

**Exploring Songwriting as an Expression of Grief on Cape Breton Island:
A Qualitative Interview Study**

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ABSTRACT

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Located in Nova Scotia, Canada, Cape Breton Island has a rich and diverse musical history, which includes a well known tradition of using songwriting as a mourning practice. In the cultural mosaic of Canada, individuals seeking music therapy bring unique and diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences. Exploring these inherent cultural practices can offer models for integrating songwriting into the bereavement music therapy session while also informing music therapy training programs and future research. Grounded in a social constructivist epistemology (Hillier, 2016) and using qualitative semi-structured interviews, this study explored the use of songwriting as an expression of grief for three Cape Breton Island songwriters. Utilizing inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), three themes emerged from the data. The first theme, transformative grief journey, reflects how participants experienced personal growth while moving through a unique journey through their grief. Songwriting helped them process a range of emotional responses, provided a safe outlet for difficult feelings, and supported their ability to move forward. The second theme, cultivating connection, highlights how songwriting reduced feelings of isolation and helped participants feel connected to others through sharing their music. The third theme, intrinsic practice, describes how participants trusted the songwriting process and emphasized its cultural importance as an inherent and meaningful way to express grief.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Researcher's Relationship to the Topic

For nearly two decades, my work as a certified music therapist has been almost entirely focused on working in end of life and grief and bereavement care. Through both my professional work and personal experiences, I have witnessed firsthand the deep sorrow of grief and the strength and resilience of those it touches. Supporting grieving families and individuals across Canada, songwriting often becomes a central focus of my work. Each time I support someone through writing a song as part of their grieving process, I am reminded of the transformative potential this practice holds.

I was born on Cape Breton Island, (part of Nova Scotia, Canada) where there is a vibrant musical tradition (Melin, 2016). In my family, as in many others on the island, music was a shared experience that brought people together and strengthened relationships. As I traveled with my work, I began to notice, anecdotally, differences in how various communities engaged in music-making. Across the country, I observed many music therapy participants who were at first hesitant to explore songwriting as an expression of grief. However, upon my return home to Cape Breton after many years, I noted, again anecdotally, that participants in music therapy sessions seemed more eager to engage in music therapy generally, and particularly in songwriting.

After observing these differences, I became increasingly curious about our human relationship to music and the creation of songs to express emotion, especially grief. I began to wonder about the culture of songwriting on the island and its place in the grieving process. As I reacquaint myself with this culture I left so long ago, I am eager to explore the practice of songwriting as a way for individuals to express grief in this unique part of the world, where it seems to come so naturally.

Significance and Need

Though each person's path through it is unique, grief is a universal experience that transcends cultural, geographical, and personal boundaries. It can touch every aspect of our lives and can be a deeply emotional journey that shapes how we connect, remember, and find meaning in loss. Most individuals will experience grief at some point in their lives. It is inevitable that if one lives long enough, they will experience the death of a family member, friend, colleague, or acquaintance. After a death, those left to grieve experience a period of bereavement or mourning

which involves coming to terms with the death and making sense of this new world after the loss (Attig, 2011). For some, moving through this process may come naturally with support from family and community. For others, this journey through postloss bereavement may require a more active approach. Worden (2009) outlines four tasks of mourning that include accepting the reality of the loss, working through the pain of grief, adjusting to the environment without the deceased, and emotionally relocating the deceased and moving on with life. These tasks do not occur in any specific order and those who are bereaved may go back and forth among them as they gradually adapt to their loss.

Creating and exploring stories about the deceased can help us adapt to life in their absence by fostering new relationships with them after their death (Hedtke, 2003). Across cultures and throughout history, humans have turned to songwriting as a powerful way to tell these stories, expressing their sorrow and honouring their connection through song (Baker, 2015; Baker & Wigram, 2005).

This transformation of story and grief into song is not a rarity on Cape Breton Island, where there is a rich musical history (Caplan, 1989; Frank, 1986; MacPherson et al., 2021). The island, first inhabited by the Mi'kmaq people before colonization, became home to diverse waves of newcomers, shaping the unique cultural mosaic it is today. All over the island you may find various communities with vibrant cultural and musical traditions, including but not limited to, Mi'kmaq, Acadian, Scottish, Irish, English, Caribbean, African-Canadian, Polish, Croatian, Ukrainian, and Italian (MacKinnon & Parnaby, 2024; Ostaszewski et al., 2018).

Gaelic culture, both Scottish and Irish, is prominent on the island today and well documented, including the use of songwriting as an expression of grief (MacPherson et al., 2021; Melin, 2016). The Gaelic lament, a passionate expression of grief or sorrow in poem or song, was once 'integral to the experience of grief among Gaels and a staple part of the narrative themes in Gaelic oral poetic tradition' (MacPherson et al., 2021, p. 22). The use of song as a central role in their oral memorial culture stayed with the Gaelic people when they left Scotland and Ireland for the new world, and landed on Cape Breton Island (MacPherson, et al., 2021). Outside of the Gaelic language, other instances of using music to grieve and honour the deceased can be found on Cape Breton Island. Caplan (1989) documented the use and function of narrative obituary verses in north Cape Breton from 1894-1902. Some of these verses, written to commemorate the lives of deceased community members, were turned into song and were

treasured musical artifacts in the community for generations (Caplan, 2018). Songs have also been written after disasters to aid in the grieving process of communities (Scanlon et al., 2012). Frank (1986) discusses the role of song in commemorating tragedies, especially in mining disasters. On occasion, these songs were published to ‘raise funds for the miner’s families’ (Frank, 1986, p. 26). In this way, songs written as an expression of grief supported communities as they grieved the loss of friends and family and coped with the aftermath of a devastating local disaster.

Songwriting has been utilized as a means of support for grieving individuals across the lifespan in both community and therapeutic contexts over decades (Dalton & Krout, 2005; Fiore, 2016; Krout, 2011; Young & Pringle, 2018). Studying the lyrics of grieving music therapy participants, themes of Worden’s four tasks of mourning can be found, demonstrating its ability to support individuals through their grieving journeys (Baker, 2015). In music therapy sessions, songwriting has been found to be helpful in supporting participants to express their grief with others (Young & Pringle, 2018). Songwriting in a group setting also has the potential to facilitate meaningful shared experiences (Ruud, 1997). Although songwriting is well documented as a way to support grieving children and youth, its use with adults receiving music therapy has received less attention.

As a music therapist working with grieving adults, I am curious about the experiences of those who turn to songwriting to express and share their grief within their communities. Understanding how songwriting facilitates the grieving process could offer valuable insights for music therapists working with bereaved clients. This knowledge could help inform music therapy training programs, guiding music therapists in supporting grieving clients through songwriting. By closely examining this practice in one specific region, we can better understand how it has supported individuals and communities and apply these insights to music therapy practice.

Purpose Statement

This study aimed to explore how three individuals who identify as Cape Breton songwriters have used songwriting to explore and express grief after the loss of a loved one.

Research Questions

The primary research question explored through this study was: How do three Cape Breton songwriters describe their experience of using songwriting to express grief? The

subsidiary research questions were: (a) How do these songwriters describe why they chose songwriting as an expression of grief? (b) How do these songwriters describe the role of Cape Breton music traditions in their songwriting practice? (c) How might these findings inform the use of songwriting as an expression of grief in music therapy contexts?

Definition of Key Terms

Cape Breton Island is located in Nova Scotia, which is one of the four Atlantic Provinces on the east coast of Canada. It is the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq people who named the island Unama'ki, or 'Land of Fog'.

Cape Breton Songwriters are individuals who reside in, or are originally from, Cape Breton Island and who play and practice songwriting for pleasure and/or professionally.

Grief is the normal, emotional reaction humans have to loss, and in this specific context, the death of a significant person (Cholbi, 2021).

Music Therapy is a "discipline in which Certified Music Therapists use music purposefully within therapeutic relationships to support development, health, and well-being. Music therapists use music safely and ethically to address human needs within cognitive, communicative, emotional, musical, physical, social, and spiritual domains." (Canadian Association of Music Therapists, 2020)

Songwriting is the practice of composing a piece of music. For the purpose of this study, only songs that were written with lyrics will be included. Music therapists use songwriting therapeutically as an effective tool for meeting the client's psychological, emotional, social, physical, spiritual, or communication needs (Baker & Wigram, 2005).

