MUS-735 American Music Survey Final Paper

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American music encompasses a diverse history in its origins. Many people are not able to really identify true American music. There are many reasons for this. Throughout the MUS-735 course, we discussed history of American music along with poverty and its implications in music education. In order to understand the average American’s apparent uneducated understanding of American music, we must first explore what the average American determines to be important in music and what music is important to them.

Ruby Payne offers a deep insight into poverty (Payne, 2013). Poverty reaches beyond economic poverty. Poverty also has its own language. This language translates into the music that Americans relate to and enjoy. Because poverty can potentially restrict opportunities for all people and categorizes people, forcing an unspoken understanding and language only relevant to those in the specific categories, people have different connections to music as an outlet to express what they cannot. To support this idea, I will use myself as an example.

I was raised on a small farm in a very rural area in western North Dakota. Neither of my parents received education past 8th grade. My father was the oldest of five in his very strict German family. He was drafted into the Army but received an honorable discharge after two years of service so he could return home to work on the family farm. My mother was the youngest of nine children in a German-Russian family. Their lives growing up were difficult. Lots of hard work and families that were far from emotionally connected. Four years after my parents were married, my sister was born. Eight years after her birth I was born.

My parents were very hard working. Even though considered to be uneducated, my father did his best to stay on top of the latest ranching ideas by reading various farm and ranch magazines and journals. My mother struggled with anything academic so she focused on helping in the field, milking cows, providing for the family through gardening and butchering. Their own parents (my grandparents) were convinced that my parents would never be successful. I believe that lack of faith in their ability motivated them more to work hard to prove everyone wrong.

My hometown was small. Everyone knew everyone and everything and then some. People knew things about me I didn’t even know. My family seemed to be a hot topic of conversation for the local coffee shop patrons. We definitely gave them things to talk about. My parents had some serious domestic issues. There was no hiding it. My sister and I took our turns displaying at school the results of domestic disturbances. It was not only the physical displays but our academic work suffered as did our social lives. Of course everyone had to talk about it. Our peers viewed us as the problem. We were defected in so many ways according to our peers and many of their parents. It was difficult to be at home and it was difficult to be at school. There was never a safe place aside from being alone in the church, walking through the pastures and fields, or sitting in a bedroom closet.

Musically, my father’s family enjoyed music but no one was a music maker. They sang old German songs and hymns and eventually took to singing old country western songs. My mother’s family was basically the same; however, my grandfather performed in a local polka band. He played the clarinet, accordion and drums. It was common to have a barn dance or a local dance in a dance hall located somewhere in an unmapped township. My grandfather would enjoy tipping his liquor during the gigs and eventually took to tipping it at home and hiding the bottles so no one would know.

I was the first in my family to complete high school. My sister quit school at 17. A cousin who was the same age as me quit at 16. My closest friend quit at age 16 as well. Neither of my parents supported the idea of my choice to attend college. Neither believed I could or would finish. My father went so far as to try hooking me up with a local boy he ‘approved’ of so I would not need to go chasing around the country.

I have always loved music. Both of my parents would sing country western songs and Gospel hymns. I remember my mother in particular having a very beautiful voice until years of smoking finally cut her range into a range of Do-Sol at best. I would lay on the pickup seat with my head on her lap while we would drive through the fields and pastures, helping my father while she would sing song after song. My father kept a journal of his favorite song lyrics. Most of them were old country western love songs. In church there were a Native American mother and daughter who always played guitar. (They still do to this day!) When I was in second grade my parents would let me sit in the pew in front of the musicians so I could feel as if I was part of the church choir. Finally, in fifth grade I was able to begin my musical training. I joined band – wanting to play alto saxophone but getting talked into playing trombone instead. My mother saw to it that I could take piano lessons, too. When I reached the end of my sixth grade year, the mother and daughter team at church asked if I would like to play organ. I have been playing and singing for church ever since.

During my school years in music, peers made fun of my ability. For some reason I did not quit. Music was the only outlet I had and felt safe with. I could choose songs to play and sing that said exactly what I was thinking, feeling, dreaming about. I felt as if I could share the deepest parts of me without anyone really knowing. I started writing my own songs in the style I had grown up with. I saved money by selling pail calves to purchase a plain Roland keyboard, amp, keyboard stand, microphone and everything I needed to travel and perform. I learned not to trust the big old upright pianos sitting around since most of them had not been tuned for years and many had keys that did not work. I entered some area country show down talent contests in Dickinson and Bismarck. At school, we never had a choir and no music class after seventh grade. Band almost became non-existent as well when I was a sophomore. William Freitag was the teacher at the time. There were five of us in band so he formed us into a jazz combo. That was my first exposure to jazz.

