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Connections, Community, Creativity

Online Music Fandoms and Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a 25% increase in global cases of anxiety and depression.¹ For many, online music fandoms became an important way to combat loneliness and aid wellbeing. Interacting with others who shared an interest in a particular musician or music genre acted as a positive support mechanism, fostering a sense of community and feeling of belonging, as well as providing a renewed sense of identity and purpose at a time of great uncertainty.²

Dr. Lauren Alex O'Hagan, research fellow at the Open University, is one such example. Struggling with her mental health, she found comfort in the Rory Gallagher Instagram community. In her own words, her decision to join was "life-changing" not just in cultivating new friendships, but also in developing new areas of academic research and the internationally acclaimed music blog *Rewriting Rory*, aimed at shining a positive light on the last ten years in Gallagher's career. In October 2024, O'Hagan took part in a podcast with Dr. Michael Lydon to discuss online music fandoms and mental health, drawing on her own autoethnographic study.³ An edited transcript of their conversation is published below.

MICHAEL LYDON (ML): Before we begin, I suppose the first thing we need to do is introduce Rory Gallagher, so I'm just going to read a brief bio from the wonderful *Rewriting Rory* blog, which Lauren has worked on over the last couple of years. Rory Gallagher (1948-1995) was an Irish blues/rock guitarist, singer, and songwriter. Throughout the twentieth century, Rory pioneered the blues across the globe, performing over 2,000 concerts, most notably in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Known for his dedication and hardworking attitude, Rory actively shunned the trappings

1. World Health Organization. "COVID-19 Pandemic Triggers 25% Increase in Prevalence of Anxiety and Depression Worldwide." WHO (2022), <https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide>

2. Jin Ha Lee, Arpita Bhattacharya, Ria Antony, Nicole Santero, and Anh Le. "Finding Home': Understanding How Music Supports Listeners' Mental Health through a Case Study of BTS." *Proceedings of the 22nd International Society for Music Information Retrieval Conference* (2021), <https://archives.ismir.net/ismir2021/paper/000044.pdf>.

3. Lauren Alex O'Hagan, "Music for Mental Health: An Autoethnography of the Rory Gallagher Instagram Fan Community," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912416231162077>

of the decadent rockstar and maintained an authentic, no-sellout image. Now, Lauren has written a number of really extraordinary papers chronicling various aspects of Rory's life. In just two years, she has redefined how people view Rory Gallagher. So, I guess the first question is, why Rory Gallagher? Why is his music so special to you?

LAUREN ALEX O'HAGAN (LAO): That's a big question and I think it can only be answered by thinking of Rory as the musician and Rory as the person. He was an exceptional guitarist, he pioneered the blues, but he was so much more than that. He was working in the rock genre, but he crossed over into folk, Irish trad, jazz. . . . He was a multi-instrumentalist, so although we know him as a guitarist, he could play the saxophone, the harmonica, the mandolin, the sitar. . . . He was an amazing live performer, of course, which is what everybody thinks of when they think of Rory, but something that's often overlooked is his songwriting abilities. He was also an incredible lyricist.

But then to look at him as a person, there's just not a bad word said about him! He was a real gentleman, the complete antithesis of what you might expect from a rockstar. And I think that's why so many fans feel such a connection with him. And as I'm sure we'll go on and talk about with my personal experiences, I feel that connection with him because I identify a lot with how he was as a person, his own personality, his own struggles. And in that way, I've felt a connection with him in a way that I haven't felt with any other musician.

ML: When did your journey begin with Rory Gallagher? When did you first listen to him?

LAO: I'm from an Irish family, so Rory has always been there, but Thin Lizzy was the first band that I got into and, funnily enough, I discovered Rory through them.

They've got a *Live in Cork* record, and I remember that Phil Lynott sings, "I got me them Rory Gallagher blues" halfway through, and I was like, "Who is this guy? If Phil knows who he is, then he's worth checking out!" and it went from there. . . . But 2016 is the year where I would say I became a proper Rory fan when I bought his debut album, and it's just grown and grown since then really.

ML: Rory is probably best known for the blues, but did he also broaden your understanding of Irish contemporary music and Irish music's interaction with the world of music?

