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Definition of the Situation in Live Bluegrass Music Concert Performance:

Sound Engineers and Musicians

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines definitions of the situation held by musicians and sound engineers participating in live bluegrass music concerts in a concert hall setting using sound reinforcement. Successful production of a live bluegrass music concert requires cooperation between the musicians who perform on stage and the sound mix engineer who is responsible for operation of the sound reinforcement system in the concert space. Cooperation between these key actors facilitates the creation of a shared definition of the situation that defines parameters of the roles they expect each other to play. Fundamental to the creation of an effective shared definition of the situation is communication between the musicians and sound engineer. Also basic to situational definitions are musicians' and sound engineers' background assumptions, including whether the sound engineer is primarily a support person or whether he or she makes use of expert knowledge before and during the show and thus takes on the role of creative artist. To examine these interactional processes the author administered a 51-question interview instrument consisting of closed-ended and open-ended questions to a sample of 28 bluegrass musicians and sound engineers in 2015 and 2016. Results of the interviews are analyzed and illustrative excerpts from the respondents' comments are highlighted. The author discusses implications of these preliminary findings for interactional processes in a live performance setting.

INTRODUCTION

In their classic work *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), Berger and Luckmann suggest that participants in an interaction create a shared definition of the situation that allows them to complete the interaction successfully. An important part of this process is their definitions of the social roles that people play (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 72). These roles are based on the status positions that persons occupy which carry with them expected behavior patterns whose dimensions may be more or less agreed upon. To the extent that the participants in an interaction agree implicitly or explicitly on the

dimensions of their respective social roles, their interactions will be successful. However participants may hold divergent perceptions about the nature of their roles and the roles of others and shape their behavior accordingly, which may reflect a definition of the situation that is not fully shared or perhaps not shared at all (Martin, 2006).

Like other art forms, a live music performance is a form of collective action (Becker, 1974). It requires the cooperation of many persons, each of whom occupies one or more social status positions with concomitant role expectations. By convention, audience members direct their attention toward the musicians on the stage, and the musicians in turn address their performance to the audience. However there are many others who are part of a live music event, including electricians, stage hands, publicists, and theater ticket-takers. In the concert hall world a distinction is made between artists and support persons, with the audience's focus being directed exclusively to the artists (Becker, 1974). Support persons are recognized as necessary for the performance to take place but their tasks are not traditionally considered to be part of the artistic performance itself.² Therefore support persons are usually transparent to the audience in the concert hall setting.

If a live music concert hall performance involves sound reinforcement through the use of electronic equipment such as microphones, mixing boards, amplifiers, and loudspeakers (and nearly all of them do), then an additional person who plays an important role is the sound mixing engineer, often referred to as the *sound man*, who operates the mixing board and has primary responsibility for sound quality and volume levels.³ The sound system may be owned or rented by the sound man, it may be

² The audience members as a group constitute an actor in the creation of the live music performance as an interaction. It is an empirical question as to whether a concert audience is primarily active or passive in this role. The research in this paper does not examine this question, but rather assumes the existence of the audience as an object of attention of the musicians and the sound engineer during the musical performance.

³ Use of the term *sound man* in this paper is intended to include women who act in this capacity. Although sound engineers have traditionally been men, there are a number of women who have

owned or rented by the concert venue, or sometimes parts of it (such as microphones) may be provided by the band. In any case the sound man is responsible for setting up the sound system, adjusting it before the show, and operating it during the performance.

Within the boundaries of cultural expectations and conventions, musicians and sound men cooperate to create a live musical performance that conforms to their respective definitions of what is being created, how it should be created in real time during the performance, and what the appropriate roles of artists and sound men are during the concert. Such definitions may be assumed to exist by all parties concerned, and therefore not explicitly referred to by them, or they may be negotiated through communication prior to the show date or through conversations between the musicians and the sound man on the day of the performance.

In a live music concert, an important aspect of the definition of the situation concerns the meaning of the artistic product itself. That is, one may consider the musical and vocal performances that are engaged in by band members to be the art that is being created. Alternatively one could define the sound that is transmitted through the loudspeakers to be an additional artistic product, much as the artistic product of a studio recording session may be seen as the finished recording (the album, CD, or Internet track, for example) rather than simply the musicians' performances alone.⁴ Thus the sound engineer could be viewed as a craftsman, as an artist, or both (Kealy, 1979). These distinctions may reflect personal attributes and predilections or distinct professional cultures of musicians and sound engineers (Charyton, 2007).

become prominent in this role (see Sandstrom, 2000). The terms *sound engineer* and *sound man* are used interchangeably in this paper.

⁴ The question is similar to that which could be asked about a horse race. Did the horse win or did the jockey win? In thoroughbred racing, the jockey receives a financial reward for guiding a horse to victory but it is the horse that is viewed as winner of the race. By contrast, in U.S. automobile racing the driver is typically considered to be the winner, rather than the car that the driver operated.

Most observers would agree that musicians in performance on the stage of a concert hall are artists.⁵ However the question of whether the sound engineer is a support person or an artist is more difficult to answer. One could imagine two extremes of role performance by sound men that would illustrate this point. If a sound man simply monitors the equipment during a performance but does not change sound settings or levels while the musicians are performing, then one could define his role strictly as a support person. However if the sound man adds things to the sound that go beyond a simple reproduction of the musicians' performance, such as adjusting the controls of the mixing board or adding electronic effects to change the sound quality and volume levels of the musician's microphones *during* the performance in order to achieve what he or she considers to be an optimal sound, then there is a creative artistic role that is being enacted and the role of the sound man becomes closer to that of an artist, much like the role played by musicians on the stage. In either case, the sound man is responsible for mediating the sound between the performers and the audience (Sandstrom, 2000).

At first glance the statuses and roles of musicians and sound men appear quite clear. Musicians are expected to play their instruments and sing songs while the sound engineer monitors the microphones, amplifiers, mixing board, and loudspeakers (the *sound system*). In this definition of the situation, musicians are creative artists and sound men play a supporting role. If both musicians and sound engineers carry out their roles competently and as expected, the result is a successful concert.

