

**‘Pardon me, I’m very drunk’: alcohol, creativity
and performance anxiety in the case of Robert
Wyatt**

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Abstract

Robert Wyatt's relationship with alcohol is multifaceted. He acknowledges its deleterious effect on aspects of his personal life, most notably on his relationship with wife and creative partner Alfreda Benge, and he has been teetotal since attending Alcoholics Anonymous in 2007-8. In professional terms, however, Wyatt continues to view alcohol positively: as a means to overcome anxiety as a performer and recording artist and as an aid to writing. From this perspective, the fact that Wyatt has not released a solo album since sobering up may be more than mere coincidence. This paper aims to answer two questions. Firstly, what is the evidence that alcohol can reduce anxiety for a performer and recording artist, and increase creativity for a songwriter? Secondly, what is the evidence that this is so in Wyatt's specific case? In answering these questions, I will draw on secondary research, as well as interviews I conducted with Wyatt and various associated musicians and family members between 2008 and 2013.

Introduction

Born in 1945, Robert Wyatt came to prominence in the 1960s as drummer and vocalist with Soft Machine – contemporaries of Syd Barrett-era Pink Floyd who toured America with the Jimi Hendrix Experience and became the first rock act to perform at the BBC Proms in London. An accident in 1973, which left him paraplegic, marked the start of Wyatt's solo career (although he had one prior solo release, 1970's *End of an Ear*). This solo career 'proper' began with the highly regarded *Rock Bottom* album (1974), and went on to include the Mercury-nominated *Cuckooland* album (2003) as well as two top 40 singles ('I'm A Believer' and 'Shipbuilding').

Wyatt's career is unusual in a number of ways. He appeared in a wheelchair on Top of the Pops as early as 1974, a time when this was considered controversial (O'Dair 2014, 220). He has collaborated with a wide range of musicians, among them Brian Eno, Björk, Hot Chip, David Gilmour, Paul Weller, Jerry Dammers, Evan Parker and Charlie Haden. He is closely associated with far-left politics, and for much of the 1980s was a member of Communist Party of Great Britain. Also unusually, given his milieu, Wyatt says he never took drugs (Wyatt, 2009a) but did at times rely heavily on alcohol – not only for recreation but also, by his own account, as a creative crutch. Not only is Wyatt willing to talk about his drinking, and its impact at various stages of his 50-year career, but he also continues to regard alcohol as having enhanced his creativity even now he is teetotal. Wyatt, then, makes for an illuminating case study in terms of the relationship between alcohol and creativity – albeit, like any individual case study, one that is illustrative only.

As an adolescent, Wyatt had not been a particularly enthusiastic drinker: 'I'd been actually against alcohol as a younger person. I'd hated it seeing old school friends, who'd been perfectly coherent, coming up all beery and leery and cross-eyed' (Wyatt, 2010). Yet when Soft Machine toured the United States in support of the Jimi Hendrix Experience in 1968, Wyatt began, by his own account, to drink in 'phenomenal' quantities (Wyatt, 2010). He had periods of relative abstinence, including a winter in Spain 1982-3 (Wyatt and Bengtson, 2010), but by 2007 the drinking had become 'impossibly bad' (ibid). Wyatt recalls 'waking up in the morning and only thinking about how long it was until the off licenses were open... There were vodka bottles poked into bookshelves and things like that. It's dreadful. I mean, I was absolutely trapped (ibid).' He attended Alcoholics Anonymous in 2007-8 and, following nine relapses (Wyatt and Bengtson, 2010b), has been teetotal ever since.

Wyatt admits his behaviour has improved since sobering up: 'Alfie [wife and creative partner Alfreda Benge] has noticed a marked improvement, a reduction in embarrassing moments socially' (Wyatt, 2009). Yet his attitude towards alcohol is ambiguous. Wyatt concedes, for instance, that his drinking exacerbated the splits within Soft Machine and probably hastened his departure from that band (Wyatt, 2010). Wyatt also admits that the drinking, at least at its peak around 2007, took place 'at great cost' to his relationship with Benge (Wyatt, 2009). Yet he insists that he remembers his drinking days 'fondly' (Wyatt and Benge, 2010). Overall, he says, 'despite all my regrets, it would be dishonest to say I wish I never had any [alcohol], because I liked some of the nice moments (ibid).'