Summary of Chapters

This chapter detailed the practice of using songwriting to express grief both in the music therapy session and on Cape Breton Island. It identifies the purpose of the study, research questions, and defines key terms. In chapter 2, the literature review will detail grief and loss, grief theory, the practice of telling story through song, songwriting practices on Cape Breton Island, the use of music therapy to support grieving individuals, songwriting in music therapy practice, and finally the use of songwriting in the bereavement music therapy session. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology, including the design, delimitations, description of the participants, materials, data collection and analysis procedures, as well as ethical considerations. Chapter 4 contains the results of the research, which addresses the primary research question and

the first two subsidiary research questions. Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the findings and addresses the final research question regarding the clinical, educational, and research implications.

Chapter 2. Review of Related Literature

This chapter explicates the literature that describes normal human responses to loss, grief theory, the practice of storytelling through song, as well as music therapy and therapeutic songwriting to support individuals who are grieving. While people experience grief after many types of loss (the loss of a pet, home, career, or relationship), this thesis will primarily focus on the grief experienced following the death of a close person or loved one. This may involve a family member, friend, or chosen family. Current theories on grief and methods for supporting grieving individuals are then outlined, with a focus on the role of storytelling and narrative grief therapy. The ancient practice of telling stories through song is then considered. The focus then narrows to one area of the world, Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, Canada, and the use of songwriting as an expression of grief. Finally, music therapy and the use of songwriting to support grief and bereavement processes within the music therapy setting is explored.

Grief and Loss

Grief is a universal human phenomenon (Buket & Kadriye, 2019). It is a normal emotional and physical response human have to loss, and in this specific context, the death of a close individual or family member (Cholbi, 2021). Nearly every individual will experience grief and loss at some point in their lives. The most intense grief one can experience is often felt as the result of the death of a family member, close friend, or loved one (Buket & Kadriye, 2019).

Although the terms grief, bereavement, and mourning are often used interchangeably to describe our responses to the death of a significant individual, they each hold unique meanings that differ in subtle yet important ways. Grief, and the act of grieving, describes the wide range of emotional, physical, and psychological responses that accompany the period following a loss. These personal responses are unique to each person who experiences them (Cholbi, 2023). Emotional responses can include, but are not limited to: deep pervasive sadness, anger, guilt, relief, shock, numbness, anxiety, anguish, social isolation, and fear (Lindemann, 1979; Worden, 2009). Physical responses are also common and can consist of difficulty sleeping, fatigue, breathlessness, tightness in the chest, and muscle weakness (Worden, 2009). It is common for these emotions and sensations to manifest in what many describe as waves that wax and wane in intensity (Cholbi, 2021; Lindemann, 1979; Worden, 2009).

Bereavement refers to the experience of losing a significant person and, specifically, to the period following a death (De Stefano et al., 2021; Zisook & Shear, 2009). When someone

loses a person they are close to, the period that follows is known as bereavement and they may experience varying grief responses. Its duration varies for each person and they are often described as being bereaved.

Mourning describes a number of culture-centred rituals surrounding grief and loss. This may consist of visitations, funerals, and other customs that are influenced by society and culture, and is often a more public expression of grief (Cholbi, 2023; De Stefano et al., 2021; Zisook & Shear, 2009). Not all who mourn are grieving, for example, those who attend funeral services to support those who are grieving. This can also be seen in the tradition of hiring professional mourners in some cultures (Cholbi, 2023).

Anticipatory grief is the emotional response experienced by a patient or their family members before an expected death. It involves many of the same emotional and physical reactions as grief that occurs after a loss (Bui, 2018).

The intense grief experienced directly following the loss of an important individual in one's life is referred to as acute grief (Bui, 2018). Over time and with support, the bereaved individual learns strategies to help them adapt to their loss and, eventually, reduce any accompanying physical and emotional symptoms (Shives, 2012). In this way, the grieving individual is able to integrate this new experience of grief into their lives. The acute phase of the grieving process evolves into what is known as integrated grief (Bui, 2018). Grieving individuals often describe this process as one that entails learning to live with grief as opposed to something from which you move on. The loss becomes integrated into the self, thoughts, and memories (Zisook & Shear, 2009).

Grief is a natural, normal response to loss and most often, grieving individuals do not require therapeutic intervention (Buket & Kadriye, 2019; De Stefano et al., 2021). However, in recent years, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V has identified prolonged, debilitating, persistent grief as a condition in need of further study and critique. This intense form of grief that interferes with the bereaved individual's daily life is currently referred to as Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder (PCBD) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Bui, 2018). This affects approximately 7-14% of individuals who are grieving and is characterized by severe and enduring grief symptoms following a loss (Smith et al., 2022). The 11th edition of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problem similarly introduced Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) (De Stefano et al., 2021). Factors

that often affect one's response to grief include proximity of one's relationship to the individual who died (e.g. parent, child, or spouse), the cause of death (e.g. sudden, traumatic death), and the support the grieving person receives (Buket & Kadriye, 2019). It is thought that failure to integrate grief can lead to PCBD (Smith et al., 2022). There has been debate on the addition of complicated grief to diagnostic manuals and concern there may be potential for overdiagnosis and pathologization of normal grief response (Stroebe et al., 2017). Although many bereaved individuals may experience severe grief responses in the immediate aftermath of a significant loss, most will eventually learn to adapt. For the vast majority of bereaved individuals experiencing a normal grief process, professional therapeutic support is not required, although they may reach out for professional support at this time.

Grief Theory

Grief theory has evolved over time. In 1969, Kübler-Ross (1969) wrote the well known book, *On Death and Dying*. In it, she outlined five distinct stages a dying person experiences: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Many years later, Kübler-Ross began to apply these stages more broadly to the grieving process in the book *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005).

Similar to Kübler-Ross, Rando (1984, 1993, 2000) theorized the grief process by dividing it into phases: avoidance, confrontation, and accommodation. This model describes 6 distinct processes known as the '6 R's of Mourning'. In the avoidance phase, individuals must first recognize their loss in order to fully acknowledge and begin to understand its impact. The confrontation phase involves reacting to the separation, recollecting and re-experiencing the deceased in the relationship, and relinquishing old attachments. In the accommodation phase, the bereaved readjust to life in a way that allows them to move forward without forgetting their past relationship. Finally, the bereaved begin to reinvest emotional energy from the prior relationship into new connections.

After years of research and exploration, it is now understood that one may experience the emotions of Kübler-Ross' model and engage in the process that Rando outlined while they are grieving, but the process is much more fluid and unique to each individual (Worden, 2009). Grieving individuals may move from one emotional state to another, then back again, in the span of days or hours, or not at all.

Recent models of grief emphasize the importance of meaning in the grieving process (Neimeyer et al., 2002; Neimeyer, 2011). Neimeyer (2011) highlights the role of meaning-making in adapting to life after loss, suggesting that interventions supporting meaning reconstruction can help those struggling with their grief. As grief is shaped by both individual and collective processes, societal rituals and cultural practices can help to integrate loss. Neimeyer argues that complicated grief arises when the bereaved struggle to reconstruct a meaningful reality after the loss. It is important to note that grief can also foster personal growth alongside sorrow.

Worden (2009) explained the grieving process in terms of the tasks one must complete. He refers to these as the tasks of mourning, which include accepting the reality of the loss, working through the pain of grief, adjusting to the environment without the deceased, and emotionally relocating the deceased and moving on with life (Worden, 2009).

Storytelling is an intrinsic way we can make sense of our lives without our loved ones after a death. By weaving the deceased into present realities, narratives help create new relationships with them after loss (Hedtke, 2003, 2017). This process allows grieving individuals to ‘honour and keep alive’ these bonds in ways that are ‘sustaining and hopeful’ (Hedtke, 2003, p. 58). Stories enable the deceased to be present - even for those who never knew them, such as children who lost parents at a young age. Through storytelling, we maintain relationships with the deceased, introduce them to new people, and foster connections between the listener and the deceased. Since ‘the listener is more than a mere passive receiver... he (or she) is changed’ by the stories about the deceased (Myeroff, 1980, p. 27).

Storytelling through Song

Stories connect us to our identity and our belonging. They emerge from connections with the world around us and are shared through our relationships. The stories we tell ‘braid the past, present and future generations together’ (Kovach, 2009, p. 158).

Since ancient times, humans have used song as a medium for storytelling and emotional expression, including the articulation of grief (Baker, 2015; Baker & Wigram, 2005). As a ‘musical species’ (Sacks, 2008, p. xi), nearly every hearing person has the capacity to perceive music, which engages various parts of the brain (Sacks, 2008). Music-making is a fundamental human activity, as innate to us as drawing and painting (Storr, 1993).

