# Questions of Cultural Identity

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# Music and Identity

## *Simon Frith*

> Henry Rollins once said that music exists to put furniture in your mind, 'because life is so cruel and TV is so mean.'
>
> Gina Arnold[1]

> Becoming what one is is a creative act comparable with creating a work of art.
>
> Anthony Storr[2]

> It is not easy, however, to be evil when music is playing.
>
> John Miller Chernoff[3]

The academic study of popular music has been limited by the assumption that the sounds must somehow 'reflect' or 'represent' the people. The analytic problem has been to trace the connections back, from the work (the score, the song, the beat) to the social groups who produce and consume it. What's been at issue is homology, some sort of *structural* relationship between material and musical forms.

The search for homology is most commonly associated these days with subculture theory, with accounts of punk or heavy metal, for example;[4] but the supposed fit (or lack of it) between aesthetic and social values has a much longer history in the study of popular culture. This is T.S. Eliot on Marie Lloyd:

> It was her understanding of the people and sympathy with them, and the people's recognition of the fact that she embodied the virtues which they genuinely most respected in private life, that raised her to the position she occupied at her death . . . I have called her the expressive figure of the lower classes.[5]

More recently the rise of identity politics has meant new assertions of cultural essentialism, more forceful arguments than ever that, for example, only African-Americans can appreciate African-American music, that there is a basic difference between male and female composition, that the 'globalization' of a local sound is a form of cultural 'genocide'.[6]

The assumptions in such arguments about the necessary flow from social identity (whether defined in terms of race or sexuality or age or nation) to musical expression (and appreciation) seem straightforward enough in the abstract (who could possibly deny that African-American music is music made by African-Americans; that the difference between male and female experience will be embedded in male and female music; that Phil Collins is an imposition on the soundscape of the Australian outback?). But they are less convincing in the everyday practice of music making and listening: how do we make sense of the obvious *love* of European listeners and players for the music of the African diaspora? Who is expressing what when, say, Ella Fitzgerald sings Cole Porter? When Yothi Yindi *rocks*?[7]

The problem here is not just the familiar postmodern point that we live in an age of plunder in which musics made in one place for one reason can be immediately appropriated in another place for quite another reason, but also that while music may be *shaped* by the people who first make and use it, as experience it has a life of its own. Marx remarks somewhere that it is easy enough to move analytically from the cultural to the material, easy enough, that is, to *interpret* culture, to read it ideologically, to assign it social conditions. The difficult trick is to do the analysis the other way round, to show how the base produced *this* superstructure, to explain why an idea or experience takes on *this* artistic or aesthetic form, and not another, equally 'reflective' or 'representative' of its conditions of production.[8] After the cultural event, as a historian might agree, we can say why expression had to happen this way; before it there is no creative necessity at all. And if art is therefore, so to speak, originally accidental, then there is no particular reason to accept its makers' special claims on it. The interesting question, rather, is how art comes to make its own claims, in other circumstances, for itself.

In examining the aesthetics of popular music, then, I want to reverse the usual academic and critical argument: the issue is not how a particular piece of music or a performance reflects the people, but how it produces them, how it creates and constructs an experience – a musical experience, an aesthetic experience – that we can only make sense of by taking on both a subjective and a collective identity. The aesthetic, to put this another way, describes the quality of an experience (not the quality of an object); it means experiencing *ourselves* (not just the world) in a different way. My argument here, in short, rests on two premises: first, that identity is *mobile*, a process not a thing, a becoming not a being; second, that our experience of music – of music making and music listening – is best understood as an experience of this *self-in-process*. Music, like identity, is both performance and story, describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social, the mind in the body and the body in the mind; identity, like music, is a matter of both ethics and aesthetics. In exploring these themes I will, among other things, touch critically on their treatment under the label of 'postmodernism', but my main concern is to suggest that if music is a metaphor for identity, then, to echo Marx, the self is always an imagined self but can only

be imagined as a particular organization of social, physical and material forces.

## The mobile self

What's at stake has become clear in the debate about postmodernism and the unstable or 'decentred' subject, a debate which has been dominated by the problems of signification and structure. Postmodernism, that is to say, is taken to describe a 'crisis' of signification systems: how can we now tell the difference between the 'real' and the 'simulated'? The postmodern problem is the threat to our sense of place – hence the mapping metaphors, the use of terms like depth and surface. What is underplayed in such discussions is the problem of process – not the positioning of the subject as such, but our experience of the movement between positions. This is where music becomes an important area for study: what happens to our assumptions about postmodern identity when we examine a form in which sound is more important than sight, and time more important than space; when the 'text' is a performance, a movement, a flux; when nothing is 'represented'?[9]

The broad argument that I want to make here, in short, is that in talking about identity we are talking about a particular kind of experience, or a way of dealing with a particular kind of experience. Identity is not a thing but a process – an experiential process which is most vividly grasped *as music*. Music seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective. As Mark Slobin puts it,

> Music seems to have an odd quality that even passionate activities like gardening or dog-raising lack: the simultaneous projecting and dissolving of the self in *performance*. Individual, family, gender, age, supercultural givens, and other factors hover around the musical space but can penetrate only very partially the moment of enactment of musical fellowship. Visible to the observer, these constraints remain unseen by the musicians, who are instead working out a shared vision that involves both the assertion of pride, even ambition, and the simultaneous disappearance of the ego.[10]

