

The Soundtrack of Identity: Where Music Meets Identity

Courtney Hilliard

The Neighborhood Academy

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Mrs. Backstrom

*The Soundtrack of Identity: Where Music meets Identity***Introduction**

Music is usually used as a form of entertainment and/or an aesthetic for social bonding, pleasure, and relaxation. Across cultures and throughout history, music plays a significant role in individual enjoyment, serving as a tool for social and cultural power and for expressing how individuals and their communities express themselves, their values, and traditions. The key to understanding the relationship between music and its society is to grasp the meanings of important concepts such as culture, identity, and music. Culture can be understood as the shared traditions, customs, and beliefs that shape a group of people, and how they perceive the world and define their identity, as individuals recognize themselves within cultural frameworks such as social roles, gender, and ethnicity. Music, as a social and cultural practice, is not just a product of entertainment but an activity that has much more cultural meaning behind it. Specific kinds of music shape identity through influencing a community's social values, beliefs, and traditions, showing how sound is a powerful tool for connection and expression.

The study of music falls within the field of ethnomusicology, where an ethnomusicologist (someone who studies music as a vital component of culture and society) examines music as an activity that connects to a community's social life, rather than focusing specifically on it as an aesthetic. Ethnomusicology highlights the cultural meaning, performances, and societal participation in music. Examining the perspectives of different cultures and sources, it gives scholars and readers an idea that music is not just a way for people to detach themselves from reality, but also plays a significant role in how values are shaped in a community's specific musical practices and how they perceive other types of music and traditions. These practices set the foundation for building a person's character and identity in many ways.

Music as Cultural Expression

Music functions as a cultural practice that carries a community's history, traditions, and values. Scholars in ethnomusicology argue that music should be studied not only for its beats and melodies, but also for its connection with the individual who listens to and engages with it. From this perspective, music can become a powerful tool for self-expression and representation.

Scholars such as Robert Garfias have studied ethnomusicology to demonstrate the importance of music as a practice across many different cultures. Garfias argues that music is always connected to the social contexts in which it is taught, performed, and passed on, which goes against Western traditions of music analysis. Western traditions focused solely on harmonies, melodies, and sound complexity rather than on their cultural meanings. From the perspective of an ethnomusicologist, music derives its significance from its connections to community life, making it an essential part of cultural identity rather than merely an object of entertainment. Garfias describes how music plays a big part in how societies function:

However, the manner in which groups of people organize themselves socially is often reflected in the way they organize themselves in their music. In some societies, there is a cohesive communal structure in which all members are regarded as equal, having equal rights and responsibilities. In other societies, there is a high degree of stratification, distinct social levels ranging from rulers, enforcers, artisans and craftsmen, to workers and peasants (Garfias, 2004, p.30). This shows that identity can vary based upon a person's environment and their role in society.

Music plays an important role in shared experiences within different cultures by creating spaces for individuals to connect emotionally and participate. According to Garfias, music serves as a social activity in which individuals learn “how music should be made, how dancers should

dance, and how singers should sing” (pub year, p#) which shows and allows people to connect to their communities and others through their customs of musical practices. Other than the social connection music brings to individuals, it is also used to preserve a culture's heritage and history.

In the past, music was passed down orally, from mouth to mouth. History being preserved is especially important for marginalized communities whose music is stolen without proper credit, which is called ‘cultural appropriation,’ and their music can serve as a form of cultural resilience. Garfias (2004) explains, “There is an increasing concern with archiving materials and the legal responsibilities and liabilities that are thereby implied, about the complexities of defining the distinction between what is borrowed, what is appropriated, and what is being stolen,” emphasizing that musical traditions can be defined by whether they are stolen, appropriated or borrowed, how ethnomusicologist study music and are considerably harder to find after they are changed and used in modern media (p.248). Garfias (2004) also states, “Culture and tradition are intertwined. We do things in a certain way; others take the idea and even modify it in the next generation. People remember what is good or useful and share it with the next generation and with their neighbors. In this way, the most important and useful things we have learned are diffused and carried on” (p 6) which demonstrates how music helps to keep cultural memories while allowing identity to change and grow over time.