Across cultures and throughout history, music has served as a powerful medium for storytelling. In ancient Greece, music and poetry were intertwined, with stories often recited alongside musical accompaniment (Lang, 1969; Storr, 1993). Similarly, during medieval times in Europe, melody and poetry merged to not only tell stories, but also to create ‘soothing balms’ for those suffering (Falvy et al. 1986). These traditions reflect a timeless truth: music not only shares stories but offers comfort and connection in the face of loss.

Songwriting on Cape Breton Island

Cape Breton is an island located in the eastern Canadian province of Nova Scotia. It is roughly 10,300 square kilometers and has a population of approximately 94,000 (Statistics Canada, 2021). This island has been inhabited since time immemorial by the Mi’kmaq people who named it Unama’ki (pronounced ‘Ooh-nah-mah-key’) or ‘land of fog’. Post-colonization, Cape Breton saw the arrival of immigrants, predominantly from France, Ireland, and Scotland (MacKinnon, 2009).

Due to its insular geography, the population remained isolated, allowing languages and cultures to be preserved over time (Laoire & Shaw, 2001). For instance, many of the 25000 immigrants from Scotland who arrived between the years of 1775 and 1850 were able to maintain their Gaelic language and traditional culture for many generations (MacKinnon, 2009). Gaelic culture, both Scottish and Irish, is prominent on the island today (Melin, 2016). This blend of isolation and cultural exchange gave rise to Cape Breton's distinctive cultural traditions, now recognized globally (MacKinnon, 2009).

Songwriting is a valued form of cultural expression on Cape Breton island, and it was not uncommon less than a century ago for communities to have a local bard whose role was to craft poems and songs (Caplin, 2018; MacKenzie & MacNeil, 2012). Bards are local poets and music composers who, through their oral tradition, document important community histories with poems and songs (Dembling, 1998; MacKinnon & Parnaby, 2024). The songs they crafted were created for diverse purposes: to document victories and histories, to preserve family lineages and share stories, and to honour loved ones and community members (Caplan, 1989; Caplan, 2018; Dembling, 1998; Frank, 1986). The craft of song creation was prestigious, and bards were often held in high esteem (MacKinnon & Parnaby, 2024). Music and songs were an important part of day to day life. A visit with neighbors, for example, would often involve the sharing of songs (Caplan, 2018). In Gaelic folk tradition, music and song often accompanied the worker

throughout the day as they worked the land and created what they needed to survive (Dembling, 1998; MacKinnon & Parnaby, 2024) .

With industrialization, the songwriting tradition evolved with the communities. Areas that were once rural transitioned to booming mining communities in the 20th century. Untrained singers would often sing a cappella as they travelled underground to their worksites (MacKinnon, 2008). As workers began to fight against unjust labour practices, protest songs were created (Frank, 1989; MacKinnon, 2009). People on Cape Breton Island have long used songs to commemorate tragedies, particularly mining disasters. On occasion, individuals or organizations published these songs to raise funds for miners' families (Frank, 1986).

The creation of songs has also been utilized in the expression of grief on Cape Breton Island. This is reflected in the centuries old tradition of the Gaelic lament, a passionate expression of grief or sorrow. Originating in Scotland, these song-poems would often describe the individual who died, the nature of the death, as well as its emotional impact. Some laments reflect the Gaelic view of death as a transition, where the person's spirit remains part of the cosmos (MacPherson, et al., 2021).

In some communities, a local bard would commemorate the lives of deceased community members with the creation of narrative obituary verses, often set to music (Caplan, 1989; 2018). The narrative obituary verses of northern Cape Breton from 1894-1902 were documented decades after their creation through interviews with community members who kept the oral tradition alive long after the songwriters had died (Caplan, 1989; 2018). Andrew Dunphy, a local bard in northern Cape Breton during this time period, travelled from community to community, sharing news, poetry, and songs. A sort of hospice volunteer, he often offered to sit vigil with community members when they were gravely ill. When asked, he wrote narrative obituary verses. These were written in remembrance of an average person as a response to an untimely death and provided comfort and peace for the community. Community members memorized and shared the often lengthy verses. These songs and songwriters were cherished by community members and in some cases, the lyrics were kept in family bibles for generations.

Stories, songs and dances of the Mi'kmaq people of Unama'ki (Cape Breton Island) have similarly been passed down from generation to generation for millennia (Smith, 2019). The arrival of Europeans to the shores of the island in the 17th century brought conflict and turmoil which ultimately led to cultural erasure that included traditional songs (Vowel, 2016). Due to the

Canadian federal government's traumatic centralization program and residential schools, the Mi'kmaq people experienced a devastating loss of culture, language, and song. One song in particular that was lost was the honour song. During a four day fast while sitting with the grief that resulted from this loss, the 'spirits responded to his grief' and Elder George Paul received the 'Mi'kmaq Honour Song' which is still sung today (Smith, 2019).

Rita Joe, a Mi'kmaq elder and poet born from Unama'ki, turned to writing as a therapeutic tool while grieving the loss of her culture and language in the residential school system (Clark, 2024). Much of her poetry speaks of the reclamation of language, traditions and culture that was stolen from the Mi'kmaq people. Her words both express difficult emotional processes surrounding this loss and offer hope for healing. In 2017, through a collaboration with Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra, music was added to her poem, *I Lost My Talk*. It was released as part of a collaborative album showcasing Canadian women.

Cape Breton Island's tradition of using music to express grief and honour the deceased is rooted in its cultural mosaic. This practice reflects the broader therapeutic potential of songwriting. The following section will explore the clinical use of music and songwriting to support individuals who are grieving.

Music Therapy and Grief

In grief and bereavement care, music therapists leverage music's ability to create a supportive environment for navigating difficult emotions, enabling participants to safely experience, express, and process their feelings (Ruud, 2007). Goals of music therapy in grief and bereavement care may include validation, expression and processing of emotions related to grief adaptation and transition as well as developing resources and coping mechanisms (Clements-Cortes & Klinck, 2016; Kinck, 2013). Bereavement music therapy sessions may include: clinical improvisation, relaxation and mindfulness techniques, Guided Imagery and Music, music listening, lyric analysis, singing, and songwriting (Clements-Cortes & Klinck, 2016; Young & Pringle, 2018). Support for those who are grieving may be facilitated as either individual sessions or in a group setting. Music therapy grief choirs provide important opportunities for grieving individuals to connect with others who are grieving. Benefits include sharing their experiences with grief, shaping new identities and finding new meaning, accessing inner resources, as well as honouring and maintaining connections with the loved ones they are remembering (DiMaio, 2017; Fancourt et al., 2022; Young & Pringle, 2018).

DiMaio (2017) investigated how participation in a grief choir compared to a verbal grief group in affecting bereaved individuals' perceived grief, coping, energy, social support, and overall health. This mixed-methods study incorporated qualitative phenomenological focus groups to help interpret and contextualize the findings of the Randomized Control Trial (RCT). Findings suggest that the grief choir was as effective as the verbal grief group in shaping participants' experience of grief, highlighting the potential of music therapy groups to support the bereaved.

Fancourt et al., (2022) explored the effects of group singing on mental health among bereaved individuals. Using a non-randomised controlled design, 58 adults either participated in weekly 90 minute group singing and social sessions or were placed in the non-intervention control group. Changes over time in symptoms of anxiety, depression, well-being, self-efficacy, and self-esteem were studied. Interestingly, participants in the choir showed more consistent depression levels and well-being, along with gradual improvements in self-esteem and self-efficacy over the 24 weeks of the study. Meanwhile, those in the control group experienced an increase in depressive symptoms, a decline in well-being and self-esteem, and no progress in self-efficacy. The findings suggest that singing in a group could be an effective way for grieving individuals to feel supported and improve their mental health.

Gillespie et al. (2024) systematically reviewed and analyzed research on music therapy for informal caregivers of individuals with life-threatening illnesses, both before and after the death. It examined the characteristics, effectiveness, and experiences of music therapy interventions aimed at improving caregivers' health-related outcomes. Reviewing 34 studies from 2003 to 2022, findings showed mixed results. While some studies reported improvements in quality of life and mental well-being, others showed no significant effects. However, qualitative data suggested that music therapy positively influenced emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being for caregivers. The authors noted that supporting caregivers through both anticipatory and postloss grief requires a tailored approach.

Songwriting in the Music Therapy Session

Songwriting is one method music therapists use within the therapeutic relationship to address a wide range of goals (Baker, 2017). Bearing witness to and assisting with the creation of a song is, at its core, a humanistic practice. The music therapist, with their support and

experience, provides a space of unconditional positive regard for the music therapy participant to freely write lyrics and create music (Baker, 2015).

