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‘Gear Acquisition Syndrome’ – A Survey of Electric Guitar Players

Jan-Peter Herbst

Arts and Music Education, Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany, info@janherbst.net

In 1996, Steely Dan guitarist Walter Becker coined the term ‘guitar acquisition syndrome’ to describe the guitarist’s compulsive and unrelenting urge to buy and own instruments. As this tendency applies to other musicians as well the term soon became what now is called G.A.S. – Gear Acquisition Syndrome. Although popular music research has emphasized the relevance of music technology, this cultural practice, shared by amateur and professional musicians alike, has not found any considerable attention yet.

By following a quantitative design with a sample of 418 electric guitar players, this article contributes to an empirical foundation of G.A.S. from a music technology perspective. It evaluates the dimension of the syndrome and explores the musicians’ intentions and aesthetic ideals behind their use of technology. The study found indications for the guitar players’ tendency to be afflicted with G.A.S., and provides insights into person-related factors like age, experience, professionalism and genre affinity.

Keywords: G.A.S., gear acquisition syndrome, electric guitar, genres, music technology

Introduction

“You’re sweating, you haven’t slept properly in days, and you’re pretty sure that you’ve been talking to yourself. Your search history is an endless stream of forums and reviews, and you’ve discovered that against all odds you’re able to carry multiple completely opposing opinions in your head at the same time. You’re pretty sure that you’re about to lose it completely, possibly in a public place. You’re scared.” (Power and Parker 2015)

This phenomenon has a name: G.A.S. The abbreviation stands for ‘gear acquisition syndrome’ and can be traced back to Steely Dan’s guitar player Walter Becker who in 1996 wrote an editorial for the *Guitar Player* magazine. Initially, Becker wrote about the ‘guitar acquisition syndrome’ that he observed in the Los Angeles music scene and suspected for many of the magazine’s readers. Because other musicians as well as producers showed similar tendencies, the term changed to ‘gear acquisition syndrome’. It describes the compulsive and unrelenting urge, triggered

by the endless search for the 'magic tone', to buy an own gear as an anticipated catalyst of creative energy and bringer of happiness (Diiorio 2016). Photographers and other artists were 'infected' by G.A.S too (Kim 2012).

Needless to say, G.A.S. is not a "clinical condition", as stated by the not quite serious Wikipedia (2015) definition; it is rather a cultural phenomenon that afflicted persons joke about. Humorous illustrations and discussions in musicians' boards are all over the internet, and merchandise is sold online and in music stores. Many video platforms showcase musicians' precious instrument collections, and the website www.guitaracquisitionsyndrome.com presents documentaries of most 'serious' cases. Jay Wright (2006) published the book *GAS. Living with Guitar Acquisition Syndrome* with confessions of 200 'afflicted' enthusiasts from 23 countries to scare off musicians not yet affected. Similarly, countless videos on how to treat the syndrome are online. There even exists a 50-minute video documentary (Diiorio 2016). Furthermore, numerous blogs and online articles address G.A.S. (Kwisses 2015; Power & Parker 2015; Robair 2015; Leonhardt 2016).

The musicians' habit of collecting instruments and exploring new ways of expression, e. g. by modifying their instruments, is by no means new. Music history has many examples of prestigious instruments of desire; doubtless, a Stradivari is one of them. In popular music, there also are instruments much sought-after, e. g. Gibson's Les Paul models between 1958 and '60 (Greenwood & Hembree 2011). Among the guitar modifications, Edward Van Halen's *Frankenstrat* – a combination of Les Paul and Stratocaster type guitars – and his tweaked valve amplifier (Walser 1993) are most prominent. Academically, research on popular music has emphasized the central role of technology. As Théberge (2001: 3) rightly claimed, "[a]ny discussion of the role of technology in popular music should begin with a simple premise: without electronic technology, popular music in the twenty-first century is unthinkable". The list of respective research is long (Belz 1972; Frith 1986; Moore 1993; Gracyk 1996; Théberge 1997; Waksman 1999). However, the phenomenon of G.A.S. has not received any considerable attention in popular music studies and musicology yet.

