

Unlimited Music: Community Music Making for Wellbeing

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Jack Drum Arts



The Soothsayers

PROJECT SUMMARY

The *Unlimited Music* project explored how community-led music-making can support mental health and social wellbeing, particularly for underrepresented groups. Led by Sally Marlow, the project brought together professional musicians, researchers, and community partners to co-develop and test a Community Music Making Toolkit.

Through a series of six workshops in collaboration with Jack Drum Arts, Soothsayers, Mental Fight Club, High Trees, The Bridge Central, and the Policy Centre for African Peoples (PCAP), the project introduced participants to accessible musical instruments such as ukuleles and percussion, as well as group singing. The workshops were designed to be inclusive, hands-on, and adaptable, allowing people of all skill levels and backgrounds to engage in music-making.

The project also facilitated knowledge exchange between musicians and community groups, ensuring that the toolkit was practical, relevant, and evidence-based. The final toolkit, set to launch in May 2025, will provide step-by-step guidance for organisations looking to integrate music into their services. By empowering communities with the tools and confidence to run their own workshops, *Unlimited Music* aims to make music-making more accessible, sustainable, and impactful.

HOW DID THE PROJECT COME ABOUT?

The project emerged from Sally Marlow's longstanding research into music and mental health, and her collaborations with Jack Drum Arts and Soothsayers, two organisations working in community music-making but in vastly different contexts—Jack Drum Arts in rural County Durham and Soothsayers in urban South London. While previous collaborations highlighted music's transformative potential, they also revealed that many community organisations lacked the expertise, funding, or confidence to run their own music workshops. To address this, Sally and her team aimed to develop a structured, evidence-based toolkit that could help community organisations integrate music into their wellbeing programs.

The project also expanded its reach by bringing in new community partners through a networking event where Sally connected with High Trees (youth development), The Bridge Central (women's support), and PCAP (African heritage communities). These partnerships ensured that the toolkit would be tested in diverse settings. From its inception, *Unlimited Music* was a collaborative effort, blending academic research, artistic expertise, and community knowledge to create a practical toolkit for sustainable music-making initiatives.



A page from the toolkit



A snapshot from a workshop

WHAT HAPPENED?

The *Unlimited Music* project brought together professional musicians, researchers, and community organisations to explore the impact of music-making on mental wellbeing and social connection. Over the course of the project, six workshops were delivered by Jack Drum Arts and Soothsayers to three of our community partners: High Trees, The Bridge Central and PCAP. Jack Drum Arts led ukulele-based sessions and Soothsayers focused on percussion, Afrobeat rhythms and song. The team also observed a singing workshop run by Mental Fight Club.

Each organisation hosted two workshops, with Jack Drum Arts leading ukulele-based sessions and Soothsayers focusing on percussion and Afrobeat rhythms. These workshops provided a relaxed and supportive environment where participants could engage with music-making, regardless of prior experience. The sessions incorporated ice-breakers, simple rhythms, and group performance elements to make music feel immediately accessible.

Researchers observed and documented the workshops to refine the Community Music Making Toolkit, ensuring that it could be adapted for different community settings. Alongside this, the project fostered knowledge exchange between musicians and facilitators, encouraging creative collaboration and new approaches to community-based music-making.

An unexpected outcome was the deepened collaboration between Jack Drum Arts and Soothsayers, which led to Soothsayers being invited to perform at the Durham Miners' Gala, a major cultural event celebrating mining heritage. Additionally, a musician from Jack Drum Arts, who had previously struggled with mental health challenges, gained the confidence to travel to London to present at a conference—an important personal and professional milestone.

The project also ensured longer-term sustainability by donating musical instruments to High Trees and The Bridge Central. However, due to budget constraints, dissemination funds were redirected to complete the toolkit, leaving limited resources for promoting it widely. The team is now seeking additional funding to ensure that as many community organisations as possible can benefit from the resource.



WHAT WAS THE PROJECT'S IMPACT?

The project demonstrated the power of community-led music-making in fostering confidence, creativity, and social engagement. Across different community settings, the workshops had a meaningful impact on participants, often in unexpected ways.

At PCAP, a woman in her 60s, who had always wanted to play the drums, was given the opportunity to do so for the first time. Another participant, who owned a drum kit, offered to provide her free lessons, enabling her to continue learning beyond the workshop. At The Bridge Central, a woman who had not played an instrument since suffering a stroke regained confidence through learning the ukulele, inspiring her to consider returning to her original instrument, the cello.

For younger participants at High Trees, the workshops created an environment where self-expression could flourish. One young girl who was disengaged at the start of the session eventually joined in, demonstrating how music can help break communication barriers and foster confidence. The project also provided lasting benefits for partner organisations. Many were able to incorporate music-making into their ongoing activities, with donated instruments allowing for continued engagement. Some organisations expressed interest in expanding their music programs, demonstrating the sustainability of the initiative.

For the musicians involved, *Unlimited Music* created new professional development opportunities. The partnership between Soothsayers and Jack Drum Arts led to further performance and collaboration opportunities, while individual facilitators gained valuable experience in leading community music sessions.

Despite the challenge of limited dissemination funds, the project successfully highlighted the role of music in enhancing wellbeing and fostering community engagement. The findings from *Unlimited Music* will inform future research and practice, with the final toolkit serving as a resource for community organisations looking to integrate music-making into their services.

SALLY'S TOP TIPS FOR IMPACT

1. Meet your partners where they are – Successful impact projects rely on strong, trusting relationships. Engage with community partners on their terms, listen to their needs, and ensure their voices shape the project from the outset.
2. Be flexible and embrace chaos where possible – No matter how well you plan, impact projects often take unexpected turns. Being adaptable and open to change allows you to respond to challenges creatively and make the most of new opportunities.
3. Be prepared for hard but rewarding work – Impact projects require significant emotional and logistical labour, especially when working with vulnerable communities. Recognising and valuing this work is essential, as the rewards—both for participants and researchers—can be transformative.

FURTHER READING

British Psychological Society. (2023). *The Power of the Arts*. The Psychologist. Retrieved from <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/power-arts>

There is pressing need to address mental health issues in our society, and many reasons why now is a crucial time to get involved in community activities that can alleviate many of the root causes of mental health issues. We hope to engage as many people as possible in simple but effective musical contexts, and add to the evidence that already points to the fact that music can heal.

The Soothsayers

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Or visit: www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/research/impact