However the roles of musicians and sound men are in fact quite nuanced and complex. How musicians and sound men define their respective roles, and the extent to which their definitions are congruent, are therefore empirical questions that are worthy of analysis in greater depth. Likewise it is important to understand how the participants actually carry out their roles and how they expect the

⁵ This of course assumes that the performance by the musicians is executed well enough to rise to the level of art. To the extent that a performance is poorly executed, attributions of artistic merit may be withheld by observers of the performance.

other participants to carry out theirs. These beliefs bear upon the extent to which a shared definition of the situation exists in any given live bluegrass concert performance.

An area of potential disagreement concerns participants' beliefs about the nature of a live performance and of their roles in it. Sociologically, this concerns control and power issues based on implicit or explicit claims of expert knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Koppl, 2010). Do musicians define what they, and only they, do as the artistic event that audience members have paid to see? As a result, do they see the work of the sound man as simply supportive of their performance? On the other hand, do sound men make claims to expertise of their own and do they therefore see what they do during a concert as an intrinsic part of the show? Do they see themselves as craftsmen or as artists?⁶

Participants' answers to these questions determine what musicians and sound men expect from each other during a show. If the sound man's role is artistic rather than merely supportive, then sound men will participate actively in the performance by adjusting sound levels and tone quality in real time during the musicians' performance. For example, they may increase microphone volume levels during a musician's instrumental solo and then decrease the volume after the solo has concluded. They might increase or decrease levels of sound effects such as reverb or echo on certain microphones or in all microphones simultaneously. Or they might raise and lower the volume of the entire band at various points in a show in order to highlight the artistic effects that they are striving to achieve.

On the other hand, to the extent that the sound man role is supportive but not artistic, they will expect to make few or no changes to volume levels and tone quality during the show. Instead, they will cooperate with the musicians during the sound check before the show to adjust the sound system to where the musicians are satisfied, and then they will only make changes to the sound system settings if

⁶ In the related case of music recording, for example, Moorefield's (2005) research suggests that recording is no longer strictly a technical task but has become an artistic one (see also Parker and Davis, 2014).

an unexpected event occurs, such as when a microphone creates feedback or when a loudspeaker stops working correctly.

Determinations of power and control follow from these points of view. Sound engineers who view themselves as support persons will consider the preferences of the band members to be paramount over their own points of view, whereas sound men who see themselves as artists will feel freer to make changes to the sound system settings that may not be congruent with band member's preferences.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) point out that a key mechanism by which shared definitions of a situation are created is communication between the participants in the interaction. Of course most shared dimensions of reality are implicitly understood rather than made explicit because they take place within a shared cultural background and therefore they do not need to be discussed in verbal conversation. However problems may occur, resulting in an incompletely shared definition of the situation, if participants do not communicate with each other to resolve areas where they may disagree. In such situations they may not even know that they disagree because they may assume, without verification, that the other person's views mirror their own. For example, tensions may arise in bluegrass music concerts where musicians see the sound man in a support role and the sound man sees himself or herself as part of the artistic performance. The musicians may become upset when the sound man changes volume and tone levels of the sound system during the performance. Or the sound man may feel bound to ignore the band's preferences in order to create a type of sound that he or she believes is most appropriate at particular moments in the concert. Other sources of disagreement may arise as well, from the perspective of musician or sound man (see, for example, Feller, 2014; Herstand, 2014; and Jones, 2012).

Musicians and sound men can be expected to possess and exhibit expert knowledge, which has technical and artistic dimensions but is also a social construction (Koppl, 2010). That is, musicians and

artists believe that they possess the knowledge and skills they need in order to effectively do their jobs. At the same time they may have a greater or lesser notion of what knowledge and skills they themselves possess, as well as the level of expert knowledge that the persons in other status positions possess. Part of this social definition consists of beliefs about the circumstances to which expert knowledge should, or should not, be applied. All of this is framed by the professional cultures within which musicians and sound men work (Tunnell and Groce, 1998).

METHODS

Population and Sample

This paper examines interactions between national-level and regional-level bluegrass musicians and sound engineers (*sound men*) as they cooperate to present live music concerts in concert hall settings. The population of interest includes bluegrass musicians who perform as members of bluegrass bands in live theater concert settings in the United States.⁷ The population also includes sound engineers who manage the sound reinforcement equipment (the *sound system*) that electronically amplifies the musicians' on-stage performance in concert hall settings where the performances take place.

A purposive sample of 15 bluegrass musicians and 13 sound men at national and regional levels in 8 US states was selected by the author for administration of the interview instrument. All except 2 of the respondents were male (see Appendix A). This type of nonprobability sampling allows for reasonable access to members of a population that is nomadic or whose boundaries are difficult to establish (Lin, 1976). The method is appropriate for bluegrass musicians and sound men, many of whom engage in

⁷ This paper does not examine other types of performance settings such as recording studios, festivals, bars, or private parties. By focusing on the concert hall here we are examining an ideal type of performance setting that highlights the roles of musicians and sound engineers in that setting.

these activities on a part-time basis and who travel to various and widely scattered venues to present musical concerts.

Measurement

A 51-question qualitative interview instrument was administered by the researcher in order to measure the concepts examined in this study. In addition to standard demographic variables, the instrument includes questions designed to establish the respondent's primary status and role (musician or sound engineer) as well as the extent of their experience in this status. Further open-ended questions allow respondents to explain in detail, and in their own words, their definition of the situation in a musical performance, as well as their views of the expected behavior patterns of themselves and other participants. Respondents were asked to define their criteria of what makes a concert successful, and how they see themselves and others contributing to this success.

Musicians and sound engineers were asked whether they see themselves and each other as primarily artists or support persons, and whether they see themselves and each other as having expert knowledge. Specifically, they were asked whether the sound coming through the sound system to the audience represents an artistic product in its own right, which would make the sound engineer an artist rather than simply a support person, or whether the sound is more accurately viewed as a reflection of the musicians' performance with the sound engineer playing a supporting role.

A further set of questions concerns communication between musicians and sound engineers before the show, during adjustment of the sound system in the sound check, and during the concert. These questions examine the extent to which musicians and sound engineers communicate with each other to build a shared definition of the situation and to resolve any points of disagreement that may arise. Additional questions ask about the existence of any less-than-effective communications that may result in failed interactions. Finally, respondents were asked to mentally place themselves in the role of

the other person and imagine what actions could be taken to improve the success of a musical performance.