This article is less concerned with adopting cultural studies theories on commodification (Simmel 1968), branding strategies (Jentetics 2012) or psychological mechanisms (Sarinana 2013) related to G.A.S. It rather aims to contribute to an empirical foundation from a music technology perspective by evaluating the dimension of the syndrome in terms of guitar players' number of instruments and by exploring aesthetic ideals and motifs behind the musicians' use of technology. G.A.S. may seem to be a playful issue but it does represent a cultural practice shared by professional and amateur musicians alike which, in turn, affects musical cultures. By gaining insights into the practices of using music technology, conclusions can be drawn about genre aesthetics and how they are shaped by musicians'

characteristics. The empirical data of this article is based on a recent study on electric guitar players' equipment and how they use their gear (Herbst 2016). This data will be analyzed regarding its potential to explore G.A.S. It is expected that personal factors like age, gender, experience, level of professionalism, and musical preference affect the philosophy on gear. Hence, the study focuses on how these factors interact and take effect on attitudes and ideals concerning musical equipment.

Method

The data is part of an extensive book project (Herbst 2016) on guitar distortion in rock music including issues related to technological development, music aesthetics, and the effects of sound on playability and expressiveness. An empirical study added a further perspective next to historical, philosophical and acoustical approaches.

Data collection

The quantitative survey was published on SoSci Survey. It was promoted in five German-speaking online musicians' boards, and in four musicians' groups on social media, with the intention to collect data from a wide range of guitar players with different experiences and preferences. Online for three weeks, 24 August to 13 September 2015, the survey had 866 clicks. With 418 completed forms (48%), the response rate was high.

Sample

97% of the sample were male; only nine females participated. The age spectrum was between 15 and 64 years. The largest groups were the 25 to 29 (16%) and the 20 to 24 (15%) year olds. Each of the five-year-groups between 30 and 54 ranked around 12%. Less represented were the youngest (15 to 19 years, 3%) and oldest (55 to 59 years, 6%; 60 to 64 years, 3%) participants.

In compliance with the age structure most participants were experienced on the guitar. The majority played fifteen or more years (58%), a small number less than one year (0.3%) or between one and three years (3%). The other groups (4 to 6 years, 9%; 7 to 10 years, 14%; 11 to 15 years, 15%) were of similar sizes.

Concerning the level of professionalism, 12 persons (3%) considered themselves amateurs, 216 (54%) intermediates, 134 (34%) semi-professionals, and 38 (10%) professionals. The level of professionalism correlated with experience ($r_s = .384$; $p < .001$) but not with age.

Regarding the preferred genres played on the electric guitar (Figure 1), an average of 3.56 ($SD = 1.82$) out of eleven was selected by multiple answer choice. More traditional genres like blues, classic rock and hard rock were most popular

in contrast to many metal genres. The 'no rock/metal genres' included music commonly played with little or no guitar distortion such as jazz, soul, funk or reggae. The genres selected by the participants were stylistically close, e. g. blues, classic rock and hard rock on the one hand, alternative rock, grunge and punk on the other hand, plus all metal genres.

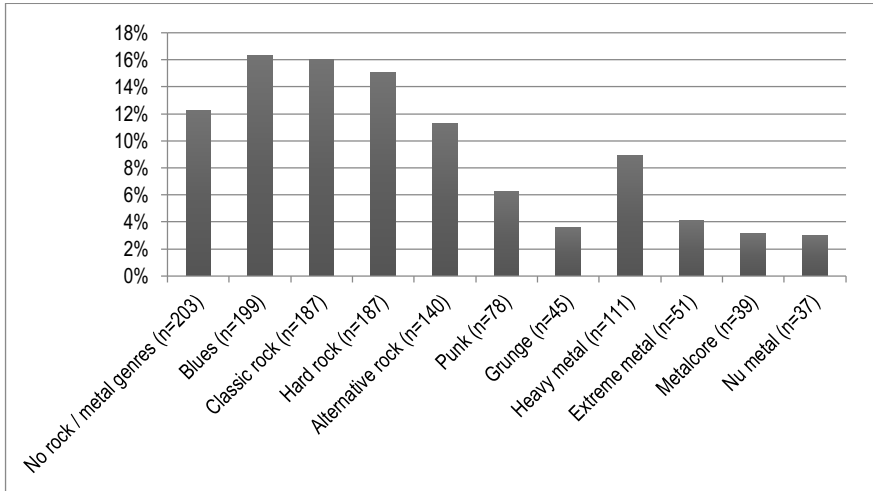


Figure 1: Preferred genres of electric guitar playing ($N = 1,090$)

