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MUSICIAN ROULETTE: A REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS OF CAPITAL, CLASS, AND CREATIVE SURVIVAL

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study explores the intersecting pressures of class, labor, and identity across the career of a first-generation college student and working-class musician pursuing a professional trajectory in music and higher education. Grounded in Bourdieu's capital theory and related frameworks (including socioemotional capital, self-determination theory, and future orientation), the study critically reflects on the author's lifelong experiences navigating music training, academic mobility, and economic precarity. Drawing on personal narrative, thematic analysis, and epiphanic moments of reflection, the paper highlights how inequities in social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital shape artistic outcomes. Findings suggest that career advancement in the arts is not merely a function of productivity or talent, but of compounding capital access and strategic timing. This work contributes to ongoing conversations in cultural sociology, music education, and equity in the arts by modeling a reflexive, insider account of how cultural laborers adapt, survive, and resist in stratified systems.

Keywords: autoethnography, creative labor, cultural production, precarity, music education, first-generation, equity in the arts, capital theory, socioemotional capital, self-determination

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INTRODUCTION

Capital has become an increasingly decisive force in shaping the educational and professional trajectories of musicians (Arditi, 2021; Bates, 2021). Yet few studies have traced how life events and corresponding capitals unfold across the totality of a musician's lifetime in western capitalist society. This autoethnographic study examines one participant—the researcher—through a reflexive, constant comparative lens grounded in capital theory and sociological critique (Adams et al., 2022; Denzin, 2013; McIlveen, 2008).

In this study, I seek to describe the musician's lived experience through forms of capital including economic, social, symbolic, cultural, emotional, mental, and human (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993, 2018; Cottingham, 2016; Lizardo, 2006). The

goal is to provide rich, reflexive data that reveal how capital acquisition (or lack thereof) affects development, coping strategies, and perceived outcomes within music education and professional markets (Burnard et al., 2015; Pinheiro & Dowd, 2009). These insights illuminate the inequities that model which musicians thrive, stagnate, or disappear from the field.

This work is situated within the experience of a first-generation college student from a low-SES and low-socioemotional capital background entering an institutional field defined by capital transactions (Bates, 2017). Guiding questions include: How do life circumstances relate to capital access? What forms of capital influence a musician's ability to develop, grow, or endure? How do experiences of risk, exclusion, and cultivation inform one's trajectory in the arts?

While previous research has explored musicians' roles within professional and educational spheres (Wright, 2017), few have addressed how capital stratification affects these paths over time. This life story focuses on moments and epiphanies where capital gaps became decisive, with particular attention to the emotional, relational, and structural consequences of limited capital at critical junctures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding capital in relation to musician trajectories requires a dual lens: one that attends to both structural forces and the individual's interpretive, reflexive experience (Bourdieu & Nice, 2008; Reed-Danahay, 2017). Autoethnographic methods are especially suited to this purpose, enabling a critique of self within social context while grounding the narrative in lived evidence (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Holt, 2003; Le Roux, 2016). This approach is particularly useful for exploring how creative practitioners internalize, resist, or reproduce marginalizing field dynamics in the course of their training and careers.

The literature on capital theory is expansive but unevenly applied within music education. While scholars have investigated stratification in arts and education (Bates, 2021; Burnard et al., 2015), few have used autoethnography to connect Bourdieu's theoretical lens to a longitudinal emic narrative of artistic labor (Ritchey, 2019; Vasil & McCall, 2017). This study contributes a crucial voice to that gap, offering capital analysis from within the music field's habitus (Bourdieu, 1993, 2020).

Bourdieu's concept of field centers on a space of social positions where agents engage in structured struggles over resources and legitimacy. In artistic fields, these dynamics manifest through prestige, recognition, and access to platforms for cultural production (Bourdieu, 1996; Scott, 2012). The field does not merely reflect external inequalities—it reproduces and legitimizes them through patterned interaction and aesthetic gatekeeping (Hilgers & Mangez, 2014). In the arts, this includes notions of taste, prestige, and recognition that mask structural exclusion through claims of meritocracy or "talent."