The 51-question interview instrument was administered by the author in conversations with research subjects. In some instances face-to-face interviews were not convenient for the subjects so the author and respondent communicated via Internet video call or via an audio call. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author, and confidentiality of research data was maintained. Interviews typically lasted 25 to 45 minutes.

The Concert Hall Setting

Live bluegrass music is performed in a wide variety of settings, including coffeehouses, restaurants and bars, and weeklong bluegrass festivals. For this research, respondents were asked to focus on the concert hall setting with a bluegrass band performing onstage and a sound engineer operating the sound system from a mixing board located in the audience area of the house. The concert hall setting provides an ideal type of live music performance with a single band, a sound man, and an audience whose attention is focused on the band. A bluegrass music concert in this setting has many similarities with performances of other types of music such as classical and jazz, and conclusions drawn about a bluegrass concert hall performance may apply to performances of other musical genres in this setting as well. Indeed most of the concert hall venues where bluegrass music is performed also host performances of music from other genres.

The Sound System: House Mix and Monitor Mix

Performances in concert halls make use of electronic sound reinforcement equipment such as microphones, speakers, monitors, and a mixing board. Collectively this equipment is referred to as *the sound system*, or sometimes *the PA* (short for *the public address system*). A traditional sound system

arrangement for a bluegrass band involves a microphone located at the center of the stage around which the musicians gather to sing and play their instruments. Band members move toward or away from this microphone in order to make their voices and instruments louder or softer, depending on what a particular song requires at any given moment. An additional microphone or two is sometimes located to the sides of the central microphone for use during instrumental solos. The bass fiddle (upright bass) sometimes has its own microphone or there may be an electronic pickup attached to it. An alternate arrangement is for each musician to have two individual microphones of their own (a vocal microphone and an instrument microphone). A typical stage plot for a bluegrass band concert hall performance is illustrated in Appendix B.

All microphones and electronic pickups are attached through cables or by wireless signal to the *mixing board* which is located in the audience area of the concert hall, either in the middle of the room or at the back, behind the audience members. The sound engineer sits at the mixing board, which faces the stage area, and adjusts volume levels and tone settings as needed. From the mixing board the sound signal is passed through cables to large speakers (the house speakers, sometimes called *the mains*) that are located in front of the audience and which allow the audience members to clearly hear the band's performance. A second set of speakers is located onstage, at the feet of the band members and pointing up at them. These are *the monitors*, sometimes called *the wedges* because of their distinctive shape. The purpose of the monitors is to allow the band members to hear themselves and each other during the show. Sometimes each musician will have his or her own monitor speaker, which only the band members (not the audience) can hear. During the sound check the sound man can adjust the volume level of each instrument and voice in the monitor speakers according to the preference of band members. The guitar player, for example, might prefer to hear the bass fiddle louder in his monitor to help him play songs at the correct tempo and avoid slowing down or speeding up. Sometimes additional monitor speakers (*the side fills*) may be placed at eye level to the right and left of the band and pointing

at them. It is important to note that volume and tone settings that the band hears from the monitor speakers and side fills (*the monitor mix*) is typically not the same as the sound mix that the audience hears (*the house mix*). This is because the purpose of the monitor mix is to assist the band in their performance while the purpose of the house mix coming through the auditorium speakers is for consumption by the audience members.

At some performances the sound engineer may be assisted by a second technician, *the monitor engineer*, who will sit at a separate smaller mixing board located just offstage from the band and out of sight of the audience. It is the job of the monitor engineer to adjust volume and tone levels in the monitor speakers according to the preferences of the band members. Meanwhile the sound engineer at the main mixing board in the house (the house engineer) will remain in charge of the sound coming through the main house speakers to the audience. If there is no monitor engineer then the sound engineer will control both the monitor mix and the house mix.

Definition of a Successful Concert

The most fundamental aspect of shared definitions of sound engineers and bluegrass musicians is their view of what the objective or goal of the concert is. It might seem obvious that all participants would agree on what a successful concert is, but this is not entirely the case among participants in this sample.

Many respondents stated that their goal is to produce the best show they can for the benefit of the audience members and that if the audience is satisfied after the show then it has been a success. For some musicians, this means creating a connection with the audience:

Musician 2: Q17: *There's multiple reasons but they all involve connecting with an audience...with how the people on the stage interact with one another and how the front person or persons connect with the audience. Because that's what makes a really good show. That's why they call it a show.*

For sound men, success can be measured by audience satisfaction, or perhaps by other metrics such as the band members' satisfaction. Several sound engineer respondents stated that since the likelihood of being booked for future jobs depends on maintaining a good relationship with the band, their primary objective was to keep the band happy. Others mentioned that show's promoter must be satisfied with their work also.

Sound Man 10: Q 17: *Probably a surprise, but my goal is to make the band happy. The caveat is that the band will be happy if the audience is happy...my business was dependent on my reputation working with bands, and if the bands would say they were unhappy working with you then you're doing poor sales.*

Musicians and sound men often see a direct link between how well they perform their individual tasks and the subsequent success of the show. Musicians are acutely aware of how well they play their instruments and sing, while sound men know the quality of the sound reinforcement that they believe they have achieved during the show. Thus the members of both groups sometimes take an individualistic approach, viewing a successful show as one where they themselves have performed their tasks well. If they feel that their own performance on stage or at the mixing board has been less than satisfactory, then their view of the success of the concert as a whole is diminished.

Sound Man 22: Q17: *Did I do a good job in relationship to what I know is happening on stage?... Success for me is based on my own opinion of how I...translated the band sound to the audience.*

Musician 16: Q32: *My primary objective is to be good...I'm really listening to myself a lot...My objective is to be good and sometimes I am and sometimes less so.*

Musician 18: Q17: *...You hear an endless stream of "Boy you guys are great..." But you think to yourself well it's nice to hear that but I know this wasn't the best show we did. I know that I screwed up a lot of my banjo parts...In terms of a successful concert my feeling is more of an internal thing with the band. We know when we did a good show and we know when we just sort of got by.*

Likewise sound men and musicians are quick to point out ways that the other group can do things to make a successful show more or less likely. Several sound men in the sample stated that even the best sound man cannot make a poorly rehearsed band, or one whose members are using poor-quality instruments, sound good. And no matter how careful and precise the sound check was, if a musician stands too far from the microphone during solos then the sound man will have a very weak signal with which to work, and the results will be less than satisfactory.

