

RESEARCH | PEER REVIEWED

## *Wanted Dead or Alive:*

### The Collaborative Art of Performing Music Therapy in Prison

Kjetil Hjørnevik <sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Grieg Academy—Department of Music, University of Bergen, Norway

\* [kjetil.hjornevik@uib.no](mailto:kjetil.hjornevik@uib.no)

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#### Abstract

Rap—perhaps uniquely among musical styles—invites expressions that explicitly draw on the prisoner identity as a vital resource for artistic credibility and creativity. Progressive rock often privileges an aesthetic of compositional complexity and technical proficiency on a musical instrument, whilst punk is often associated with DIY ethics and anti-virtuosic approaches to musicking. How can such apparently disparate attitudes towards music making be met, respected and reconciled in music therapy group work in prison, and how do these attitudes correspond to different strategies for “being a prisoner”? This article explores music therapy in a Scandinavian prison with a focus on prisoner participants’ notions of authenticity in musical performance. Through the presentation of two cases derived from an ethnographic enquiry into music therapy in prison, I introduce *the musicking persona* as a concept for understanding how the participants’ emerging identities as musicians were defined not only by their musical histories, aesthetic preferences, cultural affiliations or musical abilities, but also by the style of their musical participation. The analysis is discussed with reference to cultural criminology and desistance research. Implications for music therapy practice are addressed, including professional dilemmas linked to censorship and paternalism in creative processes in prisons.

**Keywords:** music therapy; performance; prison; incarceration; musicking persona

#### Introduction

Music therapy in prisons is a small but expanding field of practice (Choutino, 2015). A considerable proportion of available studies focus on music therapy as treatment of mental

illness or as an agent for behavioural change (Chen et al., 2016; Cohen, 1987; Dickinson, 2006; Fulford, 2002; Gallagher & Steele, 2002; Glyn 2003; Gold et al., 2014; Hakvoort, 2002; Kellett et al., 2019; Reed, 2002). Other studies, including the ethnographic study upon which this article is based, emphasise community-oriented practices and music's roles in everyday prison life (Hjørnevik, 2025; O'Grady, 2009; Tuastad & O'Grady, 2013). The use of popular music related methods such as rock band rehearsals, live concerts, collaborative songwriting, digital music production and studio recording is well documented in the music therapy literature (Gold et al., 2014; Short, 2014; Tuastad & O'Grady, 2013) and is indicated with a wide range of populations including adolescents (Crook & McFerran, 2019), in mental health settings (Solli, 2015) and with prisoners (Tuastad & Stige, 2015). Recent scholarly work suggests that participation in music therapy activities can contribute towards a coherent sense of identity in the lives of people in prison (Hjørnevik, 2025; Tuastad & Stige, 2015). This is significant since a coherent sense of identity and the ability to integrate fragmented and often chaotic life experiences into a coherent life narrative is seen as one of the most important factors in achieving desistance from crime (Giordano et al., 2007; Hunter & Farrall, 2017; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Presser & Sandberg, 2015). Studies into related fields of professional musical practices in prisons such as community music and music education programmes also point to the affordances of performance-based musical activities for developing identity and belonging (Bramwell, 2018; Henley et al., 2012; Kougiali et al., 2018; Mendonca, 2010; Wilson et al., 2009, Wilson & Logan, 2006). For instance, studies of the UK Gamelan Project highlight increased self-esteem, development of social skills, education and empowerment as key outcomes (Wilson & Logan, 2006). This research is complemented by studies from the fields of ethnomusicology and criminology which highlight the importance of music in everyday life in places of incarceration as a form of self-management and a way to manage interpersonal relations (Edri & Bensimon, 2019; Harbert, 2010; Somma, 2011; Waller, 2018). In this article, I will focus on notions of authenticity in musical performance as expressed by participants in music therapy in a Scandinavian prison. These *authenticities of musical participation* are linked to performative and discursive notions of both "prisoner" and "musician" identities. The article shows how participants developed, negotiated and integrated their prisoner and musician identities through participation in musical activities, thus contributing to the growing body of research that suggests that music therapy can be an important element in the overall identity work of prison inmates.

