

## Article

# Collective Joy: The Spirituality of the Community Big Band Wonderbrass

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**Abstract:** Wonderbrass is a community music band that performs professionally. This article—written by three members of the band—uses collaborative/conversational autoethnography to explore the significance of the band through the lens of spirituality. After a brief overview of the history and ethos of the band, the autoethnographic methodology is discussed with particular attention to its significance for the investigation of music and spirituality. The rest of the article uses this methodology to explore the authors' relationships, first to religion and spirituality, and then to their shared experience of Wonderbrass through the period of lockdown and subsequent emergence from that period. Through the conversational autoethnographic writing of the authors and analysis of emerging themes, the band is identified as supporting a spirituality that we identify as collective joy, experienced through fun, connection, and joy as sources of happiness, wellbeing, and flourishing.

**Keywords:** collaborative autoethnography; community music; lockdown; collective joy; spirituality



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## 1. Introduction

What is the significance of Wonderbrass, the South Wales community big band? Can that significance be understood through the lens of 'spirituality'? And, if so, how might the spirituality of Wonderbrass best be described? These are the questions at the heart of this collaborative autoethnography. It is written by three members of the band: the musical director, who has been part of Wonderbrass from its earliest origins, and two saxophonists who have been in the band for over fourteen years. All three of us have doctorates—one in music, one in sociology, and one in theology. All three of us are enriched not only by our involvement with Wonderbrass but by our thinking more deeply about that involvement in this way. Here our experiences with the band, in dialogue with our areas of scholarship, are woven together with one another to evoke something of the spiritual significance of Wonderbrass. After a brief introduction to the band, we discuss our autoethnographic methodology and then explore key themes through autoethnographic writing in dialogue with a range of sources that illuminate our experience of the band. Through this study we conclude that the fun, connection, and enjoyment found in Wonderbrass makes a valuable contribution to wellbeing, and that it is a significant example of collective joy, which is the essence of what we understand to be the spirituality of the band. This paper is both an empirical description and analysis of the band, and a reflection on how we have approached that analysis and what this has meant to us as both members and academics in our own fields, with regular reflections on our methodological practice.

## 2. Introducing Wonderbrass

Initially started as a ten-week workshop in the South Wales Valleys in 1992, Wonderbrass has developed into a community jazz big band offering a unique opportunity for musicians of any skill level to play with and learn from professional musicians (Smith 2013).

Members are able to develop ensemble and soloing skills in a supportive, friendly environment, joining performances when a sufficient level of ability and familiarity with the band's repertoire has been achieved to ensure a professional standard of performance. Wonderbrass is self-funding; performance fees and occasional grants fund tuition, travel, musical instruments, insurance, and projects, allowing members to participate, learn, and develop their musical skills at no personal cost. Current membership is around 30–35 active members (over 200 have participated in the band during its 31-year history) and the current age range is from people in their 20s to those in their 70s (although previously it has been from teens to octogenarians). This sustainable model has bridged the gap between community music and professional performance, providing both artistic development and social support networks for members. It provides an inclusive, creative, and dynamic approach to making music, and the band has performed at various Welsh, UK, and international jazz festivals and events.

The band has previously been positioned as a 'community jazz collective' (Smith 2015) but in light of Lee Higgins' definition of community music as an 'act of hospitality' (Higgins 2012, p. 133) and an 'intervention', Wonderbrass also fits the bill to be considered a 'community music' project in many ways. Teaching and learning are informal and occur outside any institution other than the band itself. The band began as an intervention in a South Wales Valleys locality by musical activists Rob Smith and Jess Phillips in 1992. Wonderbrass offers musical participation to its members, but also creative participation in putting together its repertoire and contributing solos to pieces in performance and on recordings. Some members contribute original pieces and arrangements to the band, and these are often developed over time to enter the band's repertoire. Many members have not improvised before they join; they learn and develop their improvisation skills through participation in the band, an example of co-creativity and networked creativity (MacDonald and Wilson 2020). Many had previously abandoned music-making as they chose to specialise in other areas in school or later. They had put aside their instruments and musical abilities in order to 'get on with life', prioritising other things instead. Wonderbrass rekindles these musical activities and—as we will suggest—enables us to 'get on with life' enriched.

As a way of 'musicking' together (Small 1998), the band views itself as a middle way between the 'open offer' of community music and the aim of working towards professional standards of performance to sustain the band through paid performances. Central to the band's ethos is the 'communal music making' (Higgins 2012, p. 3) that is a key feature of community music. Also important is the sense of place, and Wonderbrass is rooted in the South Wales community, especially in Cardiff where we rehearse and often perform (Campbell and Higgins 2015, p. 640).

As well as the musical side of Wonderbrass, in which members are able to learn from professional tutors and perform at a professional standard, the band also provides a strong sense of community: the 'wonder-family'. This is both a product of the social benefits of the organisation—bringing people physically together once a week to rehearse and less frequently to perform—and the act of making music itself, which has been found to increase social cohesion through increased contact (as described above), social cognition, social and cultural capital, communication, coordination and co-pathy (social empathy) (Jones 2010; Koelsch 2013). And as well as creating a community, Wonderbrass becomes central to the lives of many members. Tellingly, we have discovered that members' observable and public expressions of identity, such as Facebook profiles, will change to include pictures of them playing in the band. These are interventions in members' lives that Wonderbrass facilitates as they progress from new members to the stage of 'gigging musicians' after a period of learning, providing members with a new dimension to their identities, and with it 'a source of self-esteem and self efficacy' (Vallerand 2012, cited in Elliott 2020). In the rest of this article we will be demonstrating something of this significance for the three authors in particular.