The experience of identity describes both a social process, a form of interaction, and an aesthetic process; as Slobin argues, it is the 'aesthetic rather than organizational/contextual aspects of performance' that 'betray a continuity between the social, the group, and the individual'.[11] It is in deciding – playing and hearing what sounds *right* (I would extend this account of music from performing to listening, to listening as a way of performing) – that we both express ourselves, our own sense of rightness, and suborn ourselves, lose ourselves, in an act of participation.[12]

The implication of this argument is that we need to rethink the usual sociological approach to aesthetic expression. My point is not that a social group has beliefs which it then articulates in its music, but that music, an

aesthetic practice, articulates *in itself* an understanding of both group relations and individuality, on the basis of which ethical codes and social ideologies are understood.[13]

What I want to suggest, in other words, is not that social groups agree on values which are then expressed in their cultural activities (the assumption of the homology models) but that they only get to know themselves *as groups* (as a particular organization of individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) *through* cultural activity, through aesthetic judgement. Making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them. As John Miller Chernoff concluded from his study of drumming in Ghana,

> African music is a cultural activity which reveals a group of people organizing and involving themselves with their own communal relationships – a participant-observer's comment, so to speak, on the processes of living together. The aesthetic point of the exercise is not to reflect a reality which *stands behind it* but to ritualize a reality that is *within* it.[14]

And this is not just a characteristic of African music, Philip V. Bohlman concludes his study of the role of chamber music in the lives of the *Yekkes*, the German-speaking Jews in Israel, as follows:

> But this essay is not really about an ethnic group. Nor is it about the music per se of that group [though] I am here concerned with the music history resulting from the response of a group with a shared value system to a musical repertory that articulated those values. Such groups have long populated the history of Western music. Sometimes we call them ethnic groups or communities, sometimes national cultures, and sometimes we label by coupling place with abstraction, for example in 'Viennese classicism'. All these acts of labelling suggest the process of standing outside a group and looking in to see what sort of music is to be found. Suppose the group is really the product of its musical activities and the cultural values bound to them? What if excessive concern with the musical text deflects one from seeing the formation of diverse groups and music histories. What if one looked at the Yekkes, with their devotion to chamber music, as just another justification for the conditions of absolute music?[15]

Bohlman's target here is musicology. As an ethnomusicologist he is arguing that the meaning of classical music, as an experience, is not to be found in the text, but in the performance of the text, in the process in which it is realized. The Yekke chamber music groups don't have an abstract belief in 'absolute' (or transcendent) music; rather the concept of 'absolute music' is dependent on a particular way of being – playing – together.

Bohlman's argument is particularly interesting because it is applied to 'high' music making. His suggestion, with which I strongly agree, is that in terms of aesthetic process there is no real difference between high and low music. As he notes, from his perspective, 'Western art music functions not unlike styles and repertories most commonly accepted as the ethnomusicologist's field, namely folk and non-Western music.' And I would add, from my perspective, 'not unlike commercial popular music

either. In short, different sorts of musical activity may produce different sorts of musical identity, but *how* the musics work to form identities is the same. The distinction between high and low culture, in other words, describes not something caused by different (class-bound) tastes, but is an effect of different (class-bound?) social activities.[16]

Let me make the point in a different way, by quoting two music critics, one low and one high, and then considering the difference between them. First the low critic, Frank Kogan, writing about Spoonie Gee in a fanzine in the mid-1980s.

'Spoonin Rap' and ' Love Rap' by Spoonie Gee are my favourite American-made records of the last ten years. They came out about five years ago, 'Spoonin Rap' in late '79 and 'Love Rap' in '80. I've never read a review of either.

On the basis of his voice alone, the way it balances coolness with angry passion while keeping a dance beat, Spoonie is a major artist; in addition, he's a writer. His lyrics are as intense as his singing, and embody the same tensions. Example: both 'Spoonin Rap' and 'Love Rap' start with detailed and explicit bragging – about how cool and sexy he is, about how girls go for him, how they're impressed with his rapping and his car. He puts on his eight-track. He makes love to the girl in his car. In his Mercedes. The seat's so soft, just like a bed. At the moment of sexual triumph the lyrics make a jarring change, as if there's a second song hidden behind the first, as if the bragging were a set-up for something else. . . . And then it's like the first part of the song, but turned inside out – the guys and girls are drawn to his flashy clothes and car only so they can rip him off and leave him in the gutter. The girls are gonna play him for a fool. . . . Then it shifts back to what a great lover he is, nice descriptions of his girl friends. 'Spoonin Rap' shifts around in the same way. It's about how cool he is, about how sexy women are; then it's about don't do dope, don't steal, you'll go to jail and they'll fuck you in the ass. Then it's about jumping the turnstile and the cop pulls a gun but he doesn't shoot.

