

## Spirituality, Fan Culture, and the Music of Jerry Joseph & the Jackmormons

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### **Abstract:**

This article presents findings from a qualitative study with passionate fans of the rock and roll band, Jerry Joseph & the Jackmormons. The study looked at how fan involvement in the music scene enhanced quality of life through the ability to access a personal sense of spirituality. While the majority of participants (87%) had been raised in religious households, most of those (93%) had intentionally abandoned religious affiliation only to come to embrace a language of spirituality and religion to describe their attraction to the music. This study fills a gap by exploring how aspects of spiritual language and sensations can be embraced in a secular context after departure from a formal religious upbringing.

**Keywords:** ethnographic methods | fan culture | leisure | music | spirituality

### **Article:**

#### **Introduction**

This study considers people's experiences of spirituality as they participate in the music scene surrounding the band Jerry Joseph & the Jackmormons. As this article will suggest, fans' passionate involvement with a touring rock band can provide a forum for experiences of personal discovery and meaning making. Occasionally these interactions allow fans to have experiences that transcend their mundane lives. These experiences can offer fans a sincere feeling of happiness, perhaps as an acknowledgement that they are on the right path or that they have established a connection with their purpose for being in the world, thus allowing for the formation of clearer meanings in their lives (Blumer, 1969; Stryker & Burke, 2000).

One of the more prominent methods of personal identification comes through association to music (Clay, 2003; Davis, 2006). When the association with a particular music increases in its level of importance to a person, it can begin to play a significant role in maintaining a high quality of life (Ruud, 1997). In some cases, sustaining a high quality of life through one's passionate involvement in a music scene involves a spiritual element as well (Moberg, 2011). Ammerman (2013) said that works of art like music are spiritual when they invoke awe in listeners and cause them to step outside the familiarity of daily life to embrace the potential of something greater. This ability to connect to a set of emotions that transcend everyday experience can then become something that is not only highly sought after, but critical to one's quality of life (DeNora, 2000).

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the passionate fans of Jerry Joseph & the Jackmormons derived spiritual benefit and meaning through their leisure experience of following the band. The majority of participants (87%) were raised in religious households, though most (93%) intentionally abandoned their religious affiliation. This study examines how a language of spirituality and religion and the need to address one's spiritual needs are embraced in a secular context after abandoning traditional religious association. The research question guiding this study was: How does fan participation in the music scene transcend every day, ordinary experience and lead to an outlet for addressing one's personal spirituality? Results may help us learn more about how environments not intended to cultivate spirituality can be conducive to providing moments of clarity, connectedness and meaning-making. This examination might also serve as a bridge between traditional, religiously defined spiritual associations, and those of secular associations due to the high percentage of participants who identified themselves as "religious" earlier in their lives. This study will illustrate how spiritual trajectories occur in a secular context.

In our increasingly secular world, the dialog about spirituality now extends beyond traditional religious categories (Gunnlaugson & Vokey, 2014; McSherry & Cash, 2004). As people have become more diversified in their practice and belief, the language of spirituality has been appropriated for subjective purposes, not reliant on traditional religious affiliation, yet based in the same foundation of significance for describing one's most meaningful thoughts, beliefs, and practices (McGrath, 2005). This article will further explore the language of spirituality and religion in a context that it is not commonly considered—secular music.

## **Literature review**

Spirituality is believed by some scholars to be the central aspect of religion (Pargament, 1999). People may also have experiences they view as sacred or spiritual without holding religious beliefs (Heelas, 1998). Sharpley (2009) concurred by stating that "spirituality assumes the existence of the supernatural, though not necessarily a god or gods" (p. 241). Goldberg (1990) said that not all those who are on a "spiritual journey" are looking for God; the search can be for a personal "ideal of truth" (p. 9). Soeken and Carson (1987) stated that spirituality, for the individual, can be the conduit for meaning-making and defining one's existence. It will be displayed in this article how the participants embraced their participation in the music scene as an outlet for addressing their personal spirituality needs even after most had intentionally disengaged from their previous religious affiliations.

Not all scholars, however, agree that spirituality is disconnected from religion. Beringer (2000) claimed that secular spirituality was an oxymoron and that any assertion of a spiritual experience outside of one directly tied to an inclusion of "God" was "consumerist spirituality." Beringer drew a distinction between "broad" and "specific" spirituality, with the former being "this-worldly" and "devoid of superhuman meaning," and the latter being a spirituality that "takes us beyond the physical-material realm," which includes "the emotional as well as the intellectual domains" (p. 161). Beringer, though, later indicated that if our level of involvement allows us to "more fully apprehend an otherworldly sacred," we have moved from secular spirituality to specific spirituality.

