MUSICIANS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: A MUTUAL INFLUENCE

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The musical and cultural origins and affiliations of three independent-label musicians residing in the Philadelphia metropolitan area were examined by the author during a period lasting several months. Personal interviews and silent observations were utilized as the primary methods of information gathering. In addition, a comprehensive literature review of music and culture was conducted. The objective was to establish a connection between music and culture by showcasing how these musicians have self-defined and connected aspects of music and culture in their own lives. Findings suggest that the cultural identities of all three musicians are frequently misperceived by their fans, particularly with respect to the connection of the musicians’ cultural backgrounds with the music they perform. Moreover, among all three musicians, their own connections between music and culture were strengthened most through family influences and weakened most by racial and ethnic stereotyping. Interesting to note was the musicians’ universal classification of the diversity of both music and culture not as an asset but merely as something intrinsic. However, all three musicians actively incorporate more than one version of the same song into their repertoires, a process they perceive to be creative more than persuasive. In an increasingly multicultural world, the findings beg further study of the interconnectivity of music and culture, which will be especially beneficial for musicians as they write and perform music for a broad and diverse audience.

Keywords: Music, Culture, Diversity, Genre, Audience.

INTRODUCTION

Although I’m not a musician, I am a music lover and, over the past five years, I’ve also become friends with some of the Philadelphia metropolitan area’s most talented and respected musicians. My path from a mere “listener” to the inner circle of the Philadelphia region’s live music scene began with a friendship, a close-knit bond with a fellow music enthusiast, an insider to the local music scene who was willing and able to open the door to a new and exciting world—one musician (and venue) at a time.

Fondly recollecting the origin of my foray into the Philadelphia area’s live music scene, I began to ponder the musical beginnings of the musicians with whom I have since forged friendships. As a fervent supporter of the music of my friends and their comrades, I often feel as if it’s my duty to delve more deeply into their backgrounds, searching for that magical moment in time when these musicians’ talents transitioned from a skill set without context to a package delivered with the specific goal of sharing intimate aspects of themselves with others.

In this spirited mode, I’ve chosen to focus on the musical “origins” of three friends, all of whom classify themselves as musicians, and all of whom are actively performing at venues in the Philadelphia region (and, in some instances, beyond.) Moreover, I’ve chosen to intersect this
focus of my research with cultural origins. During recent discussions of both a casual and research-minded nature with my musician friends (participants) the topic of culture repeatedly surfaced. What intrigued me was how the term “culture” can be so broadly, narrowly, and varyingly defined. In a sense, the term “music” can be categorized similarly, a liberty which all the participants of my research exercised. In fact, music can be a culture all its own. According to Pasler (pp. 3-4) “Music can serve as a critical tool, activating and developing multiple layers of awareness. I also write through music by engaging with the activities and practices associated with music, as well as with the concepts, myths, reputations, and material culture that affect how we hear it…Acknowledging the significance of these elements allows me to examine how people negotiate relationships with music, and how musical meaning is often complex and contingent.” (Pasler, 2008)

Through this lens of culture, I’ll examine how that term is self-defined by the participants, and how their self-conceptualizations (as individuals and as musicians) affect their performances. In essence, my overarching goal is to showcase music and culture as interminably interconnected—whether operating in tandem, co-existing as distinct components, or blending as one entity.

As mentioned, all three of the primary participants are independent-label musicians who have residency in the Philadelphia metropolitan region. All of them write their own lyrics (although not exclusively, as all occasionally perform “covers”) and are fluent in more than one musical instrument. One is female; the other two are male. Two of them (the female and one of the males) hail from the Baby Boomer generation while the third (the other male) is a member of Generation-X. The approximate length of time each of these participants has spent performing in front of live audiences is a range of ten to twenty years.

Culturally, their heritages run the gamut, spanning three continents, although their roots of faith can be penned (at least in the early-life stages) into one category. For two of them, immigration to America partially defined their childhood years, while the third remained within a comparatively smaller set of linked communities in the American Northeast. Given this richness of backgrounds, the participants’ self-definitions are rather complex, which will be evident later in the study.