Some of the same ambiguity can be detected in Wyatt's lyrics. On Matching Mole's *Little Red Record*, alcohol is portrayed as a means of inspiring cheeky irreverence ('pardon me I'm very drunk': 'God Song') and overcoming political differences ('Starting in the Middle of the Day We Can Drink Our Politics Away'). Yet on 'Just As You Are', from *Comicopera*, alcohol is portrayed in a much more negative light, responsible for destroying trust within a relationship: 'It's that look in your eyes / telling me lies / So many promises broken' (Wyatt and Benge, 2007).ⁱ

If Wyatt's attitude to the effect of alcohol in social and domestic terms can be understood as ambivalent, however, the same is not true of his belief in its creative potential. Wyatt speaks positively of 'the confidence, the chutzpah you get from alcohol' (Wyatt and Benge, 2010) as an aid to both performing – onstage and in the studio – and writing music:

'It gave me that thing that makes alcoholics so tiresome. This egomaniacal narcissism. Unfortunately, it's what I find I have to feel in order to be bothered to make music. I have to think that the next note really matters, and that

nothing else matters. It doesn't matter if I don't eat properly, if I bugger up a relationship. I've got to get the next tune right. Objectively, intellectually, you know this is tosh. But subjectively, that's the only way I can get the fuel hot enough to write a song.' (Wyatt, 2009b)

There is evidence that might support Wyatt's claim for the positive impact of alcohol on his musical output. Below, I look first at the effect of alcohol on performance anxiety and then at the possible link between alcohol and creativity in relation to songwriting. I will follow Feist (2010) in understanding creative thought and behaviour as both novel/original and useful/adaptive (114). Originality per se, as Feist suggests, cannot be sufficient, or there would be no way to distinguish eccentric thought from creative; creativity must also be 'useful', therefore, but that usefulness can be purely intellectual or aesthetic. Csikszentmihalyiⁱⁱ (1997/2013), similarly, is clear that 'creativity with a capital C' – the kind that changes some aspect of the culture – is never only in the mind of a person; instead, the creative idea must be couched in terms that are understandable to others, it must pass muster with the experts in the field and it must be included in the cultural domain to which it belongs (27). In other words, it requires not only a person who brings novelty into a domain but also a culture with symbolic rules and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation (6).

There has been wide coverage of the link between intoxicating substances and creativity (Berlin et al, 1955; Barron, 1965; Harman et al, 1966; Zegans et al, 1967; Krippner, 1972; Dobkin de Rios and Janiger, 2003; Carter et al., 2005; Sessa, 2008), but this paper will focus specifically on alcohol, Wyatt's chosen intoxicant – and one that may be underestimated both in folklore and the literature in comparison to drugs. I conclude that alcohol may help at least certain stages of the creative process, in part by promoting a more diffuse attentional state, and also help in overcoming

performance anxiety – even if this may, to an extent, be a placebo effect. I will then explore how such findings might apply in the specific case of Wyatt. Not least since a control experiment is hardly possible, I do not set out to ‘prove’ whether alcohol helped or hindered Wyatt’s creative process, either as a performer or as a songwriter. My intention, rather, is to examine how Wyatt’s stated perceptions of the effect of alcohol relate to the academic literature. I adopt a biographical approach based on access to Wyatt and figures associated with him, using interviews conducted when researching my authorised biography (O’Dair, 2014).

Performance anxiety and the effect of alcohol

Performance anxiety, a term often used interchangeably with ‘stage fright’ (Brotsky 1996), is an exaggerated, often incapacitating fear of performing in public, best understood as a form of social phobia (Wilson and Roland, 2002). Sufferers are prone to anxiety in more general terms (Wilson and Roland, 2002), in particular to anxiety linked to crowds and social situations (Stephoe and Fidler, 1987).

Performance anxiety is linked to perfectionism (Kenny, 2011; Wilson and Roland, 2002) and to what Steptoe and Fidler (1987) call ‘catastrophising’: the anticipation of a disastrous outcome. The occurrence of performance anxiety among musicians is high (Wesner et al, 1990; Wilson and Roland, 2002); it affects popular as well as classical musicians and is not limited to those near the beginning of their careers (Kenny, 2011). Since some degree of stress and tension is necessary for an effective musical performance, performance anxiety may to some extent be facilitating, or ‘adaptive’ (Wolfe, 1989). However, it can also be debilitating, or ‘maladaptive’, since symptoms – increased heart rate, sweating and dry mouth (Goode, 2004) – can make singing or playing a musical instrument more difficult.