Leisure and spirituality

Stringer & McAvoy, 1992), park visitors (Heintzman, 2012), summer residential campers (Sweatman & Heintzman, 2004), and four-wheel driving (Narayanan & Macbeth, 2009). Physical leisure activities such as yoga (Smith, 2007), belly dancing (Kraus, 2009), whitewater kayaking (Sanford, 2007), and surfing (Anderson, 2013) have also been examined. For example, Anderson's (2013) work on surfing referenced a common term used among avid surfers—“the source”—and how experienced surfers received “physical, mental, and spiritual bliss” when in this state of liminal interaction with the water, allowing for a “connection with the creation” that was “good for the soul” (p. 959).

Other studies have investigated the ability of tourist activities to provide a forum for engaging one's spirituality (Ellard, Nickerson, & Dvorak, 2009; Sharpley & Jepson, 2010; Willson, McIntosh, & Zahra, 2013). Some examinations have explored spirituality associated with affiliation, such as finding meaning through a connection to a sports team (Percy & Taylor, 1997). Other scholars, such as Unruh and Hutchinson (2011), have explored the therapeutic elements of leisure for addressing issues of personal spirituality. They found that those dealing with serious health issues could address their spiritual needs through gardening. Some of the participants in their study stated that the inevitable birth, growth, and death cycle of plant-life allowed some participants to come to grips with mortality by realizing their connection to the natural world, whereas others saw their garden as a sanctuary from the worries of their daily lives.

For many (Anderson, 2013; Kraus, 2009; Smith, 2007), leisure is an optimal vehicle for addressing one's spiritual needs, secular or otherwise. Heintzman and Mannell (2003) used the term *sacrilization* to refer to how leisure may nurture a spiritual dimension of life, and this will be displayed in the context of the music scene surrounding the band Jerry Joseph & the Jackmormons throughout this article. As this paper shows, the participants found that through their experience and involvement with the music that is most meaningful to them, they were able to lead more personally fulfilling lives (Jaimangal-Jones, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2010). This article will fill a gap in the literature by examining how popular, secular music is experienced as spiritual for participants who had predominately disengaged from prior religious association.

## Music and spirituality

The link between music and spirituality remains an underrepresented area of focus in the leisure literature. Schmidt (2006) stated that leisure provides a space for humans to experience aspects of themselves that they might not be able to experience elsewhere. Spirituality for some fans, then, is a process of discovery. Addressing one's spiritual needs may take time, and occur through immersion in a music scene coupled with a passionate connection to the music. Epstein (1994) stated that “the importance of rock n' roll for its fans depends primarily on the extent to which it functions within their lives as a method of granting definition to experience” (p. xviii). Following DeNora (2000), Lynch (2006) claimed that music plays an important role in allowing people to actively manage their “identities, environments and emotional states” (p. 486). Lynch further elaborated that the meanings that are constructed by the listener are dependent on such aspects as the level of attention paid to the music, the listening space, and the memories and associations that are attributed to both the music and the experience of music consumption. Through this consumption listeners learn about the type of music they like and why they like it, the type of people that they might want to befriend based on shared musical tastes, manners of

expression, and style in terms of dress and self-presentation, as well as many other intangibles specific to the music scene in which they are involved.

When the devotion to a band or connection with its music grows, sometimes the experiences come to be described or identified as spiritual (Gellel, 2013). Much as Schmidt (2006) posited that individuals experience leisure in ways that are spiritually relevant due to the interaction of time, space, and freedom, passionate fan involvement in a music scene surrounding one's favorite band can provide the opportunity for participants to access a spiritual experience as well. Spirituality in this context does not necessarily imply a traditionally Western form of religious spirituality. Rather, this spirituality is usually secular in nature, insofar as it is experiential but not connected to a religious tradition (Taylor, 2007).

The potential for spiritual transcendence through secular music was examined by Gellel (2013). Gellel stated that, through music, listeners are exposed to the potential for developing emotions and positive attitudes that allows for them to acknowledge their need for others. By realizing the interdependency of human life, it can cause a shift in the paradigm through which the engaged listener sees the world; the listener may begin to construct different worldviews or be more sentimental or empathic to others' needs, as well as his or her own, through the attainment of a personal spirituality.

In a study that looked at the differences between religion in popular music and popular music as religion, Moberg (2012) stated that metal [music] culture can be seen as providing its most devoted followers with a worldview and interpretation of their place in society that involves a "cultural identity, collective rituals, and a sense of community and belonging" that mirrors functionalist understandings of religion (p. 117). According to Moberg religion is typically understood as a socio-cultural system that connects people through social identification and beliefs, and this is what can be seen in some music scenes based on the level of devotion of the participants. This statement shadows findings from Sylvan (2002) and Gellel (2013) on the parallels that exist between involvement in a music scene and religious participation and dedication.

