

Aesthetic Identity, Race, and American Folk Music

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This article uses the concept of aesthetic identity to interrogate the relationship among musical genres, social movements and racial identity. American folk music has at some times subverted and other times reinforced the categorical boundaries between blacks and whites in twentieth-century United States. Aesthetic identity is the cultural alignment of artistic genres to social groups by which groups come to feel that genres represent “our” or “their” art, music, and literature. Genre boundaries then become social boundaries. Folk music inverts the usual relationship of genre and social boundaries. Folk music is always the culture of some “other,” either racial, regional, class, or national. Before it was called folk music, American vernacular music was much more racially integrated than the society around it, creolized across a spectrum from predominantly European to predominantly African-influenced, but with most exhibiting both. Before the era of commercial recording, black and white musicians sang the same music, learned techniques and songs from each other, and shared a social world of performance. The concept of folk music was created by academic elites, but remained unfamiliar to most people until the organized left took it on as a cultural project in the late 1930s and 1940s. Both academic elites and political activists constructed the genre as an alternative to the racialized genres that the commercial recording industry had dubbed “race records” and “hillbilly music.” American communists and their allies were especially self-conscious about using folk music as an instrument of racial solidarity in a particularly racially polarized era. Submerged by McCarthyism until the 1960s, folk music was revived as a racially unified genre, but quickly became whitened. My explanation for why the folk revival was so white revolves around three factors: the continuing legacy of commercial racial categories, the failure of the New Left to control music through a cultural infrastructure as effectively as had the old left, and the cultural momentum of an understanding of folk music as

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the music of the “other” at a time when blacks were trying to enter a system that white middle-class youth were rejecting.

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The sociology of culture is premised on the notion that boundaries between aesthetic genres correspond to social boundaries between groups. One of the major mechanisms by which such correspondence operates is that groups claim genres as their own and tie their group identities to the aesthetic standards of “their” genre. Folk music presents a special problem for the relationship of social and cultural boundaries because while folk music has been a prime instrument for solidifying social boundaries between groups, no one claims to be “folk.” Those who use folk music to solidify boundaries are using music not their own. In the American setting, one of the social boundaries shaped by folk music has been racial. This article will explore how aesthetic identities of race have interacted with the construction of American folk music over time, reviewing how the racial identity of folk music has shifted between black and white poles in response to the changing social context of musical production and the interaction of musical institutions. American folk music has gone through three distinct phases of racial identity. The concept of folk music was invented within a European nationalizing project and applied in this country to white Anglo-Saxon Americanism. It was then transformed into a left wing political project in the 1930s as “the people’s music,” taking an explicitly bi-racial cast. Finally, the folk revival of the sixties, despite its close association with the Civil Rights movement, reverted to its Anglo-Saxon identity. It is especially challenging because the discursive definition of folk music has substantially departed from what the “folk” themselves were singing.

Aesthetic identities are often constructed in self-conscious cultural projects. Identifiable groups of people act intentionally to align and subvert social boundaries by solidifying or eroding boundaries between genres. The outcome depends not only on their intentions, the cultural impulse that motivates their action, or the configuration of social relations in which the aesthetic activities transpire. In this case, the disjuncture between the people engaged in the project creating the folk music genre and those who purportedly “owned” the music—the folk—meant that the best intentions of those who sought a racially inclusive genre ultimately fell short.

GROUPS, GENRES, AND RACE

The underlying assumption of this analysis is the principle that cultural objects and cultural forms reflect and constitute boundaries between social groups

(Griswold 1987; DiMaggio 1987).² One of the basic principles of the sociology of culture is homology, the notion that the boundaries between cultural forms align with the boundaries between groups. Different audiences have preferences for different artistic and musical genres, and conversely those genres often help constitute boundaries between groups. High and low art are perhaps the clearest example. Not only is classical music preferred more by upper-class audiences, but the consumption of such culture signals upper-class status, creating a social boundary between upper- and lower-class groups (Bourdieu 1984). Just as David Halle's pathbreaking work has torpedoed the simpleminded association of high-status culture to abstract art, I want to enrich our analysis of racial boundaries and musical genres. Cultural genres create boundaries between racial, gender, age, national, sexual orientation, and other groups. Bourdieu, for example, has emphasized that cultural capital is not only a quality that individuals use for personal advancement but also a means by which groups use cultural distinctions and knowledge to advance collectively by erecting invidious social boundaries. Thus, groups adopt an *aesthetic identity*, the appropriation of a cultural boundary to solidify a group boundary. They adopt an aesthetic standard to define an invidious distinction that marks *us* vs. *them*. Just as the aesthetic standard of formalism, for example, creates an invidious distinction between those with the cultural capital to appreciate high art and music, other standards demarcate the boundaries of ethnicity, race, gender, and sexual orientation. Identification with a group becomes measured by adherence to particular aesthetic standards.