Sound Man 11: Q 27: *If what is being sent to me is good, it will come out good...Some people use the term "garbage in, garbage out." You know if you're playing a [brand name] guitar it's going to be good. The pickup is good, or the mic is good, it all should be good.*

The Audience

Audience members purchase admission tickets that allow them to occupy a seat in the concert hall during a show. Band members and sound men tend to view the audience as a single entity rather than a collection of individuals. That is, they will direct their efforts to the audience as a whole, and they will often attribute the success or failure of a concert to the reaction that they receive from the audience as a whole (via applause, encore requests, sales of CDs at the CD table, etc.).

Sometimes, however, a member of the audience will approach the sound man during the show or afterwards and state an opinion about the quality of the sound. This is problematic for sound men because they often view it as a criticism that casts doubt on their expertise. It also complicates their task because it suggests that the audience is not a unified group that shares a consensus view of the show, but rather that some audience members may have opinions that differ from other audience members. This situation may be doubly frustrating for sound men if they think that the band is responsible for a problem which the sound man cannot control:

Sound Man 23: Q 19: *...there's some other thing that I have no control over like it's a band where somebody's brought an electric guitar, they have their own amp or something. So I have no control over some aspect of the sound...it makes for a problem.*

Sound Man 25: Q 48: *The most hated thing is when a band member comes up to me and says "A friend of mine is in the audience and says that my instrument is not loud enough." Of course your friend doesn't think you're loud enough. They want you to be the loudest because they're your friend [laughter].*

Expert Knowledge

Nearly all of the sound engineers and musicians in the sample acknowledge that members of the other group possess, or should possess, expert knowledge. Most musicians understand that sound systems are complex and that it takes a knowledgeable and experienced sound engineer to operate them well. They believe that sound men need to understand a great deal about the technical aspects of sound reinforcement such as types of microphones and speakers, how to avoid unpleasant feedback frequencies, and how to quickly solve technical problems that may arise during the show. Likewise sound engineers understand that musicians need be experts at playing their instruments, singing, and putting on a stage show before a live audience.

At the same time both groups recognize that levels of expert knowledge vary, and they expect to sometimes encounter some musicians or sound engineers who are less expert than others. A frequent response by both musicians and sound engineer respondents to the interview question about whether concert participants possess expert knowledge was "I would hope so" [laughter].

View of Sound Men and Musicians as Support Persons or Artists

Musicians and sound men are acutely aware of the many detailed and complex tasks that must be accomplished during a concert hall show. But where do they see the boundary line between artists and those whose job is to support the production of art?

All respondents agreed that the musicians are artists. Some musicians stated that musicians are support persons as well, especially in relation to their responsibility to correctly use the sound system so that the sound man is able to maintain the quality of the sound going out to the audience.

On the other hand most sound men see themselves as strictly support persons. They see their role as transmitting the sound that is produced by the band to the audience in a manner that makes the sound system, and they themselves, transparent to the audience.

Sound Man 24: Q8: *You know, here's the deal in a nutshell. Your job is to deliver whatever is going on onstage to every paying audience member in a nice balanced fashion. You're just a translator and you should be transparent...*

Sound Man 10: Q22: *Totally a support person. Just like a guitar cable or a pick. The sound engineer is at the disposal of the band...That's the whole point of it, you know?*

However some sound engineers emphasize the artistic aspect of their role.

Sound Man 11: Q 21: *I think we're both. We're a technician all the way up until show time. And then show time we're mixing and mixing. And mixing is an art. You know there's 5 musicians up there...and I'm the 6th artist.*

In contrast most musicians clearly view sound engineers as support persons rather than artists, and some of them are quite strident in their opinion on this issue:

Musician 17: Q20: *I'd rather it be the band's performance. I don't want the sound man to be a member of the band...I don't like it when the sound man tries to insert his "artistic vision." I hate that!*

Some sound engineers take a proprietary view of the sound that is mixed through their mixing board and projected through the sound system to the audience. They may come to see the sound as

their sound in the sense that while the music is the band's creation, the sound is the creation of the sound engineer. If a sound man is employed as the house engineer at a single concert hall, and therefore all or most of his shows take place in that location, he may feel that he knows the room much better than the band members who are only in the concert hall for one show. Based on his knowledge and experience he may feel that he knows how the music *should* sound through the sound system (even if the band may not agree with his interpretation). Since the band members cannot hear the nuances of what is coming through the house speakers which are facing away from them (they can only clearly hear the monitor speakers and/or side fills), they may not be aware that this is the case. Sometimes they only hear about it after the show, from audience members who tell them that, for example, the volume of the bass was "too loud" during the show.

The Importance of Communication (Toward a Shared Definition of the Situation)

In order for a concert to be successful, bluegrass band members and sound men must communicate with each other about their expectations and needs. Respondents in this study clearly recognize this, and during the interviews they frequently point out the central place that communication occupies in the performance of their tasks.

Musician 3: Q49: *Better communication between musicians and sound men. I think that goes a long way.*

Musician 21: Q51: *Any kind of hurdles with musicians or sound people that we experience...any kind of frustration will come from not listening to one another. So that would be my advice...just listen as much as you can to one another...*

Sound Man 25: Q51: *It's not rocket science, you know?...If everybody is good at what they do, and everybody communicates, it's going to go well.*

To the extent that shared assumptions exist, definitions of the situation may be assumed and the need for communication is lessened. How does this work in actual fact at a live bluegrass concert hall performance?

The communication process occurs at a number of points before and during a concert. First, the sound man and a representative of the band will usually communicate in the days or weeks before the performance date (referred to as *advancing the show*). On the day of the show, the sound man and the band will participate in a detailed and comprehensive *sound check* to be sure that the equipment is working and to set initial volume and tone levels. Sometimes the band and the sound man will converse informally during lulls in preparation for the show. Finally, during the show itself there may be a limited number of verbal exchanges.

