vital factors for the creation of the Dalriada community, the final element that evident itself as conducive to its continued existence was a series of recurring events of a ritualistic fashion. Rituals are processes integral to the forming and maintaining of societal groups that share space and time. Rituals involve function and symbolism, performance and exchange. Whilst they may appear as unassuming mundane acts, specificity of setting, performance, and the actors involved, create meaning and give them their symbolic power. In Dalriada some of these rituals are either inherent to the open music session or selected by group members as acts of coming-together and bonding. Rituals observed during our fieldwork and described by our informants as meaningful and significant, were (and are) repeated and have been repeated over the course of many years.

Cultural anthropologists have studied local communities for many years and have observed ways that communities express meaning and values through language and rituals. These cultural artefacts help community members make sense of their worlds and participate meaningfully in group activities – (Wilson et al, 2004: 11)

One group activity is the ‘musicians’ meeting’. Having started as a regular, functional event that brought together the musicians and the bar owner to discuss and address issues as they arose, this meeting is now less regular and performs no ‘apparent’ useful function. The meetings bring the players together, making them feel part of a whole and give the musicians’ community its own space and time, separate to the music session. One of them said that “we’re all together and think what an amazing venue, what an amazing thing we’ve got going”. Its obvious community-building functionality here is (partly) perceived as mere symbolism.

The leader of each session introduces it and openly invites anyone to join, should they like. Leaders chose to announce the session by either standing up before the music begins or during a short interval a couple of songs after it commences. During one of the Sunday sessions the leader stood up and addressing the punters shouted: “...this is an open session folks... no one will criticise you, they will kindly applaud. You can sing, or you can just crack a joke...”. The significant elements of this process are the identification of the announcer as leader; the commencement of the proceedings; the expression of inclusivity to everyone present; and the welcoming of all newcomers. During this process the leader also explains that a glass will go around later in the session – another key ritual – whereby punters can contribute to the musicians’ kitty. Through this process, a pint glass tagged with the name of each session, goes around the room (in a cyclical direction) and punters can put cash in, adding to the existing £20 put there by the ‘house’, so the musicians can buy drinks during the session.

Besides this being a monetary contribution that mainly helps the non-paid guest musicians, it also signifies participatory inclusion that brings everyone together and allows them to be in some way involved. We can say that here we have a reciprocal exchange between the parties, something a musician claimed that "...it's not about the money... [it's] a kind of ritual that unites everybody".

Exchanges and repetitions that imply – and in cases explicitly display ritualistic processes – are also found in the music and its performance as well. The 'passing of the song' amongst the musicians, always takes place in an anti-clockwise direction. Whilst no explanation was given regarding the original choice of direction, its repetition since its inception, according to one musician signifies tradition and equality – knowledge that makes the musicians involved feel "emotionally safe" and keeps everyone (leaders included) at an equitable level. Furthermore, the last song of the Sunday session is always the same traditionally. One session leader said, "...the real old crowd love to sing Wagon Wheel, that was a ritual...". Over time, groups within Dalriada's community have used this as another form of bonding – a common language. Given the familiarity with the song, this encourages everyone to sing-along on this one part of the session, thus transforming punters into performers, expressing a sense of democratic equality and by extension forming a wider community that identifies under one banner.

One important, and rather revealing, distinction amongst the sessions we observed lies within the one taking place on Saturday nights. This is what one musician called the standard "pubcovers session" that involves a guest band (different every week) that play cover versions of popular types of songs. This is not dissimilar to a 'normal' gig, whereby the band are there to 'entertain an audience', with no other meaningful interaction beyond music-sharing (musicians) and showing of appreciation (punters). The circular connection between musicians and punters is non-existent and no observable ritual serves to bring the two parties together, alter their identities and share meaning between them. One member of staff put that into context by telling us that "the lead singer [of one of the bands] is 'arrogant' and thinks he 'owns the place' ... I just don't see a need for it ... that is how they want their image to be – they want to be loud and brash and have people's attention. It's pretty annoying". The Dalriada musicians that take part in the open sessions are in direct contact with everyone within the space. They are the actors performing the ritual. These actors, in an environment where cultural values are being exchanged amongst different groups, operate in the role of "social broker" (Bernard, 2011: 430). They are the mediators that negotiate these exchanges (Småberg and Sigurðsson, 2012: 261). The above contradictory example further enhances our assumption of the properties of community-building as a process of exchanges and rituals.

Rituals, whilst integral to community-building, can similarly become a barrier to how some communities evolve. Strict adherence to traditional normative processes, legitimises the structures

of power by shaping the group's ideology (Bloch, 1989). As we have seen above, the negative response of regular customers to the change of end-song a few years ago, illustrates how rituals can lead to the assumption of power amongst groups of people. The regular customers in this example were transformed from recipients to owners of that process and their role within the community transformed. It can be argued then, that rituals are also conducive to the preservation of a 'status quo' and, in a way, are a form of conservatism.

### Harmonious Contradictions: Commonality and Conflict

Dalriada proved to be a fertile ground for ethnographic research. Over the short time span of our fieldwork we were able to recognise an identifiable community (and its 'communities') that has formed as a result of a broader ritualistic process that is the open music session. What we have learned is that community cohesion is not without contradiction and is characterised by conflicts of interest as well as collaborative endeavours, mainly affected by the sharing of (folk) songs. The rituals that assign symbolism to the act of community-building are also stumbling blocks to progress. The space wherein webs of relations are being weaved, is inclusive but also becomes exclusive. Time, space and culture are shared and contested. What we have observed, documented and analysed, is but a snapshot of the lived (and living) experience of complex human entities that inhabit an intimate space. The big picture is as constant and as dynamic as the waters of the sea outside Dalriada's big bay window.

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