Researchers in music, sociology, and education have addressed some of these dynamics, particularly regarding class and access (Cid, 2011; Coulson, 2012; Taylor, 2016). Still, few studies engage musicians' internal capital negotiations from a sociologically reflexive stance. Autoethnographic studies often center artistic process rather than structural critique, leaving a gap in longitudinal, emic narratives grounded in capital theory. As cultural workers in a meritocratic yet exclusionary system, musicians increasingly face a professional environment where the accumulation, exchange, and conversion of capital dictate long-term viability (Arditi, 2020; Hesmondhalgh, 2006). This study joins emerging scholarship in examining how that system unfolds across time for those without inherited advantages.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Capital Theory

Bourdieu's capital theory offers a comprehensive lens through which to examine how institutional and interpersonal dynamics affect inclusion and advancement in a field (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993, 2018). Capital—whether economic, cultural, social, symbolic, or emotional—is not equally distributed; its accumulation and legitimacy are conditioned by structural inequality.

Cultural capital includes institutional knowledge, aesthetic taste, and behavioral fluency that signals belonging (Bourdieu, 1977; Lizardo, 2006). Social capital comprises networks and relationships, often inherited or class-linked, that provide informal access and emotional scaffolding (Burnard et al., 2015; Luthans & Youssef, 2004). Symbolic capital refers to prestige, reputation, and recognition—the social value attached to one's identity and output (Bourdieu, 1991; Cid, 2011).

Subcategories like emotional capital (the ability to self-regulate or express empathy) (Cottingham, 2016), mental capital (optimism, motivation, and future orientation) (Luthans & Youssef, 2004), and human capital (knowledge and skillsets) (Pinheiro & Dowd, 2009) reveal the psychological and relational dimensions of capital as lived experience. I synthesize these elements into the broader frame of socioemotional capital (SEC)—a depletable, fluid, and composite resource encompassing the affective and relational capacities required to survive and self-sustain in creative labor contexts. While SEC may resemble Bourdieu's (2020) habitus in function, this study distinguishes it as a more dynamic and depletable set of affective resources that are sensitive to burnout, trauma, and environmental stress. Whereas habitus operates as an internalized generative structure, SEC foregrounds an individual's relational depletion and affective load across time, particularly in contexts of economic precarity. Habitus may shape what feels "natural," but SEC influences what remains possible. SEC functions here as an analytic lens through which moments of burnout, risk aversion, relational withdrawal, and identity negotiation are interpreted across the life narrative.

Economic capital—access to income, assets, or financial safety nets—remains the most easily convertible form. It can purchase time, health, exposure, and refinement in other domains (Bourdieu, 2018). Its absence restricts risk-taking, delays milestones, and amplifies opportunity costs (Sutherland, 2003; Thaning, 2021). Families with economic security are more able to invest in cultural formation and concerted cultivation for their children, guiding them toward institutional legitimacy with minimal friction (Bourdieu, 1977; Lareau, 2011).

Relational Theories: Concerted Cultivation, SDT, and Future-Orientation

Through the lens of the study, I also incorporate three interwoven relational frameworks and how they each connect to field trajectories:

1. Concerted Cultivation describes the early, often class-dependent structuring of motivation and advantage via enriched parenting, lessons, and interpersonal fluency. It stratifies access to culture and authority before formal training begins (Bodovski & Farkas, 2008; Lareau, 2011).
2. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) frames agency as a contextual response to perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These are not fixed traits but outcomes of social affirmation, reinforcement, and environmental cues (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Sanguinetti, 2024).
3. Future Orientation Theory (FOT) explores how individuals project hopes, risks, and possibilities based on the interplay of capital access, cultural imagination, and environmental stability (Herrera et al., 2022; Seginer, 2008).

Together, these frameworks explain how ongoing negotiations with the field's structure influence seemingly personal choices (e.g., what risks to take, which paths to pursue). These theories inform the lens through which the author selects and interprets key life epiphanies: not as isolated decisions, but as affectively and materially conditioned responses to opportunity, legitimacy, and survival.

METHODS

Autoethnography

Autoethnography offers a reflexive method for studying culture by situating the researcher's experience within their field of practice (Adams et al., 2022; Poulos, 2021). It draws from critical theory to examine marginalization through richly descriptive narratives that foreground the voice of the author-participant (Le Roux, 2016). Trustworthiness emerges not from objectivity but from resonance, plausibility, and theoretical coherence across temporal, social, and

affective contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Herrera et al., 2022). Validity is reinforced through triangulation with long-term significant others and the researcher's capacity to distinguish and interpret life themes (Howard et al., 1992).