### 3. Methodology

We didn't set out to write autoethnography, much less a collaborative one (indeed we didn't even know we were doing this until partway through the writing process!). We set out to write a study of Wonderbrass during and emerging from COVID that highlighted and evaluated our practice during that period, drawing—among other sources—on the data contained within the band WhatsApp group (the 'Wonderchat'), having obtained consent and ethical approval for this. But as we wrote, we realised that a lot of what we were saying was driven by our own sense of what had been missing during the long period of lockdown when we weren't able to play together. What we were writing about was something we had experienced with great intensity ourselves. It felt like we were using the quotes from the Wonderchat to illustrate what we already knew from our own experiences, rather than seeking meaning within the data. These illustrations were abundant: the collective joy and the 'wonder-love', the need and respect for the music and the community. Therefore, we decided to delve deeper into our own overlapping experiences of Wonderbrass by writing autoethnographically, thus blurring the boundaries between ourselves as researchers and subjects.

We agreed that we should each write an initial reflective autobiographical piece about our experience of the band during and post-lockdown. Each of us then read what the others had written, sometimes adding comments, before then writing further reflections in light of what we had read. We also met several times—usually in a pub, a practice to which we attach methodological significance—to talk about what we were writing. In this way, our narratives became intertwined as our experiences were shared. A further layer of reflection was added when we began exploring the language of spirituality, as explained below. This paper, then, comprises our own autoethnographic observations and conversations, informed by but excluding our earlier analyses of the 'Wonderchat'.<sup>1</sup>

The term 'autoethnography' is usually traced back to 1979 (Ellis and Bochner 2000, p. 739), with Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner becoming leading exponents of this approach. It is a qualitative research method that focuses on the experience of the self as a source of understanding. As Chang et al. put it:

Autoethnographers use personal stories as windows to the world, through which they interpret how their selves are connected to their sociocultural contexts and how the contexts give meanings to their experiences and perspectives. (Chang et al. 2013, pp. 18–19).

They see 'cultural interpretation' as that which distinguishes autoethnography from other forms of autobiographical writing (Chang et al. 2013, p. 21). Ellis et al. ground autoethnography in the search for 'ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience' (Ellis et al. 2011, p. 274), and this is what we are seeking to achieve in this study. The language of 'evocation' in this description is especially significant. Stephen Tyler, in articulating a postmodern approach to ethnography, talks of the ethnographic task as one of 'evoking' (Tyler 1986, p. 123), in contrast to the positivistic approach of scientific modes of enquiry, and the dialogical nature of the enterprise as he describes it corresponds closely with the conversational interrogation of our experience of Wonderbrass as it is rehearsed in what follows.

Autoethnography has been used in different disciplines, including music (Bartleet 2009; Bartleet and Ellis 2009; Spry 2010),<sup>2</sup> and increasingly in theological study (Walton 2014; Wigg-Stevenson 2017). Discussing it as an approach to theological reflection, Heather Walton articulates the hope that turning life's transformational experiences into narrative enables 'deeper perceptions to emerge' as 'epiphanies' (Walton 2014, p. 5). Often, she notes, such 'epiphanies will be linked to embodied experiences that are rarely voiced in institutional religious contexts' and the ethnographic writing that gives them voice 'can convey the complexity and ambiguity of our religious selves' (Walton 2014, p. 5). Thus it is particularly well suited to investigating the intersection of spirituality and music.

Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is less well established than individual autoethnography, but is rapidly gaining ground (an excellent musical example being Rhodd and Cohen 2022). Chang et al. describe CAE as ‘engaging in the study of the self, collectively’ and, in language that resonates with the musical focus of this study, as ‘a process and product of an ensemble performance, not a solo act.’ (Chang et al. 2013, p. 11) Given that relationships are of such importance to the selves whose experiences are being investigated autoethnographically, friendship and conversation can become key to the process, being significant for ‘the solidarity and knowledge that co-evolve with the friendship-conversation-writing process’ (Klevan et al. 2020, p. 123). This has been our experience and we have noted our participation in the life of the band being shaped by these conversations in ways that we hope contribute further to that life. Other studies have noted the significance of collaborative autoethnography for community building with attendant social implications (Pensoneau-Conway et al. 2014). In this way, the research methodology directly impacts the band as what one of the authors has described as a ‘micro-utopia’ (Smith 2021).

There is something particularly significant about using autoethnography to explore artistic endeavours because of the poetics of autoethnographic writing, which in the work of someone like Heather Walton (2014) comes to prominence. There can be great importance in the creative act of writing itself, particularly when writing for others. Something of this is captured in the final scene of the film about Nick Cave, *20,000 Days on Earth* (Forsyth and Pollard 2014), where he says:

In the end, I’m not interested in that which I fully understand. The words I have written over the years are just a veneer. There are truths that lie beneath the surface of the words . . . truths that rise up without warning, like the humps of a sea monster and then disappear. What performance and song is to me is finding a way to tempt the monster to the surface, to create a space, where the creature can break through what is real and what is known to us. This shimmering space, where imagination and reality intersect . . . this is where all love and tears and joy exist. This is the place. This is where we live.

The creative and performative act of writing allows that which we don’t fully understand to surface into that ‘shimmering space’. This is especially the case when writing is ‘performed’ in dialogue with others in our practice of collaborative autoethnography. The creativity of the process is, thus, important for the methodology.

Our autoethnographic writings acted as conversations in between our physical meetings, giving each other new ways to think, speak, and write about our own experiences of Wonderbrass. Sometimes these contributions are carefully constructed, poetic even, others are more a ‘stream of consciousness’. Some are deeply personal, while others are more like classic ethnographic descriptions. None is more valid or authentic than any other—like solos, sometimes we get our message across in more or less beautiful ways, sometimes struggling to find the right notes to convey what we wish to convey, sometimes locating our expressions in existing canons by referring to other artists, whilst at other times they come just from within. As presented here, these contributions have been edited into the current form. Their presentation is backwards in that we start our empirical section with our most recent discussion around how and whether Wonderbrass can be helpfully understood through the lens of spirituality. But it is not just one another we learn from: there are other voices here too. From an early stage we have found interpretive insights in a range of resources within our different scholarly fields. These were not simply used in the analysis but were conversation partners in the autoethnography, which has shaped the research from beginning to end.