An increasing body of literature has pointed to songwriting as an effective mode of support that encompasses diverse approaches and methods (Baker, 2015). Songwriting can be an effective method for meeting the client's psychological, emotional, social, physical, spiritual, or communication needs (Baker & Wigram, 2005). It has been used effectively in a variety of settings, including with adolescents on inpatient mental health units (Johnson & Heiderscheit, 2018), adults on a detoxification unit (Silverman, 2022), and adults with depression (Bent, 2023). In the music therapy session, both individually and in group therapy, songwriting provides a sense of structure where, along with the music therapist and the music, creates conditions where the participant feels comfortable and safe so they can reflect on the past, present, and future (Baker, 2005).

As part of the music therapy session, songwriting often includes the creation of song lyrics (Baker, 2015). These lyrics are accompanied by either precomposed music or music that is created in the therapeutic setting. Some methods used include improvisation, creating original music, and word substitution using precomposed music (Roberts, 2006).

An important part of a songwriter's therapeutic journey may include the opportunity to share their song with others. This can be a powerful part of the process, sometimes even more transformative than the original act of songwriting (Baker, 2015). In group settings, performing songs together can 'create feelings of intimacy, mutual respect, and group cohesion' (Baker, 2015, p. 82). There are also opportunities for the participant to record a song written in the music therapy session so that they may share their music on their own terms. This process may include the creation of a physical artefact, for example an album cover or music video.

Songwriting and Grief

Within the music therapy setting, songwriting has been utilized to support the grieving process, both individually and in group therapy sessions (Fiore, 2016; Roberts & McFerran, 2013). In music therapy group sessions, collaborative songwriting or songwriting with others in a group, has the potential to foster meaningful shared experiences, helping participants feel less isolated in their grief (Ruud, 2007).

The utilization of songwriting for supporting grieving children and youth is well documented in the literature (Dalton & Krout, 2005; Fiore, 2016; Krout, 2011). Songwriting

provides a structured yet creative way for young people to articulate and process their emotions, offering validation, clarification, normalization, and a means of emotional release (Dalton & Krout, 2005). Through storytelling in song, children and youth can make sense of difficult events and recognize common themes that help integrate their experiences. This, in turn, helps clients regain a sense of control after an unpredictable life event (Roberts, 2006). Heath and Lings (2012) describe this process as one that draws on an art form that is both ancient and contemporary, bridging traditional modes of expression with modern therapeutic practices.

In an effort to better understand how songwriting supports grief processing, Dalton and Krout (2005) conducted a descriptive analysis of 123 songs written by grieving youth in music therapy sessions over a 36-month period. They discerned five distinct themes within the lyrics: understanding, feeling, remembering, integrating, and growing. This research contributed to the development of a music therapy-driven grief assessment scale, offering a structured way to do the essential work of identifying where young people are in their grief journeys.

Building on this work, Myers-Coffman, Baker, and Bradt (2019) developed the Resilience Songwriting Program, a structured, theory-driven intervention that is intended to support grieving teenagers to build resilience. The program integrates evidence-based cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) strategies within an eight-session format, each lasting 90 minutes. Facilitated by a certified music therapist, participants collaboratively create and record two original songs, utilizing flexible songwriting methods depending on client needs, culminating in a final session where they share their compositions with the group. This process fosters emotional expression while also providing a sense of agency and community among grieving youth. Findings suggest that this Resilience Songwriting Program can be a powerful tool in helping youth develop healthy coping strategies for grief.

The expression of grief supports well-being and provides meaningful benefits (Roberts & McFerran, 2013). Providing children with opportunities to express grief can help them cope with a significant loss. Using songwriting as a means to support grieving children, Roberts and McFerran (2013) examined the lyrics of the songs the children had written to determine if they did use the opportunity to express their grief. During individual music therapy sessions, 14 children aged 7-12 wrote 49 songs. The children wrote about their lives, experiences, and relationships. They sometimes addressed loss, but also explored other aspects of their world. The findings showed that the children's songwriting reflected their perceptions and interpretations of

the world, shaped by their developmental stage and abilities. Songwriting can be an effective way for children to express their emotions, even if the children are not writing specifically about their grief.

While much of the literature focuses on therapeutic songwriting for children and adolescents, there is growing interest in its application for adults. Songwriting has been widely recognized as a valuable tool for individuals in palliative and hospice care, particularly in the creation of legacy projects that allow patients to reflect on their lives and leave behind meaningful messages for loved ones (Baker, 2015; Gillespie et al., 2024; Heath & Lings, 2012). However, research on the use of songwriting specifically for bereaved adults remains limited.

Young and Pringle (2018) studied the lived experiences of singing in a community hospice bereavement music therapy group. When clinically indicated, songwriting was utilized to support the group members through their grieving processes. Seven female adults shared their insights of their experiences through individual interviews and written feedback. Data was analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis and suggests that for some participants, songwriting offered a means to express grief and connect with other group members in a meaningful way. However, other members of the group did not want to compose their own songs as they perceived this process to be emotionally overwhelming. These individuals were still able to find meaning in the songs that their fellow group members composed. All seven participants indicated they felt they benefited from the music therapy program.

One quantitative, quasi-experimental research project explored 30 adult participants' perception of their grieving process both before and after a reflective songwriting program intervention to better understand how songwriting influenced their perception of their grief. The results suggest that the reflective songwriting program may enhance the bereaved participants' self-perceptions of optimism, self-confidence, positive relationships, and overall well-being (Figuerola, 2023).

Finally, songwriting was explored as a way to support grieving adults in a music therapy group for Mexican migrant farmworkers following a serious van accident that resulted in the deaths of two coworkers (Schwantes et al., 2011). Working within a culture-centered approach, the music therapy group utilized a traditional Mexican song style to tell the stories of their lost friends. Through this, the participants became closer as a group and felt connected to those who had died. The group produced a recording of the song that was given to participants so they

could continue to listen to it after the sessions had ceased. The results suggest that music therapists should consider cultural traditions when supporting music therapy clients from different backgrounds as they learn to cope with their grief.

Chapter Summary

Humanity has used the creation of songs to tell their stories of grief and fallen heroes for millennia. Today, the use of songwriting therapeutically within music therapy sessions has been well documented with grieving children, youth and anticipatory grief with adults, yet there is a notable gap in the literature concerning therapeutic songwriting with grieving adults (Clements-Cortes & Klinck, 2016). In recent years, there has been an increase in interest in the use of songwriting as an expression of grief with grieving adults. The results from these studies reinforce a common finding: for grieving individuals, songwriting within the music therapy setting can be a helpful tool for expression, validation, and the building of meaningful connections. Exploring regions where songwriting is an integral part of the grieving process could provide valuable insights for music therapists on integrating songwriting into their work with the bereaved. Cape Breton Island is one area of the world with a rich cultural history of songwriting, storytelling, and honouring the dead with song. Cultural musical traditions, like those on Cape Breton Island, can inform approaches to integrating songwriting into bereavement music therapy sessions. In addition, understanding these traditions could enhance culturally sensitive music therapy practices.

Chapter 3. Methodology

Design

This qualitative interview study was grounded in a social constructivist epistemology which is a sociological perspective that views knowledge as being shaped and developed through social interactions (Hillier, 2016). Rather than seeking to explain phenomena, this inquiry strove to explore the nuanced meanings that emerge from the data, assuming that these meanings are “multiple - no single interpretation is more authoritative than another” (Hillier, 2016, p. 108). This study employed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) inductive thematic analysis procedures to study participants’ perspectives on their use of songwriting as a means to express grief. This foundational approach to qualitative analysis was chosen both for its flexibility and accessibility in identifying emerging patterns and nuanced meaning within the data.

Delimitations

While the practice of songwriting can be found in many cultures throughout history (Baker, 2015; Baker & Wigram, 2005), this study’s scope was delimited to only one area of the world: Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, Canada. To narrow the scope of the study to meet the requirements for this thesis, the number of participants interviewed was delimited to three. For these three participants, the experience of grief was delimited to the grief felt as a result of the death of at least one important person in each of their lives. Only texts in the English language were included in the literature review.

Participants

Participants included three adult songwriters who have resided in Cape Breton, N.S., Canada, for an extended period of time, who identify culturally with Cape Breton, and who have used the practice of songwriting to express grief. Songwriters who did not identify as being connected to Cape Breton or as having written a song with lyrics as an expression of grief were excluded. Only individuals who stated that they felt comfortable discussing their grief experiences and songwriting process were included.

Materials

To capture the three interviews, the Voice Memo application on a password protected iPhone, as well as the Zoom Pro application on a password protected laptop computer were used. Following each interview, all data was immediately transferred to a password protected external

hard drive, which was kept in a secure location. All data was then permanently deleted from the Voice Memo and Zoom Pro applications. At no point was data stored in the cloud.