## Analysing Performance

Theory building about performance as method in music therapy came to the fore as Community Music Therapy became increasingly established as a discourse at the turn of the century. My own position as a music therapy practitioner researcher is informed by Ansdell's (2005) elucidation of the "paradoxes of performance" in music therapy, summed up as "being who you aren't, doing what you can't" (Ansdell, 2005, n.p). Furthermore, I concur with Aigen's (2014) notion that musical performance can be seen as "continuous with daily life rather than as something apart from it" (p. 159). For the purposes of this article, however, I will draw on a body of work that has previously been put to little use in the theorisation of performance in music therapy, namely Auslander's (2006) analytical approach to popular music performance and his elaboration of the concept of the *musical persona*. Drawing on theatre studies and Goffman's (1974) concept of frame analysis, Auslander (2004) delineates a three-step progression in how musical performance has been understood in musicological discourse: 1) Historically, the perceived *raison d'être* of performance was to "realise the score" (Auslander, 2006), and the performers' role was

reduced to being a mediator of the composer's intent and the autonomy of the work. 2) Small (1998) turned this notion on its head by suggesting that "performance does not exist in order to present musical works, but rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform" (p. 8). Small thus gave primacy to musical performance as a situated event, and to music as collaborative social action. 3) Building on this, Auslander (2006) posits that "both the musical work *and* its execution serve the musician's performance of a *persona*" (p. 102, my emphases). Drawing on contrasting examples such as the idiosyncratic style of rock singer Joe Cocker and the conspicuous anonymity of an orchestra pit musician, Auslander argues that "all kinds of musicians (i.e., singers, instrumentalists, conductors) in all genres (i.e., classical, jazz, rock, etc.) enact personae in their performances" (p. 102). Whilst Auslander then ostensibly turns the focus towards *individual* intent and personal expression, he also notes that the musical persona is co-created in the encounter between performer(s) and audience; the perceived status and authenticity of a performer is ultimately a matter of unfolding mutual negotiation. My stance is that all three perspectives offer valid theoretical assumptions from which to explore and understand performance.

In his elaboration of the concept of the musical persona, Auslander distinguishes between *the persona* and *the person*. The notion of *the person* may at first seem to contradict Goffman's idea that the self is a multiple accumulation of situated performances, rather than a fixed entity (Goffman, 1959). However, Auslander does not suggest that *the person* represents a single "true self," nor that *the persona* is a "false self." Instead, he asserts that "the version of self that a musician performs qua musician is [...] the musical persona" (p. 104). In her compelling and rigorous theorisation of musical expression in music therapy, Epp (2007) equally challenges the notion that musical expression represents a core, true self. Instead, she convincingly shows how pre-composed songs afford the situated performance of personal resources, emotions and aspirations. In line with this, Auslander recognises the self as fluid and performative, but argues that this can usefully be separated from a more intentional and even rehearsed *persona* which, in extreme cases such as with famous artists, takes the form of a commodity, co-created by the public. As an example, Auslander describes how David Jones (person) performed *as* the artist David Bowie (persona) who for a period performed Ziggy Stardust (character).

The examples from popular culture offered by Auslander are significant to our understanding of everyday musical encounters in music therapy. They form part of the cultural web within which our relationships with music are formed (DeNora, 2000; DeNora, 2014; Moore, 2012). Also, from the early accounts of rock band methods (Aigen, 2002; Berkaak & Ruud, 1994), to contemporary studies of rap, hip hop and electronic music production (Crooke & McFerran, 2018), a discourse of popular music performance in music therapy practice can be traced (Aigen, 2001). Given the rapid developments in digital technology, social media and now artificial intelligence, there is still—and perhaps even increasingly—a need to develop the theoretical bases for further understanding relationships between popular culture and the meanings of performance in music therapy practice. What Auslander usefully brings to the music therapy table is a novel perspective on how the music industry<sup>1</sup>, as an arbiter between music-as-commodity and the public-as-consumers, influences both performers' and audiences' perceptions of and relationships with performance. In the following I will draw on these ideas as a way of understanding