Alcohol and substance use disorders are highly comorbid – that is, they commonly co-occur – with performance anxiety (Kelly and Saveanu, 2005; Morris et al, 2005), as many performers attempt self-treatment with anxiety-reducing drugs including alcohol (Wills and Cooper, 1988). Some suggest that alcohol may deserve its reputation as a source of ‘Dutch courage’ – although such an effect may be psychological as well as pharmacological. In a study of 61 individuals with social phobia, for instance, Abrams et al (2001) found that participants given an alcoholic drink experienced a reduction in performance anxiety when faced with a public speaking task. Interestingly, a placebo group who *thought* they had been given alcohol also experienced a reduction in anxiety, albeit less marked than for those who had actually consumed an alcoholic drink. Abrams and his colleagues concluded ‘that the pharmacologic effects of alcohol and the belief that one consumed alcohol decrease social performance anxiety in an additive fashion’ (219).

A broadly similar study by Himle et al (1999), featuring 40 participants who suffered from social phobia, found no significant differences in anxiety between alcohol and placebo groups. Here too, however, the *belief* that one received alcohol was significantly related to levels of subjective anxiety and negative cognitions. Alcohol, they concluded, does not directly reduce social phobic anxiety – yet the belief that an individual has drunk alcohol may achieve precisely that effect. This, suggests Kenny (2011), may be because the person who believes he or she has consumed alcohol might be able to ‘externalise’ the reasons for a poor performance, blaming it on alcohol rather than any personal shortcoming (224). One recurrent feature in the research, then, is a belief that alcohol has an effect on performance anxiety.

Alcohol and creativity

The list of creative people who were heavy drinkers is lengthy (Ludwig, 1990; Beveridge and Yorston, 1999; Smith et al, 2009; Jarosz et al, 2012). Yet this correlation might, of course, simply reflect the bohemian lifestyle of artists; apart from anything else, drinking may not take place during the creative process but following it, as a 'reward' (Beveridge and Yorston, 1999).

Certainly, Bowden-Jones and Brown (2013) are unequivocal: the use of drugs and alcohol at work has a negative impact on productivity as well as the quality of work produced (491). Some of those who have specifically researched the effect of alcohol on creativity have reached similar conclusions. Gustafson (1991) found that alcohol reduces creative fluency; Plucker and Dana (1999) conclude that alcohol has at best no effect on creativity and at worst a negative effect. Beveridge and Yorston (1999) state that most artists who have experimented with creating while under the influence of alcohol have found that it hinders rather than aids the artistic process.

Other researchers, however, have published at least partially contrasting findings. Roe (1946) suggests that alcohol might play an indirect stimulating or inspirational role in creativity. Nash (1962) found that smaller doses of alcohol tended to facilitate mental associations, while larger doses tended to have mostly detrimental effects. Hajcak (1976) found that drinking led to greater originality, but diminished fluency and creative problem-solving ability. Testing fluency in course-divergent problem solving, Koski-Jännes (1985) found that moderate dose of alcohol could result in a greater number of solutions but that the level of these deteriorated under the influence of alcohol.

More recent studies have produced similarly mixed results. Ludwig (1990) found that alcohol tended to have a detrimental effect on creative activity – but not for all expressions of creative output. Although 'alcohol use proved detrimental in over 75%

of the sample... it appeared to provide direct benefit for about 9% of the sample, indirect benefit for 50% and no appreciable effect for 40% at different times in their lives' (953).

In terms of *how* alcohol might enhance creativity, Ludwig suggests it could facilitate the creative process or remove 'roadblocks or impediments to creativity', for instance depression (961). Jarosz et al (2012), meanwhile, suggest that moderate alcohol intoxication could improve performance on a creative problem-solving task, perhaps because a reduced ability to control one's attention can have positive implications for certain cognitive tasks, creative problem-solving tasks among them. Drawing on the work of Guilford (1968), Jarosz and his colleagues note that, unlike analytical problem-solving, creative problem-solving tends to be characterised by divergent (as opposed to convergent) thinking. Moderate alcohol intoxication, they found, could improve performance on a creative problem-solving task by creating a more diffuse attentional state. Sayette et al (2009) also suggest that a moderate dose of alcohol can increase the frequency of mind wandering – i.e. produce a more diffuse attentional state.

With the exception of Ludwig, whose study includes composers and performers as well as writers and artists, it is notable that none of these studies deals specifically with musical creativity – and many scholars now regard creativity as domain-specific, with music qualifying as one such domain (Simonton, 2010, 175). Yet though they might not use the term itself, many songwritersⁱⁱⁱ state that they require a diffuse attentional state to write, even if they do not necessarily turn to alcohol to achieve it.