Data Collection Procedures

Ethics approval was received from the Concordia University Human Research Ethics Committee (Certification number: 30020970) prior to initiating any recruitment or data collection procedures (see Appendix A for Certificate of Ethics approval).

Recruitment posters (see Appendix B) were distributed in virtual and community spaces that included libraries, coffee shops, and social media (e.g. local musician social media groups). The recruitment posters included information about the study and the requirements for participation. Individuals who indicated interest via email were reviewed by the researcher and selected in an attempt to ensure diversity amongst participants and to avoid the inclusion of anyone with whom the researcher had a close personal or professional relationship.

The consent form (see Appendix C) was clearly explained twice to each of the participants who met the criteria for inclusion: first, when the participant reached out to inquire about participating in the study and then again immediately before the interview began. Issues related to confidentiality were outlined. Upon receiving both written and verbal informed consent, the electronically signed consent forms were returned to the researcher and then stored on a password-protected external hard drive stored in a locked filing cabinet.

Each participant took part in one 1-2 hour long semi-structured qualitative interview over Zoom where the researcher asked questions to gather the participants' perspectives on their use of songwriting as a means to express grief (see Appendix D for the interview guide). The interviews were recorded via an encrypted professional Zoom account on a password protected laptop computer and the Voice Memo application on a password protected iPhone. The data was recorded and saved on the physical devices and no data was stored in the cloud. Immediately following each interview, the data was transferred to a password protected external hard drive and stored in a locked cabinet. When accessing the data, a password protected laptop computer was used. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed using the Adobe Premiere Pro transcribing feature. During the interviews, some participants shared song lyrics and these were used for reflection and focus during the interview. To maintain confidentiality, they were not used in the publication of this research. All data was stored on a password protected external hard drive and stored in a locked cabinet. Participants were informed that they could withdraw

from the study at any point up until two weeks after their interview was completed. Additionally, it was explained both in the consent form (see Appendix C) and verbally to the participants that once the data was analyzed, the results were disseminated and the thesis was uploaded to Spectrum, all data would be erased from the hard drives after 3 months had passed.

Data Analysis Procedures

Each interview was transcribed immediately after it was recorded. Following the completion of all interviews, the transcribed interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clark's (2006) inductive thematic analysis. Following their framework, I familiarized myself with the data by reading and then rereading the transcripts and noting initial ideas. Next, initial codes were generated, coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set. The data was collated relevant to each code. Themes were then identified: codes were assembled into potential themes and all data relevant to each potential theme were organized under that theme. Next, the themes were reviewed and checked to determine if the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. This generated a thematic map of the analysis. The themes were then defined and named, followed by ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each, and the overall story that the analysis told. This generated clear definitions and names for each theme. The report was produced which was the final opportunity for analysis. (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

Due to the relatively small population on Cape Breton Island and the public nature of many songwriters' lives, information they shared could potentially identify the participants. To mitigate this, identifying information such as age, gender, location or song lyrics were not included in Chapter Four. There was also an increased risk that the participants and researcher may know each other or their families outside of the research context. Potential participants who had a close personal or professional relationship with the researcher were, therefore, excluded from the study. Participants were informed that the interview recording would be used solely for data collection and analysis, and would not be used for any other public or private use. It was explained to each participant before and after the interviews that should a participant wish to withdraw from the study, all data related to the participant would be automatically permanently destroyed and excluded from analysis. It was explained clearly and transparently to each participant that they could withdraw from the study at any time up until two weeks after the

interview took place. Mental health resources were made available to research participants, should they need support, as discussing grief may evoke distress.

Chapter 4. Results

This chapter will respond to the primary research question which was: How do three Cape Breton songwriters describe their experience of using songwriting to express grief? The primary question was broken down into three subsidiary questions that facilitated data collection and analysis. These subsidiary research questions included: (a) How do these songwriters describe why they chose songwriting as an expression of grief? (b) How do these songwriters describe the role of Cape Breton music traditions in their songwriting practice? (c) How might these findings inform the use of songwriting as an expression of grief in music therapy contexts?

To answer these questions, three adult songwriters, referred to here as Birch, Cedar, and Maple, participated in 1-2 hour long interviews with open-ended questions (see Appendix D). Each participant had written at least one song as an expression of grief. The three participants were born on Cape Breton Island and remained there until adulthood. All participants had left the island at some point in their early adulthood years. Two returned to live on the island permanently while one participant currently lives off the island and returns each year in the summer. All three songwriters are performing musicians and play guitar and sing. The losses each participant experienced included close family members.

During the interviews, participants shared their experiences with grief and loss, their songwriting processes, and their experience of using songwriting as an expression of grief. This chapter will provide an in-depth analysis of the interview data, highlighting key findings and insights derived from the analysis of data. The three themes that emerged from the data were: a) transformative grief journey, b) cultivating connection, and c) intrinsic practice (see Table 1).

Table 1

Themes and Subsidiary Themes

Theme	Subsidiary Theme
Transformative grief journey	Variable grief responses Songwriting as a safe container for coping with complex grief responses Songwriting as a catalyst for moving forward

Table 1, Continued

Cultivating connection	Easing isolation through collective songwriting
	Fostering connection with the audience
Intrinsic practice	Trusting the process
	Cultural relevance

Theme 1: Transformative Grief Journey

The data analysis process revealed that each participant moved through a unique grief journey that had a lasting impact on their lives. However, they all indicated that their journeys included very difficult emotional experiences. Songwriting, for all of them, helped them to express those difficult emotions; and, it also helped them to cultivate the capacity to move forward after their significant loss. These grief experiences included describing and reflecting upon their relationship to the individual who had died and reconceptualizing their relationship with that individual after the death, the anticipation of the death (anticipatory grief), as well as their initial emotional responses following the death.

As each individual moved through their story, they spoke of the difficult emotions associated with their unique responses to grief, for example, sadness, anger, and relief. They also spoke of how songwriting helped them to express these difficult emotions. Three subsidiary themes were identified: variable grief responses, songwriting as a safe container for emotional expression, and songwriting as a catalyst for moving forward.

Subsidiary Theme: Variable Grief Responses

Analysis of the data indicated that there was a range of initial grief responses (e.g. shock, sadness, anger, relief) that varied in intensity. It also revealed, interestingly, that songwriting was not a prevalent source of emotional expression during this phase. Participants indicated that they really needed to come to grips with the immediate impact of the loss, and this often had to happen before the songwriting process became helpful.

Some participants emphasized the importance of acknowledging the intensity and impact of the full spectrum of emotions they experienced. One participant spoke to this reality directly when they stated, “It was too big... there was a mix of everything... there was a sadness there because you're grieving... you're missing the person” (Maple). At the same time, participants indicated that they sometimes experienced more than just the sadness, including the fairly

common feeling of relief after watching their loved one die: “There's almost a sense of relief, to be honest” (Birch).

Participants spoke about their grief as disruptive in numerous ways. Physical symptoms of grief were noted, and two of the participants expressed difficulty sleeping soon after the death of their loved one. Some songwriters said that they actually wrote their songs during the middle of the night because they were experiencing sleep disturbances. Notably, this was one of the few references to songwriting during this initial grief experience. This period of grief, for some, was a distressing time in their lives as they were learning how to navigate life after the loss. For some, it felt as though their lives were falling apart. While they were actively coping with monumental loss, songwriting did not feel like it was immediately possible.

Distance from home and family also emerged as important, and one songwriter specifically spoke of the difficulty of being so far away from home while grieving. They indicated that they felt isolated in their grief and they were the only participant who engaged in songwriting as a way of coping with the immediate loss. While they were grieving, they were away from family, and they felt that no one around them could understand what they were going through. They felt simultaneously isolated, invisible, and exposed, which was evident, they felt, in the song they wrote:

It was really hard to sit through that whole week [after a parent died]. So, I was just like, and the whole song was like, I just felt like, how can people not... like I was in my head? I had to catch myself... it was like I had a spotlight on me. How can people not see that? I'm just not connected to this? I must stand out like a sore thumb... How some people can go with all this stuff inside them and no one knows it (Cedar).