Research Objectives

I use this narrative study as a container to analyze the researcher's life across a longitudinal timeline in music, interpreted through the lens of Bourdieu's capital theory and supported by related sociocultural frameworks (Bourdieu, 1993; Pinheiro & Dowd, 2009). The methodology employs constant comparative analysis, critical ethnography, and symbolic interactionism to trace how capital appears in, constrains, or enables specific epiphanies within educational and professional environments (Denzin, 2013; Emerson et al., 2011; McIlveen, 2008). Through this study, I aim to examine the relationship between capital and life trajectory; provide descriptive, reflexive narrative grounded in critical theory; and identify themes for future investigation by educators, sociologists, and artists.

Study Participant

The sole participant is the author, a professional musician and educator with over twenty years of lived experience across institutional and freelance contexts. I grounded this selection in purposeful and theoretical sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I intentionally retained my own voice, blending formal analysis with pseudo-poetic narrative prose. Personal recollections focus on moments settled by perceived access to capital, often framed through the lens of the first-generation college (FGC) student experience—a perspective underrepresented in music education research (Vasil & McCall, 2017).

Conducting this study did not require ethical review, but I strengthened validity via data triangulation, external audit, and member checks with close confidants. All personal references are anonymized through pseudonyms or relational cues (Lahman, 2022). Narrative episodes are deliberately vague yet affectively precise, capturing the intersection of capital and circumstance without compromising confidentiality (Denzin, 2013; Faulkner, 2009).

Data Collection

This study responds to gaps in research on the lived effects of capital access within music's labor and education markets (Bates, 2017; Reed-Danahay, 2017). Research questions include:

1. How do specific life circumstances relate to capital?
2. What forms of capital most affect musical development, holistic growth, and stress regulation?
3. In what ways do capital disparities stratify musicians' trajectories?
4. How do these phenomena map onto theories of self-determination, future orientation, and concerted cultivation?

Data sources include firsthand recollection, personal writings, social media archives, correspondence, and reflective notes collected over two months. I grounded trustworthiness in descriptive richness, theoretical alignment, and confirmatory input from long-term collaborators (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Richardson, 1994). While reliability is not a standard for qualitative work, the study includes a traceable audit trail to support future scholarly analysis (Richards, 2015; Tracy, 2013).

Although the focused analytic period occurred over approximately two months, the data themselves span nearly two decades of lived experience in music education and professional performance. The two-month window represents an intensive phase of retrospective analysis rather than the temporal boundary of the experiences examined. During this period, I systematically revisited personal archives, correspondence, social media records, and reflective journals to identify recurring capital-related tensions, turning points, and patterns across time. This approach allowed for longitudinal pattern recognition rather than episodic recollection.

Analytically, I employed a constant comparative process and identified episodes as "epiphanic moments," which I then coded according to forms of capital (economic, social, symbolic, cultural, and socioemotional). I then conducted a second round of interpretive coding to examine how these capital configurations interacted with self-determination,

risk perception, and future orientation at specific life junctures. I did not impose themes a priori; rather, themes emerged through iterative movement between lived narrative, theoretical constructs, and reflexive memo-writing. The final thematic categories represent patterned intersections between capital access, relational depletion, and decision-making across time.

Ethical Considerations

I grounded the study in an interpretive paradigm that challenges the myth of meritocracy in arts and education. Western professional systems are subject to capital-dependent stratification and selective inclusion (Arditi, 2021; Bourdieu, 2018; Freire, 2000). I acknowledged my positionality and interrogated it reflexively throughout the research process. I removed or generalized narrative identifiers through symbolic metaphors and pseudonyms (Ellis, 2007). I used no direct quotes unless essential. Member checking with three close relationships helped confirm details and ensure anonymity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

LIFE STORY AND EPIPHANIC FINDINGS

Introductory Context

My life has been affected by constant instability: loss, trauma, economic precarity, addiction, and relentless transitions. It has also been affected by music. I've watched peers leverage trauma narratives for career gain, and I've certainly used creative work to metabolize pain—but never with a guaranteed return. I've seen others take on massive debt to create art, with mixed results. I eventually reached modest financial security, but not enough to gamble with high-risk investments in my music career. I used to joke about paying off a loaf of bread over two years.