Perhaps the most illuminating research into alcohol and creativity has been carried out by Norlander and Gustafson, whose work draws on the notion put forward by Wallas (1926/2014) that the creative process occurs in four stages: preparation

(defining a problem), incubation (taking time away from the problem, at least consciously), illumination (the 'lightbulb moment'), and verification (putting the idea to the test). The linearity of Wallas' model has been called into question; today, we might understand the creative process as more recursive. Yet Norlander and Gustafson have used Wallas' model as the basis for a series of detailed experiments, modifying it slightly with the addition of a fifth stage: restitution (rest and recuperation). In their results, they drew on psychoanalysis to distinguish between primary processes, based on unconscious instinct, and secondary processes, associated with preconscious and conscious logic. Norlander and Gustafson concluded that a moderate intake of alcohol obstructs those phases of creativity that are mainly based on the secondary process (preparation, parts of illumination, verification) but facilitates those phases mainly based on the primary process (incubation, other parts of illumination, restitution)^{iv}. This is their 'hypothesis regarding the influences of alcohol on the creative process' (273).

Such a hypothesis, which is supported by the earlier findings of Kalin et al (1965), would appear to resonate with the findings of Jarosz and colleagues: the primary processes are the ones that benefit from a more diffuse attentional state. (Not coincidentally, the incubation stage of the creative process, which Norlander and Gustafson (1996) suggest may be enhanced by alcohol consumption, takes place when one is *not* focusing on the creative act.) In discussing the specific case of Wyatt, I will draw on this suggestion that songwriting may benefit from a diffuse attentional state, and that certain phases of the creative process may benefit from alcohol while others do not. I will draw too on the notion that, as with the effect of alcohol on performance anxiety, any benefit that alcohol might have on creativity is not necessarily pharmacological. Lang et al (1984) found that creativity was not significantly affected by alcohol consumption, but that those individuals who *believed* they had received alcohol gave significantly more positive evaluations of their

creative performance – regardless of whether or not alcohol had actually been consumed. Our natural tendency, they suggest, may be to apply more lenient standards when evaluating our creativity after we believe we have been drinking; as with ‘externalising’ the reasons for a poor performance, there is perhaps less obligation to defend work created while intoxicated as indicative of our ‘true’ ability (399).

Performing and recording

In *Soft Machine*, Wyatt was a flamboyant performer who often dispensed with his shirt onstage. Yet he was and remains deeply anxious and prone to self-doubt – ‘a bundle of fear and worry’ (Wyatt and Bengel, 2010c). Aside from a general propensity towards anxiety, Wyatt had other traits that we might associate with performance anxiety. He was a perfectionist, known to burst into tears if a performance went badly (Bennett, 2005, 176). He was also prone to ‘catastrophising’ (Steptoe and Fidler, 1987): ‘I thought it would be a disaster, quite frankly,’ he says of his only high-profile solo concert, which took place at Drury Lane, London, in 1974. ‘I just thought, “I can’t do this, it’s going to be ridiculous. Just get it over with.”’ (Wyatt, 2009c)

As a band member, Wyatt performed regularly and with ebullience; as a solo artist, however, he has not performed a headline show since Drury Lane. His retirement from the stage only approximately coincided with his paraplegia: there were a few guest appearances, as well as that Drury Lane show and a small Mal Dean benefit performance at the ICA in 1974 (King, 1994). Certainly, logistical challenges related to his paraplegia were a factor in Wyatt’s retirement from the stage, coming to a head when performing in Italy with Henry Cow in 1975 (O’Dair, 2014, 225). Wyatt’s performance anxiety and his paraplegia may be linked: 1970’s *End of an Ear* album

notwithstanding, paraplegia signaled the 'true' start of Wyatt's solo career, and the shift from band member to solo artist placed him under considerable additional pressure. Wilson and Roland (2002) depict the relationship between performance anxiety and number of co-performers as a steeply declining curve. As far as it is possible to separate the two, however, Wyatt insists that it is performance anxiety, rather than paraplegia, that keeps him from the stage today:

'I see a line of people outside, and they've all combed their hair and bought tickets, and I've got to entertain them for that evening. I just feel so awful. I think: "I'm so sorry, I don't know if I can do it tonight." I just feel the responsibility is appalling.' (*Front Row*, 2010)

