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RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘burn me down’: songwriting as an analytical tool to explore academics’ lived experiences of fibromyalgia

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This article examines songwriting as an analytical and practice-research method for exploring the lived experiences of academics with fibromyalgia. The project emerges from a larger qualitative study and addresses the research question ‘How does the creation of a song based on one participant’s narrative and playlist help us understand academics’ lived experience of fibromyalgia?’. This practice-research responds to the limitations of conventional qualitative methods in capturing the affective, embodied, and variable dimensions of fibromyalgia. The project involved a collaboration between the researcher (Nicole), who has both academic and lived experience of fibromyalgia, and an electronic musician (Stephen), whose understanding of the condition was through indirect lived experience. Drawing on reflexive thematic analysis, Stephen analysed one participant’s interview narrative and playlist before composing the original song ‘burn me down’. Songwriting functioned not as illustration, but as a mode of embodied enquiry that ‘thinks with sound’, enabling tacit and affective dimensions of experience to emerge through creative practice. The resulting composition conveys tensions between fragility and stoicism, cyclical pain and fluctuating energy, and the emotional labour of sustaining an academic identity while living with chronic illness. The article argues that songwriting as method can operate simultaneously as analysis and representation within arts-based research, expanding possibilities for practice-research into lived experience. It also reflects on issues of authorship, collaboration, and embodied knowledge within practice-research. Overall, this project demonstrates how creative-analytical processes can generate insights inaccessible through text alone, offering a compelling model for integrating music into qualitative research.

Keywords embodied enquiry • fibromyalgia • lived experience • arts-based research
• practice-research • songwriting as method

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Listen to the audio piece 'burn me down'

Introduction

In this contribution we (Nicole and Stephen) explore songwriting as an analytical process to understand the lived experience of an academic with fibromyalgia, which is underpinned by my (Nicole) research 'The "I" in fibromyalgia: the construction of academic identity under the influence of fibromyalgia' (Brown, 2018a; 2018b; 2019a; 2019b; 2020; 2022; 2024). Fibromyalgia is a debilitating condition that is characterised by chronic, wide-spread pain, fatigue, sleep disturbances, cognitive dysfunctions, often described as 'brain fog' or 'fibro fog', increased sensitivity and psychological disorders (White and Harth, 2001) while also being associated with a wide range of somatic symptoms (Wolfe et al, 2010). The original study as approved by the University of Kent ethics board set out to explore how academics with fibromyalgia construct and inhabit their academic identities within the demanding and often exclusionary context of contemporary academia. The initial premise was informed by an awareness of how certain personality types are more prone to developing fibromyalgia and those characteristics often aligning with the expectations and cultures of academic life. However, I was not only interested in the relationship between fibromyalgia and academic identity. I also wanted to explore how individuals made sense of their place within academia when negotiating a chronic condition that is contested, difficult to understand, and that interfered with their academic work due to 'brain fog'. At the same time, I was acutely aware of the limitations of conventional research methods in capturing the lived realities of those with fibromyalgia. Much medical and sociological research on the condition rely heavily on structured instruments such as surveys and Likert scales (e.g. Martins et al, 2012; Tangen et al, 2020; Coskun Benlidayi et al, 2025) although these methods do not accommodate well the unpredictability that characterises fibromyalgia: its variability in symptoms and its fluctuations in intensity. My aim, therefore, was to explore whether creative methods might offer a more holistic means of enquiry. To this end, I employed timelines and identity boxes alongside interviews that were conceptualised as 'data travelling' interactions between researcher and participants (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015) to make sense of experiences. The timeline task soon revealed the many ways in which participants interpreted and enacted the invitation to narrate their lives. Some participants created traditional, chronological timelines, while others opted for more associative visual structures resembling mind maps. A few participants used collections of photographs to represent key moments or specific experiences. One participant submitted a 12-page written narrative detailing their experience of living and working with fibromyalgia. Within this narrative, they also included a list of

songs that they described as significant to their journey, forming a personal playlist that held deep emotional and symbolic meaning for them:

All this scholarly glory, against the backdrop of the grinding near impossibility of getting out of bed, of dealing with the pain, all of the pain, of keeping going. I remember it was a particularly bleak winter that year, or at least it was for me. A friend and I swap playlists, and the one I made in that period captures the feeling, the expansive rawness so well, that I travel back in time every time I hear it. And I play it in particularly bad times now. (Participant narrative)

When analysing the data, I drew upon all the materials that participants shared. Yet, I found myself uncertain about how to approach the song list. Unlike text, images, or chronological structures, the playlist seemed to resist my arsenal of analytic frameworks at the time. It felt uncomfortably intangible, existing at the intersection of emotion, memory, and embodiment. I set it aside. But in excluding this data set from my original study, I felt that I had, in effect and rather unethically, silenced part of a participant’s voice. Their narrative and references to music represented an effort to communicate affectively and experientially, and my inability to engage with that form of expression meant that an important layer of meaning remained unexplored.

Over time, as my understanding of practice-based and practice-led research deepened, I began to reconsider that moment of discomfort as an invitation rather than a limitation. I realised that the playlist could be a site of creative and analytical engagement in its own right. By returning to this participant’s contribution through the lens of creative collaboration with a musician (Stephen), I saw the possibility of transforming that unexamined list into an active, interpretive process. This led to the conception of the present project: an experiment in using songwriting as a form of analysis. Working together, we (Nicole and Stephen) sought to translate the lived experience of fibromyalgia into a musical form that could convey what words alone often fail to express.

We contemplated involving the participant from the original study. However, I no longer had reliable knowledge of the participant’s living situation, care context, or current level of disability, so that the unexpected re-contact could have been intrusive or distressing. Re-contacting the participant would also have risked imposing additional emotional, cognitive, and practical burdens on an individual whose health status may have substantially deteriorated since the original study. Ethical guidance in qualitative and health-related research emphasises the principles of doing no harm and respect for participant welfare (Schmid et al, 2024). And last but not least, I had formally concluded the relationship at the end of the original study through a final closing conversation that explicitly marked my exit from the field, a process that is itself ethically significant and the boundaries of which need to be respected (Knott, 2019). These considerations supported the judgement that re-contacting the participant after a significant period of non-communication was ethically inappropriate. Yet, not analysing the existing materials was also not appropriate because the participant had invested significant time, effort, and emotional energy in creating the materials. Re-engaging with the narrative and playlist supported the ethical aim of not unnecessarily silencing the participant’s voice and experiences, particularly in the context of serious illness and disability, where opportunities for representation are often limited. Therefore, we framed the project as a new opportunity to interpret

and reimagine one participant's narrative and playlist, which provided an interesting space for an exploration of how creative practice, academic enquiry, and personal connection could intersect through the process of songwriting. The overarching research question guiding our practice-research thus became:

- How does the creation of a song based on one participant's narrative and playlist help us understand academics' lived experience of fibromyalgia?

In pursuing this question, we aimed to test whether songwriting could serve as a means of a 'thinking with and by means of sound' (Herzogenrath, 2017: 10) to generate insight into embodied academic life with a chronic condition and thereby be a mode of analysis rather than mere illustration. This contribution reflects on that experiment, its process, and what it reveals about both fibromyalgia and the possibilities of creative-analytical practice.