I continued to write my songs and choose other songs that I connected with. They were mostly all country western and country Gospel songs. That was the music people there listened to. That was the music I grew up with. That was the music my parents would allow me to practice at home. Any other music I tried was not easily accepted by them. I found that the music I listened to and performed spoke pure and true to my heart. It had the words I could not find myself or I did not feel safe to say in a spoken conversation. I firmly believe that music gives an intimate voice to a poverty audience who cannot express itself intimately regarding feelings.

Growing up, any music that was not country or country Gospel I would now classify as cultivated then. It was music I did not understand and had to work hard to find connectivity to. It was music, no matter how beautiful it may have sounded, that required my intentional decision to listen to and seek for value in it. The music I would have categorized as cultivated then is now vernacular to me, for the most part. I understand the history, I understand its significance, I understand its structure and it is much more common to me.

As people immigrated to America, they brought with them their musical background. Both of my parents were first generation American born citizens so I have thought a lot about their music through the years. Since music education was not established in schools until later and the separation between people began to take place in the 19th century, a distinction was being made between music in the vernacular and cultivated music that upheld higher moral, cultural and philosophical ideals (Hitchcock, 2000). Folk music seemed to fall in between the two and, in some ways, seems to me that it brought the vernacular and cultivated music together as people were trying to find more ways to express themselves and share their stories. The music represented the events of the times and eventually the heart of America – seeking independence and individuality while following dreams and new ideals.

The combination of the vernacular and cultivated styles of music brought opportunity for America to establish its own sound and independence in music. When I think of American music I immediately think of jazz. In addition to jazz, there are other sounds of America. John Cage proves this sound of America in his piece, *4’33”*. Shocking to see and hear yet a great point is made by this piece. What music really is has been debatable and open to personal beliefs. Cage’s piece is silence but not fully. The music is the sound that is happening all around. Written and performed during a time in American history when people likely longed for some quiet time and time to connect to the peace around them, it makes sense to me that a composer would ‘strike a chord’ with nature’s sounds. Another piece by John Cage, *Dreams*, illustrates beautiful simplicity in a single note melody with some traditional melodic progressions and some non-traditional intervals and ideas. Once again, this is a piece that is profoundly simplistic and speaks deeply about that time in history.

Another sound of American music is represented in Henry Cowell’s music. *The Banshee* in particular is an interesting piece that explores, not only the physical abilities of an instrument, but also the sounds that are not traditional, vernacular, nor cultivated. One may argue that the piece is cultivated because of its strange sound and that listeners need to be primed to some degree to understand and appreciate such a piece. There is historical significance in the title itself and the origins of the subject matter, but likely never any music composed to portray the subject matter until Cowell. The combination of vernacular and cultivated music allowed for historical, cultural, and traditional topics to have a new sound and to be expressed freely.

There have been many other profound American composers who opened up endless possibilities in what we know as American music today. Charles Ives was classically trained and decided to explore freedom of composition and sound (Hitchcock, 2000). He combined his classical writing skills with the desire to break some rules. In his piece, *The Unanswered Question*, Ives begins with a comfortable progression of sustained chords. Soon he has a solo instrument entering that presents a very bold statement. More solo instruments join in with their own statements or ‘questions’. This combination of tonality represents, in my mind, some turmoil of the times and a strong desire to break free from restraints. Once again, I believe the events of the time heavily influence the music being composed. There has always been a desire for self-expression.

The desire for self-expression in music has always been present throughout history – especially Western European history. Each period in history is influenced by the events in the world. The Middle Ages saw the Black Death and the Crusades. The Renaissance saw division in the Church. The Baroque was fancy and was a bit of relief from some dark times prior. Classical saw people wanting to go back to how things were and yet composers like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart brought great musical beauty to the time. The Romantic period saw composers writing even more freely and emotionally. The start of each new period was proceeded by a desire to move forward. There have always been composers who went against the accepted norms and were progressive. One such famous composer is Ludwig von Beethoven. He composed at the end of the Classical and beginning of the Romantic period. He was not well accepted during his lifetime but he forever changed the history of music and its future.

Self-expression in music today, as in history, seeks to break boundaries, create something new, and reflect the lives of those who are writing it and those who are listening to it. A current piece I know that demonstrates the combination of two or more styles and could be considered vernacular music is *See You Again* by Wiz Khalifa. This piece begins with a pretty melodic statement and goes into a rapped section. This happens a few times throughout the song. The rap section is very rhythmic in diction but utilizes basically two sung/spoken pitches. The lyrics speak about seeing someone again in the future after life saw some difficult times. The lyrics express the importance of family. This is a piece many young people relate to and associate with high school graduation. Just as in all music, one might wonder if the song will stand the test of time.