For Cedar, songwriting offered a sense of connection and an opportunity to acknowledge and externalize what was hidden. Acknowledging that they were struggling was a definitive moment for some participants; it was potentially the first task of mourning which is accepting the reality of their loss (Worden, 2009). For some participants, part of accepting the reality of the loss meant recognizing the difficulties they were facing in their daily life due to the loss. “Finally, I realized... that I wasn't all right. I was reacting emotionally to things that I shouldn't have been” (Maple). This prompted the participant to be authentic and honest about their current state:

I stopped saying I'm all right. I stopped putting on a brave face. I just said no. People would ask me if I'm all right, and I would just say, no, I'm really not. But I will be. I'm

going to be all right. But right now, I'm not. No, I'm a mess. I'll be okay. I'm grieving, I'm not all right... I'm in rough shape right now. And I just started telling people and I stopped saying that I was all right (Maple).

This was an important indicator of acceptance' and, once participants were able to accept their difficult grief responses and their current place in their grief journey, they were able to begin to express their emotions in healthy ways and start to move forward.

Subsidiary Theme: Songwriting as a safe container for coping with complex grief responses

Data analysis highlighted how helpful songwriting was for participants who wanted a safe way to express emotions. Each participant detailed how they used songwriting as a strategy and support for coping with difficult emotions that arose during their grieving process. One participant specifically spoke to how songwriting was supportive of coping when they said, "I think it just kind of helps deal with... my own emotions" (Birch). Cedar's experience seemed to echo this when they stated that "the songs kind of help you get through all that kind of stuff." They continued, more explicitly, to say that transforming emotions into a song can be a deeply moving and powerful experience. "When I wrote these songs, it was just like a pure cathartic expression to write them." Clearly, for this participant, emotional expression was of greater significance in this part of their grief journey. However, the process of songwriting was able to help each of the participants in a number of ways that supported their differing ways of expressing and coping with the challenging emotions associated with grief.

The safety and effectiveness of songwriting for expressing emotions was evidenced in the data as well. When reflecting on their grief journey before and after writing the song, one participant noted that "I think it taught me that (songwriting) is a way more productive and safe way to process things" (Cedar). By telling their stories and articulating complex emotions through song, they were able to make sense of their new reality. One participant likened expressing their grief through songwriting to writing their feelings in a journal. They felt this was a safe way of processing their grief as opposed to making unhealthy choices: "So I think like writing more, having more of a, like an emotional diary, which songwriting is, is a better choice" (Cedar). Songwriting, therefore, took the place of other possible coping strategies that may have posed a risk for their safety (e.g. drinking alcohol).

Subsidiary Theme: Songwriting as a Catalyst for Moving Forward

As previously stated, grieving individuals begin to integrate their grief in two important ways. They learn specific coping strategies and they learn how to live with their new reality after the loss. Songwriting is one way these musicians learned how to live with their grief. Analysis of the data highlighted the communicative nature of songwriting as part of the grief journey. It served as a means of connection, facilitating communication both with the songwriter's community and with a deceased loved one. It also pointed to its important role in supporting the cultivation of a new relationship with their loved one who had died, which is an important part of this process (Hedtke, 2003). One participant spoke about their changing relationship with their loved one following a death. They said they remember, "feeling like there is a communication barrier, like they're not actually there anymore" (Birch). This prompted the participant to write a song where they held a conversation with the loved one they had lost. The songwriter wrote what they wanted to tell their loved one, and they were able to imagine what their loved one would say in return. Through this song, the participant was able to develop a new relationship with their loved one after they had died. Through the process of songwriting, this participant was able to begin to adjust to the environment without the deceased and emotionally relocate the deceased and begin to move on with life (Worden, 2009).

Just as therapeutic songwriting is a practice that can be utilized by music therapists, songwriting was viewed by these songwriters as a tool when faced with difficult times: "It was a tool for dealing with my own grief: processing stuff and turning it into something tangible" (Cedar). It is a process of taking something intangible, such as emotions, and turning them into something they can hear and play and see (lyrics on a page). In this way, participants were able to begin to move forward in their grief journey: "I think it just helps you kind of process some of it, channeling your energy into something productive and instead of just being sad about it" (Birch).

Hope also emerged in the data as an important outcome of songwriting. For Maple, songwriting served as a reminder of the importance of hope: "It was just reminding myself of that. Just never, ever giving up that hope. So that was one thing right there that I wrote that really it helped me a lot. So now it still does.". In times of grief, discovering hope through the songwriting process helped to guide this participant through their difficult journey and beyond.

Theme 2: Cultivating Connection

Analysis of the data highlighted the important relational role songwriting can play. The potential for songwriting to bring the bereaved participants closer to others was helpful for those who experienced social isolation as part of the grieving process. Participants highlighted two important themes in this area. Songwriting with others was an important relational process, and sharing songs with others after their completion facilitated a sense of connection.

Subsidiary Theme: Easing Isolation through Collective Songwriting

The data revealed that songwriting with others was a powerful opportunity to ease the isolation that often comes with grief. Co-songwriting sessions were viewed by some participants as an opportunity to process grief and express emotions in a group setting: “We get together and we're spilling our emotions out” (Cedar). Essentially, friends and contemporaries held space for their peers to express emotion in a collective creative process. Songs created within a group setting have the potential to establish meaningful shared experiences for the songwriters. Deep, significant relationships can be born out of the creation of songs that express grief. Cedar spoke of the deep connections that are made between bandmates when they write music about emotionally charged topics:

There's such a deep connection, when you're in a band with people that write songs together. You had to be like brothers and sisters for the rest of your life because it's like... if it's really emotional stuff and you're really into this like you're going to war, trying to get those emotions out. And if not, it's just fun.

Participants firmly highlighted both the reality of writing songs together and the deep potential of co-writing songs to ease the isolation that grief so often generates. These connections created long lasting emotional bonds that helped to ease feelings of isolation.

Subsidiary Theme: Fostering Connection with the Audience

Participants indicated that emotional validation was an important part of the grieving process for them; and, importantly, they stated that sharing their songs with others was a helpful way of receiving this validation. Sharing their grief songs with audiences, both through live performances and online in digital spaces, emerged as an important means of combating isolation. At the same time, it created a space where songwriter and audience could connect through their shared grief and find validation.

The anticipation of sharing a song with others can be a motivator to begin to confront and work through difficult emotions. Maple shared that the anticipation of an upcoming songwriting circle, a gathering where songwriters share their newly crafted or in-progress songs with other songwriters, motivated them to begin confronting the difficult emotions they had been avoiding, ultimately leading to the creation of their song:

I just think it's one of those things, I just wasn't ready to do it... Psychologically, I just kept avoiding it because I knew what it actually meant. And then when I got to the point where a couple of years go by and...I was doing a songwriter circle... And I finally sat down and I took all of these things that I had written and all of these lines that I had written down through the process of my [parent] passing away, the stories my [parent] told me... And that was kind of the process for me to take all of those emotions and all of those experiences and just put them in.

In addition to this important step forward through the songwriting circle, two of the three participants spoke of a desire to help others through their music. Listeners reported to the songwriters that they relate to their grief songs and in one case, the listener told the songwriter “I really needed this” (Birch). Listening to grief songs created a sense of reciprocity, as audience members shared their own experiences of grief with the songwriters. In this way, the creation of grief songs helped not only the songwriter express their grief personally, but it was also importantly validating for the audience members who may also have experienced difficulty in helping them to express their own grief. One participant described this occurrence as “satisfying”, commenting that they believe “it helps you realize that you processed it or you are processing it and it's connecting with someone else” (Cedar).

For all participants, the emotional connection with the audience motivated them to write music, with grief songs standing out for eliciting a particularly strong response. A few of the participants were explicit about wanting to connect with their audience members in specific ways:

My goals are... I want to kind of dig up something inside of you and talk or sing about something that you would relate to, because I think that's part of the human experience itself (Birch).

By engaging with and expressing their own emotional responses to grief, this participant fostered a meaningful bond with their audience, creating a shared experience rooted in human vulnerability.

The sharing of grief songs can, unexpectedly, prompt the kind of audience participation that highlights the connection that is possible in some performance settings. This participant spoke of a time when they were performing a grief song to a small audience who knew the lyrics already from a recording and could sing along.

I went to sing the first line... I went to open my mouth... and the whole audience sang it back to me. I don't even get to sing it... And so, I was like, this is working... there's some kind of connection working here (Cedar).

For this songwriter, the audience became a real-time, and even spontaneous, exemplar of how sharing can generate important human connection and help to bridge isolation.

The research findings aligned with the literature on common experiences of grief, which describes it as a process characterized by waves of emotion and experiences of social isolation. (Cholbi, 2021; Lindemann, 1979; Worden, 2009). For the participants interviewed, songwriting helped them to express their grief and connect with the world around them in meaningful ways. This was seen both during the songwriting process when writing songs with others and with the performance of the song either in person at a live event or when shared in the digital space. As evidenced in the literature and in the research findings, the process of writing and performing these songs as expressions of grief can bring participants from feeling isolated to feeling connected to a supportive community.