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<sup>1</sup> What could previously be referred to as "the music industry" with some degree of precision has changed beyond recognition since the advent of streaming, home recording and social media. It is however a safe assumption, based on their ages, that most of the participants in this study grew up with listening practices subject to a more traditional notion of "the" music industry.

how participants in music therapy in a Scandinavian prison came to shape not only their style of performance but also their *style of participation* in music therapy, and how this interacted with their sense of identity.

## Method and Setting

The two cases presented are based upon comprehensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted within a low-security Scandinavian prison housing approximately 90 male inmates. As a music therapist practitioner researcher employed by the prison, I immersed myself in this environment for a cumulative period of ten months, leveraging traditional ethnographic methods including participant observation, interviews, audio recordings, and the collection of artifacts. This involved not only active participation in music therapy sessions but also casual interactions throughout various physical spaces within the prison, including corridors, lounges and other communal areas.

Participation was open to all inmates, including those who were already involved in music activities. People's right to not participate was protected through a thorough process of informing about the project and securing consent at the earliest point of contact, before any audio recordings or fieldnotes were made. Prison inmates were also able to participate in music activities without being subject to research. The status as research participant required a signed consent form. Participants in musicking activities who did not sign a consent form were not included in the analysis and were not counted as research participants. Members of the general prison population were not considered to be research participants (e.g., the general audience at various prison concerts). A total of 31 inmates participated in the study, granting consent for the inclusion of data derived from their engagement in music therapy sessions and their daily life within the prison. As the research project progressed, I also embraced participatory action research strategies (Bradbury, 2015) where participants would engage actively in the planning, implementation and evaluation of music therapy activities thus fostering a more formalised collaboration with participants as co-researchers in processes of action and reflection.

Despite my own position in the prison being permanent, the population I was studying was in a constant state of flux due to unforeseen transfers of participants to higher levels of security, early release and compassionate leave, and the arrival of new inmates to the prison on a daily basis. Acknowledging this fluid nature of the prison environment, my analytical approach evolved to adapt to the dynamic cultural milieu continually shaping and reshaping within the prison walls. In this I was inspired by Ferrell et al.'s (2015) concept of *liquid ethnography* described as "attuned to the dynamics of destabilized, transitory communities; [...] immersed in the ongoing interplay of images; and [...] comfortable with the shifting boundaries between research, research subjects and cultural activism" (p. 218).

Data from the ethnographic fieldwork comprised of interview transcripts, field notes, audio recordings including concert and studio material, photos and artefacts. Data from interviews and fieldnotes were subject to open coding and thematic analysis (Boeije, 2009; Cresswell, 2013). The audio material, pictures and artefacts were continuously consulted and drawn on to support, contest and initiate lines of thought together with the other forms of data. Pink (2009) states that "research materials can be used as prompts that help to evoke the memories and imaginations of the research, thus enabling us to re-encounter the sensorial and emotional reality of research situations" (p. 121). On some occasions it was a matter of exploring audio materials from a particular episode or issue that was described in the field notes in order to add detail and depth, or for possible triangulation (Cresswell, 2013). In other instances, re-listening to recordings brought up new ideas and areas of interest to explore across the textual and visual forms of data. A comprehensive

synthesis of the findings can be found elsewhere (Hjørnevik, 2025) and is not presented here. Instead, the focus in this article lies specifically on the two selected examples presented as cases, illustrating relationships between musical performance and notions of authenticity in this setting.