American culture and America’s contribution to music have always seemed to be held in high esteem. I found an interesting article that talked about this but with a slightly different view point. I am not certain of the origination of the article and I realize it is not a scholarly journal, however, since we are discussing cultivated versus vernacular music, I feel an apparently personal article such as this might lend well to the debate. Here is the first section of the article:

“American + culture. Many people in the world believe these two words do not really belong together. The stereotype of the clueless and uncultured American runs deep – and not just abroad. It is part of American culture itself – a kind of “in your face” pride at being down-to-earth and every day. The common man and woman with common tastes have been celebrated in America since its independence. At the same time, the sophisticated and “highfalutin” tastes of the upper classes have been viewed with satire and disdain. That is why it is a bit of a paradox that American culture has become the world’s most widespread and influential today. Indeed, it has become so powerful and ever-present that some fear it may actually damage their own national cultures” (Damm, 2008).

I have to say this fits into our discussions regarding poverty and poverty’s influence over music and musical opportunity. This in turn supports the discussions about vernacular music and cultivated music.

When I consider America’s musical position in the world I have always wondered what position we really have aside from our great jazz. I have had this discussion with others and some even argue that jazz cannot be purely American music since it has evolved from the musical offerings of other cultures, culminating into what we generically refer to as ‘jazz’ but with many styles under it, many of which most people would not realize fit under the umbrella title of ‘jazz’. Perhaps this is a fair argument. Or is it? Then we can begin to argue that folk music is not American since it was the music of people who came from other countries and happened to settle in America. Would that make Native American music the only American music? With these arguments one would draw the conclusion that the only American music is music composed and performed by American born citizens who received musical training only in American schools and universities and have no influences from composers residing in any other country but America. Is that really being American in thinking?

I believe America stands strong in the world with its musical contributions. I may not appreciate some forms of music but I believe that American music comes from the voice of the people and reflects the American culture – whatever that culture may be, as the article above addresses. When I personally think about American music, I immediately think jazz and American folk songs. Jazz was born from the cultivated and vernacular music of many people with many backgrounds. Some of those people were well to do and others were mistreated and abused property of the wealthy. Jazz is the voice of the voiceless and represents many kinds of people, just as America does. Folk songs are songs of the people – the folks. Some folk songs are tall tales and some tell stories of life the way it was. They speak of dreams and love, family and games. Some even reference darker times in our history, such as *Blue Tail Fly* and *The Yellow Rose of Texas*, when you know the original lyrics. Maybe the ‘folks’ who wrote and sang these songs were born in another country but they chose to be American and fought to have a voice for future generations in all things, including music.

I remember my parents often saying how the music was going downhill. Nothing was good any more. They would comment about lyrics being filthy, the sound being loud and obnoxious, and the music being shallow with no meaning. They would comment (on the rare occasion they would see images of singers) about how immoral their appearance is and if they have to use sexuality to sell their music, then their music must not be very good. I recall rolling my eyes at their comments. I am now starting to feel the way they must have. I have a difficult time with much of the music being produced recently. Even if the lyrics have some connectivity, I have a difficult time appreciating the music. I definitely struggle with the importance placed on physical appearance and gestures that are suggestive in ways that, in my mind, are crude and unnecessary. Another part of music industry I have not been able to accept are the reality shows that have your one ticket to fame and stardom. Once in a while you might experience a singer with technique and skill but usually they all sound the same. Even so, this is the sound that wins popular vote.

Popular vote wins the acceptance in music. Regardless what my opinions are of the current state of music, performers are still winning popularity votes in America and all around the globe. I believe this is possible because music around the world is like music in America. The music is reflecting the times and is pushing boundaries just as it always has. It will continue to do so and the performers of such music will continue to be acclaimed as long as it is an acceptable practice to do so. I tend to be rather conservative so I question if we are sending the right message about America through music.

Most of the music people associate with today I would consider to be vernacular. The music represents the common people and their everyday voice. The music follows basic chord structure and repetitive progressions. The melodies are limited in range and require minimal skill to achieve successfully. I do not want to say this music has no value because it obviously does – the people value it. We are missing opportunity to grow with cultivated music, however. School music programs are limited financially and lack opportunities for experiences. Time allotted for music education is minimal and the understanding of the work involved to become fluent in music is diminishing. Fewer people are active in music beyond high school. Perhaps some of this has to do with the idea of immediate stardom or nothing. Technology also influences the quality of musicians. Musicians no longer need to be masters of their instruments when there are programs that will correct pitch and tone deficiencies. Fewer musicians perform live gigs and concerts, especially without the aid of auto tune or prerecorded music. Live, cultivated music concerts are still for the musically learned and elite, or so it seems.

Today’s American vernacular music represents what some refer to as moral decline and others refer to as acceptance. Whichever way you look at it, the music of America is representing the trends in morals. The messaging is clear in American music. If America is really seen as a world super power (Damm, 2008), then the world will readily accept the music and musicians we have to offer. I wonder what Beethoven, Cowell, Cage and Ives would say.

What music will stand the test of time? That answer is very debatable. Each person has music that is special to them. For each individual, that special music will stand the test of time regardless if no one else in the world remembers it. Will that special music be cultivated or vernacular? I believe that is up to each person to decide for themselves.

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