LAO: I think he's undoubtedly shaped my music and my music interests. They've changed a lot since I became a fan. Through him, I discovered that appreciation of the blues and particularly the old blues masters from the 1920s and 1930s because he always gave credit to them. Whenever he covered their songs, he would always say, "This is a song by Lead Belly or Big Bill Broonzy" unlike many other musicians of that time. In terms of the Irish side, people don't tend to talk about it, but you do hear Irish sounds in Rory's music. So, the triplets or the guitar sound in songs like "I'm Not Awake Yet." And looking towards his later career, you do start to see him branching out more and more into Irish traditional music. So, he did some stuff with the Dubliners, a great duet with Ronnie Drew of "Barley and Grape Rag." You can really see that he would fit so well into that folk scene, and I think had he lived, he would have gone on and worked far more in that area.

ML: In a time in Irish music when there really weren't many global stars, Rory was. He's arguably one of the top three most respected musicians this country's ever produced.

I wonder if you could speak a bit about how those outside of Ireland viewed him.

LAO: He's got a huge following outside of Ireland, particularly in Germany. He appeared on Rockpalast several times in the '70s, 1982 and 1990, so he's got a huge

audience there and in the Netherlands. But he also toured Japan on several occasions. There's a big following there. And he was constantly in the US, out there playing small clubs over and over. His touring schedules were intensive. He was such a dedicated, hardworking person, spent his whole life out on the road touring, sometimes up to 300 gigs a year in the '70s, which is just crazy. But that's how he got himself out there and known because he didn't release singles, he didn't appear on *Top of the Pops*. He was so against that kind of thing, yet so many people know him, and it was just through sheer hard work and touring.

ML: How much of that influence of work ethic was created with the showbands?

I know he started his career in showbands.

LAO: Yeah, the Fontana and then the Impact. Definitely. From a very young age, he was brought up in that scene. He was just fifteen years old when he joined his first showband, toured all over Ireland and then would go to school the next day and still get really high grades, which is so remarkable. He was even going to art school in the evenings at that time.

ML: You mentioned about Rory the man and that's really where we're going to next. I remember listening to Dave Fanning a number of years ago, and he mentioned Rory straight away as one of his favorite interviews because he had such an affinity with him as a person, not just as a musician. And as you said, there really are very, very few people that have a bad word to say about him. And it's this quintessential niceness about him that is really fascinating. Do you think he was masking something in terms of his own struggles, his own insecurities, his own mental health issues?

LAO: I think it was a challenge for him in that way. His brother has often spoken about that lyric in "Shadow Play": "A little Dr. Jekyll, a little Mr. Hyde," and he says that perfectly sums up Rory. Onstage, he was this really outgoing, charismatic, confident person. And yet offstage, he was an extremely shy, introverted, nervous person. And he struggled with depression throughout his life. So, I think there was a complexity to his character, and he did often feel like an outsider. And I think we'll get onto that later when we talk about the song "A Million Miles Away" and what that means to me. I think that song very much encapsulates that for him, that idea of being in a room full of people but just feeling alone and feeling [like] that outsider who doesn't quite fit in.

ML: Yes, it's such a beautiful song, but that idea of drifting, of sitting in a room full of people but being completely adrift from everyone. So, now relating to your own mental health experiences over the years, do you find an affinity with Rory's struggles? Can you find solace in them?

LAO: Yeah, absolutely. That's a core thing for me, why he's my favorite musician because I loved his music immediately, but then when I first read a biography of him and learnt of his struggles, I was like, "Wow, this could be describing me." It really struck a chord. Sometimes it can be quite difficult when I read something because I think, "Wow, I can see myself in that," but in a weird way, it also offers some kind of comfort in thinking, "I'm not alone." And I think a lot of people in the fan community feel exactly the same way. It's amazing how many fans I've come across that do have these similar struggles, and because of that, they feel this affinity with Rory.

ML: I'm glad you mentioned the fan community there because that's what we're coming onto. I wonder if you could start by reading a passage you wrote that marks the start of your journey. I found it really, really moving.