Navigating the dual role of practitioner and researcher posed methodological and ethical complexities, particularly concerning power dynamics between myself as an employee of the prison service and the prisoner participants, and insider/outsider positioning related to factions of the prison population (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Reflexivity was therefore paramount to ensuring the integrity of the research process. In my case, conflicts between striving for a critical stance as a researcher on one hand, and pragmatically seeking to promote a music therapy service as a music therapist on the other, carried with it a great responsibility for questioning my own analytic lens and acknowledging the influence of researcher participation upon the object of study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Treating reflexivity as a fundamental stance I engaged in ongoing processes of paying “serious attention [...] to the way different kinds of linguistic, social, political and theoretical elements are woven together in the process of knowledge development” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 5). Ecological validity (DeNora, 2013) was sought through close dialogue with research participants, peers and colleagues throughout the project regarding emerging analyses and themes. To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to all individuals referenced in this study, and any other personal information that could possibly reveal the identity of the participants has been anonymised.

Due to the restrictions that the prison environment represented, people’s opportunity to enact aspects of their “outside” identity was compromised. Abstaining from activities such as drinking alcohol, driving, surfing the internet or using one’s mobile phone was not just a practical and emotional loss, but also meant that people could not maintain or mediate vital aspects of their identity. In fact, many inmates took this unique opportunity imposed by the security regime to present themselves creatively and independently from the “truths” of their life on the outside. As one of the participants in the study explained:

**Bull:** [...] there are always these new people coming in [to the prison]. I never tell them how long I’ve got or how long I’ve been here or what I am in for. I just make up something. (Interview, Bull)

This quote illustrates well both the opportunities for “making up something,” but also the culture of distrust that often exists in prison environments (Ugelvik, 2014). Revealing too much about oneself is a risk, and showing vulnerability is largely considered to be in breach of the *inmate code* (Sykes 1958; Ugelvik, 2014)—the prisoners’ own rules about honour, loyalty and what is acceptable behaviour. For many music therapy participants, musicking offered opportunities to explore new ways of being, and music provided a license to express emotions and generally present oneself differently from how one was perceived elsewhere in the prison. For many, subsequent live performances meant that their musicking persona gradually informed how they were perceived by others in the prison community. For others, most notably those who identified with “gangsta” rap and hip hop (Nielson, 2010), their status as prisoners became an integral part of the musicking persona that they wanted to put across to audiences both within and outside the prison walls.

### **Case 1: Henrik and Andrew’s Conflicting Stances to Musicking**

During an “open music room” session, Henrik (congas/vocals), Ben (acoustic guitar/vocals), Andrew (electric guitar/vocals) and I (bass/drums/piano/vocals) played

together. Throughout the session, two conflicting approaches to musicking came to the fore:

### **Henrik's DIY Approach**

Henrik, a man in his early forties, had a previous history of playing percussion in a community music therapy band. He described the band's music as "punk-like [...] aggression and frustration. It was good to get it out" (Interview, Henrik). He had come to see me on his first day in the prison, but explained that he was feeling very ill, having come in "straight off the street." Consequently, he did not want to play for the first week but promised to come back when he was feeling better. A week later he returned and said, "now I am beginning to be reliable again" (Fieldnotes). Henrik's approach to musicking involved spontaneity, humour and a flexible relationship to intonation and timing. This was represented by his engagement during our playing of *The Prison Song*, a humorous lyric about prison life set to the melody of the country classic *Detroit City* (Bare, 1963):

"We started playing *The Prison Song*. Henrik immediately joined in singing whilst playing the congas energetically. Henrik's playing was impulsive and loud with little sense of a clear pulse or rhythm, drifting in and out of time with Ben's strumming and my bass playing. He made extended eye-contact with myself and Ben, smiling widely as he sang "I wanna go home" in full voice and moved his whole body in a jagged dance in front of his instrument. I felt that our rendition had a very playful energy to it." (Fieldnotes)

### **Andrew's Studios Approach**

Andrew was in his mid-twenties and had arrived at the prison at the same time as Henrik. He had played the electric guitar for several years but had little experience playing with others. He had already had several jams with others in the prison, but had developed a reputation for being arrogant, and other inmates gradually developed a consensus that they did not want to play with him. I had observed that he was an above average technically competent guitar player and singer. His approach hinged on practice, technical proficiency and accuracy in the approximation of existing material, represented by his engagement during our rehearsal of the song *Wanted Dead or Alive* (Bon Jovi):