The participants highlighted a natural desire to connect with others: "there's some kind of innate thing in you that you want to connect with people" (Cedar). This intrinsic aspect of songwriting as a form of grief expression will be explored further in the next theme: Intrinsic Practice.

Theme 3: Intrinsic Practice

Participants revealed that, in their cultural context, songwriting served as an intuitive means of expressing and processing grief. They described how this practice was deeply embedded in their traditions, making it a natural outlet for navigating loss. As they shared their songwriting practice, they emphasized how it provided both a personal sense of solace and a connection to their cultural roots. An important aspect of the songwriting process for each of the

participants was embracing the journey and allowing it to unfold naturally. These ideas will be explored further in the subsidiary themes: trusting the process and cultural relevance.

Subsidiary Theme: Trusting the Process

Data analysis highlighted how natural it was for the participants to turn to songwriting as an expression of grief; and yet, it also highlighted differences in approach and purpose. While having formal musical training does not necessarily lead to more complex compositions, only one participant received post-secondary musical training and spoke of intentionally composing complex music. For the other two participants, the songs that were written were not complicated and did not need to be in order to express emotion effectively. One participant described their songs as “really basic, honestly, there's nothing overly complex about those lyrics at all, but I kind of wanted to be a little bit overt” (Birch). For this participant, simplicity helped to get their message across with clarity.

Interestingly, while songwriting felt like an intuitive way for participants to navigate their grief, they approached it with different priorities and perspectives. Some participants spoke of how they centre emotion more than technique in their songwriting process, while others highlighted how their approach shifted depending on their intent.

One songwriter compared their two different songwriting processes. While expressing grief, the participant concentrated more on the lyrics and on finding the perfect music to convey the emotion than on music theory. They spoke of the choices a songwriter must make, “choosing chords... tempo, choosing everything to match” (Cedar). They noted that when writing songs as an expression of grief, they write the lyrics first whereas when not actively grieving, they “write music first because I’m not in grief” (Cedar). This change in songwriting practice felt natural to this songwriter and felt more spontaneous rather than a planned strategy. . The participant’s responses demonstrated the importance of attending to the different available processes for songwriting; and, importantly, the reasons one might choose one over the other. The data showed that for some, expressing emotion through music feels most natural, while others find it easier to first express their grief through writing lyrics.

Similar to composition processes, important differences emerged in how moments of creativity occurred. Participants noted that the moment of creation could come at any time. Some participants were very intentional in their songwriting practice and even took time away from their busy schedules to prioritize the practice: “I took the day off and I wrote the first song”

(Cedar). For others, the song was created seemingly spontaneously: “I was just jamming one night by myself... it all kind of came together, I think, in one night, just like scratched it down” (Birch). Each participant spoke of a natural inclination to lean into their emotions during the songwriting process, even if it was their first time doing so.

Subsidiary Theme: Cultural Relevance

The data suggests that the prevalence of music in participants’ culture positions them well to draw effectively on all that songwriting has to offer. All participants spoke of the important role that music had played in their formative years. While the style of music varied, they all spoke to the relevance of the constant presence of music in their homes: “And growing up here, too, music has been huge from as far back as I can remember. There was always music playing” (Maple). The music found in the childhood homes of the participants varied from traditional Cape Breton music played by family members or family friends, religious music in places of worship, and recorded music from around the world: “My [parent] had a lot of jazz albums... and I connected to jazz because there’s an emotion to it, which is fascinating because... there are no words” (Cedar). Importantly, and perhaps unexpectedly, their capacity to draw on songwriting seemed more connected to the omnipresence of music in the home than it did to the presence of traditional Cape Breton-style music.

Songwriting, specifically as an expression of grief, was nonetheless described as being “one of the core aspects of” Cape Breton culture by another participant. This participant explained that,

When it comes to grieving in Cape Breton especially... it has a lot to do with the Celtic culture, with the Western European culture, where they treat every tragedy as a chance to write a song about it, to immortalize the moment in song. I do think it has a lot to do with the Irish and Scottish, Western European culture here right, because everything is enshrined in song (Maple).

Maple, in particular, viewed their relationship with music and songwriting as an expression of grief within the larger context of their culture. They detailed the island’s history with death and loss resulting from coal mining disasters and the cultural practice of using songwriting to memorialize the miners who have died (Frank, 1986).

There’re all kinds of songs... that will talk about the tragedy or things that happened throughout history here. It’s a way of dealing with those emotions because some people

might not be able to talk about it, they might not be able to express it, but they hear the song and that's kind of their way of dealing with it - that's their expression. They might not be able to sit here and tell you about it, but they might be able to listen to a song and deal with those feelings for those three, 3 to 5 minutes. I think it's a bedrock of our culture (Maple).

For Maple, songwriting as a means of expressing grief was seen as an important cultural tradition that supported communities in their collective grief and, importantly, they highlighted the cultural reality that listening is an important mode of emotional expression. The data specifically highlights the possibility that their use of songwriting to express grief might be linked to a broader cultural tradition of turning to songwriting and listening in times of death and loss.

The data demonstrated the intuitive nature of turning to songwriting to express grief amongst the participants interviewed. For some, this was viewed as a direct result of their cultural upbringing on Cape Breton Island with its rich history of musical and creative expression (Caplin, 1989; Frank, 1986; MacPherson et al., 2021; Melin, 2016).

Chapter Summary

Songwriting provided participants with a meaningful and intuitive way to navigate their unique grief journeys, offering both a safe container for processing difficult emotions and a catalyst for healing. One of the most challenging aspects of grief was the sense of isolation, yet songwriting created opportunities for connection—both through the collaborative nature of writing with others and the shared experience of engaging with an audience. Beyond emotional expression, participants viewed songwriting as a deeply ingrained cultural practice, one that allowed them to honor traditions while finding personal and communal support in times of loss.

Chapter 5. Discussion

This chapter will present the key findings of the study as they relate to the research questions, especially to the third subsidiary question: How might these findings inform the use of songwriting as an expression of grief in music therapy contexts? The assumptions and limitations of the study will be identified. Implications for music therapy practice, education and future research will be explored. Finally, personal reflections will be discussed.

Assumptions and Limitations

Given my personal connection to this subject, I brought certain assumptions that are important to acknowledge. I assumed that songwriting would be beneficial for grieving adults. I also assumed that some Cape Breton songwriters had used music as an expression of grief. I also assumed that the insights from this study would be relevant to music therapists working in grief and bereavement care. The methodology chosen for the study also poses potential limitations. Researcher bias may have influenced both the qualitative interviews and the analysis and interpretation of data. Furthermore, the intentionally small sample size may have limited the depth of understanding that could be gained about how Cape Breton songwriters use songwriting to express grief.

Implications for Music Therapy Practice

The findings of this research underscore the benefit of incorporating songwriting into bereavement music therapy settings. Encouraging clients to follow their natural inclinations toward songwriting can provide meaningful opportunities for self-expression and healing during their grief journeys. Recognizing, respecting, and honouring the knowledge and experience an individual brings with them to the music therapy session can help to foster trust and strength in the therapeutic relationship. In the cultural mosaic of Canada, the individuals we support in music therapy settings bring unique and diverse cultural backgrounds. Taking the time to explore these backgrounds can help inform the most effective ways to support their songwriting experience. It is important to take into consideration how cultural traditions, like those found on Cape Breton Island, can offer models for integrating songwriting into the bereavement music therapy session. Understanding these traditions can help to enhance culturally sensitive music therapy practices.

Timing and flexibility are important factors in engaging individuals in songwriting. Some participants found it easier to begin the songwriting process after the initial response to their loss.

While individuals may vary in their readiness, music therapists must recognize that songwriting may be overwhelming for clients experiencing acute grief immediately after a death. Assessing each client's readiness for the songwriting process is essential.

Songwriting with others can help to foster a sense of community and ease difficult feelings of isolation through shared experience within a group setting. On Cape Breton Island, this is a common occurrence, evidenced by the documented participation in songwriting circles. Within music therapy contexts, individuals can receive the benefits of group songwriting in music therapy groups. This research also highlights the significance of offering opportunities to perform and share songs written within the bereavement music therapy session. This could include live performances within the therapy setting or through recording the song and the client sharing it in the digital space. The latter gives the music therapy participant the autonomy to decide when and where to share with audiences of their choosing, empowering them to connect with audiences in ways that feel comfortable and meaningful.