#### 4. Exploring the Language of Spirituality

The possibility of using the language of spirituality to think about Wonderbrass arose because one of us is a theologian with a particular interest in the relationships between theology, faith, and music. For him, this is very natural language to use. But there was

a degree of equivocation about its introduction, as explained in this autoethnographic reflection:

Extract 1: Steve<sup>3</sup>

As an ordained Anglican priest, I am publicly committed to Christianity. I preach the Christian faith and, as a theologian, I teach about Christianity. And I find there a rich resource for life, faith and the meaning-making exercise that is central to human experience. Over a period of many years, however, I have become increasingly unhappy with the way much Christian language creates a clear Christian/non-Christian binary. Obviously I recognise that there are some who unequivocally see themselves as ‘Christian’ and those who equally unequivocally don’t. But for a whole host of reasons, I just don’t find that distinction to be one that is especially helpful in the way I negotiate the wonderfully rich and complex world of human relationships. What I do find helpful is respecting people in their difference and learning from that. So I am particularly nervous about using language that tries to impose *my* understanding of the world—deeply informed as it is by my Christian faith and associated spirituality—on other people. So, whilst I find myself hugely enriched by interpreting my experience of Wonderbrass through this lens, I am hesitant about imposing that in any way on others. I am concerned that I might be making others fit into my view of the world. I *think*, however, that the language of spirituality is today so widely used with a sufficient breadth of meaning that it allows for a spaciousness that is hospitable to difference. It will be important to explore the language of spirituality and how it might create that kind of space. One of the reasons I find it useful is that I have lots of conversations with people who wouldn’t (necessarily) call themselves Christians, which are important for my (Christian) faith. The language of spirituality provides a bridge between these different worlds of meaning-making activity.

When this was shared with the other authors within our collaborative and conversational autoethnographic method, it elicited these (edited) reflections:

Extract 2: Hannah

Before writing this paper, I had never thought of Wonderbrass in an explicitly spiritual way. As someone who has grown up with religion in the formal sense as an ostensibly fairly large part of their life, I’ve never really associated it with spirituality. Spirituality was instead almost the opposite of organised religion, and a way of understanding people’s beliefs that sounded religious but weren’t, if that makes sense: beliefs in a higher being, but NOT GOD as defined in any specific religion.

For me, religion was having to go to church on Sundays as a child (which I didn’t hate, but which certainly never *did* much for me!), then having very little to do with the church since then apart from attending with my family at Easter and Christmas. Again, I don’t dislike these irregular visits, but they don’t ‘do’ much for me (apart from the singing!). I don’t think of myself as religious, but do think I have a spiritual side.

What this spirituality looks like, I’d say, stems from wanting/believing/wanting to believe there was something bigger. I find it manifest in the moments in which I feel I am part of something bigger than me, and when I find this anywhere it’s usually in the world around me. I get it when I look at the ocean sometimes, or even a really awesome tree. I used to get it in church, especially in the ancient, freezing, village churches we went to as children. Whilst bored by the sermons, I was *never* bored by the environment—the huge thick granite walls, stained glass, and pews carved with intricate (pagan) symbols. In terms of connection, there’s nothing quite like being in a place steeped with age, knowing that so

many betrothed, deceased, and recently born have been celebrated therein over the centuries.

Now I type the words ‘What is spirituality’ into Google, I find the first definition as being ‘about seeking a meaningful connection with something bigger than yourself’. In this sense, Wonderbrass is a completely spiritual experience. There are few places in my life where I find a more meaningful connection than playing with this band. It happens when we create an experience for ourselves and audiences which are completely and utterly fun in the sense used by Catherine Price (2021)—where people are engaged, focused and completely present, but at the same time, exhilarated and lighthearted. In the moment, enjoying the moment, and being the moment.

The third response reflected upon the two which preceded:

Extract 3: Rob

Firstly, religion! I’ve always had a tricky relationship with it but have flirted with it frequently. I suppose I came to the opinion that any system of belief, or creed, only worked for me as a sort of metaphor for something I’ve always felt deep down which I’ll come to later, but the feeling was not related to any expression of religion such as Christianity, Islam etc. or its philosophical parallels such as Buddhism or Taoism.

Secondly—spirituality. I’ve always found I’m closest to a spiritual feeling when I experience transcending my self and get ‘lost’ in something like some improvisation (especially free improvisation) or exercise such as running after a while when I’ve gone through all the things I shouldn’t be thinking about and just become the running, or the playing football or the improvising. It’s not as if Rob is running/improvising. It’s as if I am the thing I’m doing or, more fancifully and when I’m playing music, I become the music. It happens sometimes with Wonderbrass—in fact it happened last night (23 May 2023 Wonderbrass Performance at Ardour Academy in Roath, Cardiff, Wales) with my first solo—I started wanting to play something diametrically opposed to the style of the previous band, but as I got into what I was doing I just got lost in it until I was brought down to earth by the splintering of the accompaniment. For an unspecified amount of time I was lost in it—gone—solid gone! There’s no separation. I always think that is my version of praying—but I’m not thinking about God, I’m lost in what I am doing. Meditation has never done that for me, only total absorption in an activity. Csikszentmihalyi’s ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 1991) perhaps? And I’m just elevating that common experience to spirituality.

Finally, what do I believe? I don’t believe in an old bearded man in the clouds of course—he’s just a fabrication of the atheists and materialists—an Aunt Sally set up by those who downplay the religious. I feel I am part of something bigger than just me and my complicated family—creation I suppose, especially if that doesn’t necessarily imply a separate creator. I’m attracted to some pagan ideas as they appear to revere that which sustains us—nature—which we are part of despite our efforts to push it around and tame it. I try to live ethically—and here I specifically mean the ethics of George Fox (step lightly on the earth, respecting that of God in all men) and of course Don Cupitt (see *Solar Ethics*, Cupitt 1995). And I suppose I’m part of the universe which started cold and indifferent and will return there—with a strong streak of cold indifference running through it always—but which contains and created everything. I can only think about these things metaphorically because I have no faith. But when I lose my self in something, then I feel like I’m communing with things outside myself, and am trying to radiate positivity until that fire in me burns no more and I am gone—properly this time.