For those involved in the Moberg study, music was the integral component to realizing their personal spirituality. In their study of people's attendance at dance music festivals, JaimangalJones et al. (2010) stated that those who make the effort to travel to distant venues for the participation in a music scene come to see their partaking as a rite of passage or a pilgrimage to spiritual fulfillment. It allows for the participants to be part of something that may never happen again, and this in itself can be seen as special and spiritual. They go on to say that travelling long distances reflects the importance of the music events to the participants, and following Giddens (1991), this symbolic demonstration of cultural participation is a significant means for constructing identity

## **Methods**

### **Research design**

The research question guiding this study was: How does fan participation in the music scene transcend everyday, ordinary experience and lead to an outlet for addressing one's personal spirituality? We were interested in how fans' involvement with the Jackmormons has affected their quality of life, and what role, if any, spirituality has played in their connection to the music.

In addition, we used Stringer and McAvoy's (1992) conception of spiritual experiences to explore personal spirituality. The concept is so defined:

Spiritual experiences usually include evidence of both cognitive processes (active contemplation) and affective dimensions (feelings and emotions, such as peace, tranquility, joy, love, hope, awe, reverence, and inspiration). They are frequently described as involving a transcendence of self and/or surroundings and are most often perceived as having some degree (usually high) of emotional intensity. (p. 14)

The choice in the current study to isolate the sensation of spirituality was made because it is inclusive of a number of other emotions and perceptions, that while alone are important, become more powerful when combined to attain the spiritual connection that is reached through interaction in this particular music scene. Haluza-Delay (2000) has been critical of studies of leisure and spirituality because the focus, from his perspective, is often too much on pleasant emotional states and spiritual experiences in the moment and thus urged investigation into whether or not these experiences lead to life transformation. This study should be considered the first installment of a longitudinal research agenda that will explore the long-term effects of spiritual benefits as derived from participation in this music scene, and therefore address the issues Haluza-Delay expressed in only focusing on spirituality of the moment.

For this line of inquiry, it was apparent that ethnographic methods would yield the most thorough accounting of the phenomenon at hand (Tracy, 2013). We chose a qualitative approach and research strategies that relied largely on in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The first author also engaged in participant observation during the concerts and festivals which served to provide definition to participants' involvement.

### Religious elements of the Jackmormons

Jerry Joseph & the Jackmormons are a rock band based out of Portland, Oregon. They formed in 1995, though the lead singer and guitarist, Jerry Joseph, had established himself in the early 1980s with his band Little Women. The style of music they play is often considered to be of the "jamband" genre (Grateful Dead, Phish, Widespread Panic) in that they have an extensive catalog and rely on frequent improvisation. They rely on a heavy touring schedule to support themselves as their album sales are minimal. Their fanbase is a small but dedicated following. The Jackmormons's song catalog contains numerous songs that invoke religious themes. Some songs are explicitly religious in their titles such as Beautiful Child of God and The War at the End of the World (about Armageddon and the Book of Revelations). Other songs have lyrics that many might view as blasphemous. Both Hallelujah Trail and Beautiful Dirt have content about Jesus Christ that might be unnerving to the most devout Christian. The band also covers a song by Hiss Golden Messenger called Jesus Shot Me in the Head which can be interpreted in a number of ways. Additionally, Jerry Joseph frequently makes statements to the crowd like "God loves you" and "God bless you" to end shows. So while the music is primarily secular, there is an underlying current of religion that is relevant when exploring the personal spirituality of the band's fans.

### Setting

The Jackmormons rely on a heavy tour schedule for their income; therefore, the setting in which we conducted research involved multiple locations. While the first author had observed the band as a fan for over a decade at the time of this writing, the observations and field notes were accumulated during forty concerts (which included interaction and observations all day leading up to the performance) in five states (Alaska, Colorado, Montana, Oregon, and Washington) between December 2012 and September 2014.

## Interviews

Thirty-one people were interviewed for this study. Each session lasted anywhere from 60 minutes to three hours. The first author used an interview guide to ensure that the main topics were covered with each participant, but encouraged participants to expand on any aspect that they felt was relevant to their involvement with the music scene surrounding Jerry Joseph & the Jackmormons. This allowed for us to create historical backgrounds for their relationships with music over the course of their lifetime and to illustrate relationships they made within the scene, and what they sought in their continued involvement. Some of the questions asked of each participant included: How did you first hear of Jerry Joseph? When was the first time you saw Jerry Joseph? How often do you listen to his music outside of the concert setting? And, what do you hope to get from your involvement in the music scene surrounding the band?