"Andrew plays the guitar part to *Wanted Dead or Alive* with great precision and is faithful in his recreation of Jon Bon Jovi's vocal performance; there is a nasal quality to his voice, he uses twang in the right places, and his intonation is very similar to the original. I find myself quite enjoying Andrew's highly accomplished performance of the song." (Fieldnotes)

When we played *Wanted Dead or Alive* Henrik disengaged and apparently sabotaged Andrew's accurate rendition through loud vocal shouts. In return, when we played *The Prison Song* Andrew commented dismissively that he thought we sounded like amateurs. There seemed then to be a clash of values and lack of a shared agenda.

### **Transpositioning as Method**

After a cigarette break, I encouraged Andrew to sit down behind the drums, an instrument he was unfamiliar with. Having put the guitar down in what I interpreted as frustration, playing the drums required him to adopt a different, more exploratory approach. I invited him to remain on the drums and showed him how to play a basic 4/4 beat, repeatedly

pointing and counting aloud to indicate exactly when to play the high-hat, snare and kick drum. To my surprise playing the 4/4 rhythm pattern proved difficult for Andrew, so I encouraged him to instead play freely and to follow the music in a more intuitive way. By moving to the drums, Andrew had placed himself in the role of beginner rather than expert. This aligned him with the less technically accomplished but more playfully spontaneous approach of Henrik. Initially, Andrew dismissed his own drumming and the sound of the band. However, after playing drums to *The Prison Song* several times, Andrew was singing loudly with the rest of us on the chorus whilst maintaining eye contact and laughing; “I wanna go home, I wanna go home, Oh I wanna go home.” This shift in attitude eventually led me to suggest that we revisit *Wanted Dead or Alive*. This time, Henrik engaged with the song with the same energy and humour that he displayed in *The Prison Song*, joining in singing “dead or aliiiiive!” Andrew, now returned to the guitar, delivered the song in his usually technically proficient and stylistically appropriate way, but this time seemed very happy to include the raucous energy of Henrik. For a moment then, Andrew’s and Henrik’s approaches seemed to be integrated.

The proceedings during the session with Henrik, Ben and Andrew illustrate what I have come to think of as the music therapy equivalent of *transpositioning*. Employed as a technique within the fields of design and architecture (Snøhetta, 2020), transpositioning refers to an approach towards transdisciplinary collaboration where different professions take on each other’s roles and tasks. The aim is to overcome prejudices about the possibilities and limitations inherent within different professions and their associated skill sets, and to encourage creative collaboration through people applying their unique competencies and resources in exploring new modes of working. In music therapy groups in the prison, facilitating the experience of “the other” through transpositioning proved a useful approach to cultivate an experiential understanding of other people’s agendas and notions of authenticity in performance.

This example illustrates how musical performances were shaped by what was “allowed” or not “allowed” in the meeting between fellow participants and, in the event of a concert, between the performer(s) and an audience. As Auslander (2006) puts it, the musical persona “is [...] produced at any given performance through the negotiation of a working consensus with the audience. The audience is thus the cocreator of the persona and has an investment in it that extends beyond mere consumption” (p. 117). Andrew’s musicking persona striving for a technically skilful version of *Wanted Dead or Alive* was initially silenced by Henrik and Ben, whereas his musicking persona playing the drums intuitively, singing and having fun was encouraged. Only when the different musicking personae that Henrik and Andrew presented were made more elastic and adaptable, could we work together as a group. Given the widespread consensus that Andrew was *persona non grata* in various band groups I was very pleased that he and Henrik had achieved such a fruitful collaboration.