Some genres demonstrated greater flexibility concerning the number of genres preferred to play. With correlations between .400 and .600 ($p < .001$), hard rock, alternative rock, heavy metal, classic rock and grunge were most flexible. Blues was medium ($r = .337$; $p < .001$), and all metal genres were least open with correlations around .180 ($p < .001$). No rock/metal genres were slightly more flexible ($r = .240$; $p < .001$), yet only rock and metal genres could be selected. Otherwise, the flexibility might have been greater.

Players of all age groups played blues and classic rock, but particularly those older than 35 years. Hard rock was favored by all generations. Metal genres were preferred by younger musicians with heavy metal on the older and extreme metal and metalcore on the younger end.

Data analysis

The items of the survey relevant for this study were either ordinal (age group, experience, professionalism) or parametric (attitudes, number of instruments). Attitudes were measured on a five-point Likert scale with labels at the anchors, signing left (1) as total disagreement and right (5) as total agreement. Since the genres

were selected with multiple answer choice, they were saved in dichotomous variables. Hence, comparing genres was only possible indirectly by comparing “selected” with “not selected” genres. This was achieved with parametric point-biserial correlation (r). Spearman correlation (rs) was applied to ordinal relations. In the following summary of the results, the significance of the correlation will be marked by asterisks for better readability: * < .05, ** < .01, *** < .001. When interpreting genre correlations, it must be kept in mind that effect values may be underestimated due to the participants’ average selection of 3.56 genres.

Results

By definition, G.A.S. requires the accumulation of music equipment. Only 7% of the players possessed just one guitar, 15% two and 20% three instruments. 20% indicated having more than five and further 16% even possessed more than ten guitars. Regarding person-related factors, the experience was the crucial factor for owning several guitars, followed by age and level of professionalism (Table 1). A significant trend towards a big guitar collection was found for blues and traditional rock genres as well as for no rock/metal players. By tendency, all metal genres except heavy metal had a negative relation.

	Number of electric guitars	Number of amplifiers
Age (rs)	.292***	.231***
Experience (rs)	.402***	.356***
Professionalism (rs)	.259***	.148***
Genres (r)	blues .158***; classic rock .145**; no rock/metal .142**; hard rock .100*	blues .208***; no rock/metal .196***; classic rock .193***; metalcore -.162***; extreme metal -.129**

Table 1: Correlations regarding size of equipment

The participants owned less amplifiers than guitars: two devices (31%), four and more (25%), one and three each (22%), more than ten (1%). Here too, the experience was the most important factor even though the number increased with age and expertise as well. Just as with the guitars, blues, classic rock and no rock/metal players had the most amplifiers, metal players the least. For choosing amplifiers, the sound quality was the main reason (72%), followed by flexibility (33%) and transportability (31%). The cost was of minor relevance (17%). Apart from amplifiers, all participants, regardless of personal factors, indicated to be willing to spend money for good quality ($M = 4.34$; $SD = 0.86$). Regarding flexibility, playing more genres correlated with the number of amplifiers ($rs = .147^{**}$) and guitars ($rs = .200^{***}$).