These reflections suggest that it is definitely worth weaving the language of spirituality into our shared exploration of the significance of Wonderbrass—but not without giving some further attention to its meaning. In her study of what she calls the ‘ecology of spirituality’, Lucy Bregman describes it as ‘the depth and truth and all-inclusive wholeness of life, our lost and lamented connection to the universe’ (Bregman 2014, p. 1), an understanding which resonates with our conversation above. But she also highlights how difficult a word it is to pin down. She traces a shift in its use from an association primarily with Catholic religious orders, through a broader religious association, then out of religion altogether, and eventually to a situation exemplified by one study that found no fewer than ninety-two different definitions of ‘spirituality’ (Bregman 2014, p. 20).

In the context of our discussion, Bregman tellingly notes that what is contained in the language of spirituality can ‘deepen our experiences of recreation, so that as we play or experience the natural world we can open ourselves to connections to whatever is really ultimate and valuable.’ (Bregman 2014, pp. 5–6) This theme of ‘connectedness’ runs through Bregman’s discussion and is one that emerged as a significant feature of our thinking about the experience of Wonderbrass. After discussing the development of the language of spirituality in different intellectual spheres—psychology, religious studies, and sociology of religion—Bregman concludes her account of its ecology by considering its place in three ‘niches’: health care, the workplace, and, notably for our purposes, recreation. Here, recreation through the lens of spirituality is seen as a practice that allows people to escape what Weber called the ‘iron cage’ of the modern industrial workplace by opening a world outside that cage (Bregman 2014, pp. 135, 149). This language ties in well with some of the things we talk about in relation to aspects of the experience of Wonderbrass. Not least, the language of entering another world is suggestive of the theme of liminality that we explore later. This is also a key feature of June Boyce-Tillman’s understanding of the spiritual dimension of music when she defines spirituality as ‘the ability to transport the musicker to a different time/space dimension—to move them from everyday reality to ‘another world’’ (Boyce-Tillman 2016, p. 270; see also pp. 135–38, 265–312).

## 5. Learning from Lockdown: Autoethnography and the Importance of Wonderbrass

The reflections above relating to spirituality were the end-point of a long autoethnographic conversation. We started writing this paper a year and a half ago because the break in rehearsals and gigs necessitated by the pandemic had brought something starkly home to us: Wonderbrass was *really* important, both to us, and to others in the band. We all knew it was *fun* (in any sense of the word!), but sometimes you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone. COVID showed us this—our lives were suddenly much less fun, much less musical, and dare we say, less *meaningful*? In this section we weave together some more extracts from the writing produced by our collaborative method with some theoretical commentary, beginning with our autoethnographic reflections on the experience of lockdown before moving on to the first in-person rehearsal and beyond. In presenting this autoethnographic data, our intention is to highlight key themes that we then draw together in the final section. As part of our process of working with these texts, in the earlier stages, we bolded phrases that we found particularly telling. This highlighting has been kept in place as a further indication of our method.

### 5.1. Lockdown Hits

When the UK went into lockdown in March 2020, to try to contain the spread of COVID-19, it was traumatic for many people on many levels,<sup>4</sup> but the loss of Wonderbrass was not insignificant. Our first stab at thinking through our experiences in the form of retrospective autoethnographic writing reflected on this:

Extract 4: Rob

When COVID first happened and the accompanying lockdown rolled on for longer than I ever thought possible, I rapidly got used to a slower pace of things but was also made aware that Wonderbrass, which had met every Tuesday for 28

years, was **vulnerable and could easily disappear** as the regular rehearsal habit waned. But people missed it and were very vocal about that loss (some of them at least). We (me and the more active committee members) searched around for things that we could do online and initially we just put some sound files of solo accompaniments up on WhatsApp for people to play along to. This was a kind of reconstruction of some of the stuff we'd already distributed online so that people could practise solos between sessions. It also gave participants/members the sound of the band so hopefully they could **feel somewhat connected** through this material . . . These early forays into online activities, which now seem low tech and somewhat naïve, reminded me that band members don't just enjoy the performance side of the band but **also the musicking side of the band—the rituals around making music together that embrace rehearsing, meeting, dressing and, yes, performing.**

Extract 5: Steve

Alone in my home office again, sat in front of a screen. It's where I've spent most of the day . . . and the previous day . . . and the previous week . . . and the previous month. It's not that I don't like doing things on Zoom. It's just that I don't like doing *everything* on Zoom; and *only* doing things on Zoom. And I've a good excuse not to be here: I'm not furloughed—if anything I'm busier than previously—and my work is entirely online. But **I want to be here this evening, connecting with these people, connecting with Wonderbrass. More than that, I want to contribute in some small way to sustaining the band through this period, that the fullness of collective joy that I experience in the band may return once again when the pandemic is over.**

Rehearsing over Zoom is not the same as playing together in the same physical space. Without the memory and future anticipation of playing together—with an audience, live, in real time, on a parade or in a bar—this online meeting would have very little meaning (is that too harsh?). But because of all that Wonderbrass has been and we hope will be again, **it is charged with the dual significance of memory and hope which generate moments of joyful intensity in the present.**

There is something wonderful that I have never really articulated—to myself or anyone else—about connecting musically with people. I love it when we are playing together, the collective joy is in full swing, and we catch each other's eye and smile (with the eyes because doing it with the mouth messes up the tuning on a saxophone!) and **there is a shared recognition that we are in a good place, a fun place, a happy place, a fulfilling and life-giving place.** Am I reading too much into these moments? Might I even call it a recognition of being in a liminal space? It is undoubtedly, for me, **a place of being fully alive and present in the moment.** Sometimes these points of connection are expressed more fully in moving our instruments together. In some instances there is a standard choreography that evolved somewhere in the mists of Wonder-time; other times it just happens in the moment. But **there is a physical connection that intensifies the experience of making music together. In these moments we say that it is good to be here.**

The points at which this Zoom rehearsal comes to life for me are the points at which I feel this connection to others in the band. I see someone giving it their all, briefly spare a thought for the neighbours (mine and theirs), then give more to my playing in response. Or I try to give of myself to the online gathering, to say 'I'm not just at home alone in my room: I'm here with you'. I stand up, point the bell of my sax at the camera and dance as I play. I guess I'm trying to indicate that this rehearsal is not virtual—I am here in person—it's real. **I am longing for that point of connection; trying to make it happen; trying to spark something into life. It is the kindling of memory and hope that make it possible.**



## 5.2. Wonderbrass Returns in Person

When we met to discuss the extracts above, we identified some important themes (as emboldened above) and thought it would be useful for our thinking and our writing to repeat the exercise, looking at the post-COVID lockdown activity. What follows are our retrospective autoethnographic reflections on this.

