Community musical theater actively engages individuals in music-making and dramatic performances across the United States. The American Association for Community Theater (AACT) reports that community theaters in the US engage nearly 1 million volunteers in more than 46,000 productions for over 375,000 performances each year. While these numbers are by no means all-inclusive (as not all community theater organizations operate in conjunction with AACT and the data includes non-musical community productions), these estimations provide an impressive measure of American community musical theater’s far-reaching and engaging nature. Although a large body of scholarly literature on American musical theater exists, little work has been done that engages individuals involved in these community productions and (to the best of my knowledge) no ethnographic work has been conducted in an attempt to understand participants’ reasons for participation.

This paper reports research from an intensive ethnographic study of a Florida community group as they present a production of Maury Yeston’s blockbuster musical *Titanic*. In community musical theater, enthusiastic volunteers are afforded socially and musically meaningful opportunities to perform alongside other members of their community. My research focuses on the influences that define or confine musical experience, and the interactions that come to shape these musical activities. This examination of community musical theater, which considers its ability to shape and influence the most fundamental aspects of its participants’ lives,
reveals the power of this compelling variety of performance and its vital function in greater society.

This paper is excerpted from my master’s thesis, research for which explored the 2009 joint Tallahassee Little Theater (TLT) and Theater A La Carte (TALC) production of Titanic. My ethnographic research spanned 10 weeks, and included 110 hours of observation and 41 individual and group interviews. In my thesis I discuss how community musical theater participants are positioned at the crossroads of what ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino calls “the Possible” and “the Actual”.¹ Turino defines these terms as follows: CLICK

“The Possible includes those things that we might be able to do, hope, think, know, and experience, and the Actual comprises those things that we have already thought and experienced”.² I investigate the relationship between the Possible and the Actual as it unfolds in three contexts: between community musical theater and Broadway, within the musical Titanic itself, and for the individual participant in community musical theater.

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² Ibid, 17.
Beyond the connections I make to Turino, my research is also greatly indebted to the work of Christopher Small, whose discussion of *musicking* embraces musical performances as rituals through which the mythology of a particular social group is explored. The process-focused musicking environment of community musical theater allows participants to focus more on constructing and exploring relationships and less on standards of performance that may be more highly valued in other music-making contexts. It should be noted, however, that the product—the performance of the musical—is still important, but audiences of community performances seem to be more forgiving when they realize it is their mail carrier or family doctor up on stage and not Mandy Patinkin.

The research I report today is ethnomusicological in its approach and methods. My goal in conducting research within this community was to observe, document, and reflect upon this group’s activities, traditions, rituals, interactions, and identities. My hope with sharing my research at a music education conference is to give you a glimpse into an inclusive music-making environment with great meaning for its participants. I am hopeful that the observations and trends I share today will reveal to you the rich territory for future research that connects music education and ethnomusicology, especially when it comes to exploring how people value and engage music beyond secondary schooling.

Today, I will briefly discuss some of my ethnographic observations regarding community musical theatre participants’ understandings of the development of their musical selves. Amidst hours of interviews, pages of journal entries, and numerous accounts of intensely personal musical experiences, the important place of music in the lives of my collaborators was unearthed. A common progression of life events among several participants is herein discussed, illustrating how individuals come to

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develop what many described as a fundamental need to make music, and how community musical theater provides them ongoing opportunities to fulfill these need.

Before moving any further, I’d like to take a moment to introduce you to the musical Titanic… the creative vehicle at the heart of this ethnography. While even a basic knowledge of this particular musical is not essential to what I’m sharing with you today, I feel it’s important to provide some information about the show—the context—from which my observations emerged.