Regarding this research study’s additional participants, they’re not able, perhaps, to be classified in the most rigid sense. These folks, who comprised the audiences at the venues in which the three primary participants performed their music, remain unidentified by name or other detailed descriptors. Their (formally) undocumented input is valuable, though, as they’re reliable sounding boards, resonating back to the musicians, communicating messages of affirmation (or disaffiliation) that influence the musicians’ performances in real-time.

The venues in which all three participants performed their music, in relation to this research study, are prototypical of the types and styles of venues in which they normally perform their music. More specifically, all are located either in the city of Philadelphia or in the surrounding suburban towns. Most are intimate settings—small mom-and-pop coffee houses or Irish-themed pubs—while a couple are larger in size and scope, venues designed particularly (i.e. acoustically balanced) for the optimum enjoyment of live music performances. In one venue, the owner/manager is one of the research study’s participants, although the business is a family affair, allowing for ease of duty transferability. It should be noted that personal interviews were also conducted in several of these venues (after-hours, or in more “controlled” spaces,) which instantaneously enlivened those conversations given the subject material’s relevancy.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My research was guided by the following questions:

- How do “music” and “culture” intersect or overlap in the lives of musicians?
- Through what processes do musicians affiliate with certain genres/styles of music?
- Through what processes do musicians choose to perform music for public consumption?
- How do the backgrounds of the musicians intersect with the audience and performance venues to provide a here-and-now influence on their music?

RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE

In an increasingly multicultural global community, “diversity” is certainly a buzzword, which is relevant to my research since all of my musician friends (in this study) are of different racial/ethnic backgrounds and vary somewhat in their styles of music performed. Adding complexity to this diversity is the composition of audience members—especially since my friends all perform primarily in Philadelphia, which is an incredibly diverse city in many respects.

Along with this diversity comes applicability, as these findings could be immediately relevant to any musician, most notably to those performing music of a similar genre and conceptualization process as any of the research study’s participants. Moreover, virtually any musician could benefit from an increase in knowledge of how their past experiences correlate to their present lives of making and performing music. Further insight to the musician’s audience, their fan bases, can also be gained, which has relevancy because these groups fuel the “need” for live music performances and serve as the motivation during the live music performances.

This heightened awareness of diversity could enable musicians to craft their individuality in a package that’s attractive to their audiences. Undoubtedly, “making your mark” is paramount to a musician, as differentiation among a sea of talent remains a very coveted angle of positioning. As such, the mastery of marketability will most likely lead to financial and emotional stability in any musician’s career.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing research on the inter-relativity of music and culture is vast, not so much in volume but in scope. In many pieces of literature, the message of this co-dependency may not necessarily be blatantly contextualized—buried instead beneath the minutiae of a popular musical artist/group, for example. Yet the influence of music to culture, and vice-versa, cannot be denied altogether. In fact, there are several examples that illustrate the different ways in which music and culture co-exist. As such, further qualitative study that positions the musicians themselves as the primary voices is needed since this group has a unique insider’s vantage point to the conceptions and classifications of music that cultural anthropologists or philosophers will not.

Most noteworthy across the literature here is the theme of robust connections between music and culture, some of which are detailed in a manner that is in contrast to another. In the advertising industry, for instance, music is increasingly intersecting with pop culture icons, which capitalizes on the familiarity factor among the American population. One reasoning for this is as follows: “As transformations in the U.S. radio and music industries have resulted in narrower opportunities for a narrowing range of artists, the advertising industry gladly stepped in
to offer musicians and labels large amounts of money and potential widespread exposure. The sum of all of these shifts and changes created a distinct environment for the production of music culture and cast relationships between popular music and advertising in a new light…” (Klein, 2008).

On the other hand, the unifier could be a sense of unfamiliarity, an association with the counter-culture (however defined) that is desired as an indicator of rebelliousness or political activism. For instance, it’s been asserted that, “Like generations of white teenagers before them, white teenage rap fans are listening in on black culture, fascinated by its differences, drawn in by mainstream social constructions of black culture as a forbidden narrative, as a symbol of rebellion. Kathy Ogren’s study of jazz in the 1920s shows the extensive efforts made by white teenagers and fans to imitate jazz music, dance styles, and language as well as the alarm such fascination caused on the part of state and local authority figures.” (Rose, 1994)