Songwriting as practice-research

Practice-research represents a principled approach where research and practice operate as interdependent processes, generating new forms of knowledge through the centrality of practice and the role of artefacts (Candy et al, 2021). The field encompasses various terminologies including practice-based research (e.g. Whiteford, 2020), practice-led research (e.g. Smith and Dean, 2009), close-to-practice research (e.g. Wyse et al, 2018), and practice-as-research (e.g. Nelson, 2006), whereby these terms mean different things to different people and continue to generate debate (Till et al, 2005; Liggett, 2020). Despite its decades of academic presence, the field remains in the process of building its definitional status and discourse (Steagall, 2022). Positions range from viewing making or designing alone as constituting research, to believing research and design are incommensurable activities, with knowledge residing either within artefacts or in their dissemination and interpretation (Till et al, 2005). Central to all these forms of research is an emphasis on questions emerging from practice while maintaining scientific academic protocols and rigour. Often, 'doing and making' are integral components of the process, recognising that the researcher is not separate from the enquiry but deeply embedded and engaged within it.

Within qualitative enquiry, artistic research, and creative practice methodologies, the use of songwriting as a mode of practice-research is slowly gaining increasing attention (see Carless, 2018). This growing body of work positions songwriting not merely as a creative outcome but as a reflexive, embodied, and analytical process through which knowledge is generated, articulated, and shared. Researchers in this field (e.g. Luckett, 2016; Ward, 2022; Høybye, 2025) challenge traditional distinctions between artistic practice and academic research, proposing instead that songwriting can function as both method and mode of representation, an epistemological space where lived experience, affect, and analysis converge. Carless (2018; 2023) has been a key contributor to this emerging discourse, situating songwriting within the broader context of embodied and reflexive qualitative methodologies, examining the processes of writing songs as a form of qualitative enquiry, while highlighting how the act of songwriting itself can constitute a reflexive research practice (Carless, 2018). Here, the process of lyric and melody creation is understood as an interpretive act that allows

the researcher to engage with and make sense of complex lived experiences. As such, songwriting functions as an embodied practice within autoethnographic research and so contributes to the development of researcher self-awareness and epistemic sensitivity (Carless, 2023). Through this lens, songwriting becomes an embodied mode of knowing, in which the affective, sensory, and emotional dimensions of experience are central to knowledge production. Songwriting is also explored as a reflexive and emancipatory practice within autoethnographic research (Douglas, 2016). Writing from the dual perspective of songwriter and researcher, Douglas (2016) conceptualises songwriting as a way to ‘counter silence’ (Douglas, 2016: 798), giving voice to personal and collective experiences that are often marginalised in academic discourse. Through songwriting, researchers can engage in acts of resistance and transcendence, transforming private experiences into shared, performative narratives. This work underscores the potential of songwriting to act as a bridge between personal subjectivity and social meaning, positioning songs as spaces of connection and critical reflection.

Taken together, these studies articulate songwriting as a multifaceted research practice that integrates creativity, reflexivity, embodiment, and collaboration. Songwriting operates simultaneously as method, analysis, and representation: a process through which researchers can access affective and tacit dimensions of experience, engage participants in co-creation, and communicate findings through forms that transcend textual boundaries. Whether conceived as autoethnographic reflection (Douglas, 2016; Carless, 2018), embodied enquiry (Carless, 2023), a sense of corporeal and emotional embodiment (Jones, 2016), collaborative ethnography (Høybye, 2025), or research-creation (Synenko, 2024), songwriting as practice-research challenges the privileging of verbal and propositional knowledge in academic discourse. It offers instead an integrative approach that values the sensory, emotional, and performative as legitimate and vital dimensions of knowing.

Positionality

Before continuing, we would like to focus on our individual and joint positionality. At the time of writing up this songwriting project, I (Nicole) am profoundly deaf and have been diagnosed with fibromyalgia, Sjogren’s syndrome, and burned-out Meniere’s disease. As my health has changed over time, it is prudent to consider what I wrote about my positionality at the time of the original fibromyalgia study:

I am hearing-impaired with a by now severe to profound hearing loss in both ears, so I wear hearing aids. I have also been diagnosed with fibromyalgia. It would be a blatant lie if I was to say that these bodily experiences did not influence me as an academic. If I am honest with myself, my interest in embodiment and the use of the body stems from my personal experiences of and with a body that betrays me, often unannounced. The fact that I have been diagnosed with fibromyalgia supposedly makes me an insider researcher. However, due to the variability and uniqueness of the fibromyalgia illness experience I still remain very much an outsider to my research participants’ stories. I am acutely aware of the tensions around disclosing to the research participants and declaring myself an insider, while maintaining an academic,

research persona instead of becoming ‘the fibromyalgia patient’. At the same time, the physical experience of fibromyalgia cannot be excluded from the research process. I often experience fibromyalgia symptoms in response to environmental and contextual influences. This has led me to consider my positionality in relation to a wider range of bodily responses, such as ‘hearing voices’ when reading interview transcripts, or experiencing bodily fatigue and brain fog after an interview. Upon reflection, I realised how difficult it was for me to extract my researcher self from my fibromyalgia self. (Brown, 2020: 51)

This excerpt highlights my thinking about embodiment and how my experience with and of a chronic condition and disability will always play a role in all my research. It was my personal experience with fibromyalgia that led me to the study in the first place.

I (Stephen) describe myself as an electronic producer and drummer based in London with Austrian and British roots. Drawing from my passion for rhythm and electronic music, I create work that is both deeply personal and open to interpretation, reflecting a constant exploration of mood and emotion. My music has been described as ‘rhythmically sharp but emotionally layered’ (Johnson, 2025, n.p.). Initially drawn to rhythm and percussion, I began drumming as a child and later pursued formal training as a classical percussionist, earning a scholarship to the Royal College of Music junior department. This early education provided a strong technical foundation and an appreciation for both the discipline and expressiveness of performance. In my subsequent education and training, I developed both the creative and analytical capabilities necessary to navigate and sustain an independent artistic career. This collaboration represented a new direction for my creative practice. Although I had experience in composing, performing, and producing music, this commissioned project was the first time I was invited to create an original piece in response to research material.

Full disclosure

I (Stephen) do not have any lived experience of fibromyalgia. However, I am my mother’s (Nicole’s) son and have seen how fibromyalgia impacts an individual. In that respect, I have a lifetime of indirect lived experience of times when my mum (Nicole) would have been in pain, or when she would have experienced fatigue and/or cognitive dysfunctions.

From my (Nicole) point of view, it was Stephen’s relative closeness of experience to fibromyalgia that made me initiate this collaborative songwriting project, because I felt I did not have to explain the lived experience.

‘burn me down’: our creative analytical practice

Our first formal conversations about the collaboration focused on defining practical and ethical parameters, including payment, expectations, details about the process, and considerations of confidentiality and anonymity in relation to the original research participant. To maintain transparency and support reflexivity, Stephen agreed to document his creative process in detail. The original study was approved by the

ethics board of the University of Kent, while this project was approved by the ethics board of the UCL Institute of Education. As a lot of time had passed between the original study and this project, the participant of the original study was not involved in this project. In the original study (Brown, 2018a; 2020), Nicole undertook reflexive thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019). Some of the themes identified at the time related to participants’ experience of fibromyalgia and how they navigated their symptoms while working as academics, the participants’ understanding of academic identity at public and private levels, and the academics’ attempts to make sense of a condition that is complex and contested (Brown, 2020). It is within the context of these themes that we wanted to consider this one participant’s narrative and song list for the project in hand. We agreed that Nicole would share an anonymised version of the participant’s written narrative alongside their track list and the corresponding songs, exactly as the participant had sent everything to Nicole. As Stephen is not an experienced researcher, we considered how we could approach the songwriting process systematically, particularly as Stephen’s usual process is dynamic and intuitive. Nicole therefore outlined the principles of reflexive thematic analysis by explaining the phases (data familiarisation, generation of codes, creation of themes, reviewing, defining and naming of themes, presentation of findings) and highlighting how subjectivity and systematicity are usually accounted for (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2019). Using these steps as a framework we agreed that Stephen would familiarise himself with the material before developing what might be considered analytical conclusions. This phase would compare to the generation of initial codes and categories. We then had a follow-up conversation to allow space for clarification and reflection. At this stage, Stephen’s questions were largely practical: the intended genre and tone, expected song length, and the next steps of the process. Stephen was granted complete creative freedom, with the only constraint being that the song length would need to be between two and a half and three minutes. This decision reflected pragmatic and aesthetic considerations. The song would be played in academic settings such as conferences, training sessions, or research presentations, and it was feared that audiences would lose interest if the song was too long. In addition, the listening experiences and habits in contemporary music in the mid-2020s also lie between 2 minutes 51 seconds and 3 minutes 9 seconds (Chien, 2025).