Music, Power, and Cultural Identity

Music is used not only as a cultural expression but also as a powerful force that shapes identities, representation, and hierarchies. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh state that music plays a vital role in how societies define themselves and how they recognize others around them. Music can be found in economic and historical systems that influence and ‘borrow’ the voices of those who are marginalized and oppressed.

Traditions in Europe define Western music, which is usually described as a ‘borrowing’ of ‘others’ through a process of domination or cultural appropriation, meaning the unacknowledged or inappropriate taking of a specific culture’s customs, practices, and ideas. Born and Hesmondhalgh state that this type of hierarchy frames “non-Western/non-European” music as inferior and exotic, reinforcing the divide between cultures and races, especially if the music is not considered “European/Western.” This process of interpreting identity through the differentiation of cultures has allowed European institutions to uphold their cultural authority while diminishing the accuracy of non-European musical traditions. By considering non-European music as different or inferior, European music history follows systems of racial, cultural, and social inequality. Born and Hesmondhalgh state that representation in music shows a society's power structure, which affects how music is studied and perceived throughout the world (pub year, pg #).

Born and Hesmondhalgh speak about cultural exchange, which includes the appropriation of a culture’s traditions, values, and ideas, usually occurring in history when a more powerful and dominant group takes the musical elements or other ideas and values from marginalized societies without the proper acknowledgment of the original creators, when those groups should be acknowledged for their work. At the same time, music is also used as a tool for transformation and resistance. When musical traditions are passed down, the people of that community develop with it which causes identity to always change and grow. The authors explain that when cultural trade is conducted ethically, music can challenge socially inappropriate cultural hierarchies rather than strengthen them (pub year, pg #).

Things like power, race, and geography play a big role in shaping a person's identity. Musical platforms, resources, and cultural recognition are distributed unevenly, so that some

voices are amplified. In contrast, others remain sidelined, showing how inequalities can shape which musical genres are seen as popular, and which ones aren't. Since music can reflect resistance, unity, or a culture's pride, it can become inherently political.

Music, Gender, and Social Roles

Music plays a role in shaping gender roles and hierarchies in societies. Ellen Koskoff states that gender is not separated from a community's musical practices and traditions. Gender is immersed in how music is made, shown, and valued by the world and its communities. Musical spaces frequently reflect the social expectations and beliefs about masculinity and femininity, which impact how people participate in and perceive music (pub year, pg#). A gendered lens on music provides a better understanding of how identities formed through music are connected to a community's social structures.

Koskoff highlights that gender influences musical participation. In many cultures, genres, instruments, and performance spaces are differentiated as 'masculine' or 'feminine'. These are socially constructed to reflect a community's beliefs on what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior for men and women. Gender also shapes a person's style and reaction, which can lead to musicians being judged based on the gendered standards of their community. Koskoff states, "The traditional social structure of most American Indian communities was divided along gender and age lines, with men and women having clearly delineated and equally valued tasks and responsibilities to the group throughout their adult lives." (2005, pg. 21). This matters because music in many cultures is tied to their social roles and responsibilities. Music is used as a way for people to learn who they are and how they belong in their society when participation in music is based on gender roles, teaching individuals what is expected of them. Koskoff's approach to

observing communities through ethnographic studies focuses on the lived experiences of communities rather than theory. Ethnography allows scholars to see how different cultures and individuals navigate expectations and power dynamics and create meaning within their cultural settings (name, pub year, pg#). As noted in the previous section, the topics of gender and power overlap. Both approaches examine the inequality and hierarchy of individuals based on race and gender, but gender analysis pays closer attention to the intimate aspects of music. Born and Hesmondhalgh focus on the larger-scale dynamics of race, power, and social class; Koskoff centers on the more personal, everyday aspects of life that musicians experience within their communities. Through ethnographic and gendered frameworks, it deepens understanding of how identity is formed, how music actively participates in ideas of masculinity and femininity, and how a person's social belonging is shaped.

Music, Community, and Cultural Tradition

Music is a link between the past, present, and future through preserving a culture's memories and identity. Across many societies, the purpose of musical traditions is to act as an archive of history, experience, and values. Scholars like Kamal Salhi and Garfias demonstrate that music evolves while maintaining deep connections to culture and tradition. Examining music as both memory and expression in global spaces gives individuals insight into how music helps uphold their community's identity over time.