Once a performance date has been agreed upon by the concert hall promoter and the band (usually through the band's booking agent), the communication process between the sound man and the band members begins. In the days before the show, the sound man may send an email message to a representative of the band to ask about the band's technical requirements and other preferences. Or the initial contact with the sound man may be made by the band's production company or tour manager. The band will send a *stage plot* which is a graphic diagram of the placement of vocal microphones, instrument microphones, and band members onstage, as well as how many channels will be needed into the mixing board. An additional document known as a contract rider (*the rider*) may specify additional band preferences. Sometimes the stage plot is posted on the band's Internet web site and may be downloaded by the sound man. The stage plot will include a description of the band's technical needs and other preferences. Occasionally a sound man will search the Internet for online video clips of the band's recent performances in order to get a sense of what their stage setup looks like and what type of music they play. Or he may listen to a CD of the band's latest recording.

Advancing the Show: The Initial Communications

From the sound man's point of view, it is important to obtain at least three types of information in the days or weeks before the performance date. First, he will need to know what technical requirements the band has in terms of number of microphones, placement of microphones, number and types of musical instruments, and any additional electronic equipment they may use. In addition, he will attempt to gather information about the band's preferences concerning overall volume levels, tone settings, and how they use the microphones. For example, do they use one central microphone and do a *duck and dive* stage show by constantly moving toward and away from the microphone to mix their own sound? Or do they use individual vocal and instrument microphones for each musician, which gives the sound man greater control and responsibility over volume and tone settings? Finally, he will try to get a sense of what the band sounds like in live performance, which will give him an idea of what the band should sound like to the audience during the concert. The perspective of band members is similar. They want the sound man to understand their equipment needs and artistic preferences.

Musician 16: Q 41: *...We got to [the concert hall] and the sound people had gone online and found us on YouTube...and they'd seen our sound and microphone setup...and we got to the [concert hall] and they had set up the right kinds of mics in the right arrangement. That was really cool. I appreciated it a lot.*

Communication on the Day of the Show: Initial Conversations and the Sound Check

The communication process continues on the day of the show. Typically a load-in time will have been agreed upon beforehand. When the band members arrive at the concert hall, one or more of them will often greet the sound man and make small talk. They may give the sound man initial instructions about how the band likes to sound, or how they like their particular instrument to sound regarding tone and

volume. If they have performed at the venue before, this meeting may resemble a reunion of friends. If it is the band's first concert at the venue, there may be little or no conversation with the sound man. Regardless, the sound man must satisfy himself that the advance information that he has been given, if any, is correct, and that he is aware of any modifications that the band has made to their stage plot or instrumentation:

Sound Man 23: Q51: *Communicate early on. Getting a stage plot is really helpful...And then to communicate when you get there and really talk about what you want out of the sound...Is there anything special that you want on this particular instrument or on a particular sound?*

On rare occasions the sound man may join the band in a pre-show meal, but for the most part band members and the sound man communicate very little before the formal sound check.

The Sound Check

Respondents agree that a critically important part of any concert hall performance is the *sound check*. This is a somewhat ritualized interaction between the sound man and the band in which the sound system is tested and the volume and tone levels of microphones are set. The sound man will have each musician play their instrument, and each singer will sing into their vocal microphone. Then the band as a whole will play a song or two to allow the sound man to adjust overall volume and tone settings in the house speakers. If the band is using monitor speakers (some bands prefer not to use them) they may ask the sound man or monitor engineer to make adjustments in the monitor mix levels.

Some sound engineers have a microphone (*the talkback mic*) at the mixing board through which they can make their voice heard by the musicians onstage, through the monitor speakers at the musicians' feet. Only the musicians can hear the sound man speak through this microphone. This allows the sound man to communicate directly with the band members during the sound check and during the show itself, without the audience members hearing the conversation. This greatly facilitates

communication between the sound man and the band because during the show if there is no talkback microphone the band must speak to the sound man through the sound system (and be heard by the audience). Frequently the band cannot hear the sound man's side of the conversation at all unless the sound man leaves the mixing board and comes to the stage, which occurs only rarely.

One sound man respondent prefers to listen to the band playing unamplified, before the sound check, in order to understand what their sound is about:

Sound Man 22: Q 41: *I will have them play. I will walk around onstage and listen to each of the instruments...I try to get as best an understanding of each instrument on stage is, and what its natural sound is, before I try to translate through the PA [public address] system.*

Ideally the sound check is the point at which communication between the band and the sound man is closest and most intense. Both parties speak up with questions, suggestions, and directions. A sound check occurs before every show if possible, and it involves a somewhat ritualized series of actions on the part of both sets of participants.⁸ The band members stand before their microphones on the stage and the sound man sits at the mixing board out in the audience area of the house. The sound man informs the band of the order in which the microphones will be tested, and he tells the band when to play songs in order to set overall volume and tone levels.

Tension levels can run high during the sound check, partly because of the pre-show edginess experienced by many musicians, but also because musicians know that they cannot judge the quality of the sound coming through the sound system because the speakers are pointed away from them and toward the audience. This requires them to trust the sound man's judgment, which they may be reluctant to do.

⁸ It is not always possible to do a full sound check before the performance. For example if the show involves multiple bands who perform one after the other, the sound man may only be able to perform a quick check to ascertain that microphones are working, because of the limited time between bands.

Sound Man 12: Q45: *...A relationship begins to develop between the sound engineer and the band [during the sound check]. That's the introduction to the two parties...There's a lot to do in a very short period of time. ...It's usually the most stressful time of the entire day.*

Musician 4: Q45: *...You're not really hearing what the sound is out there. This is where you have to trust the sound man and often with our band we'll have one of the members go out [and listen to the speakers] and give an opinion...*

Although the sound man and the band members expect to participate in a sound check, they may not agree on the social norms applicable to the event. For example, some sound checks are directed by the sound man in a crisp and efficient manner. On other occasions the sound man may wait for band members to test their microphones in whatever order they wish. The sound man may need to be forthright in dealing with band members who talk amongst themselves or play their instrument while another person's microphone is being checked.