I am a first-generation college student from a working-class background who earned a doctoral degree in music education. I've attended five major music universities over twelve years and earned two master's degrees, while living in unstable conditions for much of my adult life. I've rented constantly, owned little, and delayed major life milestones due to financial insecurity. I've moved over twenty times, sometimes five times in a single year.

High adverse childhood experience scores and low socioemotional capital marked my childhood. I've taken the General Causality Orientations Scale and Adverse Childhood Experiences questionnaire, scoring 93 in autonomy, 70 in controlled, and 54 in impersonal orientation, with an ACE score of 6 out of 10—quantifying a background of high independence, low environmental trust, and trauma-related adversity. I've had to choose between basic needs like gas or food, heat or pest control. Chronic high-functioning depression and burnout have shadowed my progress. I've seen both the fragility and resilience that arise from conditions like mine.

From a capital-theoretic perspective, these early experiences functioned less as isolated hardships and more as cumulative constraints on SEC. An ACE score of 6 did not merely represent adversity; it also signaled repeated disruptions to relational and systemic trust, environmental stability, and long-term planning—factors closely tied to future orientation and perceived risk tolerance (Felitti et al., 1998). High autonomy scores coexisted with low environmental trust, producing a form of self-reliance that, while adaptive, also limited help-seeking and collaborative risk-taking. In this sense, independence became both resource and restriction: a protective mechanism that preserved agency while simultaneously narrowing access to social and symbolic capital exchanges essential for advancement within institutional fields.

Despite earning strong academic credentials, I carry over $100k in student debt and earn less than $25k annually. My credit score is strong, held back only by the debt itself. I believe if I had different early access to economic and socioemotional capital, my career trajectory would have looked dramatically different. The weight of educational debt and chronic financial precarity did more than simply restrict purchasing power; it also structured decision-making. Economic capital's convertibility into time, experimentation, and professional visibility became starkly apparent, especially with changes in location and itinerant work. Without financial buffer, risk calculus shifts. Opportunities requiring upfront investment—conference travel, equipment upgrades, unpaid collaborations—carried disproportionate psychological and material stakes. In this way, capital scarcity amplified opportunity cost and

compressed future orientation, reinforcing patterns in which survival frequently superseded strategic professional expansion.

Youth and Adolescence

My early music experiences were self-directed: rhythm reading in primary school, informal piano practice, basic guitar from a friend, and saxophone starting in middle school. My family moved frequently, and I never felt grounded for long. My uncle, a central father figure, passed away during high school. Though relatives always surrounded me, we lived in a series of apartments with little stability or living space. I practiced as much as I could growing up, within the limits of noise constraints. Without a dedicated space or quality equipment, I often turned to free notation software and digital tools to explore music.

One wealthy relative had a piano. I taught myself to read notation on it over a summer, while they took formal lessons but later pursued a non-musical career. Our family assumed real instruments were out of reach due to transport, storage, and noise issues. Professional musicians often practice many hours a day, but that wasn't feasible for me.

We couldn't afford private lessons or extracurricular programs. I felt embarrassed by our financial situation and developed coping strategies that limited my socioemotional capital. I avoided social media, downplayed my needs, and internalized shame. Even until recently, I only owned a handful of presentable clothes. These early dynamics influenced my self-perception and professional comfort in elite spaces. From the perspective of concerted cultivation, these conditions reflect more than economic limitation; they signal differential socialization into institutional confidence and entitlement. Children exposed to structured enrichment, private instruction, and normalized interaction with authority figures often acquire not only skill but fluency in elite cultural codes (Lareau, 2011). In contrast, my early embarrassment and self-minimization reinforced patterns of withdrawal rather than entitlement. Avoiding visibility and downplaying needs conserved emotional energy but simultaneously reduced opportunities for symbolic capital accumulation. SEC, in this phase, functioned defensively—protecting dignity while constraining expansion into socially competitive arenas.