I want to emphasize that aesthetic identity does not mean that every member of a group embraces the aesthetic standards attributed to the group. To suggest that would be a not very subtle form of stereotyping. Not all whites like country and western any more than all blacks enjoy soul music. But people recognize that they are members of groups that are associated with particular genres. Individual blacks may not savor jazz, but they often take pride in it. Individual Finns may honor Sibelius even if they never listen to him, because they identify with Finlandia. The development of aesthetic identities is a social construction more than a matter of individual tastes.

Moreover, the construction of genres often involves the erection of boundaries between groups. Black music and white music were pitted against each other. Youth culture is pitted against the older generation. Nationalist music blossoms in time of war. That is not to say that every genre arises in a conflict between concrete groups. Composers seek greatness by transcending existing canons to found new genres—classical over baroque, romantic over classical, impressionist over romantic, etc. We can imagine a continuum with the putatively pure artistic boundary on one end and the equally unattainable group-based genres on the other. Genres may be

²In the ensuing discussion, I will focus on music, but similar principles apply to literature, art, architecture, and other cultural forms.

placed along this continuum, or may move along it as groups become more and less identified with particular genres as “their” music.

Folk music, however, complicates the connection between group identity and group culture. As the music of “a people” or “a folk” it conforms to the principle of homology. But, in fact, folk music is typically the appropriation by one group, usually a dominant group, of someone else’s music, fortifying social boundaries by breaching the principle of homology. No one calls themselves “the folk.” “The folk” are always some “other.” So the question becomes: Who creates the genre of folk music, for what purpose, and who embraces it as “our” music? Whose aesthetic identity is defined by folk music and what social boundaries are constituted?

WHO CONSTRUCTS AN AESTHETIC IDENTITY FOR FOLK MUSIC?

The commonsense answer is that folk music was there before it was called folk music, and belonged to some traditional group as “their” music. In this perspective, folk music is nothing but the name that outsiders give to vernacular music that “the folk” have been making all along. However, this simple answer is historically misleading. Concrete, identifiable groups constructed, negotiated, clashed with, and reconstructed folk music on the basis of claims about and on behalf of particular social constituencies.

For the first generation of folklorists, folk music was the music of a national people. The notion of “folk music” was first articulated by nationalist intellectuals creating an imagined community whose collective genius fostered the literature, poetry, lore and music that gave voice to a distinctive people. The English, like other Europeans, discovered an allegedly ancient national culture of the people least touched by modernity, the rural poor. By the turn of the twentieth century, English scholars despaired that the English peasantry had been corrupted by modernization and declared that the purest form of Anglo-Saxon folk music was to be found in the unsullied hollows and hills of the American Appalachians. Cecil Sharp, an Englishman who towered over the first generation of American folklorists, explicitly declared that the greatness of the American folk tradition was racial. He believed that racial inheritance determined a culture’s value: The mountaineers’ “language, wisdom, manners, and the many graces of life that are theirs, are merely racial attributes which have been gradually handed down generation by generation” (Filene 2000, p. 25).

However, the folklorist’s portrait of the rural poor not only misrepresented their musical tastes, but helped racialize American vernacular music in general. The music that ordinary people were singing, especially in the South, included much more than the Anglo-Saxon ballads the folklorists had identified as “folk.” While many Southerners did sing old ballads, the larger corpus of vernacular music was a creolized synthesis of European and African influences. By privileging the

European influences within the category of “folk,” the music that represented “the people” was confined to “white” music.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC

Vernacular popular music in America—music created and performed by common people outside of explicitly commercial circuits³—evolved from a common stream into three twentieth-century genres: Country and western has so explicitly belonged to whites that the KKK held fiddle contests in the 1930s (Peterson 1997). Rhythm and blues has been so explicitly coded as black that it was first recorded on “race records” (Oliver 1984). Both were racially exclusive. But the genre of folk music had the potential to bridge the racially defined genres of C&W and R&B.⁴