Wyatt's drinking may be understood in part as an attempt to overcome this anxiety. Wyatt certainly sees it in such terms: 'Getting on stage in front of 5,000 impatient Texans waiting for Hendrix to come on, you do need a drink,' he says of performing in America with Soft Machine in 1968. 'I don't know how else you'd get on stage.' (Wyatt, 2009b). Clearly, however, alcohol was not entirely successful in overcoming performance anxiety, in that Wyatt stopped performing long before he became teetotal. Back in Soft Machine, however, Wyatt took a key role in the band's lengthy improvisations – a tune that lasts on record four minutes might, in performance, have lasted up to an hour (O'Dair 2014, 74) – and contributed virtuoso drumming, often in compound time signatures, and wordless vocal improvisations (*ibid*, 124). Wyatt can be understood, then, as having been a highly *creative* performer, in that his singing and drumming was both novel/original and useful/adaptive (Feist 2010).^v Indeed, his work with Soft Machine and perhaps Matching Mole could be classified in Csikszentmihalyi's (1997/2013) terms as 'creativity with a capital C': changing an aspect of culture; Wyatt's creativity as a performer was certainly recognised and validated by both critics and fellow musicians.

Although it does not quite fit with the Wilson and Roland (2002) definition of the term as an exaggerated fear of performing *in public*, performance anxiety can also be understood to have affected Wyatt's behaviour in the studio. The same catastrophising and the same perfectionism are evident as a recording musician. As he explains:

'If a recording had collapsed, or I had a bit on a record that I couldn't change and didn't like, I just felt like I shouldn't have been born and then this would never have happened. I felt shame, utter shame.' (Wyatt and Bengel, 2010b)

Wyatt has dismissed his singing voice as 'Jimmy Somerville on valium' (Kopf, 2011), and a 'wino's mutter' (Cumming, 2003). Even longstanding collaborators such as John Greaves are not confident that requests for guest appearances will be accepted (O'Dair, 2014, 312). In his desperation to avoid entering the studio, meanwhile, Wyatt has been known to call on other musicians such as Carla Bley to fulfill his obligations (ibid, 239). Wyatt seems to have felt that alcohol helped him this lack of self-confidence in the studio, just as he felt it helped him onstage: even as late as *Comicoopera*, released in 2007, engineer Jamie Johnson recalls 'a bit of secret drinking, chucking stuff in tea'. Again, Johnson's impression is of drinking as a creative crutch: his sense was of Wyatt 'needing it to do the performance' (Johnson, 2013).

Even leaving aside its impact on his personal life, there was undoubtedly a downside to Wyatt's drinking to overcome performance anxiety, both onstage and in the studio. Brian Hopper – who for a period played saxophone with Soft Machine, and whose brother Hugh was for a significant period the band's bassist – recalls occasions on which Wyatt 'wasn't always performing up to his best' due to drink (Hopper, 2010). 'In

fact, he often was late getting on stage and this sort of thing. He just wasn't *there* all the time, properly.' (ibid) As stated above, even Wyatt admits that his drinking hastened his exit from Soft Machine. This is in line with the suggestion by Kenny (2011) that, due to its impairing effects in both the short and longer term, alcohol may *compound* difficulties in coping – and is therefore, ultimately, an 'unhelpful' strategy (54).

Solely in terms of reducing performance anxiety, however, the findings of Abrams et al (2001) and Himle et al (1999) support Wyatt's belief that alcohol was beneficial. From this perspective, whether or not this was a placebo effect is hardly relevant: as we have seen, the effect of alcohol on relieving performance anxiety is not necessarily pharmacological. Perhaps by allowing him to 'externalise' the reasons for a poor performance, alcohol can be seen to have relieved the acute pressure Wyatt felt as a performer and recording artist – in his own words, alcohol 'made you brave' (Wyatt, 2009b).

Alcohol-fuelled songwriting

As well as in performing and recording, Wyatt believes that alcohol was of assistance in writing songs – something that, by his own account, has never come easily:

I have acquaintances who have a visceral love of their craft and just can't wait to get stuck in every morning. I'm not one of those. I mean, I was as a drummer and I do a bit as a cornet player. But songwriting is such a strange activity and I find it a bit scary really, just inventing stuff out of nothing. I find it vertiginous and a bit scary... Whenever you start, it all seems just too fragile and flimsy. (Wyatt, 2008)

Songwriting seems never to have come easily to Wyatt: he has likened his creative gestation period to that of an elephant – 18 months rather than nine (no author, 2008). Rather than writing entire songs himself, he has often written lyrics to melodies by the likes of Hugh Hopper or, composed music to lyrics by Benge; his two most commercially successful singles, 'I'm A Believer' and 'Shipbuilding' are both covers. In recent years, he has written using a process he calls 'karaoke cornet': playing along to jazz records and developing his improvisations to a point at which he can 'let the undercarriage, the chassis, the chord sequence, go' (Wyatt, 2008).