Sound Man 7: Q44: *Well you have to be a little bit of a cat herder during sound checks... Sometimes you have to be a little firm. You have to stop and say "I can't hear." All the people with the band will be talking.*

Musician 6: Q48: *I think the most disagreement is about how to proceed with the sound check. Like who is instructing who on when to do what. Sometimes communication just completely falls apart during a sound check.*

If the sound system includes monitor speakers then the sound check is complicated by the fact that there are two sound systems in operation at the same time, the main speakers for the audience and the monitor speakers for the musicians. In this case band members may spend considerable time communicating with the sound engineer (or the monitor engineer if there is one) about volume levels and tone settings in the monitor mix that they will hear during the performance. But they may leave the settings for the house mix to the engineer since they cannot clearly hear the house mix and it is beyond

their control anyway. Some musicians believe that it is inappropriate for a musician to tell a sound engineer how things should sound in the house mix, because such requests or directives infringe upon the expert knowledge of the sound man.

Musician 21: Q43: *In my opinion if I wanted to dictate what it was going to sound like out in the house, as far as level, than I would hire my own engineer...That's like him coming up and tuning your instrument for you...You just don't do that...that's insulting.*

Musician 20: Q46: *We try to never tell the guy what to do with his front of house system because that's just assuming that you know more than he does.*

Communication During the Show

Once the band has begun its performance, opportunities for communication with the sound man are limited. Any comments directed to the sound man into a microphone will be heard by the audience and may distract from the show. So therefore band members try to avoid communicating with the sound man during the show. They cannot clearly hear the quality of the sound coming through the main house speakers, so sometimes the band's front man will ask the audience between songs whether they can hear everything clearly. At this point an audience member might shout out "turn up the fiddle" or "turn up the vocals," and the sound man will be asked to make the adjustments. Sometimes a band member will discreetly ask the sound man, through the microphone, to make an adjustment in volume or tone. But the band's focus is on their show and they do not want to draw the audience's attention to possible problems with the sound system.

Musician 21: Q38: *We don't want anyone watching our shows and feeling like there's anything wrong...So you might hear me ask for something over the microphone politely once, maybe twice. But if I don't get it I don't complain about it. I just go through the show.*

The situation requires tact on the part of the band's front man, lest his comments be taken as a criticism of the sound man.

Sound Man 10: Q46: *The most successful way [for band members] to do that from a sound engineer's point of view is to, during the repartee with the audience, to just under your breath after a comment get the sound engineer's attention...If you do it in a very not to the audience way, something that's kind of under your breath, then the sound engineer will [very much appreciate it]. The worst is to call everybody's attention to the sound engineer...*

Failures in Communication: Disagreements between Sound Men and Band Members

If all goes well, the band and the sound man will have the information they need to produce a successful concert. Through the process of communication they will have negotiated a shared definition of the situation that allows them to perform their respective tasks well. Suggestions or instructions that might seem critical are usually accepted by musicians and sound engineers alike as constructive and beneficial for the show.

Sound Man 24: Q48: *...No one really takes offense if you make a suggestion. It's not for personal ego, it's for the good of the whole. Guys are pretty open to suggestions to make it sound better.*

But lack of consensus sometimes arises. In the interviews each respondent was asked the question "What things, if any, do band members and sound men sometimes disagree about?" Most respondents emphasized that disagreements are rare, but at the same time they could easily recall instances where such disagreements had occurred.

One point of contention occurs when the band feels that a sound man is, intentionally or unintentionally, making adjustments to the house mix sound that do not conform to the band's opinion as to what the band should sound like.

Musician 19: Q48: ...The sound engineer might try to put their own personal tastes into how they want it to sound out into the room, rather than honoring what the band wants.

Musician 18: Q48: They're looking for appropriate [volume] levels perhaps but they may be overlooking the tone of the instrument which we try to get as natural as possible.

Musician 3: Q48: ...It's subjective. If a sound engineer is not familiar with mixing acoustic music he may not get the subtleties of an acoustic band. It's a very different animal.

At the same time sound men frequently encounter musicians who are opinionated, self-centered, and recalcitrant. Rather than working collaboratively, these musicians insist that the sound system settings be changed to highlight their own voice or instrument.

Sound Man 25: Q48: Every musician always thinks they need to be the loudest thing in the band. And every musician disagrees with the sound guy when he tells them [they] are actually loud enough in the audience.

Sound Man 23: Q48: The band members a lot of times want something to be louder and louder. Especially guitarists, I find [laughter]. They always seem to want their guitar to be louder and louder.

On occasion a sound man may want to experiment with a newly acquired piece of electronic equipment that he is not completely familiar with. If a problem arises during the show with the new equipment, then the band members may feel taken advantage of, preferring not to serve as subjects for the sound man's testing of the new equipment.

Sound Man 12: Q48: ...Or a sound engineer comes in with the latest greatest toys and just doesn't have the chops to manipulate...because the gear, like any instrument, it's your tools and you have to know how to use those tools. It's so much more than just pushing a button and turning a knob.

Quite often disagreements will relate to volume levels in the house mix. This refers to how loud a particular instrument should be or how loud the overall mix should be (how loud the main speakers should be in the house). Band members usually feel that the house volume is an essential part of their

show and that they should be in control of it (through the sound man). But the sound engineer may feel that the volume level that the band wants is inappropriate for the audience, the room, or the type of music being performed.

Sound Man 14: Q48: *Well you know it will happen that we have a difference of opinion about overall volume. They want it louder, I want it somewhat softer. It just happens and it's a taste thing...In the end it's [the band's] call even if the audience catches me at break time and says "The band was way too loud." Well, I say, that is exactly what the band wanted.*

Volume levels in the onstage monitor mix are also a source of disagreement, particularly because, in contrast to the house mix, the band members can hear the monitor mix very clearly. Musicians may focus on their individual volume level but sound engineers need to balance volume considerations with technical considerations such as feedback limitations and distortion. This means that they sometimes cannot achieve the monitor speaker volume levels that band members' want.