### Extract 6: Hannah

The last time I had been in a room with this many people with actual instruments had been around 16 months ago. The pandemic had been floating around on the news but felt very distant back then, until suddenly it wasn't and we were all confined to our houses, juggling childcare, jobs and a **pernicious undertow of nervousness**. The 'lockdown' had lifted in summer 2020, but this didn't extend to allowing indoor wind instrument or singing rehearsals until much later, and even when it did, it took us some time to reconvene; the undertow had not lifted for many, and our members had wavered between desperately wanting to play together again, and keenly feeling the constant threat of COVID. In the end we decided a phased return would be the most positive; with the rhythm section getting together twice, and then the full band meeting once, to ready us for the one booking we had that year, before taking some time off over the summer due to a shortage of gigs and a surplus of need for members to catch up with people they'd been unable to see during periods of tighter restrictions. We chose Porter's, a local bar and independent music venue, as our venue for the rehearsal, as it was large enough to accommodate everyone safely. The room was one with which we were familiar: prior to COVID, we had enjoyed a residency at Porter's, playing there every couple of months.

As people began arriving, the imperative to maintain social-distancing was keenly felt; friends who would normally embrace had to settle for smiling through their masks at one another, bodies uncomfortably restrained. Spaces were occupied, following a logic of arrival time rather than standard placement based on sections. . . . Maybe the distancing served an additional purpose at this point, as conversations between members could not easily take place and we went straight into the music. I had to start with Buddy Stomp, one of our classic street tunes written by our director, with a lovely baritone kick off. I fluffed it a bit, nervous to be blowing in front of people again and somewhat rusty as well, but everyone joined in, and there it was, live music! We were **transported** from the weird Zoom environment in which we had been rehearsing for the last 14 months, playing our instruments on mute to avoid the problems of latency, and hoping not to disturb the young children sleeping elsewhere in the house, and back into **that amazing space of collaboratively making a tune together**.

We were so loud—being as we were spaced out to fill a whole room of which we would normally occupy just the stage, with an audience to absorb and respond to the sounds. Once we **found our flow** I'm sure most of us forgot everything we knew about dynamics and restraint in that tune. We followed this with another somewhat raucous and well known number, before starting work on one of the pieces our director had arranged during lockdown. This pulled us back a bit; some of us had never played it, as not all of the band attended the Zoom sessions (they aren't for everyone!), and it was a more restrained piece anyway. I'd had some reservations about playing newer tunes in this session, worrying it might alienate those who hadn't been 'Zooming', but on the contrary something about this was actually more poignant than blasting out some classics we all knew and loved. 'Dancing on Table Mountain' was not too musically challenging, and although some had played it along with backing tracks online, none had played it live with other members of Wonderbrass. We went through the sections in turn, and then put it together. And for me **that's where the magic happens: that first**

**time you play a new tune together.** You can hear the backing tunes online, you can play your own part until you're blue in the face, but that moment where everyone, however imperfectly or tentatively, piles their efforts on top of one another and what comes out is recognisably a tune, a musical entity that didn't previously exist in our repertoire, there's nothing quite like that.

Extract 7: Steve

The return to meeting in person was long-awaited and much anticipated. Porter's was the perfect location. Since the destruction of Gwdihw<sup>5</sup> by capitalist forces (Smith 2021), some of our best gigs have been in Porter's—it's where the collective joy overflows within the band and between band and audience. I expected it to be extremely emotional. I was even a little concerned that I might be a bit of an emotional wreck!

Strangely, though, whilst it was wonderful to be back together and it was an enjoyable, significant, and memorable evening, I was not overcome with the emotion that I expected to feel. Perhaps it was too much to take in—we were finally back! Perhaps it was the careful social distancing—there was a protective ring around us and we couldn't connect fully.

During the same week I was taking part in a theology conference online. On the Thursday morning—the Wonderbrass return had been on the Tuesday—a Muslim participant led the optional morning prayers. She invited us to reflect on things that we were thankful for. I thought back to Tuesday evening and, as I sat in front of my screen, tears of gratitude rolled gently down my face. They were tears of joy, but no doubt incorporating a whole complexity of other emotions relating to the pandemic. So the significance of the Tuesday evening had not passed without affecting me. I was glad to have that moment in which I was able to dwell on and savour the significance of Wonderbrass in my experience. Gratitude is a good word to capture that.

### 5.3. Listening for Inspiration

This final extract reflecting on the COVID experience tries to capture something of our learning creatively, picking up themes from the other reflections like motifs picked up from other soloists.

Extract 8: Rob

To begin a solo here I would have to restate the italicised motifs from the other solos. We experienced *collective joy* that to some extent saw off the *pernicious undertow of nervousness* and began a process of putting it to rest which hopefully continues. I want to build upon this to revisit both the Zoom sessions and the reuniting rehearsal. (This might lead on to what we have experienced since but that is outside the scope of this little solo offering. A solo is an offering isn't it?)

Zoom worked because we were all in a bad place. The world was in a bad place and to some extent it will always be. But we collectively realised that not meeting and playing together was making things worse for us. **We were missing each other and the musicking** (Small 1998). So in that very real sense the **Zoom was therapy**. We put into the sessions and got out of them what we wanted, hopefully also what we needed from them. But they were therapeutic. They used **music and musicking to make us feel better and stronger**. As a group and individually. They also **kept the band alive as a community**.