What’s interesting in the case of The Beatles—a 1960s-era musical ensemble that was influential to all the participants in this study—is that the aforementioned cases of pop-culture and counter-culture bleed into each other. Their mop-top haircuts and distinctly edgy rock sound were a challenge to the status quo in that tumultuous time period; yet the high quality of their lyrics and their spirited performances also made them immensely popular in America, their native England, and around the globe. In essence, The Beatles personified the connectivity and the permeability of music and culture, aggressively linking the distinct cultures of England and America in the 1960s. Shepherd speaks more about this, referring to The Beatles’ music as “another form of expression…that would relocate the mainstream of British and, more specifically, English life to accommodate the shifting cultural terrain of the late 1950s and early 1960s. That was what The Beatles achieved with a musical and cultural synthesis rooted so cleverly in the safety and sentimentality of British music hall and the colour and sexuality of recent American culture” (p. 130). Furthermore, Shepherd suggested that “The scale of The Beatles’ success, not unconnected to their rapid acceptance into the existing canons of taste, was built upon a tangential jolting of the public musical cliché…Their music was described as ‘fresh’ and ‘exciting,’ not ‘alien’ and ‘offensive.’” (p. 130)

So, has this sort of transference of music and culture become obsolete, relegated only to that musically innovative time period, or can evidence of it be found in the present? Again, precision in data-matching is not possible in this qualitative study, yet cyberspace has rooted itself as today’s (instant) communicative vehicle of choice, making connectivity more seamless than ever before. This has been a boon for the participants in this study since they’re able to frequently post their music and establish a dialogue with their fans through this medium. From the perspective of both musicians and fans, studies show that those in either group who are geographically disparate, yet connected in cyberspace, are increasingly turning to music as the premier equalizer, acquiring the ability to surmount (intangible) borders that people construct for any number of reasons. As an example, Jenkins recently coined the term ‘fandom’ as a new form of community, “one formed by the relations of consumption and categories of taste” (Jenkins, 1992) Jenkins goes on to suggest that folk music has become their equalizer, “creating a common identity for this geographically and socially dispersed group.” (Jenkins, 1992)

Blacking (1995) and Scott (2000) were rather revolutionary in their assessment of music and culture as a coupling that could not only have permeable boundaries but also be re-definable. In a similar vein, the participants in this study have also infused their lyrics and music with their own cultural identities, in some cases blending styles and genres, creating a charismatic and personalized repertoire of songs offering a definition of them that’s constantly in revision. In this regard, music adopts a humanlike quality, communicating messages in a bona fide language that
can be analyzed and deconstructed. The Blacking piece (p. viii) echoes this, as his mindset is one of “discontent with fundamental questions of earlier ethnomusicology, such as the relationship between lifestyle and musical style…(Blacking) broaches the issue of musicality as an inherent human quality…Even early on, when descriptions of musical cultures as homogenous units were the rule, and when children’s music would have been considered a simpler version of adult music, (Blacking) explored…the special role of youth music as an emblem of the young as a distinct ethnic group.” Furthermore, Scott (p. 90) believed this distinctive musical culture had a voice, and assembled the thoughts of some of the brightest minds in music in his compilation of essays titled ‘Music and Language.’ Within this compilation, two essays in particular (one by musicologist Harold Powers and another by Leonard Bernstein) detailed “the various uses of the metaphor as tools in linking music and language” and “the historical origins and development of three such uses: that of making a semantic (affective) connection, phonological (structural) connection, and linguistic connection (connection in meaning).” (Scott, 2000)

Sometimes the message or meaning in music isn’t so much remodeled as it is supplanted or overpowered by cultural forces. This was evident in the musical history of one of my participants, whose strong affiliations with the rhythms of her country of origin were placed on the back burner during the beginning stages in her career. Instead, she performed hard-driving rock music, which was very popular (and, hence, more palatable and widely-accepted by audiences) in the modern culture of that time period. (Fahey, 2010) Concurrently, popular music was having a similarly overpowering effect on previously-entrenched forms of music in the school systems’ music education programs. As Bowman states, “In the space of about ten years (beginning in the late 1960s)…many fewer students were involved in the (school’s) music program. Kids were still interested in music, but it was their music, the popular culture, which had captured their interest and devotion. The distance between classical music and rock widened. In order to keep kids involved in music programs, the repertoire became dominated by pop arrangements. What was lost was any attempt at producing musically literate students.” (p. 119)