Some degree of censorship, exclusion and coercion will be present in all musical groupings, but in this particular case it needs to be understood against the specific social confines of *being a prisoner*. Ugelvik (2014) points out that in response to the prison’s “profound attacks on the prisoners’ self-image and sense of personal self-worth,” prisoners develop a “shared response to pain and deprivation” by defining themselves as “a group with specific values and virtues” (p. 58). The inmate code (Sykes, 1958) may appear in varying manifestations in different contexts, but the central thing according to Ugelvik is that shared values—whatever they may be—*are* established in order to have *something* to unite over. This way of responding to the “external pressures and aggression imposed by the prison environment” (p. 57) gives rise to well documented phenomena such as inmate hierarchies based on the types of crime people have committed, or the golden rule that one does not “snitch” (p. 58). The clash between Henrik’s fun and haphazard approach to musicking, and Andrew’s stylised and technically accomplished aspirations was about

something more than the oft encountered animosity between “musos” and those that subscribe to a more “punk” aesthetic; Andrew’s approach to musicking threatened the “specific values and virtues” (Ugelvik, 2014) that Henrik and Ben identified with; engaging in musicking for fun and spontaneity in the face of prison life. Henrik’s deeply thoughtful decision to abstain from playing with the band when he was in his drug withdrawal phase, and his comment that he was now trustworthy again and therefore could engage in music, suggests that for him, playing together was not something to be taken lightly. His approach to musicking was not about *not* taking his music seriously, but rather about protecting his own form of resistance against the system (Ugelvik, 2014): conviviality and fun through music (Procter, 2013). Threats to this musical conviviality seemingly threatened his very approach to being a prison inmate.

## Case 2: “Gangsta Rap” and the Prisoner Identity as Musical Resource

For most people who participated in music activities in the prison, becoming a musician was a way of *not* being “a prisoner,” i.e., to get away from the inscription of a prisoner identity (Hjørnevik, 2025). Conversely, for some being a prisoner was clearly a way of *becoming a musician*. After all, the prison provided the time, people, materials and opportunities necessary for many to develop a longstanding ambition to learn to play, to sing or to write songs. Being a prisoner could also be central to some participants’ development of a musician identity. For instance, being in prison aligned well with established notions of “gangsta rap” culture (Baker & Homan, 2007; Nielson, 2010; Short, 2014). This notion was mediated through the ubiquitous imagery of drug dealing, prostitution, gun violence, money laundering, theft and other illicit activities present in the music videos I sometimes downloaded and watched with participants who had an interest in hip hop. Identifying as a “gangsta rapper” (Bramwell, 2018) meant overtly subscribing to a culture of resistance and sometimes outright hate against authorities—in particular aimed at the police, and by extension, at prison officers.

For Ali, an 18-year-old man serving time for drug related offences, imprisonment held a potential to provide credibility to his outside identity as a rapper. He openly disclosed his prisoner status in his lyrics and made references to it when posting his music on YouTube, something he was able to do when on temporary leave of absence from the prison. As part of engaging Ali in music therapy activities, I facilitated intermittent studio recordings in the local community with a professional hip hop producer who had previously produced leading national rap artists. This could however be perceived as a controversial practice by prison officers, both because of the risks and practicalities of escorting prisoners to the studio location outside the prison, and because of the lyrical content of some of the songs. True to the gangsta rap aesthetic, lyrics included graphic references to crime, violence and drugs, presented in derogatory and aggressive language with abuse directed at the police and at prison guards. Ali repeatedly explained that “it needs to be real, otherwise there’s no point. You have to sing with feeling!” (Fieldnotes). Interestingly, this expectation that music should be performed *with feeling* marked musical performance as one of the few domains in the prison milieu where the display of emotion was accepted and positively encouraged. However, such lyrics also had potential to cause offence among prison staff, other inmates and a wider audience, and occasionally this attracted a degree of collegial scepticism towards this part of my practice. Positively this made me reflect on pertinent questions about the professional, ethical and artistic integrity of the music therapy service and its role within a rehabilitative regime. Lyrics were sometimes subject to discussions about censorship with other music colleagues—e.g., within the prison school department—which provided a great support. There was also usually a consensus within the prison’s multi-disciplinary team and the regional Prison Service management that a

high degree of leeway had to be allowed to give participants the opportunity to create an expression that they experienced as authentic. My own stance was that being able to express anger and frustration could have a therapeutic function in addition to being idiomatic to the genre, and that many participants engaging in rap had a strong desire for their voice and their stories to be heard. I generally drew a line where participants directed their lyrics at specific people who could be recognized, or when other factors suggested that the lyrics could pose a risk to the performer, the audience or the staff, e.g., during live performances.