CLICK

(*Field recording will be played; excerpt from Act 1; 1:37)

CLICK

Titanic: The Musical

Titanic, a mega-musical with music and lyrics by Maury Yeston, premiered on April 23, 1997 at the Lunt-Fontanne Theater on Broadway. The musical ran for 804 performances. It is described by William Everett and Paul Laird as embracing an unlikely topic for a musical, focusing on “a sea disaster with no happy ending following a handful of characters from… the departure of the White Star Line ocean liner Titanic to its sinking in the mid-Atlantic.” Titanic was a musical with unique challenges neither of the companies at the center of my ethnography had seen before—a musical of such epic proportions that it required the full financial forces and creative energies of two companies. The excerpt I just played for you, taken

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from Act 1 of the musical, illustrates how the challenge to create an unparalleled “floating city” was a vision that drove the story of the musical. Just as the designers and builders who brought the ship to life in the early 1900s dreamed of creating something bigger than themselves, so too did the staff of the TLT/TALC production use all of their resources to bring history to life in Tallahassee. While its Broadway manifestation is referred to by musicologist Jessica Sternfeld as a “megamusical” because of its elaborate staging and grand story, it is now frequently seen on the stages of community theaters in the US.6

With that very basic overview of the musical Titanic underfoot, I’d like to know move forward and discuss the nature of individuals’ experiences in this particular community musical theater production. (0:13)

CLICK

Developing the Creative Self: Examining the Individual in Community Musical Theater

Over the course of my ethnography, a trend emerged when participants were asked why they so thoroughly enjoy community musical theatre. A similar story materialized, told by many different voices, wherein individuals became excited about music at an early age and decided to pursue music through secondary school, only to have their dreams of being a full-time music performer dashed or reevaluated during post-secondary years, leading them to turn away from a life completely devoted to music. These stories yielded a common ending; most participants turned to community musical theater when they wanted to continue developing and exploring their creative, musical selves; they needed to find a way

to balance their desire to be musical with their career, family, and other commitments. The trend is by no means all-encompassing; as with any group of people, there were several outliers to this path of development. Regardless of this, the qualitative data gathered in my ethnography provided overwhelmingly analogous experiences across many different life-stories.

Conversations with my collaborators revealed how individuals who perform in community musical theater developed an understanding of the centrality of music-making to their identity at a very early age. This common progression of life events is captured in Figure 1 of your handout. In this chart, we see a series of events in boxes, categorized as musical experiences and exposures. These experiences move forward chronologically in time, as indicated by the arrow that shows the progression of individuals’ “Life Stages.” Five life stages are here identified: pre-school years, school years, post-secondary years, early 20s, and post-post secondary years. Mirroring the life stages on the opposite side of the page is a string of quotations included to capture individuals’ understandings of the self as a musical being and changes in their understanding of the role of music in society over time. These are not actual quotations taken from research participants; they are generalized statements used here to capture the essence of many similar opinions specific to each life stage on the chart.
The chart shows how many community musical theater participants’ understandings of the self as a musical being is developed at a young age; many participants identified a key musical experience (many but not all in community musical theater) that inspired the individual to seek out more opportunities to be musical. One example of such an experience is captured here by *Titanic* cast member Sean Griffin; this excerpt is taken from a journal entry of his: CLICK

When I was in the Pensacola Children's Chorus, we were doing a small number of songs from *Aida* for our spring show. We were all dressed in cheese cloth "Nubian" outfits for a song called “The Gods Love Nubia.” It was the finale to our whole show, and as the music built and built, we got bigger with it. At one point in the song, the music goes out and the whole company sings a capella for about 8 measures. That was the most emotional moment in a show I had had up to that point. I was on the verge of tears, and everyone around me was feeling it as well. I will never forget this moment, because it was the moment that I knew...this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.7

Griffin’s experience is not uncommon to many participants in community musical theater. Many individuals were able to pinpoint powerful musical and/or theatrical experiences from early in life that were incredibly influential, constructing in their minds an understanding of human beings as fundamentally musical. Many participants also indicated that these initial experiences were social in nature, taking the form of choirs, middle school plays, community choruses, etc.

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7 Sean Griffin, journal entry sent to author, 1 June 2009, Tallahassee, FL, e-mail.
From early powerful encounters with music and theater, many individuals moved forward to seek opportunities to express themselves, develop musical skills, and continue experiencing that which first hooked them to music. Many students became widely involved and highly specialized in their secondary years, participating in school choirs and drama troupes, and some even having the opportunity to participate in semi-professional or professional productions. This involvement only heightened and intensified the desire to perform. As they continued to age and develop, their understanding of the human being as musical is continually reinforced through these activities.