Essentially, what can be learned from the literature above is that the interconnectivity of music and culture is not only time-proven but is enticingly multi-faceted, with both entities fulfilling roles that address my research goals. More specifically, music and culture can exhibit a “separate yet unified” relationship, or bridge distances both measurable and figurative, or cross-breed to effectively negate the boundaries of both, or be situationally malleable by those claiming ownership (i.e. musicians.) Undoubtedly, the vibrancy and versatility of this relationship is propagated by all the participants in this study—and begs for further qualitative research that will perhaps build additional theories.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY/DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS
PARTICIPANT SELECTION

The participants of this research study are all musicians who regularly perform live music at a variety of venues. Since all of the participants are also friends of mine, they are familiar with each others’ music and personalities (although not necessarily to the point of being classified as a “friendship” status.) In addition, all participants are long-time residents of the Philadelphia metropolitan region, yet only one of them was born and raised locally. The other two emigrated from other countries.

In selecting these participants, the prevailing theme was convenience; so those musicians (friends) to whom I had the easiest access were the finalists. To begin the process, I submitted emails to all the musicians in my social circle, explaining (briefly) my research project and how
their input would be valuable to my chosen topic. Once those with an interest and the time to participate were identified, the next step was to arrange for a mutually convenient time to conduct a personal interview with each of them, which was accomplished through a brief series of phone calls and text messages. This emphasizes another participant selection criterion—the fact that I preferred to involve those who were naturally outgoing, gregarious, opinionated, and descriptive in their analyses of life occurrences. As it turns out, all three of my participants fit this bill precisely, as the conversations within the interviewing process were full of rich dialogue and poignant stories.

What paved the road even further during this continuous information-gathering process was the strong connectivity of the participant(s) to the observational field. More specifically, I knew from prior experience (as a frequent audience member) that these musicians spend a large amount of time in live-performance venues throughout Philadelphia metro. With the participants and the venues so often tied closely together, I was able to both engage in observation at a venue and conduct an interview in one visit.

The musicians in this research study are representative of the greater population of independent “local” musicians in that they’re sphere of focus and influence is generally relegated to the region in which they live and work. Admittedly, there are exceptions, as invitations to travel to other cities and states (and countries) are occasionally received; yet those instances only serve to spice the musical tour schedule.

As referenced prior, all the musicians whom I interviewed consider themselves lyricists as well as musicians, since they frequently craft words to accompany their melodies and harmonies. Moreover, they’re all multi-instrumental, meaning that they are proficient in (and have an affinity for) more than one musical instrument. The common bond in that realm among these three musicians would be a mastery of the acoustic guitar.

**DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES**

**PERSONAL INTERVIEW:**

This method of data gathering was truly at the heart of my entire research study. In addition to being a directly useful way to gather factual data (i.e. family background) and stories of yesteryear, it was also an enjoyable process. Since all of the primary participants in this research study were friends of mine, the dialogue of the interviews was strikingly informal, punctuated with colorful terms and vivid details. This lack of formality allowed the participants to quickly feel at ease during the interviews. Similarly, their collective comfort with sharing moments of their familial and musical lives took the pressure off me to play the role of “master interviewer.” As a result, I was free to be just me, and the participants were equally free to divulge details without concerns of confidentiality or misuse.

Through all these conversations with the participants, I gained insight into what made them tick on a musicianship level, on a personality level, and with regard to their belief systems—their affiliations and rationalizations for choosing the paths in life (especially music) that they’ve traveled. Furthermore, I was able to begin connecting the dots between their music and their sense of cultural belonging, which I had always classified as two rather distinct disciplines prior to conducting my research.
SILENT OBSERVATION:

In order to add depth to the information and revelations that transpired during the interviewing process, I decided that several observations at regional live performance venues would be a good strategy. To clarify, I say “silent” because I wanted my observations to be as unobtrusive as possible. As opposed to actively engaging audience members in conversation about the whys and hows and whens of their desire to hear live music, I thought a subtler observation process would free my mind to capture more fruitful moments, actions, and dialogues. As Maxwell states, the observational process can expose what is subliminal or unvoiced, the more practical applications of active theories (p. 94). In my case, what resulted was an ongoing picture of how people react to live music performances, and how their encapsulations of the performer(s) affect their reactions.