There's a lot of precedent in black lyrics for jarring emotional juxtapositions – in the blues particularly, also in Smokey Robinson's deliberate paradoxes. But the nearest emotional equivalent isn't in black music, it's in punk – early Stones, Kinks, Velvets, Stooges, Dolls – where a song will seem to be one thing, then be another. The ranting part of 'Love Rap' could be Lou Reed in one of his bad moods – except that, unlike a Jagger or a Reed, Spoonie hasn't calculated – may not even be aware of – his juxtapositions. Which adds to his power. The feelings have great impact because they come from an unexpected source. If Spoonie were in punk or rock his alienation and rage would fill an expectation of the genre. In disco, they seem truer. . . .

Spoonie Gee has made some great records and an equal number of mediocre ones. I think he's a genius, but I don't think he knows what he's doing. He's drawn to a vision of the world as a fake and treacherous place. Maybe something's bugging him. Maybe unconsciously he feels that it's not only the world that's fake, or women that are fake – it's himself.

Spoonie's not one of us. He has nothing to do with punk culture or post-punk culture. I don't know if I could carry on an interesting conversation with him, if we could find any cultural or moral common ground. But there is a common ground, that part of the intellect called the 'emotions', where I do my deepest analysis of life. However much I admire current heroes like Mark E. Smith and Ian Mackaye, people I identify with, I know they don't make music as strong as this.. Listening to Spoonie is like hearing my own feelings, and I have to confront my own fear. This means maybe that I'm not really unlike him. Maybe I'm more like him that I am like you.[17]

I've quoted this at length because this is how the piece works as criticism – in the steady move from description to emotion to identity, via questions of voice and genre, text and performance, knowledge, truth and feeling, all here focused on one artist, on a couple of tracks.

Now compare high criticism: Gregory Sandow on Milton Babbitt:

Like any Babbitt piece, *Dual* is a labyrinth of closely packed information: every detail means something, or – which to me is the awe and almost the horror if it – could mean something. The F sharp, E flat, and B natural isolated in the highest register of the piano in the first two measures return in measure six as the first three notes of a melodic phrase, accompanied by the B flat, G natural, and C natural that were the next notes heard in the highest register at the end of measure two and the start of measure three – and these are just the most obvious connections that could be made between two parts of the piece chosen almost at random. Babbitt likes to say that moments in his music can be memories of what came before, and presentiments of what is to come. Serial technique produces ever-new associations of familiar elements giving everything that happens the power of an omen. Following a Babbitt piece in close detail is like reading entrails or tea leaves: every rearrangement in every bar might mean something. So many rearrangements are possible that you never know what the omens really mean; new developments seem, if not arbitrary, then at least wilful. This is a sort of higher-order zaniness, something unpredictable and even wild that transcends Babbitt's logic, and finds its way into something I haven't mentioned yet, which I'll call Babbitt's mode of musical speech. . . .

For in the end I do find Babbitt eccentric. He's a superb musical craftsman, and, I think, an authentically great composer, though in some ways hard to take, but he's also zany, wild, and – I say this again with admiration – more than a little bit mad. His music, and the whole school he represents, are products of the 1950s, as much the symptoms of the eruption of tumultuous subterranean forces into above ground life as monster movies, rock and roll, the beat generation, and abstract expressionism. But in Babbitt's case the eruption is controlled, disguised, and unmentioned, the secret nobody will acknowledge or even name. In a videotaped interview with Ann Swartz of Baruch College, Babbitt calls himself 'a man of the university', whose music 'reflects the life of the academy, in the best sense of the word'. That's partly true, of course, but there's much more there. There's no point in thinking that Babbitt should do or think anything but what he does. . . . But I can't help thinking that he's sold himself short by trying both to extend the boundaries of his art and to remain academically respectable, and by acknowledging only the verifiable (and therefore trivial) aspects of his amazing work. If – like Joyce, Jackson Pollock, or John Cage – so passionate a man had chosen to define himself as an artist and not as an academic, what might he have achieved?[18]

The descriptive terms here are different (the language of notational rather than lyrical analysis), the genre distinction draws attention to a different context (the academy rather than the market), but the overall shape of the review is the same – the move from describing the music to describing the listener's response to the music to considering the relationship of feeling, truth and identity. And Kogan's and Sandow's judgements are, in fact, much the same: both Spoonie Gee and Milton Babbitt show flawed genius; in both cases the critics seem to know better than the artists what they are – or should be – doing.

What links these responses, in other words, is the assumption that music, the experience of music for composer/performer and listener alike, gives us a way of being in the world, a way of making sense of it. And if both critics begin by stressing their distance from the musicians – both Spoonie Gee and Milton Babbitt are set up as decidedly odd; both critics also end up in a sort of collusion with them: musical appreciation is, by its very nature, a process of musical identification, and the aesthetic response is, implicitly, an ethical agreement.