To some extent, alcohol might have helped Wyatt to write for the same reasons it helped to overcome performance anxiety: a fear of mistakes can be debilitating (Bohm, 1996/2004, 5), certainly for a songwriter (Webb, 1998, 21). Alcohol, as Wyatt says, made him brave. As a songwriter, however, there might have been an additional reason to drink alcohol – not only to overcome nerves, but to enhance creativity.^{vi} By his own account, Wyatt's use of alcohol in an attempt to assist songwriting increased with age. A pivotal track in this regard was 'Blues in Bob Minor' from 1997's *Shleep*: this was the point, according to Wyatt, that he really began to view alcohol as a creative crutch:

Alfie was away for a weekend, and I spent the entire weekend – apart from, I suppose, a bit of breakfast – on brandy, in the backyard, in sunny weather, writing "Blues in Bob Minor". It was pouring out of me. And I suddenly thought: "In this state, I could do hundreds of blinding lyrics." Suddenly I'd found a tap to turn on. (Wyatt and Benge 2010b)

Although Wyatt has always been to an extent a cult artist, *Shleep* (1997) was in relative terms a commercial, as well as critical, success (Childs, 2010). The same

could be said of *Cuckooland* (2003), with its Mercury shortlisting, and *Comicoopera* (2007), which *Uncut* magazine suggested was the best record Wyatt had ever made (Lewis, 2007). Drinking to drown the inner critic might be implicated in this success, particularly for *Comicoopera*:

I got in a panic that I was burnt out. My brain was no longer an Oxford Circus of ideas, it was more a little country village of ideas – in other words, there were some, but they were fewer, and pottering about at a slower pace. Just getting older. But this distressed me, because I didn't want to start making out-to-pastures type records. I wanted to regain the mad innocence and enthusiasm of youth, which is what brought us into it. And I found that drinking helped me do that. (Wyatt, 2009a)

Ludwig (1990) suggests the most objective way to test the validity of the claim that alcohol facilitates inspiration is to determine how well writers, artists, actors and composers function once they have stopped drinking (962). In that regard, the fact that Wyatt has not released an album of original material since becoming teetotal^{vii} might be seen to support his conviction that alcohol helped him regain 'the mad innocence and enthusiasm of youth'. That appears to be what Wyatt himself believes:

'I just tried to write a tune the other day and I can't remember writing a tune sober ever before. I couldn't imagine normally even sitting down at a keyboard without the bottle of wine on the left hand side and the packet of fags on the right hand side, Fats Waller style.' (Mulvey, 2008/2015)

Correlation, of course, is not causation. But bearing in mind the placebo effect identified by Lang et al (1984), it seems possible that alcohol helped Wyatt write

simply because he *believed* it would do so – just as it may have done with recording and performing. It might also be that Wyatt falls within the 9% identified by Ludwig (1990) for whom alcohol is of direct benefit – or at least for whom alcohol is useful in removing ‘roadblocks’ such as depression, a recurring feature of Wyatt’s adult life. Certainly, the diffuse attentional state brought on by alcohol, identified by Sayette et al (2009) and Jarosz et al (2012), might be understood as promoting the divergent thinking Wyatt required to write music and lyrics.

Perhaps most useful in understanding Wyatt’s use of alcohol as a songwriting tool is the ‘hypothesis regarding the influences of alcohol on the creative process’ developed by Norlander and Gustafson (1994, 1995, 1997, 1998). This is the notion that alcohol obstructs certain stages of the creative process (preparation, certain parts of illumination, verification) while facilitating others (incubation, other parts of illumination, restitution).^{viii} The lyrics for ‘Blues in Bob Minor’, for instance, may have been composed while drunk yet they were edited in sobriety – crucial, according to Norlander and Gustafson’s hypothesis, for a stage (‘verification’) associated with primary processes. By the time of ‘Out of the Blue’, released on 2007’s *Comicopera*, a shift was evident. Similarly divergent thinking lay behind Wyatt’s composition (of the music only, this time: Benge wrote the lyrics). Indeed, it might be understood as one of Wyatt’s most avant-garde pieces, and he himself admits it was ‘extraordinary’:

I had this track, in fact I was working on it in the front room when [keyboard player] Steve Lodder was coming round... Anyway, he heard it, and he said, Robert’s doing something completely mad in there... But I knew it was really strong. (Wyatt and Benge, 2010b)