In the period between the end of the American Civil War through the 1920s, when much of the music now known as folk music was widely performed, but before these three genres of vernacular music took shape as specific genres, the people who wrote and performed music remarkably transcended the racial chasm of their social milieu. Although folklorists privileged Anglo-Saxon ballads, most vernacular American music was neither purely European nor African, but displayed various degrees of creolization. Black and white musicians knew each other, sang each other’s songs, performed for the same audiences, and freely borrowed styles, formats, knowledge, and songs. The most popular forms of vernacular music were manifestly synchronized from African and European roots. Minstrelsy, the closest thing the nineteenth century had to mass culture, was an ambivalent white caricature of black culture. Minstrel performers and their more respectable musical cousins such as Stephen Foster carefully did “field work” among black workers and songsters. Revival meetings, where blacks and whites found salvation, fused European solemnity with African ecstasy to create gospel music. Thus, when you examine pre-twentieth-century music, the commonalities between what black and white musicians were doing are at least as striking as the differences.⁵ Even though

³The boundaries between commercial and noncommercial music and between common and elite groups are not neatly delineated. Many part-time composers published songs or performed for money. And one might legitimately ask whether the music of the middle class, like the songs of Stephen Foster or “A Bicycle Built for Two,” were the “vernacular” popular music of the middle class. I prefer to distinguish between popular music and vernacular music in order to focus on the common roots of country and western, rhythm and blues, and folk. Popular music has been defined as a separate genre all along.

⁴Jazz came from the same roots, but quickly became distinguished from the other three genres; while the others remained primarily rural, jazz was urban, and by the 1920s, cultural movements like the Harlem Renaissance were associating jazz with the avant garde, in contrast to the continued low-brow connotations of rhythm and blues, country and western, and folk music.

⁵The discovery by Francis James Child of English ballads that had been passed on from generation to generation in the American South—the Child Ballads—was not representative of American vernacular music. Child only went to a few very isolated enclaves where few blacks lived and collected only the songs that conformed to his notions of “pure” folk music, ignoring the extensive local music that did not.

post-Civil War singers and songwriters lived in a racially segregated society, they would not have necessarily identified their music as specifically white or black until crystallized into racially encoded genres.

Despite the folklorists' original definition of folk music as white, the reality of creolized vernacular music made it plausible for the second generation of folklorists, especially those with left wing rather than nationalist commitments, to broaden the definition of folk beyond Anglo-Saxon mountaineers, shifting the aesthetic identity of folk music to a class rather than a racial axis.

While folklorists were collecting songs from those they considered "the folk," anointing some of what they found as "folk music" and ignoring the rest, commercial record companies were experimenting to find their niche in the marketplace. Many companies sought specialized markets for particular regions or demographics, with "race records" and "hillbilly records" being two of the categories that guided their marketing efforts. However, the racial genres of commercial marketing do not explain why folk music became white. Indeed, the overt racism of commercial music fortified the polarity of the folk/commercial dichotomy. Both academic folklorists and leftist advocates of people's culture explicitly juxtaposed folk music against commercial music. Whatever folk music was, it was decidedly anti-commercial.

By the end of the 1920s, the marketing of commercial music crystallized racial aesthetic identities. Tin Pan Alley and hillbilly music were white; jazz and "race music" were black. Folk music was a term used only by folklorists with little meaning to most people. But that changed in the next decade. In the 1930s and 1940s, people loosely associated with the Communist Party, including academic folklorists like Charles Seeger, father of Pete, Mike, and Peggy Seeger, took on folk music as a project, discovering the "people's" music (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). Folk music became the music of the left. Even though the Wobblies had used music as a weapon of insurgency early in the century, most leftists did not embrace folk music. Earlier Seeger, a member of a communist musical collective, had argued that "many folksongs are complacent, melancholy, defeatist, intended to make slaves endure their lot—pretty but not the stuff for a militant proletariat to feed upon" (Lieberman 1995, p. 30). But he later had a change of heart and helped his son, Pete, inspire a whole generation to embrace folk music as the musical expression of radicalism. One of the converts, Almanac singer Millard Lampell, wrote, "We think this is the first time there has ever been an organized attempt . . . to sing the folksongs of America. We are trying to give back to the people the songs of the workers" (*ibid.*, p. 53). Just as music for the early folklorists had been "folk" because it was white, for the communists it was folk because it belonged to the workers, both black and white.