To pull off this method of analysis effectively, I opted to appear not too involved and not too attached simultaneously. In all observations, I positioned myself either at the edge of a crowd—in a seat at the midpoint along a wall, for example—or in the midst of a crowd, where I could get “lost” while remaining at the heart of the action. As a bonus to this process, my smaller stature was beneficial in aiding my ability to blend into a crowd unnoticed, or relegate myself to the fringe of a crowd without the detachment being obvious. Chalk one up for genetics as a boon to conducting qualitative research!

SOLITARY RESEARCH:

I conducted research at a local library, and online using the Internet as a portal to supplemental information. Through this type of research, I relished the chance to proceed at my own pace, unabated by the timelines or agendas of others (not that I really felt any pressure in that sense among the “friends” in this research study, yet still a valid point to make.) Without the inescapable reality of real-time turn-around that accompanied the interview and observation processes, data from this method could be gathered in multiple sittings and revisited as certain pieces became more (or less) useful.

RESEARCHER ROLES AND VALIDITY

From the beginning days of this research study, I recognized my potential to taint the results that I was to gather. Although my motives for conducting this research were purely out of passion, interest, and boyish curiosity, I was concerned at first how my friends—who were to become critical parts of my research—would perceive my words and actions. Suspicion can exist even among the firmest of friendships; so to counteract that potential pitfall in my research, I spelled out my concerns and objectives in plain language, backing up statements with typed messages (emails and text messages) as I deemed necessary. Furthermore, following the advice of Creswell, I solicited feedback at least once from each participant during the information gathering and interpretation process (pp. 202-203,) which was a quick-and-easy way to validate for accuracy and content. I plan to keep this door of communication open as well, sharing the results of the final product, and any subsequent research on this topic I may decide to undertake.
Having already proven myself to these participants as a credible and trustworthy person, I realized that this new “researcher” role was uncharted territory in my relationships with all of them. Again, to bridge the potentially-damaging communication gap, I chose to wear my heart and mind on my sleeve, so to speak, emphasizing my passion and commitment to this topic that constitutes such a huge portion of their worlds.

As I conducted the research, I found myself constantly falling back on my prior knowledge, which spans a time frame of approximately five years as an active and fervent aficionado of live music performances. Although clearly not an expert in this arena, I discovered that my comfort within the various venues and the chosen participants was not a hindrance but a benefit, as I had more direct access to an arsenal of information that would’ve had to otherwise be extracted from externalized sources.

Concerning the issue of researcher bias, I don’t believe that my inherent biases are pronounced enough to inflict any harm on my research study. I’d really like to say that I have no biases, but that statement would be incredibly unsubstantiated and quite ridiculous. Instead, I made a point to keep reminding myself of this issue, to filter everything through the screen of doubt—not in a negative sense, but to cleanse the data of anything that could be perceived as questionable. Maxwell supports this line of thought, stating that the researcher’s acknowledgement of their own biases—and their potential impacts—is a very important step in alleviating threats to validity (p. 108).

In addition, I vowed to the participants to be fair in my judgments, open-minded in my approach, and adhere to a high level of confidentiality with the data (hence my assignment of pseudonyms to my primary participants.) Overall, I’m confident that my research was perceived by all parties as genuinely undertaken and responsibly addressed.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Musicians position themselves through their own unique voice (or song) to deliver messages steeped in emotion, yet the cultural influences to that projection of voice are undeniable, as would be the case in certain other arenas (i.e. politicians running for office.) Further complicating the matter for these musicians in my study, and more broadly, is when the connections between their music and their culture are misconstrued or misunderstood. As in any other mode of communication, messages cannot be properly received without mutual intelligibility among all parties.

With that in mind, my research study has revealed both the connections and the chasms between music and culture, and the breadth of diversity (or multiplicity) within both—all of which are particularly evident among the experiences of the three participants. More specifically, connections were strongest under the influence of family (either biological relation or communal,) chasms were at their broadest and deepest with reference to conceptions of race and ethnicity, and the diversity factor (of both) was seen as something inherent and invigorating yet not really classified as an “asset.”