By this stage, however, Wyatt had moved from what might be termed alcohol misuse to alcohol dependence – and had lost the ability to edit and refine once sober. So

while alcohol might have facilitated the incubation stage and aspects of illumination stage, could be understood as obstructing the verification stage of the creative process. Benge, certainly, was alarmed to find herself suddenly responsible for quality control:

A lot of the time when Robert was drunk I think he wasn't doing things well enough. I was scared of him just being careless and just not thinking about the detail enough. By the skin of his teeth he scraped through it, but there were moments where I thought, "What is he doing? This isn't going to work, it's going to rebound on him, and then he's going to be *really* destroyed." So it was touch and go. (Wyatt and Benge, 2010a)

'Out of the Blue', Benge states, is the track about which she was most concerned, and some critics agreed; in an otherwise positive review of the album, a journalist from *The Guardian* suggested the track would empty a pub (Adams, 2007). In Feist's terms, we might regard the track as novel/original but not useful/adaptive. Yet the jarring notes of 'Out of the Blue' can also be understood as entirely appropriate for a song about the military bombing of a civilian home. And even now he has eschewed alcohol, Wyatt himself views the track as an artistic success:

Alfie was very suspicious of this [drinking while working on 'Out of the Blue'] because she thought that it must be all crap, because the only reason I thought it was good was because I was drunk. And I was certain she was wrong and I still am certain she was wrong. (Wyatt and Benge, 2010b)

Strictly in terms of the effect of alcohol on his creativity as a songwriter, then, the extent to which Wyatt needed to be sober for the verification stage of the creative process can be debated. There is clear evidence, however, that alcohol may have

helped during the incubation and illumination stages. Interestingly, Wyatt's drinking during the restitution phase, identified by Norlander and Gustafson as one that may be assisted by alcohol, seems in Wyatt's case to have been disastrous: he continued drinking after *Comicoopera* until he was served an ultimatum by Benge, at which point he agreed to attend AA.

Conclusion

Elements of this article, derived from an officially approved biography, may seem uncritical and anecdotal. As Tom Perchard (2007) notes, the historical biography is now viewed with suspicion by those who believe that the genre's literary emplotment and narrative demands can waylay the scholarly search for objective truth (119). Scholars, Perchard continues, have long shown 'disdain' towards the format (120). Yet one clear advantage of the interview methodology, applicable to authorised biographies of living subjects, is access. Although widely interviewed, Wyatt has never spoken about his drinking in such detail, and neither have the other figures I have cited. This research could not, then, have been carried out from existing articles; the comments about relapses and periods of heavy drinking, for instance, derive from those interviews. That said, I have not relied solely on any individual account, even that of Wyatt himself; as far as possible I have sought corroboration from other sources. The interview material, then, is treated critically rather than being understood, simply, as 'truth' (Perchard 2007 126).

I collected numerous accounts for the book, interviewing 75 people as well as conducting extensive archival research in the British Library and Wyatt's own cuttings archive. In this respect, my biography was unusual in not wholeheartedly adhering to the myth of the individual; instead, I aimed for the kind of 'polyphony' – that 'interplay

of voices, of positional utterances' – that James Clifford (1986) once called for in ethnography. Thomas Swiss (2005 290-1) points out as a 'particular feature of most rock autobiographies' the fact that they are written collaboratively – often listing the musician's name first on the title page, then adding a 'with'. Yet authorised biographies are not, or not always, synonymous with these ghosted autobiographies, not least because rock musicians often become autobiographers in order to make a profit (Swiss 2005, 288) whereas Wyatt did not profit financially from my book (although it may, of course, have increased record sales). Swiss suggests another reason for rock musicians to write autobiographies: 'to seize narrative authority' (288). Arguably this is more relevant to *Different Every Time*, my authorised biography, in that Wyatt did express some interest, in the early stages, in setting the record straight regarding his schooling (not, he says, as happy as is sometimes claimed) and his parents (who were not, he insists, as bohemian as is sometimes reported). Yet Wyatt also stated on more than one occasion that it was 'my' book, rather than his – at our very first interview, conducted for *The Independent* newspaper before I had conceived of a biography, Wyatt spoke of the importance of free speech to someone who 'still gets called a Stalinist' (Wyatt 2008) – and there are parts of the book with which he is uncomfortable^{ix}. This suggests that I have, at least, avoided hagiography.