I've always worked with subpar equipment. My saxophones are 20 years old. Repairs were infrequent, and habits I formed around these limitations have been hard to unlearn. My home recordings have always been lo-fi, lacking the polish of studio-produced work. Dedicated spaces and resources could have significantly improved my creative output. Access to space and equipment is often framed as technical preference, yet in capital terms it represents cumulative cultural formation. Quality instruments, acoustic environments, and studio exposure not only refine output but normalize professional standards. Repeated reliance on subpar tools subtly aimed my habitus toward improvisational adaptation rather than aesthetic polish (Bourdieu, 1984, 2020). While this cultivated resilience and versatility, it also positioned my work outside dominant markers of prestige, limiting its convertibility into symbolic capital within competitive artistic fields. Some experiences outside of music (e.g., retail, advertising) proved useful later. Even marching band, though draining and difficult, now informs my teaching. But the opportunity costs were high—including mental health strain, time lost, and feelings of misfit.

Those with concerted cultivation had consistent support, quality mentorship, and exposure to opportunities. My first saxophone teacher in high school was affordable but inappropriate and emotionally harmful. I didn't attend music camps. I knew these opportunities mattered, but they were out of reach. Concerted cultivation operates not only through enrichment but through the quality of mentorship. Inappropriate or emotionally harmful instruction introduces distortions in relational trust and authority negotiation. Rather than reinforcing competence and belonging, such experiences can fracture SEC and complicate later professional interactions. The absence of camps, masterclasses, and stable mentors did not merely delay skill acquisition, but delayed integration into networks where symbolic capital circulates informally. Early exclusion thus compounded across developmental stages, influencing how I later navigated professional proximity to power.

Academics

Academia remains inaccessible for those lacking in capital. I never felt fluent in the norms of conferences, administration, or institutional networking. My education trained me to function more like a freelance worker than a professor. I value education deeply and try to advocate for others, but often feel at the lowest tier of power. From a field-theoretic

standpoint, this sensation of operating at the "lowest tier" not only reflects personal insecurity but signals a mismatch between embodied habitus and institutional expectations. Academic spaces reward fluency in symbolic exchange—confidence in presentation, informal networking, and strategic self-promotion. Without early socialization into these coded traditions, participation can feel performative rather than natural, reflecting unequal familiarity with the tacit mechanisms through which capital circulates and converts within institutional fields (Bourdieu, 1993, 2020).

Conference participation is costly: registration, travel, printing, lodging. At one event, I had to reprint a poster due to formatting rules that others simply ignored. My instinct was to comply fully with institutional expectations, reflecting a habitus shaped by uncertainty about legitimacy within academic spaces (Bourdieu, 2020). I observed how social capital influenced visibility—friends gathering to boost another's audience, presenters publicly affiliating with well-known peers. I often felt peripheral. In academic conferences, visibility functions as symbolic capital accumulation. Audience attention, public affiliation, and name recognition operate as informal signals of legitimacy. These dynamics illustrate how social capital converts into recognizable legitimacy within the field, at times independent of intrinsic merit. Positioning thus reflected not only evaluation of work, but degree of integration within relational networks that amplify recognition.

I've witnessed presenters with supportive parents who were academics themselves—offering insight into how networks of privilege replicate themselves. I tend to under-explain my work at conferences, perhaps because I feel unworthy of people's time. I've defaulted to parking my things near trash cans—a subconscious signal of self-placement, mirroring how blue-collar experiences can translate into self-minimization in white-collar spaces. The divide between white- and blue-collar worlds plays out symbolically in these moments. These embodied behaviors reveal how capital stratification becomes internalized. Over time, repeated positioning at the fringes redefined my professional identity: I began to anticipate invisibility and moderate my own presence accordingly to conserve socioemotional capital in environments perceived as evaluative or exclusionary. In this sense, identity was not fixed but negotiated through ongoing assessments of belonging, risk, and legitimacy within the field.

Despite moments of connection, I often lacked long-term mentorship. Many of my professors retired or moved, or remained distant. I leaned into self-reliance, but it wasn't always enough. The lack of socioemotional capital left skill gaps I couldn't fill. Mentorship, in capital terms, operates as a multiplier of both social and symbolic capital. Its absence compounds slowly but decisively across time. Without consistent advocates to normalize institutional navigation, strategic errors feel personal rather than structural. Leaning into self-reliance strengthened autonomy but also reinforced isolation, limiting exposure to the informal sponsorships through which academic mobility frequently occurs. This gap illustrates how capital disparities reproduce themselves across generations within higher education.