The participants were selected through the aid of gatekeepers, influential people involved in the music scene (Tracy, 2013). The fans that fit this designation were those who had a high level of involvement in the music scene based on their longevity and frequency of participation with the band. These gatekeepers were chosen through purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) developed from first-hand knowledge through the long established involvement of the first author. Further participants were contacted through suggestions received from already established participants using a snowball sampling technique (Tracy, 2013). Starting with gatekeepers for interviews, these participants would in turn inform the first author of other fans who would be good candidates for interviews based on their level of involvement and devotion to the band. Being that the band has a relatively small, but devout following, it was commonly stated that there were about '100 core people' who could be counted on to be at the major concert events every year. Those that fell into this category were the focal point for conducting interviews.

The majority of interviews (25) took place the day of a concert. This was partially for the convenience of the first author, since the fans were scattered throughout the country and few lived near him. This also allowed for the fans' responses to reflect a recent shared experience with the band. Six of the interviews were not conducted during concert events. These occurrences provided a "check" against the potential for participants being "caught up in the moment" immediately preceding or just following a concert. This tactic also allowed for the researcher to observe whether fans' claims of spiritual experiences during a concert were remembered when separated from their participation in the scene.

All interviewees were assigned pseudonyms to provide confidentiality, but based on certain responses, pseudonymous identities may be apparent to other fans. The participants were both male and female, and ranged in age from their late-20s to their late-50s, with the average age being forty-two. The interviewees predominately resided in the western states, mostly in Colorado or Oregon. At the time of the interviews, the participants had seen anywhere from 25 to 250 shows in their tenure as fans.

The subject of spirituality was introduced to the participants during the interviews; however, the researchers did not define spirituality for the participants. The interviewees were given the opportunity to follow the topic at their discretion, and for most it was a subject that involved a great deal of expansion. Some of the questions asked in regards to this line of inquiry were: Does Jerry Joseph and his music represent anything for you in a spiritual sense? Does your presence or interaction at his concerts create any sense of feeling or emotion you do not get elsewhere? And, is there any aspect of your involvement in the music scene that parallels traditional Western religions?

### Participant observations

The first author participated in all of the concerts he attended during the study period just as any fan of the band would. During the first author's period of involvement, he had established many relationships within the music scene, and was familiar with many of the traditions associated with attending a Jackmormons's concert. The first author interacted with people before, during, and after the concerts, and made arrangements to schedule interviews when possible. The primary focus of these observations was to note how the fans either prepared for their participation in the concert event, or how they engaged in interpersonal and intrapersonal exchanges with other fans and themselves during the concert. Consideration was given to how people acted toward the music, which included dancing, singing, and social exchange of shared sentiment through the bond of music. Of particular interest were conversations that directly referenced the event about to happen, or had just happened, which included discussions of special moments that transpired. These observations served as a frame of reference based on comments participants made about the spiritual aspects of their involvement. In many instances fans would report that certain lyrics or entire songs triggered their spiritual moments or connections, and it was these particular instances where the emotional component of their personal spirituality was enacted.

While the music was important to everyone in different ways on a personal level, it was also used as a social conduit before, during, and after the concert experience. Specifically during the concert the first author would take notes on how those he had interviewed before the concert engaged with the music and others; also of particular interest were those he had not yet interviewed, but already made plans to interview when time allowed. The purpose of this directed people-watching was to look for special moments that might occur, such as sharing a song with someone by dancing together or embracing during its performance, or perhaps becoming immersed with the music on a very personal level by singing along, signaling towards the stage, or closing one's eyes and blocking out the noise and surrounding people.

In observations outside the concert, it was important to note how people interacted in regards to the music that had just transpired. Often people would record the concert and listen to it the next day. This would allow them to relive the experience with their friends and listen to highlights, or find other moments they may have missed. This often included commentary on the other events that transpired throughout the night, and on the music itself, allowing for the fans to relate to each other about what was most meaningful to them in regards to this band.

While it might have appeared awkward to take notes during the concert, mental notes were made on what took place during the shows, and jottings were recorded after the concert. These jottings captured key events, such as a fan's rush to the stage for a certain song or another fan who broke into tears during a song. The jottings were also composed of statements made to

the first author, such as a specific song being “spiritual.” Many of the fans gathered for afterparties, and these scenarios made for a great environment to capture the camaraderie that was built through the fans of the music scene. Field notes were written typically in the morning after the concert. The first author would find a time in the early morning while the past night’s events were still fresh, and fans would be less likely to be up and around.

At the events that were more of a festival-like atmosphere (multiple shows in the same city), the first author frequently interacted with the fans during the day leading up to the concert, and in many cases was introduced to new people who became acquaintances and potential collaborators for future research. These longer periods of downtime between shows allowed for the first author to really get to know the person behind the fan, which created further context for their relation to the music. In some cases it provided depth to interviews that had already taken place, and in others it created specific questions to be addressed with the fan when a time for an interview could be arranged.