For contextualizing the number of instruments, and for obtaining insight into G.A.S., the players’ attitudes and aesthetic, ideals concerning their equipment

were evaluated. In general, the guitar sound was very important for most players ($M = 4.69$; $SD = .067$), especially for the more proficient ones ($r = .123^*$). Closely related, most had a clear vision of a good sound, and it advanced with higher experience and level of professionalism (Table 2). Participants reported a personal sound ($M = 3.80$; $SD = 1.04$) to be more relevant than an innovative sound ($M = 2.71$; $SD = 1.22$). Both criteria increased with higher professionalism (personal $r_s = .176^{***}$; innovative $r_s = .119^*$). The genres differed only slightly. For most metal players, having a personal or an innovative sound was less relevant. These ideals, however, were important for players of grunge and alternative rock, who seemed to be valuing individual sounds, for instance by means of effects pedals (Herbst 2016: 290ff). What is more, most players acknowledged different equipment to affect their playing ($M = 4.00$; $SD = 1.01$). A general orientation towards aesthetics of the 1960s and '70s could not be confirmed. This was more likely in age and for blues musicians and, by tendency, by players of classic rock and no rock/metal genres. All metal genres rather disliked such an aesthetics.

	Clear vision of a good sound	Orientation towards aesthetics of 1960s and '70s	Preference for traditional guitars	Interest in testing gear in music store
Means (<i>SD</i>)	4.18 (0.83)	2.59 (1.24)	3.52 (1.37)	3.04 (1.32)
Age (<i>r</i> _s)	.110*	.242***	.120*	-.347***
Experience (<i>r</i> _s)	.204***	.029 ^{ns}	0.26 ^{ns}	-.314***
Professionalism (<i>r</i> _s)	.234***	.013 ^{ns}	.015 ^{ns}	-.059 ^{ns}
Genres (<i>r</i>)	hard rock .158***	blues .305*** classic rock .278*** no rock/metal .134** heavy metal -.110* nu metal -.176*** extreme metal -.181*** metalcore -.261***	blues .310*** classic rock .138** heavy metal -.138** nu metal -.175*** extreme metal -.243*** metalcore -.244***	metalcore .178*** hard rock .157** nu metal .127* heavy metal .104* no rock/metal -.134***

Table 2: Abilities, aesthetic ideals and interests regarding guitar equipment

Testing gear in music stores, an activity potentially related to G.A.S., was not favored by the average player. Especially older and more experienced guitarists did not enjoy it (Table 2). By tendency, players of harder genres liked public testing whereas no rock/metal players did not. Guitarists of blues and traditional rock genres were fond of informing themselves about guitar equipment online or in magazines. Generally, this activity was of medium interest ($M = 3.76$; $SD = 1.21$) and lost attractiveness with more experience ($r = -.140^*$).

To shape the sound, the players experimented more with different guitars ($M = 3.60$; $SD = 1.28$), pedals ($M = 3.34$; $SD = 1.46$) and amplifiers ($M = 3.23$; $SD = 1.38$) than with pickups ($M = 2.99$; $SD = 1.41$), speakers and cabinets ($M = 2.87$;

$SD = 1.39$). Experimenting with speakers and cabinets increased with greater professionalism ($rs = .165^{***}$) and experience ($rs = .167^{***}$).

Discussion

The study was based on a sample of electric guitar players and aimed to contribute to an empirical foundation of the G.A.S. phenomenon. The guitar seemed a valid starting point since the term emerged in the context of this instrument, and because guitarists were expected to be particularly 'vulnerable' to the syndrome. This work confirmed the guitar players' close connection with their equipment. On average, the musicians had five electric guitars, a third five to ten, and a sixth even more than ten – not to mention acoustic guitars, recording gear and other tools. Even though they owned less amplifiers, the findings still indicate a big equipment collection. The size of the collection grew with age and experience, probably as a natural accumulation over the years. It could well be that this trend was related to income. Younger players may also be 'afflicted' but lack the economic means.

As expected, the stylistic flexibility correlated with the size of the equipment (Leonhardt 2015). The results indicate that flexibility was of little relevance for choosing amplifiers. Electric guitarists seem to use specialized gear for certain genres, probably leading to accumulating devices. This explanation is supported by the finding of players agreeing to different sounds taking influence on their playing, which again is an inevitable result of diverse equipment. The main study of the author (Herbst 2016) complies with this hypothesis. There, an acoustic analysis proved sound to take effect on the instrument's playability and expressiveness, and this assumption was confirmed in the succeeding survey (Herbst 2016). Hence, G.A.S. may be a result of increasing expertise and professionalism, especially when involving the extension of the stylistic repertoire. Players sticking to a limited stylistic range may be content with fewer but not less specialized equipment of high quality.