Professional Experiences

Most of my gigs came from word of mouth. I've taught all ages, performed in many settings, and participated in a wide range of musical contexts. My versatility has been both a strength and a survival strategy—one I now try to pass on to my professional mentees. But logistics have been challenging. Long drives, unreliable transportation, limited resources—these all informed my professional decisions. I've declined stable jobs due to ideological conflicts or unmanageable time commitments. At one point, I didn't have a car at all. Maintaining even minimal professional functionality required navigating endless logistical burdens.

I've carried musical gear across the country, clinging to the few items that offered consistency and transformative potential. For many musicians, instruments function as both practical tools and symbolic anchors of professional identity; in my case, limited financial capital intensified this attachment because replacing or upgrading equipment was rarely feasible. I've had promising ideas stalled because I couldn't access the networks or resources needed to bring them to life. I've applied for jobs that others were offered informally, through networks I wasn't part of. Tracking business expenses, joining organizations, and maintaining memberships has been difficult. Even when I've joined unions or professional groups, they rarely provided support unless I was already inside their network. Some colleagues have secured jobs with fewer qualifications but stronger mentorship ties.

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Still, I've begun to stabilize. I recently became debt-free with the help of state-funded teaching assignments and now teach in higher education, gaining the cultural and symbolic capital that might help me advance. But it came at a cost, including a pay cut and years of economic strain.

Future Prospects

I've always been cautious about taking financial risks in music. I know people who attended music production schools only to be left with debt and outdated equipment. Without financial backing, I can't afford those risks. Even basic resources like textbooks or modern computers have sometimes been out of reach. Paradoxically, these constraints pushed me toward alternative strategies—open-source software, informal online communities, and self-directed experimentation—which partially compensated for resource limitations while also influencing my creative approach. Until recently, much of my software was outdated and incompatible with current systems, forcing me to use university-owned computers for basic tasks or manually recreate lost edits due to formatting mismatches.

Some of my best work remains unfinished because I lack the time, energy, or capital to realize it properly. During the pandemic, I released several "bedroom albums" using open-source tools. These were affordable and creatively fulfilling, but didn't necessarily increase my visibility or financial sustainability. I documented how algorithmic platforms and capitalist media dynamics have changed the way people value and consume music. The symbolism in my own albums reflects this: my debut project featured a train photo as a metaphor for career precarity; another used MIDI-only jazz to satirize commercialization. But without the right networks, these projects didn't travel far. While artistic quality and timing inevitably shape reception, visibility in contemporary music ecosystems also depends heavily on social circulation, platform amplification, and endorsement within professional networks. My cultural production may be high, but without social and cultural capital, it rarely translates into lasting impact.

My goal remains higher education, but without a dedicated mentor or insider connections, I worry about my competitiveness. In academic labor markets, opportunities often circulate through relational networks before formal hiring processes occur, reinforcing the importance of social capital in professional mobility (Bourdieu, 1993; Pinheiro & Dowd, 2009). I've watched peers succeed with less training but more capital—and I've seen how concerted cultivation creates access long before applications are ever submitted. My story isn't singular; but its details help reveal the deeper structures that filter who thrives and who merely survives in music and education. I hope this account can reveal what's often hidden: that success is not just due to talent or effort, but to who is granted the capital to endure. At the same time, prolonged navigation of these constraints can cultivate forms of resilience, adaptability, and creative problem-solving that also shape professional identity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In reviewing my own trajectory through this autoethnographic lens, I uncovered distinct patterns of capital-based stratification and overlooked intersections between agency and access. While I anticipated that my lived experience would reflect disparities in capital, I hadn't realized how profoundly those disparities influenced every element of my education, music career, and mental health. These reflections revealed rich theoretical implications and thematic markers for future study. Across the life story, seven interwoven themes emerged: (1) constrained capital conversion, (2) interrupted network continuity, (3) habitus misalignment within elite spaces, (4) socioemotional depletion under chronic precarity, (5) time scarcity as structural constraint, (6) identity negotiation across classed contexts, and (7) conditional recognition mediated by endorsement. These themes clarify how agency and effort operate within—but are not independent of—capital-dependent systems.