## Postmodernism and performance

The blurring of the high/low cultural boundary (here between critics) is, of course, a sign of the postmodern, and in bringing Kogan and Sandow together I need to distinguish my position from the one usually adopted. The confusion of the high and low is conventionally indicated by quotation (or appropriation) across the divide: the pop recycling of classical music and the art re-use of pop are taken to mark an underlying shift of aesthetic sensibility. In practice, as Andrew Goodwin has pointed out, such arguments mostly concern a relationship between the artistic avant-garde and certain pop forms (pop art remains the model): the most cited postmodern musicians are people such as Laurie Anderson, David Byrne and Brian Eno, who are clearly 'artists' rather than 'pop stars'. The institutional boundary between high and mass art seems intact – there remains a clear difference between a Philip Glass and a Madonna in terms of packaging, marketing, performance space, recording sound, and so forth; just as we can continue to distinguish between the pop Eno (producer of U2 and James) and the art Eno (producer of ambient video). The *frisson* of blurring of the art/mass boundary depends on the boundary still being clearly drawn.[19]

And if we go back to eighteenth-century debates about musical meaning, and to the origins of the Romantic view of art that underpins high cultural arguments (the view which was duly appropriated by would-be artist rock musicians in the 1960s), it becomes apparent that the high/low distinction doesn't really concern the nature of the art object, or how it is produced, but refers to different modes of *perception*. The crucial high/low distinction is that between contemplation and 'wallowing', between intellectual and sensual appreciation, between hard and easy listening (which is why a comparison of high and low critics becomes interesting).

To add low cultural goods to lists of 'art' objects available for intellectual (or 'serious') appreciation (which is what postmodern theorists tend to do) is not, then, to get rid of the traditional boundaries between the high and the low, and the much more interesting issue is whether we can really continue to sustain the implicit separation of emotion and feeling, sense and sensuality, body and mind. (This is the issue raised, for example, by

the ambient house music of groups like Future Sound of London and the Aphex Twin, music which draws simultaneously on rave culture and minimalism.) The question, in fact, is whether musical experience has ever really been mapped by the high/low, mind/body distinction. The nineteenth century ideologues of absolute music may have worked hard to make musical appreciation a purely mental experience, but this was hard work precisely because most listeners didn't listen to music this way, however much they wanted to. Even high music making and listening remained a physical as well as a 'spiritual' activity, a sensual as well as a cognitive experience; to enjoy music of all sorts is to feel it.

At the same time, musical pleasure is never just a matter of feeling; it is also a matter of judgement. Take the postmodern reading of contemporary pop in terms of pastiche. Digital technology has certainly speeded up the process in which composition means quotation, but what we need to consider here are not so much the specific texts that result, as the way our attention is drawn to the *performance* of quotation. On rap tracks, for instance, far from musical authority being dissipated into fragments and second-hand sounds it is enhanced by the attention drawn to the quoting act itself. As Paul Gilroy suggests, 'the aesthetic rules that govern it are premised on a dialect of rescuing appropriation and recombination that creates special pleasures'. Pleasures in which 'aesthetic stress is laid upon the sheer social and cultural distance that formerly separated the diverse elements now dislocated into novel meanings by their provocative aural juxtaposition', and in which the continuing importance of performance is 'emphasised by [tracks'] radically unfinished forms'.[20]

Hip-hop, in other words, with its cut-ups, its scratches, breaks and samples, is best understood as producing not new texts but new ways of performing texts, new ways of performing *the making of meaning*. The pleasure of montage comes from the act of juxtaposition rather than from the labour of interpretation – and for the listener and dancer too, the fun lies in the process not the result. Not for nothing is rap a voice-based form with an exceptionally strong sense of presence. The aesthetic question about this postmodern music, at least, concerns not meanings and their interpretation – identity translated into discursive forms which have to be decoded – but *mutual enactment*, identity produced *in* performance.

## Space, time and stories

It is conventional, nowadays, in the academy at least, to divide the arts into separate categories such that the performing arts (theatre, dance and music) are differentiated from the fine arts (literature, painting, sculpture) and, on the whole, the performing arts are taken to be inferior to the fine arts, incapable of providing such rich aesthetic experience or social commentary. This is a relatively recent hierarchy, an effect of nineteenth-century conventions, the impact 'of Romanticism, the simultaneous

emphases on art as individual expression and as private property. 'High' art was thus institutionalized by the bourgeoisie as a transcendent, asocial, experience (in the contemplative bank-like setting of the gallery and the concert hall, the museum and the library).

In the eighteenth century, with its concern for rhetoric and oratory, the distinction between the performing and the fine arts was not so clear and there were ways in which the former were clearly superior to the latter. One way of thinking about the contrast here is to see the fine arts as being organized around the use of space, and the performing arts as organized around the use of time. In spatial arts value is embodied in an object, a text; the analytic emphasis is on structure – a detached, 'objective' reading is possible, and artistic meaning can be extricated from the work's formal qualities. In temporal arts the value of the work is experienced as something momentary, and the analytical emphasis is on process; 'subjective' reading is necessary – a reading taking account of one's own immediate response – and the work's artistic meaning lies in that response, the work's rhetorical qualities.

The first point to make about such distinctions is that they do not, in fact, describe different art forms so much as different approaches to art forms, different ways of framing 'the aesthetic experience', different assumptions about what is artistically valuable or meaningful. The nineteenth century argument that art was 'timeless' meant, then, an attempt to objectify all art, the performing arts too; one effect was to redefine music as a musical object, to put the analytic emphasis on the work, the score, rather than on its performance. And, given that to be 'music' the score had to be performed, the performance itself was also objectified, made the object of repeated performance, such that the tradition, the history of performance could be claimed as defining music's meaning, rather than the immediate effect, which was, by its nature, inevitably distorted by social, historical and material exigencies.