Perchard^x (2007, 135-5) states that the eventual textualisation of history or biography gives its writer ultimate control, although he notes that the balance of power may be very different during the course of the research itself. For an authorised biography, the balance of power might be different for the eventual textualisation as well, although I was not aware of censorship from Wyatt or Bengé. They spoke openly of Wyatt's alcoholism, as well as his suicide attempts and points of tension within their relationship; regarding the 1973 accident that left him paraplegic, Wyatt simply says he was too drunk to remember the precise

circumstances, and whether or not this is an evasion is impossible to say. That said, an author does not embark on a biography without some interest in the subject; 'even biographers that resist the notion that the story they are telling has anything to do with them, and who put themselves in the narrative as little as possible, have to admit that their choice of subject has been made for a reason, and that there is no such thing as an entirely objective treatment' (Lee 2009 12). An element of self-censorship, then, cannot be discounted.

That Wyatt's drinking appears to have been detrimental in some respects should not be ignored. Alcohol was at least partially responsible for his accident in 1973 (Wyatt, 2009b) and he admits that, once paraplegic, drinking 'played havoc with my condition' (Wyatt and Bengé, 2010b). I have already noted that alcohol affected Wyatt's relationships with other musicians and, according to Brian Hopper, his professionalism. And, as Wyatt acknowledges, drinking nearly cost him his marriage. Whereas, at one stage, Wyatt seemed able to draw on alcohol only when he needed to, he lost that ability as he moved further into alcohol dependence. This, ultimately, made the drinking unsustainable.

It is important to acknowledge that a purported belief in the power of alcohol to enhance his creativity might simply have been an excuse for Wyatt's drinking. We might note that Wyatt was already at increased risk of alcohol problems, given that alcoholism has a substantial heritability (Enoch and Goldman, 2001; Enoch, 2013), and both Anderton (2011) and Bengé (2011) speak of alcohol problems on his mother's side of the family. According to Raeburn (1987a and b), Wyatt's choice of profession also put him at increased risk: rock musicians, she suggests, use alcohol as a means of coping with occupational stresses such as financial uncertainty and the lifestyle demands associated with touring.

Although it is not possible to prove whether or not alcohol made Wyatt more creative, however, there is evidence in the literature to support Wyatt's belief that alcohol helped him to overcome performance anxiety and to enhance at least some stages of creativity. That these benefits might to some extent have been placebo effects is not to undermine alcohol's effectiveness in particular respects.

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ⁱ Perhaps significantly, Wyatt co-wrote the song with Benge, and its composition coincided with his period of heaviest drinking (Wyatt and Benge, 2010a).

ⁱⁱ Csikszentmihalyi defines creativity as 'a process by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changed' – and 'new songs' is one of the examples he provides (7).

ⁱⁱⁱ To take only three examples, Paul Simon (Zollo, 2003, 97-8), Neil Young (ibid, 354) and David Crosby (ibid, 373).

^{iv} The reason for the ambiguity with regard to the illumination stage is that the alcohol group in that experiment scored lower on flexibility compared to the placebo group but higher on originality (Norlander and Gustafson, 1998, 265). The illumination phase, Norlander and Gustafson suggest, features both primary and secondary process activity.

^v The same could be said of Wyatt's more recent, very rare, guest appearances; whistling with Charlie Haden, for instance, at London's Royal Festival Hall in 2009.

^{vi} This is not to imply that performance itself is not creative; indeed, the strong element of jazz and improvisation in *Soft Machine*, in particular around the albums *Third* (1970) and *Fourth* (1971), arguably made these performances more creative than most. Wyatt's recordings, similarly, display a creativity that is distinct from the writing process – not least in his numerous cover versions.

^{vii} *For the Ghosts Within*, released in 2010, was a trio record, recorded with Gilad Atzmon and Ros Stephen and credited to all three musicians; it featured no writing contribution from Wyatt himself.

^{viii} True, Norlander and Gustafson only investigated the effect of *moderate* amounts of alcohol on this stage. Yet both Bengé and Wyatt agree that, even around *Comicoopera*, Wyatt was not consuming particularly large quantities of alcohol. 'It affects him so fast. It's the first drink... He's drunk from the first teaspoon almost. The first glass, certainly.' (Benge 2011)

^{ix} At one launch event (Wyatt and O'Dair, 2014a) Wyatt agreed that having such a biography written was 'unnerving' experience, with 'an element of being on trial'; at another (Wyatt and O'Dair, 2014b) he stated: 'It's not a book I would have written'

^x Perchard's specific focus is jazz but his arguments certainly hold true for popular music biography (and Wyatt has, in any case, always been heavily indebted to jazz).