By the time this conversation was had, Stephen had already internalised the data, had begun to take notes, and to draw his own interpretive conclusions. This marked the transition from data analysis to practice-research proper: a creative process that would embody analytical insight through composition rather than through written interpretation.

Stephen took notes regarding musical elements from individual songs of the entire playlist particularly paying attention to emotional tone, lyrical themes, sonic texture, similarities, and striking elements that resonated. The song’s instrumental base developed quickly from that, but finding a vocal performance that captured the appropriate emotional tone required more time and sensitivity. Throughout the process, Stephen used the music software Ableton Live to document both musical and analytical reflections. The Ableton project file became a form of digital notebook, with locators and markers indicating where certain elements would occur, even before the composition was begun. Voice notes, written annotations, and iterative edits allowed the creative process to unfold reflexively, moving fluidly between experimentation and structured reflection. The fragments Stephen had noted down

served as the building blocks of the final composition, ensuring that the finished song was not a direct musical representation of the playlist, but would be subtly shaped by it and would retain its emotional core. The creation of the song in this respect constitutes a construction between the researcher and the musician based on their own histories and experiences as well as the participant's data. Participant data was filtered through the researcher's analytical lens and subsequently transformed through the musician's compositional practice. Each stage involved selection, omission, and interpretation, making it untenable to claim that the output is a transparent or unmediated representation of participant perspectives. As such, the work should be understood as a layered construction in which authorship is distributed but not equal, with the researcher and musician maintaining primary responsibility for shaping the final form.

Once the song was completed, Stephen invited Nicole to the studio to experience the work in an acoustically controlled environment, using industry-standard speakers to convey the full emotional and sonic detail of the composition. This listening session marked a turning point in the collaboration, transforming the analytical and conceptual discussions into an embodied experience.

Analytical insights and discussion

Together and independently from one another we reflected on our creative and emotional journeys through the project, considering not only what we had learned about fibromyalgia but also how the collaborative process itself had reshaped our understanding of practice-research.

The process of transforming a participant's narrative and playlist into song revealed both the emotional intensity and the fluctuating nature of living with fibromyalgia. The original research showed that while symptoms of fibromyalgia often flare and recede, the condition is nonetheless experienced as all-encompassing, a persistent presence marked by an undercurrent of pain and episodes of depression that vary in depth and frequency (Brown, 2022; 2024). This continuity of suffering, coupled with its unpredictable rhythm, is captured sonically in the song's composition. The gentle, dreamlike melody and emotive vocals (see Appendix for lyrics) are underpinned by a sharp, steady rhythm and a strong bass line that occasionally seems discordant or mismatched. This musical tension mirrors the lived experience of fibromyalgia: the simultaneous striving for calm and control amid a body that feels unsteady and unreliable. The lyrical refrain, structured like a self-affirmation or mantra (see Appendix for lyrics), evokes the inner dialogue of someone seeking to endure, cope, and make sense of their condition. This layer of understanding emerged through the iterative process of moving between researcher-musician dialogue, the participant's narrative, and the act of composition.