Sound Man 22: Q48: *...There are performers who think you can just turn the monitors up indefinitely. And especially with acoustic instruments...you're very limited with how much of the monitor level can be sent back at the instrument without producing feedback.*

Being human, band members and sound engineers are not immune to difficulties with large egos, both their own and those of others. Cooperation can usually be maintained, questions can be answered, and problems solved. However there are times when communication breaks down and egos assert themselves.

Sound Man 12: Q48: *And it just becomes a battle of the egos. I think the essence though is the same...the desire to really want to do a good job.*

Respondents stated that when disagreements occur, they tend to involve two things: the overall volume of the sound system, and whether or not the sound man should adjust volume levels during the performance.

The overall volume of the sound coming to the audience from the house speakers is set by the sound man according to his perception of how loud the music should be. For instance bluegrass music, which is performed on acoustic instruments, is traditionally not as loud as rock and roll music, which is performed on electric instruments. The sound man may also take into consideration particular characteristics of the auditorium where the concert is taking place. Some concert halls are known to have excellent acoustics and the audience will be able to hear the band's performance clearly without the sound system being set at a high volume. Other auditoriums may require louder speaker settings in order to be heard clearly, for example, at the back of the house or in upstairs balcony areas.

Musician 2: Q48: *I think if there's a disagreement it's probably over how loud, or not so loud, the overall sound should be. What's too loud for the room. There might be some disagreement about that.*

Other disagreements may occur where band members prefer to mix themselves onstage by moving closer to their microphones to increase the volume level of their voice or instrument, and backing away from the microphone to decrease their vocal or instrumental volume. Many if not most bluegrass musicians prefer to take this approach, and they will assume that the sound man will refrain from adjusting volume levels of the onstage microphones during the performance: that he will "*set it and forget it.*" However if the sound man is not aware of the band's preference in this regard, if he is not familiar with this traditional practice of bands in the bluegrass genre, or if he disagrees with the *set it and forget it* approach, then he may raise and lower microphone volume levels during the show, a practice known as *riding the faders*. This often causes frustration among bluegrass musicians because it takes control of their volume levels away from them and makes it difficult for them to reliably adjust their volume to the requirements of the songs. For example, a musician may approach his microphone for a solo and find that the microphone volume is off. Then the sound man may turn the volume up when he realizes that the musician needs it to be loud at that point. Thus the first part of the solo is not

heard by the audience because of the sound man's delayed response. When this occurs it can make the musician quite upset.⁹

Musician 17: Q36: *The sound man should not ride the faders during [our show]! The sound man should set the levels and let us work our mics...let us do our thing.*

Musician 1: Q35: *During the show [the sound man's] only function, his only role, should be unless conditions change for whatever reason, to leave it alone...I call it "playing the band" and I've seen them doing that and it destroys bands.*

Band members may be unaware that the sound engineer is riding the faders during the show. If the volume levels in the monitor mix, which they can hear clearly, are stable and satisfactory then they may be unaware that the volume levels that the audience is hearing through the main speakers (which the band members cannot hear clearly) are quite different.

The Crux of the Matter: Who "Owns" the Sound?

When bluegrass band members and sound men hold congruent definitions of the situation in the concert setting, then they can each complete their tasks to produce a successful outcome. But this research has revealed the presence of a fundamental lack of agreement that may occur during some concerts. One such situation takes place during a concert when sound engineers make frequent adjustments or changes to the sound that the audience hears in the house mix. For example, they may *ride the faders* or add heavy effects such as reverb or delay. These adjustments or changes go beyond the relatively minor adjustments that most band members view as appropriate and necessary, such as when a microphone is much too loud and needs to be brought back into balance with the volume levels of the other microphones on stage. Instead, they are changes that the band members would see as

⁹ Although the musicians cannot clearly hear the house mix during the performance, they can usually detect large changes in volume or tone for particular microphones by listening to the sound coming from the back of the house speakers or the sound echoed back to them from the audience area of the room.

extreme or artistically unnecessary. The sound engineer may be aware that his actions are not in accordance with their wishes. However he may feel justified in making the changes based on his expert knowledge, training, and experience, or simply on his personal preferences about how the music should sound.

A similar situation may occur when one or more band members disagree with the sound man's suggestions, do not participate fully in the sound check, or make major sudden unexpected changes of instruments or song choice. That is, band members may assert their perceived right to present their musical art as they see fit without consideration of the sound engineer's needs or preferences. Of course this makes the sound engineer's job much more difficult than it would otherwise be.

So a fundamental question arises: who "owns" the sound? Should the music that the audience hears from the theatre speakers (the house mix) be a completely faithful and accurate reproduction of the band's artistic creation according to the musicians' preferences or should the sound man be free to shape the sound in real time during the concert according to his own expert knowledge, experience, and preferences? The present research suggests that while most bluegrass band members believe that they "own" the sound, some sound engineers believe that the sound is theirs to shape. It should be evident to the reader that these are opposing and incompatible points of view.

Like performing artists in other musical genres, bluegrass band members tend to assume that the sound is their own artistic product, and that any changes or adjustments that the sound man makes will be only for the purpose of making the house mix more of an accurate and "natural" reflection of what the musicians are doing on stage. This unstated belief is so dogmatic that most musicians would probably be surprised if it were questioned. If a sound man rides the faders or adds heavy reverb (and the band becomes aware of it), the musicians would view this as unacceptable interference with their artistic product. As we have seen above, some of the musician respondents in this research are quite emphatic on this point.

Sound engineers, on the other hand, sometimes feel that they own the sound, rather than the band that is performing onstage. That is, they reserve the right to mediate between the band and the audience by making adjustments to the sound system settings so that the house mix conforms to their professional judgement of how the music should sound. They may seek the band members' preferences, but at the same time feel justified in ignoring them if they conflict with the sound engineer's professional judgement. Or they may feel that the adjustments they are making are actually in accordance with the sound that the band wants, so they may perceive no lack of congruence between their definition of the situation and that of the band.¹⁰

While the performance is taking place, the sound man has nearly total control of the sound that the audience hears. He has his hands on the buttons and knobs that control volume, tone, and special effects. The band, in contrast, can only change volume levels by moving closer to the microphone or farther away. They have no control over tone settings at all. The sound engineer makes these changes in real time while the performance is taking place onstage. Therefore the band members may not be aware that the changes to the house mix are being made because they can only hear the monitor speakers and not the house mix. They can only base their evaluation of the sound on what they are hearing from the onstage monitor speakers at their feet. If the monitors sound good, then their evaluation of the sound is favorable. But what the audience is hearing may be quite different.