LAO: Sure. January 4th, 2021. I've been standing in the hallway with my shoes on for half an hour now. I've got butterflies in my tummy. My hands are shaking, and there's a thin sheen of sweat forming on my forehead. All I need to do is reach out and grab the doorknob, yet I'm frozen, paralyzed. The outside world has become so scary. All I want to do is retreat into my shell and hide away, but I know it's not healthy. Fifteen more minutes pass. I'm still standing there. I take three deep breaths. Then with clammy palms, I somehow manage to open the front door. On wobbly legs, I descend the stairs, and then I'm outside. The cold winter air hits my face and I gasp. I try to start walking, but my feet won't let me. I feel sick. My mouth is bone dry. My heart is racing. After just 30 seconds, I admit defeat and come back inside. This is perhaps the lowest point of my life. I throw myself down on the bed, put on Rory Gallagher's "A Million Miles Away," and I begin to cry. As soon as the song finishes, I start it again and again and again. I don't know how long I end up listening to it, but it's so cathartic.

Eventually I sit up, reach for my notepad, and scribble down a few lines: "I cry at what's become of me, but is it wrong to also feel comfort? Knowing you felt the same. Somehow, without intention, I've built my own Conrad Hotel around me." Setting down my pen, I grab my phone and log into Instagram. Through my tears, I smile at the photo of Rory that's just been posted. He looks so angelic. I leave a comment saying exactly that. For a fleeting moment, my world feels bright again. I'm grateful for the temporary respite from my troubled mind, yet I anxiously wonder how long it will be until the next panic attack comes.

ML: Thank you very much for sharing that. That was really, really beautiful. You've spoken before of a "journey" and joining this Rory Instagram community when you were at your lowest ebb. But did you feel at the time you were beginning a journey, or were you just so deep in anxiety that it felt there was no hope?

LAO: I had no idea! And it's really weird now to reflect back and think of it as a journey because at the time I just couldn't see a way out of how I was feeling. I was just so low. I hadn't felt that low before. And this pandemic was eternally going on. We didn't know when it was going to end. And it wasn't until I reflected later, with the starting of *Rewriting Rory* and then finally getting to Cork to visit Rory's grave, when I realized just how far I had come. And a lot of it was through the support of the online fandom on Instagram.

ML: So, could you tell me a little bit about joining Instagram and the community?

LAO: Yeah, so I had been on Facebook and Twitter for years but never used Instagram. It wasn't until the pandemic where I was feeling so isolated, so lonely, very far away from family and friends. . . . And music was my passion. There was no one I could talk with about it, so I think I initially turned to Instagram to have a space to say what I wanted about music. And at the time, I didn't realize it was anything more than that. So, I remember my first post was in November 2020. I just posted a picture of Rory with a little caption about what a great musician he was. I didn't think anything of it. And then, a few hours later, I had a reply from a girl called Denise in Austria, and she at the time had set up the first Rory fan page on Instagram and she just said, "Feel free to come and join my page and say hi." Little did I know that was the start of this whole thing that developed, of all these friendships and the community that built around that.

ML: You mention in your research about the Gallagher Girls. Could you speak a little bit about who they are and how their relationship developed?

LAO: Sure. So, it started on Denise's page, as I say, and she had a very interactive page at the time. She put different questions up every day like what's your favorite guitar solo, your favorite Rory concert? And then conversations would take place in the comments section. Although she had lots of followers, there was a core group that would reply every day of about fifteen to twenty people. And, interestingly, it was mainly women, which is unusual in a rock community, which tends to be more heavily dominated by men. But I think the setting of Instagram meant that it was a lot of women, particularly young women. The youngest was fourteen and the oldest was in their forties. At first, we just chatted in the public domain, getting to know each other gradually. And slowly, my own fan page for Rory grew. At the time, there were multiple other Rory fan pages too, so you had these individual profiles, but then all of us were commenting on each other's profiles, too. As our relationships grew, we then moved into the private domain and were sending private messages to each other more. Then eventually further down the line, that went to Zoom conversations, some of us met up in real life, so it's amazing how it started as this public Instagram thing, then it moved out into bigger projects. . . . Like the *Rewriting Rory* project again is a collaboration with a fan from Australia who I met through Instagram.