We would like to return to the central research question of whether the process of songwriting can express an academic's lived experience of fibromyalgia. We would like to suggest that when the creative process integrates the participant's narrative and both direct and indirect lived experiences, songwriting can yield a meaningful and affective output that resonates beyond the immediate research context. Evaluating the success of the song, and ultimately of the project, presents a methodological challenge. As an extension of a larger qualitative study, the songwriting process does

not align neatly with conventional research evaluation criteria. Instead, it is more appropriately considered through the lens of art-based research quality frameworks. [Barone and Eisner’s \(2012\)](#) dimensions (incisiveness, concision, coherence, generativity, social significance, and evocation and illumination) and [Leavy’s \(2015\)](#) criteria (methodology, usefulness, public scholarship, audience response, aesthetics or artfulness, personal fingerprint or creativity, and ethical practice) offer valuable perspectives for assessing artistic and analytical merit. For this project, the most relevant criteria are evocation and illumination, audience response, aesthetics or artfulness, and personal fingerprint or creativity ([Barone and Eisner, 2012](#); [Leavy, 2015](#)). The song’s creative fingerprint is evident in how it came into being through an iterative, deeply relational process of researcher–musician dialogue, grounded in the participant’s narrative and playlist. Albeit informal and anecdotal in nature, audience response to the song has been consistently noteworthy. When presented to delegates at conferences and in training workshops, individuals living with fibromyalgia reported a strong sense of recognition, identifying with the affective and experiential dimensions conveyed through the music. Those without direct experience of the condition tended to express curiosity and a desire to learn more, often framing the song as an entry point rather than an explanation. For listeners the song does not necessarily enhance their factual understanding of fibromyalgia in a clinical sense, but there is impact in the song’s expressive qualities, which draws audiences in and fosters a different, more affective mode of engagement with the condition. The song is not experienced as ‘easy listening’, but rather as an evocative, artful representation of the complexity and persistence of pain, aligning with the criteria of aesthetic and affective resonance central to arts-based enquiry. To this extent, therefore, the outcome of this project is also successful in relation to evocation. In this respect, this project affirms that creative practice can transform lived experience into a form of knowledge that is felt as much as it is understood.

Reflections on collaboration and research practice

The collaborative process at the heart of this project was shaped by a set of overlapping roles and relationships that blurred conventional distinctions between participant, researcher, and creative practitioner. Nicole and Stephen entered the project carrying multiple identities. As the researcher, Nicole brought not only academic and methodological expertise but also personal, embodied knowledge of fibromyalgia. This lived experience inevitably informed the research orientation and the interpretive stance adopted throughout the project. As a musician, meanwhile, Stephen approached the collaboration primarily as a creative artist rather than as a researcher. Yet, his perspective was also intimately shaped by experience. As Nicole’s son, he had grown up alongside her illness and so has a deep, tacit understanding of fibromyalgia’s presence in everyday life. This practice–research does not adopt a participatory methodology, nor does it seek to redistribute authorship or decision-making. Therefore, the participant is not a co-creator or co-author, even though the project is based on the participant’s narrative and playlist. The entangled relationships between the researcher, the musician, and the participant’s material, but not the participant themselves, added richness but also complexity to the process. This raised an important methodological question regarding how the creative, dynamic

process of practice-research aligns with the expectations of academic rigour when collaborators are not equally experienced (Mathiassen, 2002; Uggerhøj, 2014). Commonly, practice-research requires a researcher engaging in both practice and reflection, and this dynamic shifts significantly when the 'doing' is primarily undertaken by someone outside the academy. In this project, the research itself unfolded through a kind of distributed practice, where creativity, interpretation, and reflection were shared, rather than held by a single practitioner-researcher.