The participants of the sample believed the guitar sound to be highly important, without any reservations. The majority also had a clear vision of a good sound, which indicates a high awareness when dealing with music technology. With this vision advancing with age, experience and professionalism, competences in using technology deliberately may be understood as part of a guitar-specific expertise complying with the importance of the sound for guitar players found in academic literature (Gracyk 1996: 110ff). However, it is surprising that a personal sound was of little importance, and an innovative one even less. Consequently, competences in music technology may rarely lead to creating utterly new sounds, but neither are traditional aesthetics intended by most musicians. Having diverse role models could be an explanation. As debated in music education, popular musicians learn with role models trying to imitate their sounds (Green 2002;

Ahlers 2015). This assumption was confirmed by professional players increasingly valuing more personal and innovative sounds. Professionals probably develop their own sound through disengaging from their models.

Against the widespread opinion in popular music research of rock musicians being reactionary and tradition-conscious (Grossberg 1992; Moore 1993; Gracyk 1996), the participants were very hesitant in agreeing to an orientation towards aesthetics of the 1960s and '70s, the time when the potential of the electric guitar had fully emerged and taken influence on the development of rock and metal genres (Elflein 2010). The results indicate a clear line between the genres; blues, classic and hard rock were more traditionalist than grunge, alternative rock and metal. Regarding G.A.S., being tradition-conscious does not counter the desire for additional instruments. On the contrary, the traditionalists more than other players owned the highest number of guitars and amplifiers. One possible reason could be the urge to collect famous models in guitar history, inevitably leading to more equipment than necessary for musical practice (Leonhardt 2015; Diiorio 2016).

In his pioneering article on G.A.S., Walter Becker (1996) also described the *Guitar Modification Syndrome* as a “dangerous complication to the original syndrome that seems in more advanced cases to be doing most of the damage”. The findings show that even though players experiment with different guitars and amplifiers, they seldom alter the electronics by replacing pickups or speakers. The correlations indicate such activities mainly for professionals who are probably trying to optimize their equipment with subtle modifications. Hence, Becker’s ‘worries’ cannot be confirmed for most guitarists and may concern professional touring or studio players primarily.

Quite a few issues arise from the current study that should be addressed in the future. First, theoretical work on defining and conceptualizing the phenomenon is needed. The not quite serious journalistic and encyclopedic literature does not go beyond criteria such as the “urge to acquire and accumulate lots of gear” (Wikipedia 2015) and the addictive compulsion to buy more gear than necessary (Leonhardt 2016). Empirical approaches require a more sophisticated definition for better operationalization – in general and for specific instruments. Closely related, cultural studies oriented research could explore issues like commodification and power structures in the industry. Aspects worth considering were the effect of role models and the ever-expanding market of signature equipment. Another field worth exploring was the process of how values are passed on within musical cultures, potentially explaining the prestige of certain instruments and how they shape sounds of genres (Brockhaus 2015). Such research may identify diverse intentions and desires behind G.A.S. (Leonhardt 2016; Power & Parker 2015; Kwisses

2015), classify groups of musicians, and determine the effect of using specific technology on genre aesthetics.

Conclusion

This article addressed the largely unexplored issue of G.A.S. from a music technology perspective with the attitudes and intentions of practicing musicians in mind. Tendencies of guitar players' urge to accumulate gear could be confirmed, and person-related factors were explored. As expected, age, experience, level of professionalism and genre affinity proved significant for attitudes towards using technology and for aesthetic ideals. Evaluating gender effects was practically impossible due to the low number of female participants. Yet, the survey points to G.A.S. being a phenomenon affecting many electric guitar players.

The study is subject to several limitations. Based on the survey of another study, the data could not be specifically tailored to the scope of the article. Likewise, since the focus of the original dataset was on rock music, genres other than rock and metal were rarely considered. Furthermore, the study only addressed electric guitar players. Future studies may concentrate on different instruments common in popular music and compare instrument-specific practices. Taken together, such research could greatly contribute to an understanding of how the creative production process works in different genres, and how person-related factors are involved.

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