ML: Wonderful. In some ways, it's almost counter to what people assume, to the assumption that online interaction can have negative responses and can further anxieties and so on. What I found really interesting about your research is that you almost developed your own codes, your own way of messaging each other, signaling to each other with various pictures that were shared at a certain time. So, when you needed strength, one of your Gallagher Girls would share a picture to give you inspiration. Could you speak a bit about that, please?

LAO: Yeah, so we did develop our own codes. I should say at this point actually that with my anxiety struggles, I never felt confident to talk about them in public, and this is definitely something that Rory has really given me inspiration with. I've had anxiety ever since I can remember. I was diagnosed officially at seventeen. I'm thirty-two now, so I've lived with it all my life, yet always kept it to myself, which was very difficult. Trying to put on a brave face in these situations and feeling alone, like "A Million Miles Away" goes. But through this community and getting to know people, I just felt people could see a side of me that is difficult for me to express outside of the online setting. It felt very non-judgmental, which is very different to what you might expect in a social media setting. And so, because of that, I did open up to these people and tell them about the difficulties I was having. And, in turn, they started opening up to me. And it was amazing to see how many of us were also finding it very hard during the pandemic, had similar issues with anxiety or depression.

So, yeah, we developed our own code. Mental health and wellbeing were part of our conversation, but they weren't the ultimate focus. Rory was still that focus, but through him, it was helping us to manage our mental health. So, if I tried to go out and have a walk and I was struggling, some of the friends would stay online and be texting me. And I think the international nature was great for that because there was always somebody available, whether in Australia, the US, the UK. And then if I'd made it back okay, I'd get like a reward. Like they'd send me some pictures or a song or something like that. Similarly, with the Instagram Stories, they knew that if I put "A Million Miles Away" in my story, they'd be like, "Okay, there's something not right here." So rather

than me having to say, "I'm not feeling well today," that would be a cue and they'd ask, "Is everything okay?" Also, if people were out and I didn't feel able to go out that day, they'd be sending me things. Like if they were in a shop and they saw something that reminded them of Rory, a check shirt, for example. It's just amazing that everyone had their own ways of coping and their own cues to manage things.

ML: This community outreach is really inspiring, particularly the idea of rewarding.

There's almost this family unit and community aspect of reaching out and knowing you enough to know when you need help. And you said that it developed into meetings through Zoom. That must have been a really big step for you in terms of being able to contact people and say, "Let's have a meeting. Let's talk." Did you feel rewarded as you were going on this journey? Like thinking, "Okay, I'm achieving something with this" at each step.

LAO: Yeah, I definitely did. And I think that's what I kept thinking because sometimes I thought, "Oh, I'm on Instagram all the time. What's wrong with me?" But then I thought, "Actually, it's being really beneficial for my mental health." And at a time where we can't do much else, that socializing aspect was so important because it's something I find very difficult in the outside domain. Also, I think one of the parts I always say about is recovering my teenage side because my teenage years were not great years. I was bullied at school. I didn't have many friends, so I felt like I'd missed out on that connectivity that you have with your gang as a teenager. And I felt at my age now, I'd finally discovered that I had this group online and I'd just be giggling all the time. We have our own way of talking, our own in-jokes. So, this stuff I'd felt I'd missed out on as a teenager, I'd finally got through this online setting.

So, yeah, I think to get to that stage where I felt confident enough to say, "Let's meet on Zoom," that was huge. And I think it was very interesting that Rory was at the heart of that, but it was leading off in different ways. So, we started doing more and more social activities online but linked to Rory. We had a little informal book club because he was a really avid reader. He loved detective fiction. So we started up a reading club with some of his favorite books and the same with films because he loved movies. And then even artwork inspired by the idea like I said at the beginning that he was really into art and a great artist. We started exploring poetry, fiction . . . all different creative activities that I haven't done for years. I used to write poetry when I was thirteen, and suddenly I was inspired to do that again, and I guess the way it goes full circle is that this year there was a poetry competition in Cobh and Rory was the theme of that competition. I entered and I actually won it! And that was incredible because I don't consider myself a poet, but it was very much a spoken from the heart thing. So, yeah, you just don't know where these things are going to take you.

ML: That's fantastic. Wonderful to hear. What's the name of the poem? Just in case people want to read it?

LAO: It's called "Immortality" and it's about Rory's relationship with his Fender Stratocaster because it's that one instrument that he picked up as a teen and played his entire life.