Sound men will often see themselves as the audience's representative. In other words they will mentally put themselves in the role of audience member to evaluate how the performance is sounding to people sitting in the house. Then they will make adjustments to the house mix with the expectation that the adjustments will make the sound more like what a typical audience member would want to hear. If the sound man knows that the band does not want such adjustments, then he must choose whether to meet the expectations of the audience or of the band.

¹⁰ Much as a museum conservator might feel that cleaning and restoring a painting would allow the painter's artistry to shine through more clearly to the viewer.

INTERVIEWER: *So you're thinking about what would be the best for the audience's ears...?*

Sound Man 14: Q48: *Yes, and there have been disagreements over that.*

Lack of Communication After the Performance

An important finding of this research is the fact that little or no communication takes place after the concert has concluded. Prevailing social norms dictate that cursory post-concert compliments be given, and there is no in depth assessment of how the concert went or how it might have been improved. The musicians pack up and leave, the sound man disassembles the sound system, and few words are exchanged between them. Thus an important opportunity for communication is lost. Regardless of whether a show has been successful or not, there is no post-concert occasion for communication that would allow for an assessment of the show by the musicians and the sound engineer. There may be a cursory thank you to the sound man as a musician walks by the mixing board on his way out of the door. But the focus has shifted to the trip home or to the next show. Days or weeks later a band member might mention to a promoter or fellow musician that the sound engineer did a particularly good job, or not so good a job, at the show. Such informal evaluations may influence whether the sound engineer is hired in the future. Sound engineers likewise may spread the word that the band was good to work with, or that they made his job much harder by being difficult.

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study confirms the importance of participants' shared definitions of the situation for creating successful social interactions. At the same time, respondents in this study often hold disparate definitions, exhibit a lack of trust in other participants, and show a lack of awareness of the definitions held by others.

Musicians and sound engineers generally pay lip service to the traditional definition of a successful concert when they say that their task is to make the audience members happy and satisfied with the performance. However further questioning in depth reveals that different definitions of a successful concert are operative. For example musicians sometimes define a successful concert in terms of their own success or lack of success as an individual musician or singer. Sound engineers may be trying to please the band members rather than the audience to increase the likelihood that the band will hire them to do the sound for future shows.

Both musicians and sound engineers rely on their own expert knowledge and experience when aspects of their definition of the situation come into conflict with definitions held by other participants. They do this because they believe that their experience and expert knowledge give them the right and obligation to do so. As a result, members of the band believe that they “own the sound” due to their status as artists, while sound engineers often believe that they are the final arbiter of the sound that the audience hears because that is their responsibility as employees and as trained and experienced professionals.

Musicians believe that the role of the sound engineer is to follow the band members’ directions in order to have the audience hear a faithful reproduction of the band’s sound. If the sound man rides the faders or makes noticeable adjustments to the sound during the performance, they will see this as contrary to their wishes. If this occurs they may attribute the sound man’s actions to lack of experience or a lack of awareness of the genre of music they are playing. Most sound engineers see their role as producing good sound for the audience. However sometimes the sound man believes that his role is to override the preferences of the band if, in his professional judgement, adjustments to the sound are required in order to make the sound better for a particular concert in a particular concert hall.

Communication between the band members and the sound man is critically important in order to establish the parameters of a shared definition of the situation in a bluegrass music concert. However

the extent to which this communication takes place, and the level of detail within it, is quite variable among participants in this study. Sometimes communication is present and effective while at other times it is not. Ritualized communication between band members and sound engineers frequently takes place in the days before a show. Likewise communication is detailed and in-depth during the sound check on the day of the show itself. But surprisingly there is little or no communication after a show has concluded and therefore there is no opportunity for musicians and sound engineers to come together to assess the efficacy of their definitions of the situation. Even if the musicians and sound engineer feel that the concert did not go well, politeness norms preclude honest expressions of dissatisfaction. Any disagreements or difficulties caused by incongruent definitions of the situation will therefore remain unresolved and may reappear at a future show.

This study suggests some additional fruitful areas for future research. What is the role of the audience, for instance? To what extent is the audience an active participant in the concert? How do musicians and the sound man take into account the audience as a whole, or specific audience members? And how do audience members define a successful concert? To what extent are they aware of the sound system and how it is used by musicians and the sound man? Do audience members have the same criteria for a successful show that musicians and sound engineers believe they have? That is to say, what is their definition of the situation?

The present study illustrates some processes used by participants in shared task-focused interactions to create a shared definition of the situation. At the same time it suggests that current theory may overemphasize the extent to which definitions of the situation are in fact shared. Sometimes participants agree on a social definition of reality and other times they do not. As this study shows, the consequences of a lack of agreement can be unsatisfactory outcomes and failed interactions. And even though participants have a sense that communication is key, they often do not follow through to make communication effective. Finally, they do not take the opportunity to assess with each other the

outcome of the interaction after it has taken place. Further research on communication processes in interactions may yield additional theoretical insights bearing on these findings.

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APPENDICES

**Appendix A:
Sample**

Respondent #	Musician (M) or Sound Man (SM)	State
1	M	NY
2	M	MA
3	M	VT
4	M	VT
5	M	VT
6	M	VT
7	SM	NY
8	M	VT
9	SM	VT
10	SM	NY
11	SM	NH
12	SM	NY
13	M	VT
14	SM	MA
15	M	NY
16	M	VT
17	M	NY
18	M	VT
19	M	VT
20	M	NY
21	M	NY
22	SM	VT
23	SM	RI
24	SM	TN
25	SM	VT
26	SM	IN
27	SM	CT
28	SM	NY

Appendix B: Typical Stage Plot for Bluegrass Band Concert Hall Performance (see next page)

Appendix B: Typical Stage Plot for Bluegrass Band Concert Hall Performance