Questions of power, authorship, ownership, and who gets recognised were central in this practice-research (cf. Harrington, 2026). As the musician Stephen was granted full creative autonomy in composing, arranging, and performing the song. This freedom was intentional, reflecting an ethical commitment to honour his artistic integrity and avoid instrumentalising his creativity for academic ends (Rimas and Rimas, 2024). However, this very openness also complicated notions of authorship and ownership, as the song's creation was driven by Stephen's artistry, but emerged from research the framework for which Nicole designed and applied. Furthermore, Stephen developed the song in response to and inspired by the experiences and playlist provided by a research participant as the project's initial creative stimulus. 'burn me down' thus embodies multiple layers of contribution and ownership: the participant's narrative voice, the musician's creative interpretation, and the researcher's conceptual framing (McDonough and Brandenburg, 2019). Therefore, materially and practically, the song is Stephen's creative output, which he is entitled to use for his musical and artistic purposes, with Nicole owning the rights to use 'burn me down' for academic and research purposes.

Rather than seeking a definitive resolution, we have come to view this entanglement as intrinsic to the ethics and epistemology of practice-research. The process of co-creation resists clear demarcations between researcher and artist, between analysis and expression, and between knowledge and experience. In this sense, the collaboration itself becomes both the method and the finding, a space where questions of authorship, embodiment, and relationality remain open, negotiated, and continually redefined through practice. Unlike conventional methodologies that prioritise replicability in evidence-based approaches through controlled variables and fixed procedures (von Thiele Schwarz et al, 2025), practice-research operates through iterative, intuitive engagement with materials, forms, and ideas (Nelson, 2006; Candy et al, 2021). The knowledge it produces is constituted through the practitioner-researchers' situated, embodied interaction with the practice itself. Intuition here is not a lack of rigour but a trained and reflexive mode of knowing developed through expertise, sensitivity to context, and sustained critical reflection (Bulley and Şahin, 2021). The transformations that occurred within this process, like shifts in perception, understanding, and articulation, took place incrementally and were not always fully accessible to propositional description. They resisted straightforward replication. By foregrounding internal transformation and intuitive processes, practice-research expands what counts as knowledge and how it can be produced, while still maintaining accountability through reflective articulation and methodological clarity.

For Nicole, the transformation of the participant's narrative and playlist into a song required a different mode of attentiveness than conventional thematic or discursive analysis, one that foregrounded the affective, sensory, and embodied experience (Leavy, 2015). And as someone who has fibromyalgia, this was an opportunity to remain closely attuned to the affective and experiential dimensions of living with fibromyalgia, to be heard, rather than to have accounts reduced to abstracted categories

or themes. Stephen benefitted as a songwriter by extending creative capacities for working with prompts, in this case illness narrative, voice, and embodiment, which are different to his usual ways of working. Transforming research material into song necessitated aesthetic and ethical decision-making concerning representation, interpretation, and emotional resonance. Stephen may also choose to further develop the song in the future and potentially incorporate it into his broader electronic music repertoire, as the work aligns with his ongoing artistic interest in using synthesisers and electronic sound design to create immediate emotional resonance and to evoke feeling from the very first notes of a composition.

Conclusion

Songwriting is particularly well suited to exploring the lived experience of fibromyalgia because it operates at the intersection of language, affect, and embodiment, precisely the domains in which this condition is most difficult to articulate. Songwriting offers a multimodal form of expression and temporal and relational articulation of experience, in which meaning can be distributed across lyrics, melody, rhythm, and vocals. This allows experiences that are episodic, ambiguous, or affectively charged to be rendered without requiring full coherence or linear narrative. In this sense, songwriting accommodates fragmentation, repetition, and dissonance, formal qualities that can mirror the unpredictability and persistence of chronic pain. As a result, songwriting does not simply document experience, it enacts it, producing a form of knowledge that is both expressive and analytic.