Self-Determination and Future Orientation

I rarely listen to jazz anymore, despite working in the field and loving it deeply. It stirs too much anxiety and regret, illustrating how musical stimuli can reactivate emotional and autobiographical memory associations (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). Instead, I gravitate toward pop, country, or rap—genres that feel distant enough to soften the dissonance. When applying to academic conferences early on, I assumed that one could only present fully formed, polished research. I once submitted a paper and poster early in my studies, but the lack of recognition made me feel left behind. The

financial and cultural barriers to accessing symbolic capital—like album reviews or awards—require a tacit knowledge of the system, from what to submit to how to bend the rules.

Having pursued an academic career for over a decade, my experience within contingent labor and competitive job markets has led me to perceive higher education as structurally strained. From this vantage point, the proliferation of credentials, publications, and productivity metrics can feel inflationary—raising thresholds of legitimacy without proportionally expanding opportunity. Despite strong grades and completed projects, I applied to dozens of higher education positions and received no response until a well-positioned colleague vouched for me. That recommendation granted immediate access to teaching work, illustrating how social capital can convert rapidly into institutional legitimacy. This moment sharpened my awareness of how capital combinations—mentorship, endorsement, and immersion—influence academic mobility beyond formal merit indicators.

Throughout my journey, I've engaged with high-status professionals and peers, often holding my own musically and socially. But I didn't understand how to develop transactional or professional relationships, even with those I deeply admired. I've missed opportunities for collaboration and lost touch with colleagues who were some of my most musically compatible peers. In retrospect, these relational losses reflect inconsistencies in social capital maintenance rather than a deficit of ability. Bourdieu's framework clarifies that competence alone does not sustain mobility; relational durability and strategic reciprocity often determine whose work circulates and whose remains localized. My difficulty developing transactional professional relationships reveals how concerted cultivation affects not only skill acquisition but also comfort with strategic networking behaviors.

Economic and Socioemotional Capital

I believe deeply in my own ability. But that belief becomes strained when the world fails to validate my work or lift me out of poverty. I've often heard, "You seem like you've got it all together," which ends up masking my need for help, connection, and opportunity. This tension illustrates the paradox of high autonomy orientation under low structural support. Self-determination theory emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as psychological needs; yet autonomy without relational scaffolding can morph into self-isolation. My perceived competence obscured unmet needs for sponsorship and collective buffering against precarity.

My human capital and creative output are relatively strong. But every time I moved—geographically or institutionally—it reset my sociocultural and symbolic capital. These transitions disrupted my networks and momentum, and though they expanded my geographical reach, they didn't alleviate the chronic struggle.

At times, I scraped together enough financial capital to invest in better gear or professional services. And for a brief moment during the 2020 pandemic, when financial aid prioritized accessibility and public good, there was some recognition for my open-source projects. But those moments were rare.

I've learned to code-switch in academic and professional environments, adjusting aspects of speech, demeanor, and self-presentation to align with institutional expectations (Bourdieu, 1991). Formal settings do not always welcome my natural South Floridian mannerisms. Success in these spaces often depends on knowing which types of capital the ecosystem values (like studying abroad or organizing social gatherings), not necessarily teaching skill or musical proficiency.

My limited resources have created tangible obstacles: phones dying en route to gigs, unreliable cars, and emergency expenses that derail momentum. I've cried in my car after losing service while trying to navigate to a new school or rehearsal. These episodes reveal the emotional cost of working under chronic material insecurity.

Time is the most valuable form of capital. Financial capital buys time, and with time I could expand my contributions: arrangements, workshops, research, compositions, and more. Instead, I split my hours between caretaking, moving, and surviving. Time scarcity operated as a structural bottleneck on capital accumulation. While peers converted financial stability into research productivity or creative output, I was continuously diverting my temporal resources toward maintenance labor. When others were researching or composing, I was at the laundromat or fixing a car. This diversion illustrates how economic capital indirectly governs cultural production through the mediation of available time (Bourdieu, 2018).

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During one difficult evening, I recorded a video monologue in my apartment. I rambled about the mounting costs of conferences, the outdated tech I couldn't replace, and the constant strain of keeping up. At one point I laughed, "Midlife crisis, here I come," alone in the camera glow. It was raw, absurd, and honest.