ML: Without going into too much critique or assessment of the various different social media platforms, do you find that Instagram offered a unique opportunity to develop this online fandom? Would you find it more difficult perhaps with X or Facebook?

LAO: I think so. Facebook was what I was most familiar with before and I was—and still am—a member of various Rory groups on there, but I tend to be more of a silent observer. I think in the Facebook domain you tend to get a lot of older people, people who were there at the time and saw Rory live, so I think it's very different. Instagram has a lot of new fans. It's amazing how many people discovered Rory during lockdown. A lot of young people have said, "Rory came up as recommended on my YouTube or my Spotify" and then they got into his music. So, I think there's a real excitement in that Instagram community that for the first time, people are like, "Who is this guy?" so I think that was an important aspect. Also, I think having a younger audience, the fact it is very female-dominated, which is very different to the Facebook community as well. That was interesting. For me, I think it definitely feels a lot less judgmental, and maybe people are a bit more open as well on there, a bit more willing to put themselves out there. Rosemary Hill talks about the concept of imaginary community,⁴ and I think that's really important to Instagram because it's more about the emotional connections of fandom. So, being a fan is not just about going to a concert or buying a CD; it's very much about those internalized emotional experiences, but then how they're articulated in that online domain when you find like-minded people. And I think that's definitely what I came across in Instagram that you don't get in the same way on Facebook.

ML: And, of course, perhaps the only way to experience music during the pandemic was to have that deep connection through listening and online participation because there were no gigs, no friends you could visit. We were so limited. Do you feel your connection with the Gallagher Girls and the Rory community on Instagram would have been possible without the pandemic?

LAO: It's something I've often wondered because I feel like . . . would I have even joined Instagram without the pandemic? Because it was that situation I was in and the loneliness and the anxiety I felt that led me to reach out on there. It's crazy to think how different things might have been. I might not have ended up establishing *Rewriting Rory* and everything that's come with that. So, I think the situation was definitely very conducive to Instagram and how it worked and the interactivity. The community is still there, it's still active, but it was definitely more active in those years of lockdown where people had so much time. And I think that was part of the importance of it for me as well: I had the time to research my posts. So, I wasn't just putting up an image of Rory or a clip of his song; I was thinking, "I want my content to be engaging, to be a bit different." So, I would use my research skills, but applied to this setting to find new information or something that people didn't really know before and share that.

ML: And through that, did your academic engagement also become more engaged at that point as well?

LAO: Exactly. They go hand in hand really: the academic work on Rory and all the personal stuff I was doing because I was uncovering things or finding out new stuff and thinking, "Gosh, nobody has published on this before. There's a real gap here!" Rory was such an important figure in the Irish rock scene, and yet nothing's been written about him academically, so I think then there was that natural transfer where

4. Rosemary Lucy Hill. "Reconceptualizing Hard Rock and Metal Fans as a Group: Imaginary Community," *International Journal of Community Music* 7:2 (2014): 173–87.

I thought, “Okay, I don’t want to just share this on a social media account. This needs to be published to show his contribution in that way.”

ML: You mentioned this really interesting, gendered aspect about the research and particularly the fact that Instagram facilitated this engagement with young women who were fans. You’ve also written about engaging with men of a certain age who would have had a different relationship, but they also expressed their anxiety. They were also able to engage with this community, so it wasn’t exclusive to the Gallagher Girls; it was broader.

LAO: Yeah, that was actually an amazing bit for me. I’m glad you brought that up. As I said, there were a lot of women, but, of course, there were men as well. So, I started to do more and more mental health awareness stuff on my page. In May, there’s a Mental Health Awareness Week and in October, there’s a Mental Health Awareness Day, so I started to do that on my page. Using Rory and his experiences there and also drawing on my own experiences. And that made people feel a bit more able to open up. I think particularly for men, they typically are more likely to keep these struggles to themselves because of these ideas of *machismo*. I think by knowing that Rory had these problems too, yet he was still this incredible musician, achieved so much. . . . They really identify with that, and it also empowered them to speak out more. I talk in my paper about a guy in his sixties who messaged me privately just to say, “I really appreciate what you’re doing. I’ve had these same difficulties all my life. Never felt able to talk about them before.” So, that was just such an amazing feeling to think I’m also helping people as well as helping myself through this community.