### Establishing trust and credibility

The first author has attended well over 100 concerts featuring Joseph with his band the Jackmormons or in other arrangements since the first encounter in 2002. In 2008 he made his first friends (and future study participants) in the music scene surrounding the band. There is rarely a show that the first author attends where he is not introduced to more fans who are friends of the people he has met along the way, a common occurrence in jamband music scenes.

The second author’s involvement was limited to data analysis, application of theoretical framework, and content editing. The second author did not participate in or observe any concert events, nor did she conduct or sit in on any interviews. This author’s less biased involvement was valuable in that it allowed for an impartial consideration of the phenomenon, thus acting to counter any potential for skewed reporting due to the first author’s lengthy involvement in the music scene surrounding the band.

### Data analysis

We adopted Charmaz’s (2006) grounded theory approach, which involved an inductive understanding of the uniqueness of each participant’s meaning and understanding of their involvement. First, we read through the interview transcripts and highlighted anything related to spirituality experienced during involvement in the music scene. As part of the initial coding, we assigned primary codes using, when possible, in vivo terminology. Next we grouped primary codes into further concentrated categories through focused coding (Tracy, 2013). The categories established were spiritual experience; a Church-like experience; meaning making; and connections to the self, others, and something bigger. Fans spoke at great length of the music scene serving as a conduit to personal expression and spirituality. That these experiences occurred in intimate environments with others who also received similar benefits caused the shared interactions to reinforce the idea that fans were part of something special. We chose to prioritize interview content because it spoke to the key element of personal experience. The focused coding was therefore derived from interviews, and observations were chosen as they fit the participants’ responses. Observations were then used to ‘set the scene’ and thereby provide detailed information about the participants.



## Results

Music scene participation is often talked about by passionate fans as a venue to cultivate one's self and address individual needs. One of the most significant aspects that can be developed, in some cases, is personal spirituality. Because popular music is typically seen as ephemeral and oftentimes indulgent, it is not given much consideration or respect as a valuable and realistic vehicle for addressing one's spiritual needs. In the excerpts that follow, we give various accounts of how participants came to embrace their personal spirituality after most had intentionally abandoned their previous religious affiliations. By using a language of spirituality to illustrate their experiences of meaning-making and being part of something larger than themselves in a secular outlet, the participants were able to address their spiritual needs in a way that had not been possible in their religious upbringing. This section is organized into four themes of the music-spirituality connection: spiritual experience; a Churchlike experience; personal meaning making; and connecting to self, others and something bigger.

### Spiritual experience

Some fans received spiritual fulfillment through multiple sources. As the majority of fans had been raised in religious households yet intentionally abandoned their affiliation with organized religion, finding activities that addressed their personal spirituality involved a process of discovery. Matt (12/31/2012) found his spirituality through two outlets; becoming disconnected from the modern world through immersion in nature, and attending a Jerry Joseph & the Jackmormons' concert. While the two activities differ in a variety of ways, the common thread that holds them together is Matt's ability to participate in an experience that transcends the banality of everyday existence. His interactions in these two leisure activities gave him the opportunity to connect with a part of himself that was not possible to reach anywhere else, and the spiritual connection he found specifically within the music scene surrounding the band allowed him to "[have] the best year of [his] entire life."

Hunter (6/20/2013) found music in general to be spiritual, but she stated that there were certain emotions that she only received while attending a Jackmormons' concert. She described the music as "honest" and her relationship to the music as a "love affair" because it "brings out emotions" that are typically only found in human-to-human relationships. She went on to say that the band has certain songs that will "bring you to tears at times because of what you're going through; whether it's a religious moment, or just a moment of faith or remembrance."

While speaking with Bella (8/03/2014) about whether or not Joseph's music represented anything for her in a spiritual sense, she defined it as "soul cleansing." She said that every time she went to a show she came away feeling good because the music "heightened [her] feeling of being a spiritual person." Bella went on to say that there were moments at concerts where Jerry Joseph would call from the stage to elicit a response from fans that made her feel as if she shared a spiritual connection to others in attendance when they responded.

### A church-like experience

It was common for fans to relate their experience at Jackmormons' shows to that of attending religious ceremonies. As indicated, the majority of participants had abandoned their previous religious affiliations, but most still embraced a language of spirituality to describe their

experiences and sensations while engulfed in the concert event. Speaking with Barry (6/19/2013) about his involvement, he said: “Going to a [Jackmormons’s] show is like church for me.” He stated that the music makes him feel as if he is having a spiritual experience and that his participation in the music scene “allows [him] to reflect on [himself]” through a connection to the music that he described as having “soul.” Wilson (6/30/2013) also said attending a Jackmormons’ show was like church for him (a church in which he chose to be affiliated). The first author followed up Wilson’s response by asking him if he was trying to access a higher power when he came to their shows, to which he responded, “It kind of happens. At shows I’ve gotten to higher points of consciousness through music, and that never happened with traditional church.” He also mentioned “losing himself in the music,” and when asked what he meant by that, he responded:

It’s like when you close your eyes and there’s this rush of good euphoria. It taps into something; it’s comforting. It takes you out of your body pretty much. You just close your eyes and get immersed into the music and it just takes you along for the ride.