**CLICK**

With solid training, affirming experiences, and a strong understanding of the self as fundamentally musical, many individuals progressed to post-secondary education, pursuing music, theater, or music theater degrees. A large number of music and theater students from Florida State University (the large university in Tallahassee) were involved in *Titanic*; many indicated their desire to go on to perform on Broadway, or “make it big” somewhere outside of Tallahassee. Dreams intact, affirming experiences behind them, they pushed forward. Many discovered at this phase of development that performance is a highly competitive and demanding career path, full of sacrifices. Bart Pisapia, a *Titanic* cast member, captured his post-secondary crisis-of-sorts as follows: **CLICK**

My bachelor’s degree is in theater. I was really just doing something that I enjoyed. When I graduated, I realized that I really didn’t want to go to New York or California. I enjoyed doing theater, but decided that I didn’t want that kind of life. I didn’t want that to come out of necessity to live. I wanted to
settle down and that’s hard for actors to do, at least at the beginning. I stayed in Tallahassee and got another degree in teaching.⁸

Other participants indicated being troubled by thoughts they were not talented enough to pursue a career as a performer, sometimes even being told this by an applied instructor or professor. A conflict arose for the individual—they were challenged to reevaluate what it means to be musical, and how they can continue “being human” without dedicating themselves solely to music. As a result of this, many chose to change degrees within the first few years of post-secondary education, to complete their music or theater degree and then pursue another more “practical” degree, or to drop out of their degree program without graduating. A few “made it” and persevered beyond this conflict, be it through persistence, exhaustive practicing, nepotism, or sheer luck.

CLICK

Moving past crisis, many collaborators indicated a desire to return to being musical, and found community musical theater waiting with open arms to welcome them back. In the post-post-secondary life stage, music-making opportunities in school were either no longer available or no longer viable, and professional opportunities were now exclusively available to the few who have dedicated themselves to a performance career. Experiences in post-secondary settings seemed to have often soured individuals on what it means to be “musically talented” and tended to intensify their desire to have meaningful musical experiences that valued participation over technical perfection. At this point across many life course stories,

⁸ Bart Pisapia, interview by author, 11 June 2009, Tallahassee, FL, digital audio recording.
participants turned or returned to community musical theater which they embraced as a welcoming, available forum for social-musical participation.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This common socio-developmental progression provides great insight into how and why individuals came to be involved in community musical theater, while also shedding light on how individuals’ understanding of the self as fundamentally musical drives the “need to make music,” as it was referenced in so many interviews. This investigation of a progression of life events common to many participants demonstrates how community musical theater allows individuals to meet their fundamental need to be musical. To me, what is so disconcerting about this trend is that so many of these individuals came to love and value music at a young age, and were guided through early stages of life with many musical opportunities. Somewhere during the post-secondary stage, a shift occurred… a disconnect between an individual’s desire to be musical, available opportunities to be musical, and the value or place of that individual’s musical offering in greater society. Interestingly, the individual’s need to be musical never disappeared… in many, the drive became so strong that they describe feeling out-of-sorts until discovering an outlet like community theatre through which they can musically express and connect.

Much could be done with the common progression I have shared with you today. My theoretical analysis might be strengthened by research in developmental psychology and sociological life course research. The chart could also be used in
future interviews, wherein community theater participants are asked to respond and react to the progression, perhaps providing further evidence of this common musical socio-developmental track. This trend could also be used as a reflection point in qualitative studies in other communities of musical theatre performers, and other community music-making groups.

More research is needed that employs traditionally ethnomusicological methods like ethnography in territories which have too often been overlooked by many fields of music scholarship because of their process-over-product orientation. Engaging with musicians of all types and talents in a variety of contexts both close to home and far away welcomes new understandings of not only how but, perhaps more importantly, why people choose to be musical (or not) in the ways they do (or don’t) and how these involvements change over the course of our lives. It is my hope that my ethnographic research and the reflections I have shared with you today will inspire you to broaden your research horizons accordingly. Thank you.