First, regarding connections, the influence of family as a unifier and fortifier of both music and culture was universal among this study’s participants. Family members were assigned credit for generating an interest in music among the participants, and also in the sense of increased exposure, as reinforcements of other cultural identifiers (i.e. race, country of origination.) For instance, in the young life of my musician friend, John, musical performances were not something foreign, requiring a ticket purchase or a journey into a large urbanized city, but a regular occurrence in his own household. Many members of John’s family in his native Ireland
would gather in their living room around the piano and sing songs together. A multi-generational affair, this practice subversively yet enjoyably ignited a passion in John for music as a unique mode of communication, a way of unifying those of disparate communities—whether defined merely geographically or more ideologically.

Oftentimes, according to all the participants in this study, this familial support can also be found in fellow band members, who they regarded as a “second family” (assuming the group doesn’t experience any internal conflicts.) Yet in the case of the “occasional musician”—an individual who appears on a one-time-only basis, or someone who joins in an informal jam session at the spur of a moment—that conviviality is also ever-present. Although these individuals aren’t part of the normal routine ensemble, their musical contributions and their efforts to support the host musician(s) are almost universally rewarded with the branding of “family” status that’s at or very near the level of those in the core group.

Since these familial relationships—biological or otherwise—were considered by the participants to be crucial building blocks in the construction of their culture and their interest in music, then it’s interesting to reverse the flow, from the music to the individual. Lea, one of the participants in this study, spoke to this idea of music being a culture all its own, communicated through a unique lyrically-based language, that imparts its thoughts and emotions onto the listener (or the performer.) According to Lea’s viewpoint, “music is special…There’s a connection sometimes…Music is its own language!…like a family relation…It’s spoken differently…something magical…just a smile or twinkle of an eye…instant symbiosis!” (Fahey, 2010).

Second, regarding the chasms or divisions between music and culture, I uncovered an interesting dichotomy in cultural perceptions several times during my research. Although the musicians I interviewed had an extremely heightened and informed sense of their cultural backgrounds, and precise ways of packaging their entire cultural cache, a rabid confusion remained among those with whom they communicated—especially in a musical context—as to their purpose, or who they were. One participant in this study, whom I’ll call Lea, told me “I wish I had a dollar for every time someone I meet asked me ‘Who are you?’” (Fahey, 2010). Lea continued on that same theme with a tale from her earlier days as a performer. Her strong sense of cultural affiliation as a multiracial (American) apparently was somehow lost in the translation, which didn’t position her well with a nightclub manager who was not comfortable handling the blossoming music career of a racial minority. Understandably, Lea was quite angry and frustrated. In her mind, she personifies the image of a proud multiracial woman; yet this other individual’s comment immediately closed the door to good communication and limited Lea’s ability to share herself through her music with the public.

Equally damaging and frustrating is when this similar process of marginalization is adopted by fans—as is sometimes the case for Manny, another participant in this research study. A Caucasian of European descent, Manny began at a young age to strongly affiliate with the rhythms of soul music, which were (and still are) typically linked to the Black race. As a result, he chose to perform that style of music, weaving it into his repertoire—a practice that has carried through to the present. In addition to simply liking the “sound” of soul music, Manny goes as far as grounding this affiliation culturally, stating that part of his lineage is Sicilian, which was dominated by the influences of the Moors (an African people) many years ago. As such, Manny feels this association has been passed down through the generations. (Fahey, 2010) The criticism arises when some fans choose to perceive Manny as a White man who’s not performing the culturally-proper music. To them, only Blacks should be performing soul music, and for Manny to attempt it makes his motives very questionable or fraudulent.
A similar situation occurs with John, yet another participant in this research study, who hails from Dublin, Ireland, and has lived in America for all of his adult life, still retaining a mild “brogue” in his speech. He told me about a repetitive occurrence at his live music performances, where members of the audience (usually Irish-Americans) will challenge him about his identity, claiming that he’s not a true Irishman because he doesn’t know certain stereotypically Irish tunes (i.e. Danny Boy) or chooses not to perform such tunes. In John’s words, “There’s a belief that, as an Irish native, I’m duty-bound to know and perform such songs…duty-bound to keep the traditions of Ireland alive in America” (Fahey, 2010).