Lockdown changed my thinking about what the band is. I've framed it as a community before but I think that changed during the Zoom sessions (I think it helps here if I think of the Zoom sessions partly as a therapeutic process to maintain the **collective well-being of the community** and including the 'closure' of the reunion rehearsal). The community part of our community music

project got more important, the public-facing activities of the band, performances, became less so—impossible even! What do I want to do with this new understanding of Wonderbrass now? Well I'm not sure yet. But as a starting point let me look at the ideas of communion and *communitas*. According to an online dictionary, communion is the sharing or exchanging of intimate thoughts and feelings, especially on a mental or spiritual level and *communitas* is the sense of sharing and intimacy that develops among persons who experience liminality as a group. Do we experience a secular form of liminality when we play together? Should that be our aim? To get really 'into the zone' when performing and to haul ourselves, personally and collectively, into the present moment. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1991) this is where flow happens—immersed in the present moment, absorbed in the work or play at hand. **Sharing and intimacy happen when we perform well—it's like the shared experience (some might say drug) that binds us together**—but we also share the positive feelings associated with performing optimally and receiving applause and recognition for our joint work and play.

So let me end this solo in a series of rising phrases. . . questions. . . though there will be no climactic conclusion. Is the band more important as a community of well-being than as a performing unit? Are both equal? Is it possible to amplify the community aspect, musicking as communion? Would amplifying *community* turn the volume down on the *music*? Have the things we've done since reunification turned down the volume on *community*? . . . Can our audiences be brought into communion (there is a sense of communion in music—there are performances that include the audience—there are performances that make audiences work quite hard to structure their experiences—there are jazz concepts and titles such as 'complete communion'). How do we take the therapy forwards and spread the love?

## 6. Appreciating What Was Missing

Perhaps what we learned most importantly through this period—in which we saw the temporary loss of face-to-face Wonderbrass, the reuniting afterwards, and for we three, the many, long and enriching conversations both over and between pints—was the significance of what was missing. There is a lot that can be achieved online, but it is not the same, and in this final section we seek to articulate the palpable sense of absence that attended the poignancy of our online sessions. Wonderbrass sought to come out of the pandemic with a band who were still able to deliver professional standard performances, and in doing so we sustained a sense of community online. Moreover, we shifted focus all the more to our community, with band members leading sessions, co-authoring papers, and of course soloing when they may never have done so before. Much more challenging, however, was maintaining what Victor Turner (1969) and Edith Turner (2012) describe as *communitas*, the distinctive feature of being together in a liminal space (as referenced in extract 8), and it is to this that we turn in seeking to articulate what we might call the spirituality of Wonderbrass.

As noted above, performance is central to the Wonderbrass phenomenon. Whether playing on the street as part of a parade or gigging in a Cardiff bar, the joyful exuberance of the band's performance draws people in and the space that is created in that moment can be described as a liminal space. Victor Turner took the concept of liminality from Arnold van Gennep's work (Van Gennep [1909] 2019) in which the middle stage of a rite of passage is the liminal, or transitional, stage. Turner first used this concept in studying initiation rituals in central Africa, but then used it to produce a highly developed conceptual framework for the study of ritual (Turner 1969), extending the concept of liminality to a wide range of situations from Christian pilgrimage to trick or treat. But it was his wife Edith who, having collaborated in the work on pilgrimage (Turner and Turner 1978), went on to give particular significance to the quality of *communitas* experienced in a context of liminality (Turner 2012). She uses this to understand what is happening in situations from festivals

and sport to revolution and nonviolent resistance. Music, for Turner, is ‘a fail-safe bearer of *communitas*’ (Turner 2012, p. 43). Whilst she links this in particular to the experience of being in a flow state, the ritual quality of musicking together in the kind of environments under consideration here is one that generates an intense sense of belonging together. Turner uses the language of ‘collective joy’ to capture something of the experience. And this is related to music also by Barbara Ehrenreich (2007). *Dancing in the Streets*, the title of Ehrenreich’s ‘history of collective joy’, is something that often features quite literally as part of Wonderbrass performances, some of which are as part of street parades and carnivals.

Ehrenreich’s study draws on Victor Turner’s work on liminality and *communitas* together with Durkheim’s ([1912] 2008) notion of collective effervescence to explore the significance of making music and dancing together from prehistoric times (Ehrenreich 2007, pp. 21–41) through to what she refers to as the ‘rock rebellion’ of the 1960s (Ehrenreich 2007, pp. 207–24) and the ‘carnivalizing’ of sports (Ehrenreich 2007, pp. 225–45). Whilst the collective joy found in these various forms has at times been repressed in the name of civilization, it has always found new forms, and live performances by Wonderbrass can be seen as part of a contemporary manifestation. But it is important to note the significance of this. Central to Ehrenreich’s argument is that this type of music and dancing have ritual qualities that generate cohesiveness and feelings of unity (Ehrenreich 2007, p. 10). In some situations, this may have a transformative political dimension that goes beyond simple social connectedness, and that dimension might be more difficult to articulate for Wonderbrass, although it is captured in the language of ‘micro-utopias’ referenced earlier (Smith 2021). The closing paragraphs of *Dancing in the Streets* articulate a vision that does encapsulate the broader social significance of the band. Ehrenreich is describing a samba school that she encountered practising for *carnaval* on Rio de Janeiro’s Copacabana beach—a diverse group of people musicking and dancing together. In an observation that is highly reminiscent of the abolition of social hierarchies in Turner’s *communitas*, she notes: ‘Here, for a moment, there were no divisions among people except for the playful ones created by *carnaval* itself’. And then she continues:

As they reached the boardwalk, bystanders started falling into the rhythm too, and, without any invitation or announcements, without embarrassment or even alcohol to dissolve the normal constraints of urban life, the samba school turned into a crowd and the crowd turned into a momentary festival. There was no ‘point’ to it—no religious overtones, ideological message, or money to be made—just the chance, which we need much more of on this crowded planet, to acknowledge the miracle of our simultaneous existence with some sort of celebration. (Ehrenreich 2007, p. 261)<sup>6</sup>