Through performing groups like the Almanacs and later the Weavers, publishing ventures, booking agencies, and outreach to schools and unions, the political left popularized folk music as singers like Woody Guthrie, Huddie Ledbetter, and Aunt Mollie Jackson became seen as carriers of a genuinely American, authentically

indigenous music. The knowledge and appreciation of folk music moved beyond folklorists as folk music became a genre of popular music. One of the reasons that the leftists embraced folk music as “the people’s music” was that it was less racially encoded than vernacular forms like country and western or rhythm and blues. An aesthetic standard of authenticity, a quality based on the identity of the music maker, was amenable to being “the people’s” music. Many of the forms, styles, and instruments that signal “authenticity” or “folk-ness” come from slave music, including practices like the call and response, the twelve-bar melody, and instruments like the guitar or banjo (Cruz 1999). So the leftists sustained, or at least made a valiant attempt to sustain, the racially inclusive meaning of folk music, promoting the Huddie Ledbetters as well as the Aunt Molly Jacksons as personifications of the “people’s music.” Huddie Ledbetter, known as Leadbelly, a black musician discovered in a Louisiana prison, and Aunt Molly Jackson, a white union activist, discovered at the Harlan County coal strike, were both poor Southerners brought to New York City by folklorists, where they joined the community of leftist musicians and were prominently displayed as “authentic” representations of American culture.

The contradiction was that the leftists, no less than the older folklorists, were promoting the music of the other. Most were either Eastern establishment WASPs or second-generation eastern European Jews. Harvard educated Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger, both sons of early folklorists, were two of the most important people to popularize folk music, one as a collector of songs, the other as an organizer and performer. Moses Asch, who organized the leading folk record companies, Elie Siegmeister, another prolific collector, and Irwin Silber, who helped run musical organizations and publish folk songs, were of recent immigrant stock. None were genuinely “folk” in the usual sense of the word. They were all promoting the music of groups they did not belong to themselves, sincerely convinced that members of those other groups should identify with “the folk.”

THE SIXTIES REVIVAL

The popular view of the folk music revival of the 1960s is that it erupted after the remarkable popularity of the Kingston Trio and their clones. In the heyday of Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and Little Richard, “Tom Dooley” rocked the charts and changed music history. Not only did old ballads and new ballad-like songs appear on the charts, but millions of American youth bought guitars and joined with their friends in dormitory rooms, coffee houses, and hootenannies. The popular media portrayed the revival as more than a taste in commercial music; it was a quest for authenticity and movement against the sterility of commercialism. However, in the composition of the performers, the demographics of the fans, and the discourse of criticism, the folk revival was distinctively and constitutively white. This is especially notable because the folk revival coincided with the Civil Rights movement, was embraced by many white activists, and often expressed a

leftist message in lyrics. Given the bi-racial history of folk music, especially during the Communist Party era, why was the revival so white?

Two factors were especially important. First, the New Left as a social movement surrendered control of music to the commercial industry. Second, the cultural momentum of the “folk” category resonated much more with whites than blacks.

Even though the Civil Rights movement was a catalyst for the folk music revival, the political movements of the 1960s, although organized around several cultural activities, did not develop any organizations to control the production and distribution of music, leaving the institutional production of culture to commercial interests. Without a self-conscious organized effort to make folk music racially inclusive, it was incorporated into the prevailing structure of popular culture of the early 1960s, which was racially segregated. Even as the New Left erected a formidable cultural infrastructure including underground newspapers, a national news agency, film collectives, and bookstores, it did not develop the kind of musical institutions that the old left had organized in the 1930s and 1940s. Even though music had been a cultural pillar of the early Civil Rights movement, many of the leaders of the anti-war and student movements became wedded to a heavy political economy framework, distancing themselves from the cultural focus of hippies. Though the mass media news blurred the distinction between the political movements and the counterculture movements with imagery like “flower powers” and its celebration of the culturally potent, politically radical Yippies, the political and cultural wings of the baby boomer generation were mutually suspicious and at times downright hostile. Those organizations, such as Newsreel, Radio Free People, or Liberation News Service, that might have erected a musical infrastructure remained primarily political and verbal, disseminating ideologically charged more than aesthetically pleasing content. Music was abandoned to the record companies and coffee houses. Even politically committed singers like Phil Ochs and Pete Seeger free-floated without any organizational base.

