

## 8 Conclusion: Towards a Theory of GAS

GAS accompanies many musicians throughout their lives, regardless of whether they are familiar with the term or not. As we have shown, it is debated on message boards and online blogs, and it is implicit in special-interest books for musicians. Most of our survey participants identified GAS as the main topic, suggesting that they are aware of the phenomenon and discursive term. Against this backdrop, the distinct lack of research on this cultural practice came as a surprise and let us explore GAS in popular music. Relevant work in popular music studies and music technology was scarce, which is why we chose a multidisciplinary approach that considered cultural and leisure studies, sociology, consumption research, psychology and psychiatry. Such a multifaceted approach not only proved to be valuable but was necessary to study GAS. This concluding chapter brings together the various evidence and theoretical deliberations to work towards a theory of GAS. In the introduction, we preliminarily defined it as a pronounced and prolonged interest in music equipment, combined with an intense desire to acquire and possess certain items of gear, which still holds. Our explorations yet showed that GAS involves far more forms and practices.

A recurrent interest of our study has been the role of personal, social and musical motives in the consumption of musical instruments, some of which shall be highlighted again. There are several musical reasons why musicians in popular music have a pronounced interest in technology and consider acquisition and upgrade essential for their musical development and performance quality. The right rig is required for maximum expressiveness, and specific setups may be necessary for the convincing performance of individual genres. Specialist gear can enhance stylistic versatility and lead to sonically more convincing performances. Consequently, the more varied a musician's stylistic repertoire becomes, as expertise increases, the more specialist gear may be required. Whether or not this 'necessity' is genuinely justified for musical reasons cannot be said with certainty, yet the survey has shown that greater playing experience correlates with a richer instrument collection. Role models were expected to be influential on musicians' gear choices, but the evidence is mixed. Special-interest books suggest that amateur musicians, especially guitarists, are interested in the gear renowned musicians are playing. Further signs that desires of amateurs can be awakened by the gear their idols play came from our interviews with musicians at a music store, some open comments in our survey and several posts on message boards. The survey results, however, do not confirm a significant impact on buying decisions. The main criteria are sound, playability and construction quality when choosing an instrument. The rig is expected to support the musical intentions and, above all, enable a distinctive personal sound. It seems to have become more important to have an individual sound than to follow role models

and adhere to expected genre aesthetics. Therefore, customising and modifying stock instruments in the process of craft consumption is popular amongst musicians to tailor the rig to their individual needs and progress towards a unique setup. Similarly, replacing gear with higher quality equipment or gear that better suits one's style is another step on the path to creating an original sound. Different groups of musicians such as players, collectors, gear heads, crafters and purists are discussed in the literature. Although their practices differ, our theoretical deliberations and empirical findings suggest that all groups work towards upgrading their rig or instrument collection, just with varying goals and justifications. The findings indicate that the distinctions are much less clear-cut than the literature has us believe. Crafters and purists are players, and many who identify as collectors also play. Perhaps it is the group of gear heads concerned the most with their rig, with their interest in gear overweighing playing in some cases. Collectors in the true sense seem to be rare on message boards for musicians because hardly anyone, if any, identified themselves as mere collectors, and neither did the survey participants; all those collecting were also playing. The widespread notion of collectors accumulating and curating rare instruments behind a glass window could not be confirmed. Such collectors likely exist, but they probably socialise in different communities of practice than those for musicians.

Personal situations and motivations also influence how musicians deal with gear. By drawing on a multitude of theories and data from consumption, collecting and leisure studies, we found strong evidence that musicians perceive their rig as part of their (extended) self. Not serving a sole instrumental purpose, the rig represents dreams and hopes, characterises lifestyles, and enables the musician to become a member of communities where gear is part of social etiquette, helping them build bonds and determine their position in the social hierarchy. For many musicians, instruments are more than just tools for making music. The findings suggest that players form relationships with their instruments to which they attribute human qualities over time. The fact that instruments are sometimes given a name further demonstrates the degree of personification. Possession rituals make the objects part of the extended self.