What was of particular note in this study was the use of religious terms (outside of “spirituality”) without prompt. “Church” was the most common word used to describe the experience of being at a Jackmormons’s show, and since Jerry Joseph is commonly referred to as The Reverend, it makes this term especially apropos. Janet (6/15/2013), who had been raised a strict Catholic and had issues with aspects of her religious upbringing, stated that she felt as if she was only now getting what she was expected to receive from traditional Western religion growing up:

This music is what I’m here for. The one thing in my life that’s worked is going to shows and letting this [music] go in me and through me ... It’s church. It’s like the church where all the people I want to be with are right there ... [And] maybe everybody needs some form of church to feel like they are in that right place ... It doesn’t fit into the box of what you would consider church, but in my heart I feel its church. It’s the love and light and vibration church. Putting that reverend in this place [Telluride, Colorado] is pretty intense. Everywhere I’ve seen the Jackmormons is spiritual.

Certain aspects of fan involvement mirrored the gathering of adherents to traditional Western religious systems. Fans would often congregate before the “sermon” of The Reverend, talking with their friends, awaiting the performance. When it was time for “church” to start, the fans readied themselves for the performance of their ‘spiritual leader.’ The following description is from the field notes of the first author during the 2013 Dixie Mattress Festival (DMF), a popular, annual music festival that features the Jackmormons’ as headliners for three nights in rural Oregon (6/28/2013):

While waiting for the first night of The Dixie Mattress Festival to start, I watched the fans gather around, talking and drinking, just a short distance from the venue. When the band walked out, everyone stopped their discussions mid-sentence and bee-lined for the stage, many finding ‘their spot’ where they stand for all Jackmormons’s shows, regardless of the venue. The sermon was about to start. As the Jackmormons ripped into ‘Jump,’ an up-tempo, fiery song about a man’s indifference to whether or not he lived

any longer, everyone thrashed about. In the song the protagonist speaks of not having much concern for his life; in fact, one line proclaims, “I can’t see the sense in staying alive.” The irony here, this first night of the Dixie Mattress Festival, is that it appears no one has ever felt more alive than they do right now. In the song, the hero plans on jumping to the rocks below to leave this world; in this field on this night, for most fans, it appears that everything they want in this world is right here.

Many of the fans had to travel great distances to come to the DMF; in some ways there was an aspect of pilgrimage because of the specialness associated with this event that had become an annual ritual for so many. While speaking with Dave (7/24/2013) about his involvement at past DMFs, he said the specialness of the festival mimics religion in that it “provides ritual, community and the baseline for how to be a good person.” He went on to say that when you “travel great distances to be involved in something that is held in such high regard to your family of friends, it takes on a special quality that is typically only found through religion.” For many of the participants, the DMF was a safe space to channel personal release, to gather in communal interaction and appreciation, and also served as a beacon for addressing personal spiritual needs.

### Personal meaning-making

We spoke with one fan of the Jackmormons, Tom (12/30/2012), who had been spiritually grounded in his upbringing in a Christian church, but who had since gravitated toward a more secular kind of spirituality. The first author asked him about particular songs that the band plays that have religious associations in their lyrics (whether as praise or blasphemy). We were interested whether or not he felt more connected to the band’s music when those songs were played because they resonated with the spirituality of his upbringing. He replied:

I don’t know if it connects me more, but a lot of the songs - Hallelujah Trail is mixed in with a story of him and a woman selling body parts for heroin, so it’s such a, its talking about salvation, but it’s such a contradiction inside that that’s what I like. It’s the poetry of it. Like I said, “the taste of redemption might be in reach if you stretch out your fingers and stand on your toes.” I love that line, because sometimes when shit’s bad, it’s like stop and breathe and reach out.

Since Tom had referenced that line a couple times during his interview, the first author asked him if the band’s lyrics helped him outside of the concert setting. He replied, “Yeah, it’s gotten me through some tough times. It can help me take a step back. Like at the shows, it’s a substitute for the drugs.” Tom went on to say that in his personal time he will often listen to the band’s music to ease his mind, or address difficult or pressing issues in his life. Listening to the music allowed for Tom to feel centered and in touch with both his potential for growth and his innate need to feel connected to something beyond him. In following up with Tom (6/15/2013) in the months after his interview, he revealed that he was dealing with a parent’s serious illness, and he found the Jackmormons’s music to be a powerful outlet for dealing with the realities of his family’s situation.