This process of objectification was also a process of academicization (hence, eventually, Milton Babbitt), as art became an object of study, and scholars became guardians of its traditional meaning, as they had always been in matters of religion and law. Here too the emphasis was, by necessity (the necessity of what can be stored and taught), on the qualities of a work in space, structural qualities, rather than on the qualities of a work in time, the qualities of immediacy, emotion, sweat – suspect terms in both the library and the classroom.

It should be stressed too, though, that what I'm describing here is a discursive process, an idealistic attempt to grasp an experience through a particular evaluative framework which was not, and perhaps could not be, entirely successful. In the end, how people (or, rather, critics and scholars) talked about music became detached from how people (musicians and listeners) felt about it. There was always an excess in musical experience, something unreasonable, something that *got away*. And if it is relatively easy to illustrate the problems of treating temporal arts in

spatial terms (analysing a score or a playscript is not, in the end, to treat the experience of music or drama), it is just as important to note that the 'spatial' arts also have temporal elements. We do, after all, experience books in time; poems too have a beginning, a middle and an end. Reading is a process, and an emotional process at that; oratory is an aspect of the fine art experience too.[21]

The linking concept here is narrative – structured time, temporal space: if narrative gives the fine arts their dynamism, it gives the performing arts their structure. Musical pleasure is also a narrative pleasure, even when the music is at its most abstract – compare Greg Sandow's response to Milton Babbitt cited earlier to Greg Tate's appreciation of Cecil Taylor:

> Someone once said that while Coleman Hawkins gave the jazz saxophone a voice, Lester Young taught it how to tell a story. That is, the art of personal confession is one jazz musicians must master before they can do justice by their tradition. I couldn't relate to Cecil's music until I learned to hear the story he was shaping out of both black tradition and his complex 'life as an American Negro'.[22]

For Tate, as for other jazz writers, the 'story' in music describes an entanglement of aesthetics and ethics; such a narrative is necessary to any claim that art has something to do with life. A good jazz performance, that is to say (like any good musical performance), depends on rhetorical truth, on the musicians' ability to convince and persuade the listener that what they are saying matters. This is not a matter of representation or 'imitation' or ideology but draws, rather, on the African-American tradition of 'signifying'; it puts into play an emotional effect, a collusion between the performer and an audience which is engaged rather than detached, knowing rather than knowledgeable.

This is the reason why popular music (and I don't believe the argument is confined to African-derived forms, though it does help to explain their remarkable global impact) must be understood not to represent values but to embody them. The point is well made in Christopher Waterman's study of *jùjú*:

> Jùjú history suggests that the role of musical style in the enactment of identity makes it not merely a reflexive but also a potentially *constitutive* factor in the patterning of cultural values and social interaction. Yoruba musicians, responding creatively to changes in the Nigerian political economy, fashioned a mode of expression that enacted, in music, language, and behaviour, a syncretic metaphoric image of an ideal social order, cosmopolitan yet firmly rooted in autochthonous tradition. This dynamic style configuration, consonant with Yoruba ideologies of the 'open hierarchy' as an ideal pattern of aesthetic and social organization, allowed jùjú performance to play a role in the stereotypic reproduction of 'deep' Yoruba values during a period of pervasive economic and political change.[23]

This echoes Paul Gilroy's comments on the ways in which in the history of black culture, 'the politics of trans-figuration strives in pursuit of the sublime, struggling to repeat the unrepeatable, to present the unpresentable'. If the politics of fulfilment, in pursuit of rational western politics,

seeks to 'assimilate the semiotic, verbal and textual', the politics of transfiguration 'pushes towards the mimetic, dramatic and performative'. Hence 'the traditions of performance that continue to characterize the production and reception of African diaspora musics'.[24] Gilroy notes that

> The power of music in developing our struggles by communicating information, organising consciousness and testing out, deploying, or amplifying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency, individual and collective, defensive and transformational, demands attention to both the formal attributes of this tradition of expression and its distinctive *moral* basis. . . . In the simplest possible terms, by posing the world as it is against the world as the racially subordinated would like it to be, this musical culture supplies a great deal of the courage required to go on living in the present.[25]

Gilroy thus suggests that 'the history of black music enables us to trace something of the means through which the unity of ethics and politics has been reproduced as a form of folk knowledge', and if music thus may 'conjure up and enact the new modes of friendship, happiness and solidarity that are consequent on the overcoming of the racial oppression on which modernity and the duality of rational western progress as excessive barbarity relied', it also conjures up and enacts dialogue, argument, call and response: 'lines between self and other are blurred and special forms of pleasure are created as a result'. Gilroy quotes Ralph Ellison on jazz:

> There is in this a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself. For true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment . . . springs from a contest in which the artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity; as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus because jazz finds its very life in improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazz man must lose his identity even as he finds it.[26]

But while music is thus particularly important in the complex history of black identities, this use of music, as that aesthetic process through which we discover ourselves by forging our relations to others, is not confined to black cultures. In Britain, for example, white listeners have long been engaged in their own enactments of black musical values. Take Brian Jackson's 1960s description of the importance of the Huddersfield Jazz Club to its displaced working-class grammar school girls and boys:

> If the life of New Orleans was an exaggerated image of working-class life, the stimulating generalized emotions of jazz were a hazy image of what the world of art could offer.