Several sociodemographic variables are essential in the context of GAS. Age is one of them. The survey showed that older musicians tend to own more equipment on average. Yet the peak is reached in the fifties, then the values fall again. Generally, the desire to acquire new instruments diminishes with age, although the qualitative findings also present examples of musicians whose interest in gear is as great, if not greater, than in playing. Some players downsize their rigs to make it easier to transport, while others want to enjoy their retirement and find pleasure in buying gear. Musicians with more playing experience also own more equipment, for which may account occasional discretionary purchases, reluctance to sell or lack of effort to trade gear to keep the collection size stable. Professional players, as has also been shown, possess more gear, which likely is due to their endeavour to play various

styles for reasons of employability or professional self-image; achieving this status involves extensive experimenting with instruments. The propensity towards nostalgia contributes to an increasing collection size, accompanied by a generally higher interest in gear. While some posts on the analysed message boards suggest that collecting may be based on upgrading instead of accumulating items, collecting leads to higher numbers of objects in possession, according to the survey results. The survey indicates that some musicians see symbolic meaning in instruments they own and therefore do not sell or trade them. However, many message board users tend to trade equipment with little nostalgic hesitation. Besides collecting instruments as one aspect of GAS, specific musical motives play a crucial role for GAS as an overall phenomenon, the musicians' great interest in the expressiveness of their playing and sound. The same applies to musicians with a strong orientation towards specific role models and their gear.

Gender is another crucial sociodemographic variable frequently discussed in research on consumption and collecting. Traditionally, the music instruments industry paid little attention to women as consumers. Likewise, in the common GAS discourse, they were hardly ever considered or otherwise merely seen as restricting their male partner's GAS behaviour. There are signs, though, that the musical instruments industry is changing. Retailers have created more welcoming spaces for non-male customers, and manufacturers increasingly produce instruments optimised for the female anatomy. These are positive signs, but more effort is required to reach parity. As evidenced, the endorsement practice is unbalanced, prioritising men by awarding them with more endorsements and sponsorship of higher-value gear than women. Our findings are inconclusive in terms of gender equality. On the one hand, women and non-binary genders are drastically underrepresented in the survey's sample population and observed online communities, where sexist comments were commonplace. On the other hand, the survey results give no indication of substantial gender differences. Female musicians likely vary in their gear-related practices more gradually than substantially, which would be in line with the theories and empirical studies in collecting and consumption. Probably GAS is similarly pronounced in women as in men but less openly presented. How it differs in detail is difficult to determine with the given data, which is why more research is needed, either with a more balanced gender ratio or specifically targeting female and non-binary musicians.

There are clear indications of social motivations in dealing with gear and the discourse surrounding it. Many musicians visit music stores with fellow players, and purchases are often motivated by group projects and bands. As the findings suggest, bandmates are important points of reference even though musicians prefer them not to interfere in their gear choice because the rig is very personal to a player. Social considerations often affect acquisitions, be it for gear envy or adapting the rig to the overall sound of a band. The evidence is inconclusive as to whether musicians play-

ing in bands or so-called ‘bedroom musicians’ are more inclined to GAS; many players in both groups have a pronounced interest in gear. While bedroom players are not influenced by bandmates, being members of online communities impacts, through social conformity, their dealing with gear.

A fundamental assumption guiding the research project was that players of various types of instruments would differ in their buying and collecting behaviour, with players of electronic or electric instruments being more susceptible to GAS than those of acoustic instruments. We expected electric guitarists to be affected by GAS the most, given the term GAS roots in ‘Guitar Acquisition Syndrome’. Our analysis of special-interest books indeed suggests that the literature on the electric guitar is gear-centric. Books about the electric guitar focus on the rig and sound production much more than books about the acoustic guitar. Likewise, books about the bass guitar, a similar instrument to the electric guitar, hardly cover gear but scales, grooves and signature lines instead. The literature clearly is technologically deterministic for the two instruments, electric guitar and synthesisers, but not for keyboards. For the other instruments, acoustic guitar, bass, drums, saxophone and trumpet, books cover playing techniques, technical exercises, rhythms and grooves, music theory, songs and etudes. In other words, our assumption that players of electric guitar and other electronic instruments would be the ones most concerned with gear and therefore susceptible to GAS has been confirmed by the analysed books. This impression fits well with the theoretical deliberations on the part of the music technology literature, yet our two empirical studies have not found sufficient evidence thereof. The survey results indicate that the overall differences between the instruments are relatively small, apart from a few instrument-specific attitudes and options, such as modifying the instrument, for which there is a developed market for electric guitars. While the size of equipment collections is difficult to compare, the psychological processes associated with GAS allowed comparison between all instrumentalists. Differences between electric and acoustic instruments were tendential, so the results cannot definitively confirm a systematic inclination to GAS for electric musicians. Hardly any differences between mono- and multi-instrumentalists could be found. Furthermore, the survey results are consistent with the findings of the message boards analysis, which demonstrated a comparable discourse and GAS behaviour in all forums, regardless of the type of instrument. An interesting result shows in the discrepancy between the instrument-specific focus of special-interest books and the similarities between the interest in gear and attitude towards GAS across all studied instruments. Even if not representative of the entire musical instruments industry, these books still suggest that ‘the industry’—or at least the authors and publishers of such books—have a wrong impression of their target audiences. Only players of the electric guitar and synthesiser are considered gear- and technology-centric. Players of the other instruments are assumed to be predominantly interested in play-