This spontaneous response to live music was also found serendipitously by one of the authors of this paper in another autoethnographic account:

Extract 9: Hannah

Shortly after lockdown had eased but before indoor rehearsals were possible, I heard the faint strains of brass from the local park as I returned home from a walk with my family. Grabbing my bike (and ditching my kids with my long-suffering husband), I pedalled in the direction of the music to find a brass band rehearsing in the local park. They were surrounded by families, dog walkers, paused cyclists; clapping, nodding, smiling. Likely it was the first time the group had met face to face in many months, and the experience of stumbling upon this music, this community of people of all ages (including a child clutching the leg of their brass-blowing parent) playing *together* and to an audience (whether intended or not) was transformative—it gave me *hope*. And the expressions on the faces of other bystanders who gathered round, and of the musicians between tunes, reiterated what an important and powerful force live music was. It made me yearn for our return to face to face, and for us to have once again an audience, without whom, we are not whole. Tuesdays are a fix, but gigs are the ‘hit’.

Such moments capture something of the significance that Wonderbrass has, not only for members but within the wider social context, and something which was so glaringly absent during lockdown. Importantly, it would not and *cannot* exist without the public performative dimension. The various approaches to maintaining this celebration of our simultaneous existence—as Ehrenreich expresses it—online worked well, particularly when they emphasised the togetherness of the band, as with the Zoom sessions; but what we have been describing in this section cannot really be recreated online. Nevertheless, the fruit of such experiences of *communitas* generated in liminal performance spaces is something that contributes to a sense of community that *can* be both sustained and extended in an online environment.

### 7. Fun, Flourishing, and Eudaimonia as a Basis for Spirituality in Wonderbrass

Three interrelated themes can be applied to our subject here, and we will present them as a cumulative, though not hierarchical, journey. Words and phrases like collective joy, collective effervescence, and liminality abound in social sciences, and we will shortly present two more niche-sounding concepts which pertain to this subject, but a much shorter word best explains the first stage of what is happening here—one which may sound trivial but, we would argue, is anything but. Fun. While we have, as authors, had protracted conversations about the extent to which we can characterise the experience of Wonderbrass as somehow spiritual, the same has never been necessary when talking about it as fun, though one author did reflect upon it within another autoethnographic foray:

Extract 10: Hannah

Partly through writing this paper, and partly because of a book I've been reading, I've been thinking about Wonderbrass a little differently. It relates to the idea of fun.

What is fun? Catherine Price (2021) says that it depends upon three characteristics overlapping: connection, playfulness, and flow. Wonderbrass definitely includes all three at times, perhaps that is what makes it so magical. But it's also perhaps why COVID has challenged it so much.

I think the playfulness gets lost on Zoom. I think you need the connection to experience the playfulness. Playfulness means not taking yourself too seriously, and it's really hard to do that when you're playing alone in a room. You can hear yourself, and only yourself, so it's hard not to judge yourself and/or feel self-conscious. When you are in a room soloing with others backing you, smiling at you, bouncing along to the music, it's easier to forget that the noises being made are mainly from you.

The connection, for me, facilitates the playfulness, and the two combined help you get into the flow; that condition of complete immersion. The flow is also, for me, dependent on being there. I never achieve full engagement/immersion whilst on Zoom. Perhaps it's because I associate my computer with work, and I'm sitting at my desk (or sometimes standing at or dancing by my desk). Even still, it's my work space.

I also find Zoom incredibly challenging to remain focused: it's too easy to click away, check something, do something else, anything else. It's self-perpetuating, and self-defeating. Again, the flow is lost, the connection is lost. Zoom was important, it maintained the community, but it never reached quite the same level of 'fun'.

Coming back to face-to-face, I realised I was doing the same thing when I check my phone during rehearsals; I'm taking myself out of the flow and distracting myself in ways which undermine all three elements of fun—playfulness, connection, and flow.

Price argues that fun bears striking resemblances to conceptualisations of flourishing, which we suggest is the next stage in this non-hierarchical but cumulative and mutually dependent exploration of what we experience in Wonderbrass. ‘Fun isn’t just a result of human thriving; it is the *cause*. Fun encourages engagement with the world. It invigorates us and nourishes us. It brings us together. It reminds us of who we used to be—and who we *want* to be’ (Price 2021, pp. 290–91). In flourishing, we find ‘positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and positive accomplishment’ (Price 2021, p. 108). In having ‘fun’, you may not need to accomplish anything beyond the achievement of the three states of connection, flow, and playfulness (not taking oneself too seriously), but through achieving these, you are a good halfway to flourishing, and the additional elements of meaning and accomplishment needed to bridge the gap between ‘fun’ and ‘flourishing’ abound within the community and experience that is Wonderbrass.

In extract 4 above, Rob refers to losing his self in soloing, experiencing ‘flow’.<sup>7</sup> But it’s not just in soloing that we flourish in the flow found in Wonderbrass—it’s through embedding ourselves in something bigger than ourselves, giving to (and receiving from) others as we create something together, and in finding that liminal space which, for many of us, contrasts sharply with our workaday lives sat at our desks (often still at home), a point which resonates with Bregman’s reflections on spirituality in the context of recreation referred to earlier. For one author of this paper, a mother of two young children, this extract from Price’s *The Power of Fun* could have been written by herself as a reflection on Wonderbrass, and precisely *how* it helps her to flourish:

For a few blissful hours, I am not thinking about work or parenting or any of my adult responsibilities. Instead, I am doing something purely for my own enjoyment, something that usually leads to the elusive state of playful, connected flow—and that always gives me a feeling of escape. The sense of lightness and relief is intoxicating; it buoys my spirits throughout the week. Far from making me a slacker, having this regular opportunity for fun makes me a *better* wife, mother, worker, and friend—and a much more enjoyable person to be around. (Price 2021, p. 267)

The step from fun to flourishing is found in the sense of accomplishment; we might not individually flourish every rehearsal, or every gig, but every now and then, each of us masters something with which we have previously struggled, and in these moments, we flourish. This might be through learning a tricky line, hearing a piece you have arranged played by the band, or playing a solo for the first time. For others, because of the structure of the band (run by a voluntary committee who deal with all the necessary governance and administration), it might be accomplishing something through contributing to the running of the band, in which so many, members and audience alike, find enjoyment. This is in line with Small’s understanding of all that is involved in ‘musicking’ (Small 1998). And perhaps it is for those who give the most that the final level of experience is reached: eudaimonia.