Others were more open about the spiritual relationship they had to the music of the Jackmormons, especially when in attendance at their concerts. Keith (6/18/2013) stated that

when he is at Jackmormons's shows "it feels as close to heaven as I'm going to get. Every time makes me feel like that." Keith was one of two self-identifying, traditionally religious fans the first author spoke with. He was raised a strict Christian, but had fallen away from his devotion during his high school and college years. Since that period of time he has grown closer to Christian doctrine, and stated that he imagined the uplifting sense of emotions and feelings of closeness he gets from his involvement in the music scene to parallel what he imagines heaven to be like. Keith went on to say he often cries tears of happiness at shows. At the time of the interview Keith was trying to beat a drug addiction he had been battling for years. He said that he found the music gave him insight into his life and the problems he was trying to face. Jerry Joseph, who is in recovery from his own struggles with substance abuse, writes extensively about his battles with dependency, and many of the study participants who had similar issues found the music to be inspirational for their battle to overcome their addiction.

### Connecting to the self, others and something bigger

A significant component of fan involvement involved the search for personal discovery and meaning making which often extended to the formation of meaningful relationships as well as the transcendent element identified as personal spirituality. Janet (6/15/2013) said Joseph's music represented life, love, death and rebirth for her. She said that her involvement in the music scene surrounding the Jackmormons made her feel as if "I'm part of something bigger that I have no control over, and it's right where I'm supposed to be, and that's because of Jerry." When asked what it was about Jerry Joseph that allowed her to feel this way, she responded: "He's reconnected me to all these feelings and emotions that are connecting me to the bigger picture of everything." When asked about what this "bigger picture" entailed, Janet said, "Jerry's music has taken me to those parts that are broken. Puzzle pieces, and I'm being fit back together ... it helps to make me part of everything that surrounds me."

The connection between the emotional sensation received from the music of the Jackmormons and spirituality can best be summed up by Dave (7/24/2013) when he responded to what type of person identified with the music of the Jackmormons. He found that the type of support he received in the music scene was the kind you would typically find in a church, and went on to say further:

The fact that we can get together and share this mutual experience and get this weird religious effect without having to commit to a religion; my friends that I go to shows with, they aren't formally religious, but we all share the common bond of a release and we share the experiences with each other. It's almost like group therapy. You're sharing a common catharsis.

During the 2014 installment of DMF, the first author conducted a focus group interview with three participants. The weather was not quite ideal as it had been raining for most of the weekend. The focus group participants along with the first author were squeezed under a tarp for a discussion, and a cast of about five other individuals sat quietly listening to the conversation. The research agenda had become common interest amongst the fanbase and folks were quite eager to find out more. The first author asked Arlo (6/28/2014) if there was any sort of spiritual component of his involvement, to which he responded:

There [are] times where at [these] shows I think more about God and spirituality than I do any other time for sure. Because he's talking about it [Jerry Joseph frequently makes reference to God in his songs, in praise or blasphemy], and because I'm feeling it. I'm in touch with a higher power. I'm more aware of just everything. It's a very easy access point to get to with [the Jackmormons]

Arlo was then asked to describe this "feeling," to which he replied:

[I'm] more aware of how lucky we are by experiencing life. [We're] lucky to be alive and to be here at this show. Whether it's related to spirituality, this is our church. [A] traveling church. You go listen to the Reverend preach. He makes me feel good and think about God and being good to people. This is the same thing as spirituality. I suppose [it's] just a different way to reach that point.

Arlo, and the majority of the participants in this study, did not initially become immersed in the music scene surrounding the Jackmormons to attend to spiritual needs. As their connection to the music grew and became more central to their life and aspects of their sense of self, the music and their participation in the subculture revealed itself as a context to address personal spiritual needs, and for some, became a prominent component of their involvement.

## **Discussion**

Though devoid of a Western religious context, it has been shown that the participants of this study predominately had transcendent experiences through their ability to connect to themselves, the music, and others in a manner most participants regarded as spiritual. That these spiritual experiences occurred after having intentionally abandoned religious affiliation suggests the need for further examination into how leisure can serve as a context for spiritual expression apart from religious association. For the fans the first author spoke with, the experiences they had at Jackmormons' concerts were seen as special in that the concerts were positive outlets for them to connect with people who had become close friends and a place where they could truly enjoy themselves and address their spiritual needs. Lynch (2006) stated:

It may not, therefore, be so much the cognitive content of song lyrics that are seen as important by listeners, but the entire aesthetic effect of listening to a particular piece of music in a particular setting, with particular people, at a particular time of the day that makes popular music an important aesthetic tool for managing one's experience of self and the world. (p. 486)