The approach of using songwriting as an analytical tool is not limited to fibromyalgia, although its suitability depends on the phenomenology of the condition in question. Songwriting is likely to be particularly effective for other chronic conditions that involve fluctuating symptoms, invisible or contested forms of illness, and complex affective dimensions, such as chronic fatigue syndrome, long COVID, or rheumatoid arthritis. In these cases, patients often struggle to communicate experiences that are not easily measurable or externally visible, and songwriting can provide an alternative mode of articulation that validates subjective knowledge. Even in cases where the experience is less affectively or temporally dynamic, collaborative or assisted songwriting practices could extend the method's applicability, although this introduces additional questions around authorship, mediation, and interpretation.

The broader applicability of songwriting across chronic conditions also lies in its capacity to generate shared understanding. Songs can be circulated, performed, and listened to by others, allowing individual experiences to resonate collectively without being reduced to standardised categories, thereby creating a bridge between personal narrative and social recognition. This is particularly important, when conditions are frequently misunderstood or minimised, and in contexts where aspects of patient experience and patient-centred approaches to care should be prioritised. By encountering illness narratives in musical form, healthcare providers, educationalists, medical professionals, and other stakeholders may develop greater sensitivity to the complexities of chronic conditions and the limitations of purely biomedical frameworks. Songs can also be used as a pedagogical tool for patients themselves, supporting self-reflection and peer connection. Therein also lies the potential for other researchers working on fibromyalgia or related chronic and

poorly understood conditions. Researchers may not evaluate the song primarily according to conventional aesthetic criteria associated with commercial or professional songwriting, but rather in terms of its capacity to convey experiential meaning and provoke empathetic or interpretive engagement. Also, the song may act as an impetus for methodological reflection by demonstrating how arts-based and practice-led approaches can open alternative pathways for analysis, dissemination, and participant representation in health research.

For practice-researchers, this work demonstrates the potential of creative collaboration to extend enquiry beyond the individual artist-researcher model. Knowledge emerged relationally, through dialogue, experimentation, and shared meaning-making, highlighting the value of ‘doing and making’ as analytical acts. The project also illustrates how embodied engagement, particularly when collaborators have direct and indirect lived experience of the phenomenon under study, can deepen reflexivity and authenticity within research.

Future research could further develop embodied enquiry as a practical methodology for non-musician researchers, enabling songwriting to be used as an accessible creative-analytical tool alongside poetry, fiction, or visual arts. Expanding this praxis would democratise creative research by integrating musical expression into broader qualitative enquiry. Additionally, revising and theorising the collaborative process itself could lead to the development of clearer parameters and frameworks for practice-based partnerships. Ultimately, this project affirms songwriting as a legitimate and generative form of embodied enquiry, capable of expressing the sensory and emotional dimensions of human experience that traditional research methods often overlook.

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NB and SJB collaborated equally on the conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, and methodology for the practice-research.

SJB was solely responsible for the project administration and the software.

NB wrote a first draft based on conversations and notes from NB and SJB. SJB reviewed the manuscript and NB finalised it on the basis of the joint comments.

NB: Nicole Brown

SJB: Stephen Josef Brown

Research ethics statement

The original study as approved by the University of Kent (2018) ethics board set out to explore how academics with fibromyalgia construct and inhabit their academic identities within the demanding and often exclusionary context of contemporary academia.

This practice-research project was approved by the ethics board of the UCL Institute of Education (2024).

Data availability statement

The authors declare that they take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the analysis. The data can unfortunately not be shared.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix: lyrics to 'burn me down'

Gon' burn me, burn me
Gon' burn me

You gon' burn me down again
You gon' burn me down again
I don't have the strength if
You gon' burn me down again
You gon' burn me down again
I don't have the strength if

Gon' burn me
Gon' burn me, burn me
Gon' burn me
Gon' burn me

You gon' burn me down again
You gon' burn me down again
I don't have the strength if
You gon' burn me down again
You gon' burn me down again
I don't have the strength if

Gon' burn me
Gon' burn me
Gon' burn me, burn me

You gon' burn me down again, burn me
You gon' burn me down again
I don't have the strength if
You gon' burn me down again, burn me
You gon' burn me down again
I don't have the strength