Ali was very open in our sessions about the resentment he harboured against the police and the prison service, and he wrote lyrics containing graphic descriptions about what he wanted to do to “someone in a blue uniform.” When planning our first trip to the professional music studio however, Ali reflected critically on the impact of his music:

**Ali:** I don't want the officers here to come with us [to the studio] though. It would be really embarrassing if they heard the lyrics. Or...not embarrassing...but I don't want them to hear them, do you know what I mean? I don't want them to hear them and think they're about *them*. Most of them are alright. You know the score. It's not like I hate all the people that work here. That officer [name] in [another] prison, he's the best guy I've met. I just have to get these songs out my system, then I can start to write about other things. I promise. I know you don't like these lyrics, but come on, you know why I'm pissed off and why I have to get it off my chest. (Interview, Ali)

As Ali illustrates, antagonistic lyrics were often expressive of anger towards a faceless system of power, rather than against the actual people who wore the uniforms. Ali was clearly aware of the adverse reactions his lyrics could elicit, and I was surprised to find in our conversations that his own threshold for what he deemed shocking or provoking was lower than mine. His assumption that I did not like his initial lyrics was true, and I had attempted to give honest feedback about what I found problematic. However, I tried to keep the focus on how I experienced the song in relation to the lyrical style and musical traditions we operated within. Homing in on aesthetic, technical and performative aspects of his performance was my strategy for critiquing the text whilst still taking his anger and frustration seriously. Accordingly, we maintained a close working relationship and had many conversations in my office where Ali was able to vent his frustration. Having recorded the vitriolic first track he had been working on since he was transferred to the prison, he was able, as he had predicted, to move on to create new tracks. One of these was called *Doing Time in Style*, and the sentiment of his lyrics had altered to the extent that he was invited by the prison school department to perform live at a prison event. Ali's first lyric can thus be seen as a distinct stage within a therapeutic process. Instead of being censored, Ali was able to go in the studio to record his frustration. This enabled him to move on and develop a multi-faceted and reflective musicking persona that could both draw authentically on gangsta rap culture and the prisoner identity, whilst *also* being able to work amenably and constructively within the power regime of the institution.

Ali's case illustrates well that the use of songwriting as method in music therapy should always be sensitive to stylistic and cultural traditions for genre specific performance. And, performances of such songs must always be understood in relation to the *discursive domain*<sup>2</sup> (Auslander, 2006) of which they are a part.

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<sup>2</sup> Auslander refers to discursive domains as “established ideas about what a performer should be” (p. 102), stating that “audiences and musicians alike are aware of a set of emotions and attitudes [...] deemed appropriate within the genre frame [...], and musicians generally draw on that vocabulary in their performances” (p. 112).