This appears to ring true for the fans of Jerry Joseph & the Jackmormons with whom the first author spoke: fans' total experience at concerts made for the transcendent feeling they cultivated at the shows. This is the spiritual benefit they derive from being a fan. Much as other studies have been conducted on the liminal aspects of leisure involvement in regards to personal spirituality (Anderson, 2013; Kraus, 2009; Narayanan & Macbeth, 2009), the fans' presence and interactions at these concert events was a forum to live in the moment and focus on their personal development. It is important to note that this study's focus was on spiritual experience rather than spiritual transformation. Whether or not these fans did indeed evolve spiritually over

time was not a specific item of concern upon initial inquiry, but it certainly allows for further research to be undertaken with this group of participants. Future investigation in this area may provide insight into whether the participants view their involvement as a newfound, personal religion. That they drew frequent comparisons to past associations with formal religion suggests this possibility, but is by no means conclusive. Kraus (2014) has begun investigation in the area of spiritual stability and change through leisure, and future examination with this participant pool could provide insight into the 'fluidity' of spiritual experience and emotion. The previous abandonment of religious affiliation as an avenue to spirituality for the majority of participants, suggests the potential for future spiritual change in this group of informants.

Leisure activities can and do function as spiritual experiences (Kraus, 2009). "When people experience leisure," Joblin (2009) writes, "their spirits soar and their humanity finds larger expression" (p. 96). He went on to say that those that develop these intense connections to their leisure pursuit can then come to acknowledge their experiences as connecting to the spiritual dimension of their lives. Rudolf Otto (1958), referring specifically to the transcendent power of music, said that music "releases a blissful rejoicing in us" that consumes our mind leaving us unable to express what has touched us so deeply (p. 48). This musical sensation was described as "wholly other" and beyond the emotions of our ordinary lives (p. 49). These feelings that are accrued through fan involvement, in this case, the medium of a Jackmormons' concert, functioned as a place where the participants were able to find harmony between their inner and outer lives through music and establishing relationships (Schmidt, 2006).

For fans of the band participating in this music scene, we found Heintzman's (2009) concept of leisure-spiritual coping, where spiritual coping takes place inside of one's leisure activity, to be especially apt. Fans spoke to this in regards to their use of music as a tool to get through hardships like drug addiction or family illnesses. Further, fans stated that music invoked moments of faith from their past. This reinforces Yob's (2010) claim that emotions generated from music allow people to gain insight into their lives and build off their experiences to better themselves and their future situation.

This investigation of the fans of the band Jerry Joseph & the Jackmormons has shed light on how otherwise secular music can come to be redefined as spiritual, if not defined as sacred in a traditional religious and liturgical sense. Only two of those interviewed maintained a traditional, Western religious affiliation; most of the participants did not identify with any sort of religious practice, and in the majority of cases, intentionally abandoned their former religious association only to come to find something in the music that inspired them to invoke a language of spirituality, and in some cases a language of religion, to express their connection to the music and the band. And while these experiences took place in a communal setting, the act of accessing one's spirituality occurred at an individual level. The fact that the participants of this study found their personal spirituality in a communal setting in tandem with many others who came to similar realizations shows that secular music possesses the power to address the meaning making component of spirituality. Participation for these fans combined both the interpersonal and intrapersonal components of social interaction that allowed each individual to address their spiritual needs and receive confirmation from likeminded others. Following Cavicchi (1998), Marsh and Roberts (2012) stated that the significance of musical encounters reverberates long after the experience has taken place for passionate fans. The process of involvement with the music grows and becomes more of a component of fans' lives, and allows for fans to create meanings for themselves about who they are in the world. The preceding vignettes have illustrated the truth of this statement for those who participated.

## Conclusion

Accepting that spirituality can and does exist apart from formal religious structure and dogma allows more people to become engaged in discussions centered on the benefits of association with spiritual contexts or organizations. By expanding the dialog on spiritual experiences, especially when acquired through non-traditional contexts such as leisure, we possess the potential to find common ground that unites people from numerous walks of faith or personal belief systems. The fans of the band embraced a language of spirituality and religion to describe their interactions and sensations accrued while participating at concert events. For many, the ability to address their spiritual needs was significant, even after intentionally disengaging from religious participation years, if not decades, ago. This highlights the need not only for further exploration of leisure as a context for personal, secular spirituality, but also to consider the residual effects of a religious upbringing. Are these fans hearkening back to their religious youth, or is spirituality an inherent component of our shared humanity?

This study has been a glimpse into the lives of passionate fans of the band Jerry Joseph & the Jackmormons whose comments about their experiences link music as a leisure activity to personal spirituality. Our time spent in observation at concerts and the extensive interviews the first author conducted with fans of the band have provided a significant accounting of the role music plays in creating connections to oneself, others, and one's personal spirituality. The fans of the Jackmormons not only found an avenue for personal expression and maintenance of personal identity, but they also were able to interact with like-minded people to create a community that made their connection to the music scene more intimate. Coupled with this was the establishment of a positive context for attaining a personal spirituality that further led to feelings of happiness and an increased sense of self-worth.

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