ing. Hence it seems that special-interest literature is relatively backward. Our findings strongly suggest a readership for gear-centred media tailored specifically to drummers, bass players, saxophonists and trumpeters.

From our own participation in virtual message boards emerged the expectation that online practices contribute to a pronounced interest in musical gear that creates and fuels GAS. Prosumptive practices, such as window shopping on eBay and other online platforms for second-hand instruments, raise hopes of finding exciting new pieces of gear or bargains. The pleasure of observing the market, knowing the value of items and bidding is enhanced by daydreaming and competition because every day can be the day an item turns up, or a low bid is unexpectedly successful due to lacking competition. Empirical research in consumption studies finds that the pleasure of such auction and second-hand selling websites is short-lived, yet our findings suggest the opposite; musicians are visiting them frequently, if not daily, for years. As our findings further indicate, interest in gear and acquisitions is only half as pleasurable if the action and success are not socially shared on message boards and other social media. We have observed that GAS is commonplace in discourse and daily exchange. Evidence thereof is the high number of GAS-related threads, ranging from lingo threads in which the term is included, GAS tests, quasi-academic discussions about GAS, to interest in scholarly work. Overall, online discussions provide ample evidence that the Internet has significantly changed musical and equipment-related practices. Besides a wealth of information on equipment and how to improve tone, there is a continuously expanding consumer market that becomes ever more convenient, and new and used instruments are sold and distributed worldwide. The market for used instruments cannot be overstated as both the survey and the forum analysis suggest that most musicians prefer to buy used instruments and ‘flip’ their gear in order to upgrade their rig and experiment with gear without losing money on selling newly bought equipment.

Studying musicians based on the theoretical concept of communities of practice turned out to be useful because it highlighted the various ways of learning, not only of the instrument but also of the broader musical culture of being a musician. Learning takes many forms, but two stand out: engaging and experimenting with gear. These practices seem to be important for most players’ musical development. Besides, becoming part of musicians’ communities requires learning the expected behaviours and conventions that have a material anchoring. The findings suggest that GAS is expected behaviour that newcomers in these communities must learn along with the respective discourse. Members are expected to play the ‘GAS game’, that is, to show interest in gear and practise self-seduction, which is shared socially. However, they must also find the right balance between gear and playing. While community members rarely share video and audio recordings of their playing, they frown upon an excessive preoccupation with gear that drastically outweighs musical use.

At its core, online communities are about making music, yet equipment is an inseparable part of it. Musicians delight in sharing their ‘guilty pleasures’ because, after all, acquiring gear as a communal event is enjoyable and even more so when they are commended for it. As threads like ‘New Guitar Day’ demonstrate, a certain ‘glamour’ is associated with the proud presentation of a new acquisition. Interestingly, the atmosphere and tone in the musicians’ boards are encouraging and positive, whereas in similar communities for recording engineers and music producers, the tone is highly competitive. In the musicians’ boards, social hierarchies are either flat or implicit, at least in the observed GAS-related threads. Regarding the second way of learning, that of musical maturation, the research suggests that progressing as a player is accompanied by experimenting with different rigs and finding the one that supports the playing best. The requirements change, and instruments and other gear have ‘learning curves’, so musical abilities are best mapped to suitable equipment that neither restricts expression nor overwhelms the player. It follows that growing musical expertise is ideally correlated with gear upgrades until a stable playing level is reached. At this point, new equipment may provide new learning incentives, or it will be acquired purely out of curiosity. Learning curves, however, take various forms for different instruments. While a mediocre guitarist is only limited in that they cannot fully utilise a too advanced setup, the wrong saxophone with an unsuitable mouthpiece would make it difficult for the player to perform convincingly, if at all.