Finally, when working with grieving individuals, finding hope and meaning in difficult times can support their healing process. This research demonstrates that songwriting can serve as a meaningful way the bereaved can find hope and meaning after a significant loss.

Implications for Music Therapy Education

This research highlights the potential benefits of songwriting as a means of expressing grief, offering insights that can be incorporated into music therapy education. It identifies emotional, psychological, and social advantages for grieving adults, including fostering resilience, providing a sense of agency, and strengthening community bonds.

Contemporary certified music therapists are not the first to use music to express emotion, offer support, and find hope in challenging times. There is a deep and varied history of the practice not necessarily found in clinical textbooks. When educating future music therapists, it is important to note that our work gains value by drawing insights from those who use music to enhance their health and well-being, even without a music therapist's guidance. Doing so can make our practice more relevant and resource-oriented while deepening our understanding of culturally meaningful ways of using music.

Implications for Music Therapy Research

This study explored the use of songwriting as an expression of grief in one specific area of Canada. A larger data set would give more detailed information on this practice. It would also

be beneficial to study the long term effects of utilizing songwriting as an expression of grief both within the music therapy session and as it occurs naturally in the community. Further study could explore other areas and cultures and their history and use of songwriting to express grief.

Given the limited amount of literature on the use of songwriting as an expression of grief with adults, it would be beneficial to study further music therapists' use of songwriting in the therapy setting with this population. It could also be beneficial to study how songs written in the therapy setting are being shared in digital spaces.

Personal Reflections

This research experience was a profound opportunity for personal growth. I had always known that Cape Breton Island had a history of using music for healing. Even before learning about music therapy, I understood that musical family members and friends shared their music with seniors in long-term care facilities and brought guitars when visiting loved ones who were ill. I had heard the songs honoring the past, yet I was surprised by the wealth of information available on songwriting and specifically, songwriting as an expression of grief. Exploring the cultural grief practices of my community after nearly two decades away from home was eye-opening. I was delighted by the overwhelming response to my call for research participants—so many songwriters reached out, eager to take part. To me, this highlights the significance of this cultural practice and fuels my curiosity to explore it further.

Connecting with the songwriter participants and learning how they utilize songwriting to express grief was a gift. I was surprised to hear from each participant just how impactful sharing their music had been on their grief journey. To me, this underscores the importance of incorporating songwriting into group settings, as well as providing opportunities to share and record the music that is written within the music therapy session.

This thesis provided an opportunity for me to delve into the history and literature, and connect with my community that will forever shape the way I work. I am already noticing a shift in how I facilitate groups, recognizing within myself a deeper trust in the music and songwriting process. Now, when someone tells me they wrote a song as an expression of grief with no formal musical training or experience, I have a greater understanding of the roots of this practice and its role in helping communities collectively share their grief. I also have a newfound respect for the beautiful diversity of Cape Breton Island/Unama'ki, and a growing desire to continue exploring songwriting as a way to express grief both on the island and beyond.

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Appendix A: Ethics Approval



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant: Meaghan Jackson
Department: Faculty of Fine Arts\Creative Arts Therapies
Agency: N/A
Title of Project: Exploring The Use of Song writing as an Expression of Grief by Three Cape Breton Musicians: A Qualitative Interview Study
Certification Number: 30020970

Valid From: October 31, 2024 To: October 30, 2025

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Richard DeMont".

Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster



RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS WANTED *The Use of Songwriting as an Expression of Grief on Cape Breton Island*

Principal Investigator:

Meaghan Jackson, MTA

Goal of the Research: To explore the practice of songwriting as an expression of grief with Cape Breton musicians.



Full participation in this study involves: Participating in one interview, either in person or on Zoom, to discuss your experiences with songwriting as an expression of grief. Total participation time is approximately 1-2 hours (depending on the length of the interview).

Participant Inclusion Criteria:

- You must reside in Cape Breton, NS for an extended period of time
- You must self-identify as a musician
- You must have written a song as an expression of grief (ie written a song after a death)
- You must be over 18 years of age
- You must be able to participate in an interview discussion about your grief experience in English

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

Meaghan Jackson, MTA

Email: meaghan.jackson@mail.concordia.ca

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics approval from, the Concordia University Human Research Ethics Committee, certificate of approval number 30020970.

Appendix C: Information and Consent Form

Study Title: Exploring The Use of Songwriting as an Expression of Grief by Three Cape Breton Musicians: A Qualitative Interview Study

Researcher: Meaghan Jackson, MTA, MA in Creative Arts Therapies student, Concordia University

Researcher's Contact Information: meaghan.jackson@mail.concordia.ca

You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

A. PURPOSE

The purpose of the research is to explore and document the use of songwriting as an expression of grief on Cape Breton Island. This project aims to better understand the use of songwriting in the grieving process as it occurs naturally by listening to the lived experience of musicians who have written songs as an expression of grief so that it may inform the use of songwriting as a therapeutic intervention by certified music therapists.

B. PROCEDURES

If you participate in this research, you will be asked to:

- Take part in a 1-2 hour long interview where you will be asked questions about the loss you experienced as well as your songwriting process.
- The interview will take place either in person or on Zoom.
- Agree to have the interview recorded solely for use by the researcher and the research team.
- Agree to have anonymized quotations from your interview included in publications and presentations or to tell the research team you do not want your quotations included in any publications or presentations; the research team will ensure no identifying information about you is shared.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

Risks are anticipated to be minimal, but it is possible to experience minimal discomfort when sharing your experiences of grief and songwriting. If any such discomfort is experienced, the researcher will provide immediate verbal support and will provide a list of counselling support resources in your area.

There are no direct benefits associated with participating in this research. You may benefit indirectly from contributing to work that has the potential to inform future music therapy practice and from the opportunity to have your voice and experience heard and valued.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will gather the following information as a result of this research: recorded and transcribed interviews in which you describe your experiences of using songwriting as an expression of grief. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. The transcription will be generated using Adobe Premiere Pro, a password-protected software program on the researcher's computer that creates transcripts automatically from recordings. Recordings and transcripts will be stored on password protected external hard drives in a locked cabinet. No one will have access to the information except people directly involved in conducting the research, and the information will only be used for purposes described in this form.

Participant consent forms with identifying information will be stored separately from interview recordings and transcripts on two separate password protected external hard drives and stored in a locked cabinet. Only the researcher will have access. There will be no hard copies generated, everything will be stored digitally.

We intend to publish the results of the research in the form of a MA thesis that will be uploaded to Concordia Spectrum, an open access research repository. Participants will not be identified in publications or presentations.

All stored recordings, transcripts and information will be destroyed 3 months after the research has been completed and published on Spectrum.

E. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you can stop at any time. You can also ask that the information you provided not be used, and your choice will be respected. If you decide that you don't want us to use your information, you must tell the researcher, and you may do so anytime up until two weeks after the interview takes place. There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking us not to use your information.

We will not be able to offer you compensation if you are injured in this research. However, you are not giving up any legal right to compensation by signing this form.

G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page 1. You may also contact the research assistant with general questions about the study at meaghan.jackson@mail.concordia.ca

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact Dr. Cynthia, Associate Professor and thesis supervisor, Department of Creative Arts Therapies, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 8691 or cynthia.bruce@concordia.ca.

Appendix D: Interview Guide

This initial introductory text will be read at the beginning of each interview.

I would like to begin by welcoming you and thanking you for your participation.

The purpose of this research is to explore the use of songwriting as an expression of grief on Cape Breton Island. The project aims to better understand the use of songwriting in the grieving process as it occurs naturally so that it may inform the use of songwriting as a therapeutic intervention by certified music therapists. You will be asked questions about your grief experience and songwriting process.

I'd like to remind you that your participation is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your participation and contributions with no negative consequences at any time during this interview and up to two weeks after the interview today.

1. Can you tell me about a time you have written a song or songs as an expression of grief or after a significant loss? *Definition of grief: the normal, emotional reaction humans have to loss, and in this specific context, the death of another (Cholbi, 2021).*
2. What prompted you to write the song?
3. Can you tell me about your songwriting process?
4. How did it feel to write this song?
Follow up question: How does it feel now, looking back at this time?
5. What is your understanding of the use of songwriting as a way to express grief on Cape Breton Island?
6. Is there anything you wish to add about loss, grief, and songwriting?

Appendix E: Referral Resources

Provincial Mental Health and Addictions Crisis line (available 24/7):

902-429-8167 or 1-888-429-8167 (toll free)

Hospice Cape Breton Bereavement Coordinator: 902-574-1339

Bereaved Families of Nova Scotia: 902-564-6795

Pamela Lappin, social worker: 902-202-5565