Eudaimonia brings us back to where we started, with fun, because eudaimonia is inextricable from happiness, something which fun never fails to bring us. But of course it’s more than just happiness, and it’s more than flourishing. It’s about both of these achieved as an end in themselves. The happiness we, as members, find in Wonderbrass, is in the ‘fun’. We find it when we perform well, achieving ‘excellence’ and finding pleasure in so doing, and doing so for no end but that.<sup>8</sup> Aside from our musical directors, no-one in the band gets paid; we do it *because* it’s great fun. Most of us might not step back and think about what that means or even why it is important; the fact that it *is* fun is justification enough, and for some of us, that may be all it is, and if that’s the case, fantastic, because fun is, as Price argues, anything but trivial: it is hugely important to human wellbeing, and for Aristotle, the end of any activity, for it to be understood *as* eudaimonic, must be happiness (Aristotle 2009, p. 11). But this is not just hedonistic; the happiness we create for ourselves is dependent upon and contributes to the happiness of others—and it is here, in the absolute importance of the community that is Wonderbrass in which we experience musical and spiritual connection to ourselves, to others, and to the music that we create,

that we find eudaimonic happiness. As Elliott explains, ‘a life well-lived, a eudaimonic way of life, is a life that pursues ongoing self-growth and happiness’ (Elliott 2020, p. 110), and in doing so enriches the lives of others. Part of the meaningfulness of Wonderbrass comes from this communality that is strengthened by experiences of *communitas*. There is an ethic of care which underpins Wonderbrass, and we are socially connected as the ‘Wonder-Family’, and like any family, relationships are not always ‘equal’, and like all families, some do more to keep the institution functioning than others. But we are also musically connected—when we sound good it is because we are playing *together*, listening to, responding to, and respecting one another, clapping and whooping to improvisation efforts (whether impressed by the quality or just congratulating on giving it a go) or just counting the bars until we next come in; it does not work without that communality, being immersed ‘in a rich and diverse web of intersubjective relationships that are valuable and therefore meaningful’ (Silverman 2012, p. 33).

## 8. Conclusions

Charles Keil and Steven Feld highlight something central to the Wonderbrass experience in their study, *Music Grooves* (Keil and Feld 1994). They make the striking statement that ‘physical grooving, being together and tuning up to somebody else’s sense of time is what we’re here on the planet for’ (Keil and Feld 1994, p. 24). That certainly resonates with our sense of what was missing during lockdown, as highlighted in this study, and further points to the spirituality of Wonderbrass. But more than this, it is significant for what we have learned from and about our methodology. Keil and Feld’s book is in the form of a dialogue that seeks to bring together the work they have done independently, enhancing it through conversations about each other’s work. They talk about ‘getting into the dialogic groove’ (Keil and Feld 1994, p. 1), which captures our experience of collaborative autoethnography in a way that highlights the importance of connection as key to the significance of our experience of Wonderbrass. In writing this paper, we have locked into one another’s ‘grooves’. Through expressing our own experiences and developing our own thinking on the band in this collaborative and dialogical manner, our own perspectives have been refined, but also reinforced. The authors have experienced increased feelings of connection in, for example, fleeting eye contact during rehearsals and gigs or shared choreography, passed on simply through duplication rather than verbal discussion. Both the eye contact and the ‘moves’ have always occurred and always had meaning to each of us, independently, but have taken on a deeper meaning now that we all recognise that the richness these moments of *communitas* express to us are shared at least by our co-authors and, we hope, the other band members. In this way we have solidified a new shared language and meaning to better understand our experience of the band. We have also demonstrated the value of the discourse of spirituality as part of this shared language to articulate the overlapping and intersecting experiences of at least three members of the band. Connection, belonging, *communitas*, and communion; fun, flourishing, wellbeing and eudaimonia; losing our selves in the flow; belonging to something larger than ourselves—this is the rich vocabulary we have accumulated to speak of the collective joy that is the spirituality of Wonderbrass.

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## Notes

- 1 It no longer made sense to explore these chat exports as ‘data’. The themes to which we turn later, ‘collective joy’, ‘meaning’ and ‘connection’ shone through in this, but our interpretations of these were found in our own experiences, academic proclivities and personal sensibilities. We were increasingly finding that we were just seeking validation for our own interpretations through others’ words, but of course our own words were in there too. We were too much part of what we were researching for this to feel like the right approach.
- 2 For a useful bibliography on musical autoethnography and autoethnographic approaches more broadly, see <https://chris-wiley.com/autoethnography/> [accessed 22 June 2023].
- 3 Rather than a more formal academic styling to indicate authorship of the autoethnographic reflections, we have used the first names that we know each other by to capture the conversational friendship approach of our collaborative autoethnography.
- 4 For another band’s experiences of surviving lockdown together see (MacDonald et al. 2021).
- 5 ‘Gwdihw’—a Welsh word for ‘owl’—was the name of a Cardiff music venue until January 2019 when it fell victim to redevelopment plans, though at the time of writing the site still stands empty after four and a half years. Wonderbrass played there regularly, led the march to protest the redevelopment, and played for the final gig on the day it closed.
- 6 For similar accounts of audience and performers merging—sometimes a feature of Wonderbrass performances—see also (Sublette 2009, p. 359).
- 7 This is not, it seems, simply a perception—research has found that the part of the brain that self-censors actually reduces in activity during improvisation (Limb and Braun 2008).
- 8 For an excellent brief summary of eudaimonia, particularly as relevant to music and music education, see (Haroutunian-Gordon and Laverty 2020, pp. 91–92).

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