Jackson notes the importance of the jazz 'solo' for these self-conscious individualists as they struggled to make music for themselves (solos in which no one else in the club even feigned interest), but he also notes how

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jazz was used in Huddersfield as a musical practice in which to stage an understanding of collectivity:

> It didn't lead to social promotion or to high art – there was no 'transfer' at all from jazz to classical music. Its function was to hold together and sustain a steady stream of post–1944 Act pupils. As a floating community, it became admirably and intricately designed for that purpose – and the feeling of how to do *this*, was the real inheritance from working-class Huddersfield.[27]

To turn to a different world altogether, Philip Bohlman explores the role of chamber music – another form of small-scale making-music-together – in shaping German Jewish identity in Israel, in both articulating cultural values and enacting collective commitment to them (from the audience as much as from the performers). In this context the scored basis of 'absolute music' was as ethically binding as the improvised basis of jazz:

> Viewed from a performative perspective, the absence of specific meaning within the text allows meaning to accrue only upon performance, thus empowering any group – for example, an ethnic community – to shape what it will from absolute music. A gap therefore forms between the content of chamber-music repertoires and the style of performance situations. It is within the mutability allowed by style that differences in meaning and function of music arise, thereby transforming chamber music into a genre that can follow numerous historical paths. These paths may be as different as, say, the ethnic associations in Israel and the practices of amateur music making found in many American academic communities. Clearly, such cases reflect different attitudes towards both the repertoires of chamber music and the communities that lend the music its distinctive functions and form its different histories.[28]

## From aesthetics to ethics

Underlying all the other distinctions critics continue to draw between 'serious' (European-derived) and 'popular' (African-derived) music is an assumption about the sources of musical value. Serious music, it seems, matters because it transcends social forces; popular music is aesthetically uninteresting because it is determined by them (because it is 'functional' or 'utilitarian'). The sociological approach to musical value has thus meant uncovering the social forces concealed in the talk of 'transcendent' values; the populist reversal of the high/low hierarchy has meant praising the 'functional' at the expense of the 'aesthetic'.

My concern is the opposite: to take seriously the aesthetic value (the aesthetic function, as one might say) of all musics, popular music too. The sociologist of contemporary popular music is faced with a body of songs, records, stars and styles which exist because of a series of decisions, made by both producers and consumers, about what is 'good'. Musicians write tunes and play solos and program computers; producers choose from different mixes; record companies and radio and television programmers decide what will be released and played; consumers buy one record

rather than another and concentrate their attention on particular genres. The result of all these apparently individual decisions is certainly a pattern of success, taste and style which can be explained sociologically, but it is also a pattern that is rooted in individual judgement.

We can, as I suggested earlier, trace such judgements back to material conditions easily enough, by way, for example, of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of taste. We can point to the cultural capital embedded in technique and technology: people produce and consume the music they are capable of producing and consuming; different social groups possess different sorts of knowledge and skill, share different cultural histories, and so make music differently. Musical tastes do correlate with class cultures and subcultures; musical styles are linked to specific age groups; we can take for granted the connections of ethnicity and sound. This is the sociological common sense of rock criticism and the idea of authenticity:

> There is not a British rocker on earth who could ever turn Jack Scott's chorus-line,
>
> Lonesome Mary's cuttin' out
> Hate to be around when Johnnie finds this out
>
> into anything approximating a convincing statement.[29]

But while we can thus describe (or assume) general patterns of musical taste and use, the precise fit (or homology) between sounds and social groups remains unclear, which is why commonsense sociology has had to deploy its second set of arguments, about the match of music's *formal* and social functions. This approach is most sophisticated in ethnomusicology, in anthropological studies of traditional and folk musics which are explained musically (in terms of their formal and sonic qualities) by reference to their use – in dance, in rituals, for political mobilization, to solemnize events. Similar points are made about contemporary popular music, though its most important social function is assumed to be commercial – the starting analytical assumption is that the music is made to sell; research focuses on who makes marketing decisions and why, on the construction of taste and 'taste publics'. The appeal of the music itself, the reason why people like it, and what, more importantly, 'liking it' means, is buried under an analysis of sales strategies, demographics, the anthropology of consumption.

From the 'consumers' perspective, though, it is obvious that people play the music they do because it 'sounds good', and even if musical tastes are, inevitably, an effect of social conditioning and commercial manipulation, people still explain them to themselves in terms of something special. Everyone in the pop world is aware of the social forces that determine 'normal' pop music and 'normal' pop tastes, but a good record or song or sound is precisely one that transcends those forces.

From this perspective, pop music becomes the more valuable aesthetically the more independent it is of the social forces that organize it, and one way of reading this is to suggest that pop value is thus dependent on

something outside pop, is rooted in the person, the *auteur*, the community or the subculture that lies behind it. Critical judgement means measuring performers' 'truth' to the experience or feelings they are describing or expressing. The problem is that it is, in practice, very difficult to say who or what it is that pop music expresses or how we recognize, independently of their music, the 'authentically' creative performers. Musical 'truth' is precisely that which is *created* by 'good music'; we hear the music as authentic (or rather, we describe the musical experience we value in terms of authenticity) and such a response is then read back, spuriously, on to the music-making (or listening) process. An aesthetic judgement of effect is translated into a sociological description of cause: good music must be music made and appreciated by good people. But the question we should be asking is not what does popular music reveal about the people who play and use it but how does it create them as a people, as a web of identities? If we start from the assumption that pop is expressive, then we get bogged down in the search for the 'real' artist or emotion or belief lying behind it. But popular music is popular not because it reflects something or authentically articulates some sort of popular taste or experience, but because it creates our understanding of what 'popularity' is, because it places us in the social world in a particular way. What we should be examining, in other words, is not how true a piece of music is to something else, but how it sets up the idea of 'truth' in the first place – successful pop music is music which defines its own aesthetic standard.