ML: Wonderful. For your journey to impact so many people along the way is extraordinary and something that’s very uplifting to view. So, you’ve obviously come out of this pandemic in a significantly improved situation—from being at such a low point to this really inspiring story where you’ve met this wonderful community and you’ve got this support through this online music fandom. Do you feel that you owe Rory? Do you feel that you owe him something in response?

LAO: I owe him so much. I really do. And I think *Rewriting Rory* is part of what came out of that feeling of owing him because I feel like he hasn’t been given justice in academic work and even, I would argue, in fan communities. I feel like there’s still very much this bias towards his early career and because later in life he did have health troubles, his physical appearance changed, you do still see a lot of negativity towards that era of his life and people not watching concerts from then or not listening to music then, or making certain judgements based on his health or his appearance. So, it’s so important for me to get that out there because . . . for me personally, that’s actually my favorite period of his music. One of my introductions to Rory was his 1987 Cork Opera House concert. Still one of my favorites. It’s funny because most people come in at *Irish Tour* and that’s their favorite, but it’s always for me been that end part, *Defender, Fresh Evidence*. . . . So, a lot of this blog that I set up with my friend is very much about raising awareness of all the amazing stuff that Rory was still doing in that latter part of his career and getting the word out there.

ML: Those of us who do suffer from anxiety issues and have mental health struggles are often the quietest people in the room, those who are very self-reflective and, as a consequence, we keep to ourselves. Do you feel like Rory’s quietness, his niceness, his complicitness in being in the background, hampered his legacy to a certain extent?

Because particularly within rock music, we're all aware of this toxic masculinity that comes to the fore, that it's the loudest voices that get the attention.

LAO: I think it's a difficult one because, first and foremost, Rory saw himself as a musician. He wasn't interested in fame or fortune. He just wanted to play. And he often said that he didn't care if there were ten people in the room or 1,000 people in the room. He just wanted to play. So, I think he didn't necessarily think like that. But at the same time, I think later in life he was very hurt at the way that he had been forgotten about or how his check shirt was seen as this gimmick. It was almost like shorthand for "his music is not progressing, he's just playing the blues, this is old person's music." So, I think, yeah, particularly later in life, he did feel hurt by those comments in the press. But at the same time, his brother has said before how he had the level of success that he wanted. He wanted to be low key in that way. So, I do often wonder what he would make of it now with this growing community of fans.

ML: His brother Dónal has done great work to make sure that he gets out there. There's Rory Gallagher Corner in Dublin, there's a statue in Ballyshannon. . . . He's becoming a tangible part of Irish life now. There's been this real remembrance, which is important. Returning to the online fandoms, do you have any advice for engaging with them? Could you perhaps offer any words of guidance?

LAO: From my experience, I think it's just a case of not being afraid to say hi and interact because most people are very welcoming. From my very first post, someone jumped in and said, "Hey, welcome! Come and join my page." I think hashtags can be important to get your profile out there, to make sure you're hitting the right people. So, in my case, by hashtagging Rory Gallagher, blues, Ireland, you're hitting the right audiences. And then these things work by algorithm. The more you look at something, the more similar things will come up. So, it almost self-creates that community for you and accounts that might be of interest. And then it's just about having the confidence to say hello and have those engagements in the comments section. You just don't know what comes from that. As I say, in my case, that then led to more private conversations and the friendships that formed. Some people might not want to speak, but they're happy to just be sat there engaging silently, reading posts and being part in that way, so there's different ways that you can engage. Whereas others went on to create their own fan accounts. So, I would just say I think it's really wonderful to be part of it as engaged or as less engaged as you want, but there's still that feeling of community there.

ML: Fantastic. And community is the key word really. That's really what got you through. And you were helped by your community when you needed it, and you helped your community in kind, which is wonderful to see. It's been incredibly inspiring listening today to your journey. And for those of you who are listening in and want to look for more of Lauren's wonderful research, you can find it on *Rewriting Rory*. Thank you.

LAO: Thanks so much.

* You can watch the original podcast here as part of the Open University's OpenLearn platform. ■