GAS is as much a psychological as it is a cultural phenomenon. Even journalistic accounts describe mental processes in step models for the ‘GAS attack’. Fundamental to the urge to acquire gear is the indefinite quest to improve the rig and the (not always earnest) belief that a bigger gear collection or upgraded setup helps the musician to improve as a player. GAS is assumed to occur in never-ending cycles. Empirically derived models in collecting and consumption studies largely agree with the journalistic models created by GAS-affected musicians. They all show that rarely does GAS truly disappear, even when the perfect rig has been acquired. Most musicians have a general interest in equipment as part of their hobby or profession, and in times of doubt, stagnation or other situations preventing them from playing or pursuing musical projects, GAS strikes.

The two empirical studies have shown various attitudes towards equipment and GAS and the respective dealings with gear. Generally, most discussions and opinions revolve around the relationship between interest in gear and playing. Our findings further highlight, in line with journalistic accounts, the burden of GAS that lasts on the individual when they possess too much equipment, something that has rarely been documented so clearly before. As it is stressful for many musicians to have too much equipment, they try to avoid this burdensome situation. However, GAS is also considered a distraction and symptom of other problems, or even a consequence of

psychiatric conditions such as obsessive-compulsive behaviours or behavioural disorders like ADHD. For most musicians, however, the interest in gear is harmless and, according to the prevailing view in consumption research, life-affirming and potentially beneficial for their development as musicians and their personal growth. As such, our understanding of GAS differs profoundly from the ‘disease’ described in blogs, books and musicians’ communities.

Roy Shuker (2010: 198) concludes his book-length study on record collecting with the insight that due to the diversity of motives and practices, no standard definition of the ‘record collector’ holds. He suggests acknowledging instead a range of types associated with specific collecting practices, such as ‘the record collector as cultural preserver, as accumulator and hoarder, as music industry worker, as adventurous hunter, as connoisseur and as digital explorer’. Neither do the broad range of practices, intentions and opinions observed amongst musicians concerning equipment give us a basis that would allow for a simple definition or theory of GAS. Decisive for musicians’ criticism of academic studies on GAS is the over-simplification that a definite theory would necessarily entail. That is why we will refrain from proposing such a theory. For now, we are content with the findings of our empirical studies and theoretical explanations drawn from multiple disciplines. GAS seems to be a popular umbrella term encompassing a variety of practices related to the way musicians think about and handle their equipment. As a generally known term, it is open to modifications to serve the views and attitudes of individuals and interest groups. What the research has clearly shown is that there is no single form of GAS. That is consistent with the over forty ‘strains’ Jay Wright identified in *GAS. Living with Guitar Acquisition Syndrome*, all bearing a sense of humour, of which this one is an example:

Porn Pop-up GAS—a somewhat less dangerous form that seems to only attack online store and auction lurkers. Onset apparently starts with the appearance of professional quality images of the victim’s brand and finish preferences, causing a virtual assault on the visual senses. These attacks have been known to serve as powerful libido stimulants. (Wright 2006: 55)

Since relating to and being part of music-making, GAS summarises a spectrum of cultural practices. It accompanies musical learning processes, and so, exploring the creative and expressive affordances of gear should be understood as contributing to musical expertise and reflecting it. We took it for granted that GAS-affected musicians would differ significantly from collectors and other groups such as purists and crafters, which, however, proved wrong. The findings revealed only insignificant differences. Music-making is so multifaceted and varies with changing personal circumstances, ambitions and interests that it is challenging to maintain clear classifications. Interest in gear fluctuates throughout a lifetime; it will never diminish com-

pletely, at least for musicians with a respective propensity. GAS is a constant companion for many musicians and perhaps an indicator of the great importance that music-making and music-related practices, be it as a hobby or profession, holds for the individual.