Interestingly enough, musicians (not necessarily exclusive to those participating in this study) can also be the perpetrators of cultural divisions. For instance, when performing live music, those musicians who are considered to be the competition, or at the very least an “other,” an unfamiliar entity, can often be regarded with contempt—despite the widespread ideology that “musicians are like family.” An obvious example of this would be a popular event held many times per year across various venues (informally) titled “Battle of the Bands.” Embattled to win coveted prizes or cash, all the groups of musicians involved in this contest—in which votes are cast for the best musical ensemble—can be blinded by the competitive nature of the event, generating suspicions of other musicians whose motives and self-identities aren’t quite clear. A similar apprehension surfaces when musicians are discussing any people who are unaffiliated with music (or its industry) whatsoever. The resounding response toward these people is that they’re not considered to be truly “family,” certainly not in the genealogical sense, yet not in more liberal contexts either. It’s as if music, in this broad set of cases too, is an equalizer, or perhaps a qualifier.

Third, regarding the diversity factor in music and culture, it’s curious how the participants in this study were able to pinpoint elements of diversity and redefine what that term meant for them individually (or perhaps to their ensemble.) John, the native Dubliner whose family would commonly gather in their own homes to sing songs, recalled that virtually everyone in his family had their own “version” of a song, their own special way of performing it. Sometimes, the modified version had altered lyrics, other times the tempo changed, or the pitch in which it was sung. Regardless of the modification, or the status of the individual within the hierarchy of John’s family, respect for their version of the song was paramount, and was also static over time as the song would be sung in a similar fashion again and again. In fact, John has recently written a spirited song about this ongoing event in his young life titled Various Verses, in which one line reads “We sang various verses, called them our own, called them our own!” (Fahey, 2010).

In the present, all the musicians in this research study have established their own musical diversity by choosing to develop and retain more than one version of certain songs (i.e. acoustic versus electric/symphonic) in their repertoire at any given time—especially when performing live. What’s really interesting is that none of these participants labeled this practice as a form of self-marketing. To them, the multiplicity factor of music, represented in these various versions of certain songs, is a natural by-product, an asset rooted in creativity much more than in marketability. This speaks directly to the issue of cultural affiliations. In these musicians’ eyes, the differing versions (and sounds) of some songs are self-serving, yet in a non-arrogant way, a tether to their cultural roots, or perhaps a fresher culture developed as an adult. Conversely, the typical audience member at a live music performance will likely assume on a subconscious level that music sounds the way it does because it was specifically crafted for them, a purposeful attempt by the musician(s) to connect with those beyond the limelight of the stage. Alternatively, and equally as likely, an audience member may believe that the version of a song they’re hearing is the only version, a tried-and-true version that’s impervious to change of any kind.
It should be noted as well that diversity among the participants in this study was also evident in their conceptualizations of family, which they admitted to existing in different versions much like the songs they perform can also have different versions. To these musicians—whose family roots are apparently so heavy an influence in their associations with music—their multiple conceptualizations of family that do not involve blood relations are methods through which they can most easily and quickly make meaning of an ever-changing social climate.

In summary, there exists a firm linkage between music and culture, one that can be manipulated by musicians as they see fit, capitalizing on the ability to connect or divide situationally. Moreover, the diversity of music and culture (as separate and conjoined entities) in the eyes of musicians is as dominant in the sense of multiplicity of uses and purposes as in the sense of the differences among each entity’s components. Through the experiences of the three musicians who participated in this study, this interconnectivity of music and culture surely provides the framework within which they affiliate with certain genres and styles of music, and choose to become musicians in the first place. The audience members at live performances are undoubtedly a highly-relevant piece of this puzzle too, as they bring their own cultural affiliations (and prejudices) to the table. Musicians very often choose to respond to the diversity of their audiences, which can happen in a planned-out manner or more spontaneously.

The co-dependency of music and culture is curious, indeed, which supplicates further scrutiny. Further research, perhaps an ethnographical study, would certainly shed more light on this topic. In the meantime, this relationship will continue to be a work-in-progress, with musicians well-positioned in the driver’s seat as the group most attuned to the nuances and most able to display their multitude of cultural self-identities in a universal forum that celebrates diversity with vigor and valor.

WORKS CITED