## The imagined self

The experience of pop music is an experience of identity: in responding to a song, we are drawn, haphazardly, into emotional alliances with the performers and with the performers' other fans. Because of its qualities of abstractness, music is, by nature, an individualizing form. We absorb songs into our own lives and rhythm into our own bodies; they have a looseness of reference that makes them immediately accessible. At the same time, and equally significantly, music is obviously collective. We hear things as music because their sounds obey a more or less familiar cultural logic, and for most music listeners (who are not themselves music makers) this logic is out of our control. There is a mystery to our own musical tastes. Some records and performers work for us, others do not – we know this without being able to explain it. Somebody else has set up the conventions; they are clearly social and clearly apart from us. Music, whether teenybop for young female fans or jazz or rap for African-Americans or nineteenth century chamber music for German Jews in Israel, stands for, symbolizes *and* offers the immediate experience of collective identity.

If narrative is the basis of music pleasure, to put this another way, it is

also central to our sense of identity. Identity, that is to say, comes from the outside not the inside; it is something we put or try on, not something we reveal or discover. As Jonathan Ree puts it,

> The problem of personal identity, one may say, arises from play-acting and the adoption of artificial voices; the origins of distinct personalities, in acts of personation and impersonation.[30]

And Ree goes on to argue that personal identity is therefore 'the accomplishment of a storyteller, rather than the attribute of a character'. He draws on Sartre and Ricoeur in suggesting that narrative is 'the unity of a life', not something achieved through some essential continuity but rather through a 'recurring *belief* in personal coherence, a belief necessarily 'renewed in the telling of tales'.

> The concept of narrative, in other words, is not so much a justification of the idea of personal identity, as an elucidation of its structure as an inescapable piece of make-believe.[31]

This argument has two immediate implications. First, identities are, inevitably, shaped according to narrative forms. As Kwame Anthony Appiah points out,

> Invented histories, invented biologies, invented cultural affinities come with every identity; each is a kind of role that has to be scripted, structured by conventions of narrative to which the world never quite manages to conform.[32]

But if identity is always somehow constrained by imaginative forms, it is also freed by them: the personal is the cultural, and, as Mark Slobin suggests, we are not necessarily restricted in terms of such cultural imagination by social circumstances: 'We all grow up with *something*, but we can choose just about *anything* by way of expressive culture.'[33]

In broad terms we may be able to relate social and cultural identities, to finger social and cultural 'theft'. 'The blackface performer,' writes Eric Lott, 'is in effect a perfect metaphor for one culture's ventriloquial self-expression through the art forms of someone else's.'[34] But at an individual level, biology, demography and sociology seem less determining. As I have argued elsewhere, with reference to literary forms and social identities (black writing, women's writing, gay writing, etc.), the question is not 'simply whether such writing can be mapped back onto the reader (reading as a woman, a man, a black) but whether literary transformation – the process of writing *and* reading – doesn't subvert all sociological assumptions about cultural position and cultural feeling'.[35]

And this seems an even more obvious question about popular music, of which the dominant forms in all contemporary societies have originated at the social margins – among the poor, the migrant, the rootless, the 'queer'.[36] Anti-essentialism is a necessary part of musical experience, a necessary consequence of music's failure to register the separations of body and mind on which such 'essential' differences (between black and white, female and male, gay and straight, nation and nation) depend. Hence Paul Gilroy's scepticism about rap nationalism: 'How does a form

which flaunts and glories in its own malleability as well as its transnational character become interpreted as an expression of some authentic Afro-American essence?'[37]

If Gilroy remembers that growing up he was 'provided by black music with a means to gain proximity to the sources of feeling from which our local conceptions of blackness were assembled', he also realizes that 'the most important lesson music still has to teach us is that its inner secrets and its ethnic rules can be taught and learned'.[38] And as a child and young man I also learned something of myself – took my identity – from black music (just as I did later, in the disco, from gay music). What secrets was I being taught?

First, that an identity is always already an ideal, what we would like to be, not what we are. And in taking pleasure from black or gay or female music I don't thus identify as black or gay or female (I don't actually experience these sounds as 'black music' or 'gay music' or 'women's voices') but, rather, participate in imagined forms of democracy and desire. The aesthetic, as Colin Campbell has argued, these days describes a quality of experience rather than a state of being, and the popular aesthetic experience is an effect of 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism':

> The pleasures which self-illusory hedonism supplies are largely aesthetic and emotional, the scenes created in imagination having the characteristics of both works of art and drama.[39]

In his classic account of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman thus emphasizes Simone de Beauvoir's point that in dressing and making up, a woman