## Concluding Reflections on the Performance of Music Therapy in Prison Settings

The two cases above show that a lot was at stake for the prisoner participants in making musical performance authentic to their own experience of identity. As Moore (2012) highlights: “‘Authenticity’ is an unavoidably loaded term, for it carries an ethical charge: in some circumstances, to be declared inauthentic is, somehow, to be less than fully human” (p. 260). In face of a carceral culture of suspicion and untrustworthiness (Ugelvik, 2014), the desire for musicking to be experienced as “real” was clearly strong. Ruud (2013) explains how the quest for authenticity is often based on the notion that we have an inner, real core which can be expressed in a spontaneous and unmediated way (p. 122). He goes on to problematize this notion, stating that we instead must consider authenticity itself to be a discourse; a way in which we talk about and think about music (p. 124). Authenticity, according to Ruud, refers to whether or not we are seen to act from our own motivations and interests or whether we are seen to be led by forces external to ourselves. He also refers to the degree to which someone is *seen* as being original rather than a copy of images created by the media and mass markets (p. 122). Applying this understanding of authenticity to the data, Andrew’s performance of *Dead or Alive* could be seen as less authentic since he assimilated the performance of Jon Bon Jovi to such a large degree, displacing “himself” in lieu of replicating someone else. Ben and Henrik’s approach to the same song, singing in broken English with a strong local accent, may be seen as more authentic to a “true” self. However—as Ruud points out, and as musicking in the prison routinely demonstrated—there are many different “authenticities” (p. 124). Andrew’s skilful, detailed and deeply embodied re-creation of *Dead or Alive* could certainly be seen as more authentic by many precisely due to the personal investment involved. Ali’s transformation from an antagonistic provocateur to a more self-reflective rapper could easily be interpreted as a “redemption narrative” (Maruna, 2001), conforming to the rehabilitative agendas of a punitive regime and therefore reducing his credibility. However, since Ali was not subjected to censorship in the process, but was rather encouraged to explore and critically reflect on his own aesthetic expression, he maintained his agency, and his own and others’ perception of himself as authentic. The nature of participation in music therapy exhibited by the participants presented in this article was different, and was guided by their differing values and views of musical performance. Building on Auslander’s concept of the musical persona in musical performance, the *musicking persona* is a concept through which we can understand people’s signature modes of participation in music therapy. The musicking persona as introduced here encompasses 1) discursive domains, 2) notions of authenticity, and 3) personal performance agendas.

This has implications for the practice of music therapy in prison settings specifically. A central tenet in research into desistance from crime is the importance of fostering a coherent sense of identity (Maruna, 2001). Indeed, scholars in criminology place identity work and the narrative construction of a continuous life story (Presser & Sandberg, 2015) squarely at the centre of what a contemporary prison service needs to offer (McNeill & Schinkel, 2016). The concept of *tertiary desistance*, i.e., the more advanced stages of establishing a life of desistance, refers “[...] not just to shifts in behaviour or identity but to shifts in one’s sense of belonging to a (moral) community” (p. 608). This emphasis on the social dimensions of desistance from crime resonates with fundamental principles of Community Music Therapy (Ansdell & Pavlicevic, 2000; Procter, 2013). This indicates a client-led and performance-oriented approach to music therapy also in prisons. This study suggests that musical performance in the safe and professional context of music therapy offers unique and potent opportunities for prisoners to explore new *ways of being* whilst simultaneously holding on to core aspects of their values and identity. In line with the emphasis on social recognition within the concept of tertiary desistance, musical

performance facilitates a particular form of collaborative witnessing of the musicking persona. Whilst existing research largely presents music therapy with prisoners as a forensic mental health intervention, with notions of change primarily linked to cognitive, behavioural or emotional transformation in the individual, this study suggests that music therapy practice in penal carceral settings needs to be acutely attuned to relationships between musicking as a situated cultural practice and the ongoing identity work of prisoners from an ecological perspective informed by cultural criminology. This includes in-depth familiarity with discursive domains in musical performance, in order to formulate bespoke and individually tailored strategies for musical participation. This call echoes the more general call from Krüger and Tuastad (2025) that “professional discretion in music therapy should encompass a reflexive stance toward popular music, recognizing the cultural and social dynamics that shape musical experiences” (p. 11). Moreover, we need to cultivate the nuanced understanding that through musical performance 1) the prisoner identity can become a resource for *the musician*; 2) the musicking persona can become a resource for *the prisoner*; and 3) they can both become resources for *the person*.

### About the Author

Kjetil Hjørnevik is associate professor of music therapy at the University of Bergen, Norway where he is currently programme coordinator for the MA in Music Therapy. He graduated as a music therapist from the University of Roehampton, London in 2005 and has since worked extensively in mental health and carceral settings in the UK and Norway. Kjetil completed his PhD research into music therapy in prison settings in 2021 at Nordoff & Robbins/Goldsmiths University, London.

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