Music serves as a vehicle for passing down beliefs, traditions, and values across many generations. Identity grows through a person's mentality and environment. Garfias emphasizes this by showing how people in the past transmitted stories, memories, and music orally rather than documenting history (pub year, pg #). This allows communities to preserve the important parts of a person's cultural identity. Certain songs, melodies, rhythms, and performances can

carry a community's achievements, struggles, and history, shaping how a community will be in the present and future.

Beyond preserving the past, music can create important, meaningful connections between generations. Individuals can connect and engage with their heritage through musical practices and performances. Garfias highlights that the balance between adaptation is crucial, as it explains that music from the past usually evolves into something new and modern, which becomes the new idea for the community:

As we observe the use of patterns and principles of organization of time in music in several different cultures, what we have been describing is a set of performance principles which have evolved in each culture over a long period of time. There has been, in every case, a mixture of newly created practices that eventually become standard within that culture. (Garfias, 2004, pg. 155).

Music also has a big connection to expressing religious identity. Kamal Salhi's source on "Music, Culture, and Identity in the Muslim World" demonstrates how certain musical practices connect to religious beliefs and a culture's norms. Music brings a sense of unity among community members. Salhi mentions, "The movements in Muslim-influenced dance and music are designed to reproduce the basis of reality and to worship God by using the body in ways that are not customarily parts of prayer." (Salhi, 2014, pg. 18). But at the same time, Salhi points out that there is tension between traditions and modernity. As global influences and technological advancements evolve, they reshape musical production and distribution. Communities must navigate how to maintain their authenticity while embracing newer forms of music.

Music, Belonging, and the Limits of Identity

While music may play a big role in shaping identity, it does not fully define individuals. Experiences in music can create strong feelings of belonging and identity in a culture, but identity will always be more complex than any musical practice or performance can define. Scholars Keith Negus and Patria Roman Velazquez emphasize that music can help forge connections emotionally, socially, and culturally, while also showing that identity is a highly flexible force that will always be evolving. Exploring both the emotional power of music and its limitations will give a clear definition of how music is shown in identity without completely defining it.

Music is a force deeply connected to emotion, making it a powerful tool for promoting a person's sense of belonging. Negus explains that participation in music ties individuals to one another who share similar experiences or backgrounds. Listening to or performing music can create a sense of community and connection among people, even those who have never met, through shared experiences that foster emotional bonds, shared understandings, and unity, showing how music can bring people together and build a community's collective identity. Negus and Velazquez state, "Music, according to this argument, seems to organise and create our identities for us. Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers the body, time, and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginary cultural narratives" (2002, p.4). This quote follows the idea that music builds identity through a person's experiences and how it impacts the mind. Even though music strongly influences identity, it does not fully explain an individual's identity.

Negus and Velazquez emphasize that people move among many identities depending on the social environment and experiences they encounter. Music doesn't capture the full complexity of a person's beliefs, background, and experiences. Many factors shape identity, such

as family, technology, education, and personal choices, while people may connect to certain genres of music or the lyrics, it is because of their personal interpretation rather than the music itself. Music is also influenced by many outside factors such as culture, status and technology, meaning that not everyone is exposed to the same stuff which changes identity. Music can only echo experiences, not replace them.

Conclusion

Music is much more than entertainment; it is a force that can help shape how an individual understands others and themselves. The research above shows that music can contribute to identity by showing tradition, preserving memory, shaping gender roles, and challenging their communities' power structures. At the same time, it shows the adaptability and complexity of identity, suggesting that no single experience or expression can fully determine who someone truly is.

Across many cultures, music plays an important role in preserving and passing down traditions, beliefs, and stories. Musical practices serve as cultural memories that link past generations to the present and future, and help those communities maintain a sense of progression. Music is also influenced by social and political power, reinforcing cultural norms like gender and social roles. There are considered 'expectations' about who performs, what they perform, and how they are perceived in a community. Ethnographic perspectives highlight that musical practices are shaped by a person's everyday life, emphasizing that identity is usually experienced rather than abstract.

Overall, understanding music helps individuals better understand others. Musical practices show how people and their communities express history, emotion, values, and traditions, and how identity changes and evolves. Studying music gives readers insight into how

people create connections, meaning, and an understanding of the complexity of the world. Music offers an influential lens that allows for exploration of diversity and the culture of the human experience.

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