Current Outcome

To cope, I've turned to video content and therapy. More recently, I've adopted my late relative's symbolic worldview: that cockroaches signify resilience, termites warn against parasitic people, and every loss marks an invitation to grow. This mythology comforts me—offering meaning amid exhaustion.

I continue to create, but without the networks or marketing knowledge to sustain visibility. I've hesitated to ask friends for help, fearing the risk or cost would outweigh the benefit. I've never felt entitled to invest in myself artistically, especially post-2008 crash. Even when I had the means, I feared it wouldn't be "allowed."

Ironically, becoming fluent in capital theory made me hyper-aware of how it unfolds around me. I now see its movements in real time—in how people curate their appearance, name-drop connections, or perform mental wellness to maintain symbolic capital. I often stay silent during "mental health" conversations because my reality feels too heavy or unspeakable. Here, SEC becomes visible in its absence. Emotional disclosures that are palatable within professional discourse often presuppose a safety net. When vulnerability risks reputational cost without compensatory support, silence becomes protective. This dynamic reveals how even narratives of resilience can function as symbolic currency within stratified fields.

I'm doing somewhat better now. I've paid down significant debt and found enough side work to stabilize—though I still live paycheck to paycheck and remain shut out from homeownership or starting a family. A small inheritance helped me recover somewhat, while also reaffirming the trauma that accompanied it. Ultimately, prolonged navigation of stratified institutional environments and capital-mediated systems reshaped my professional identity. I oscillated between confidence in my musical competence and chronic doubt about my legitimacy within institutional hierarchies. Over time, this oscillation cultivated a survival-based orientation: cautious investment, guarded self-presentation, and strategic silence. Survival itself becomes a form of agency within capital-stratified systems.

Rather than framing this trajectory as grievance or deficit, I now understand it as an embodied case study in how capital structures shape not only opportunity but self-concept. This account illustrates that identity formation in creative labor is inseparable from material conditions; resilience emerges not as a personality trait, but as a negotiated response to structural constraint. Even now, I navigate grief and therapy while trying to find my place in a new city. I have not met conventional benchmarks of self-sufficiency, but I have endured—and with support from friends, colleagues, and family, I am building something sustainable. While this narrative offers conceptual insight into capital-stratified navigation, it remains bounded by methodological and positional constraints.

LIMITATIONS

This study is limited by its reliance on a single, reflexive case and retrospective interpretation of lived experience. Although triangulation and theoretical alignment strengthen credibility, the analysis reflects one positional standpoint shaped by memory, affect, and evolving self-understanding. I present socioemotional capital (SEC) here as a provisional analytic lens rather than a universal construct. Future research may test, complicate, or refine these themes across broader samples of musicians navigating similar structural conditions. The aim is not statistical generalization but illumination of patterned mechanisms within a single trajectory.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Musicians with high capital reserves may bypass key challenges while reaping full benefits of capitalist arts structures. This creates skewed definitions of success and reinforces inequities across education and professional music sectors. Capital stratification is intensifying, while the illusion of meritocracy masks how different capital forms (economic, social, symbolic, emotional) impact opportunity (Bates, 2021; Bourdieu, 1984). Music field agents should reflect on their own

access and trajectories—like the poster attendee who recognized their early advantages—and participate in this conversation.

Capital theory's limits are only those of the agents reflecting on it. Narratives like this can expose stratifying mechanisms and help illuminate pathways to reform. If SEC is depletable, then we must invest in replenishing it: through equitable support, peer-driven networks, and sustained, un-gatekept mentoring. Too often, those closest to transformative ideas are furthest from the means to implement them.

This study's findings suggest that capital access is time-sensitive and context-dependent: each form interacts uniquely with a musician's life and decisions. Seven emergent themes for further study include: (a) stressors and social distinctions; (b) socialization vs. isolation; (c) opportunity cost and risk; (d) stratifiers vs. advantages; (e) grief and loss; (f) mentorship gaps; and (g) lack of place or belonging.

In the case of this study, lower levels of SEC—including emotional, social, and symbolic capital—often overpowered strengths in cultural production, self-determination, and human capital. SEC does not replace habitus but complements it by foregrounding depletion, burnout, and affective load as dynamic variables in capital navigation. Cross-analysis by scholars in music, psychology, and sociology is needed to further map how capital interacts within musician trajectories—and what can be done to intervene before burnout becomes destiny.

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