> does not present *herself* to observation; she is, like the picture or the statue, or the actor on stage, an agent through whom is suggested someone not there – that is, the character she represents, but is not. It is this identification with something unreal, fixed, perfect as the hero of a novel, as a portrait or a bust, that gratifies her; she strives to identify herself with this figure and thus to seem to herself to be stabilized, justified in her splendour.[40]

But if musical identity is, then, always fantastic, idealizing not just oneself but also the social world one inhabits, it is, secondly, always also real, enacted in musical activities. Music making and music listening, that is to say, are bodily matters, involve what one might call *social movements*. In this respect, musical pleasure is not derived *from* fantasy – it is not *mediated* by daydreams – but is experienced directly: music gives us a real experience of what the ideal could be. In his discussion of black identity, Paul Gilroy thus argues that it is neither 'simply a social and political category' nor 'a vague and utterly contingent construction' but 'remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires'.

> These significations are condensed in musical performance, although it does not, of course, monopolise them. In this context, they produce the imaginary

effect of an internal racial core or essence by acting on the body through the specific mechanisms of identification and recognition that are produced in the intimate interaction of performer and crowd. This reciprocal relationship serves as a strategy and an ideal communicative situation even when the original makers of the music and its eventual consumers are separated in space and time or divided by the technologies of sound production and the commodity form which their art has sought to resist.[41]

And once we start looking at different musical genres we can begin to document the different ways in which music works *materially* to give people different identities, to place them in different social groups. Whether we're talking about Finnish dance halls in Sweden, Irish pubs in London, or Indian film music in Trinidad, we're dealing not just with nostalgia for 'traditional sounds', not just with a commitment to 'different' songs, but also with experience of alternative modes of social interaction. Communal values can only thus be grasped, as musical aesthetics *in action*.[42] Helen Myers, for example, quotes Channu, a village singer in Felicity, Trinidad:

> Indian music sounds much sweeter. Whatever the Indian sing and whatever music they play, they don't do it of a joke. It's serious thing for whoever understand it. It brings such serious feelings to you. Calypso they only sing. You might hear calypso. You will just feel happy to jump up. But if you hear a real technical piece of Indian music, you might sit down stiff and still, and you might be contrasting so much that you mightn't know when it start or when it finish.[43]

For these Trinidadians, 'Indianized pieces, borrowed from a twentieth-century urban Hindi culture' are therefore heard as 'more authentic than the local Westernized repertory, a reflection of their New World heritage'. Authenticity in this context is a quality not of the music as such (how it is actually made), but of the story it's heard to tell, the narrative of musical interaction in which the listeners place themselves.[44]

## Conclusion

Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives. Such a fusion of imaginative fantasy and bodily practice marks also the integration of aesthetics and ethics. John Miller Chernoff has thus eloquently demonstrated how among African musicians an aesthetic judgement (this sounds good) is necessarily also an ethical judgement (this is good), The issue is 'balance': 'the quality of rhythmic relationships' describes a quality of social life. 'In this sense, style is another word for the perception of relationships.'

> Without balance and coolness, the African musician loses aesthetic command, and the music abdicates its social authority, becoming hot, intense, limited, pretentious, overly personal, boring, irrelevant, and ultimately alienating.

And

> As the dance gives visible form to the music, so too does the dance give full and visible articulation to the ethical qualities which work through the music, balance in the disciplined expression of power in relationship.[45]

Identity is thus necessarily a matter of ritual, it describes one's place in a dramatized pattern of relationships – one can never really express oneself 'autonomously'. Self-identity *is* cultural identity; claims to individual difference depend on audience appreciation, on shared performing and narrative rules. As Appiah puts it:

> The problem of who I really am is raised by the facts of what I appear to be: and though it is essential to the mythology of authenticity that this fact should be obscured by its prophets, what I appear to be is fundamentally how I appear to others and only derivatively how I appear to myself.[46]

In her study of music making in (the very white) Milton Keynes, *The Hidden Musicians*, Ruth Finnegan persuasively argues that these days people's voluntary, leisure activities are more likely to provide their 'pathways' through life than their paid employment. It was in their musical activities that her city dwellers found their most convincing narratives; it was in their aesthetic judgements that they expressed their most deep-seated ethical views.[47]

This is, perhaps ironically, to come back to music via a spatial metaphor. But what makes music special – what makes it special for identity – is that it defines a space without boundaries (a game without frontiers). Music is thus the cultural form best able both to cross borders – sounds carry across fences and walls and oceans, across classes, races and nations – and to define places; in clubs, scenes, and raves, listening on headphones, radio and in the concert hall, we are only where the music takes us.

### Notes

1 Gina Arnold, *Route 666. On the Road to Nirvana*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1993, p. 228

2 Anthony Storr, *Music and the Mind*, Harper Collins, London and New York, 1992, p. 153.

3 John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1979, p. 167.

4 Although the best version of the argument remains the earliest, Paul Willis's *Profane Culture*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1978.

5 Quoted in Eric Lott, *Love and Theft. Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1993, p. 91.

6 For the debate about race and rap see, for example, Greg Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk. Essays on Contemporary America*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1992. For the debate about gender and music see Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings. Music, Gender and Sexuality*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991. For discussion of national musical identities see Deanna Robinson, Elizabeth Buck and Marlene Cuthbert, *Music at the Margins*, Sage, London, 1991.