Moreover, if the New Left had created a musical infrastructure for solidifying its constituency, it would have faced an uncongenial cultural context if it had wanted to use folk music to bridge the broader racial chasm. As the music of the “other,” folk music appeals primarily to people who embrace marginalization. Indeed, it was folk music’s “authenticity” as a marginal genre that appealed to white middle-class youth seeking a relatively safe way to distance themselves from the mainstream (Cantwell 1998).⁶ The aesthetic identity of folk music as “other” meant

⁶African Americans generally did not identify themselves as “the folk,” and did not welcome their anointed role as authenticating white culture. White singers like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, both of whom were profoundly influenced by the *Anthology* and recorded several of its songs, eschewed the mainstream culture that the Civil Rights activists were clamoring to join. Blacks could not join the folk music affirmation of the other because they were an “other.” While the first generation of urban blacks may have found a connection to their rural roots in rhythm and blues, those born in the North increasingly identified jazz, soul, and rap as “their” music (Filene 2000). And by the time part of the African-American movement began to reject the white mainstream, folk music was firmly entrenched in that mainstream.

that folk music became “their” music because it helped them imagine themselves as someone other than who they feared they were: white middle-class consumers. What the middle-class youth found aesthetically pleasing about folk music—its anti-commercial simplicity, its musical purity, its evocation of a dissolving past—appealed primarily to whites who wanted out of the mainstream more than African Americans, who had been excluded.

CULTURAL MOMENTUM

This contrast between social and cultural boundaries created by promoting the music of a social “other” means that the social identity and meaning of folk music is more plastic than other genres. Folk music’s racial coding is especially ambiguous and multivalent. All popular culture is embedded with racial codes, associating genres and racial groups. People think of rhythm and blues as black or country and western as white partly because most of the performers are of a particular race, partly because of the themes common to the lyrics, and partly because the musical forms or tropes are attributed to racial groups. Musical notes that fall between the notes of the diatonic scale, known as blue notes, are associated with black music, while singing notes in diatonic pitches with little inflection is considered white. The codes that define a song as rhythm and blues or country and western are highly racialized, including the musical forms—both melodic and rhythmic—the vocal techniques used, and the instrumentation. What makes a song folk music, both in historical roots and contemporary meaning, while racially salient, is also highly plastic. The defining feature of the genre is social: A group with cultural authority defines someone else as the folk—an imagined community with a common past, making their music “folk music.” Because folk music is always revivalist, no one calls themselves the folk or says they are writing a new kind of folk music. But the past of folk music is typically set against the present, and usually with a message. For the ballad collectors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was a racially pure nation, unsullied by the ills of modernism. For the leftists of the 1930s and 1940s, it was the virtue of the “the people” vs. the greed and corruption of the capitalists. For the youth of the 1960s, it was authenticity vs. the shallowness of commercialization. But the puzzle is why the last revival, spawned in a moment of interracial hope, became so white.

Because folk music was a music of the “other” it could easily be appropriated by anyone who wanted to claim it. Despite the best efforts of the leftists in the 1930s and 1940s to promote racial integration by constructing a racially inclusive music, they had little success in convincing the “folk” that this was *their* music. Only in the 1960s, when a generation created a *counterculture*, pursuing authenticity through some “other” than the sterile suburban world of their parents, abetted by a political movement that discovered “their” own music in the protest music of

the past, did a major group of people embrace folk music as their own (Cantwell 1998). So the student movement was simultaneously promoting the construction of a new genre of folk music, which in the end was very white, and advocating racial integration in the political and economic realm. When the Civil Rights movement fractured along racial lines, the white movement abandoned the political use of music and let it become more identified with white angst than political activism.

CONCLUSION

The shifts in the aesthetic identity of folk music cannot be explained by change in the larger cultural currents in society. The boundaries among genres influence social boundaries less as a response to the vicissitudes of an autonomous cultural drift than from the willful action and interaction of identifiable groups. Only the first phase—the early folklorists’ Anglo-Saxonist nationalist project—coincided with broad cultural trends in race relations. The post-Reconstruction period was characterized by the installation of the Jim Crow system crystallized by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision validating legal segregation. Though more progressive than much of the rest of society in that period, the discourse of early folk music was not radically out of step. The Communist project for racial inclusion in the early 1930s and 1940s, though concurrent with New Deal liberalism, was much more radical than larger cultural trends. At best, cultural currents were indifferent to racial issues. Other than the Communist Party, integrationist organizations such as the NAACP were working quietly behind the scenes. In the 1960s folk music was most racially inclusive in the period before the mass media and public opinion shifted to support integration. Just about the time the cultural mainstream became racially tolerant, the New Left split along racial lines and the aesthetic identity of folk music became white.

The aesthetic identity of folk music is ironic. Folk music is embraced by an “us” who seek to identify with a “them.” Nonetheless, “folk music” has been a historically consequential concept both to energize political movements and to provide enjoyment for listeners and participants. Whoever the “folk” are when people embrace folk music, it is not themselves, but more likely who the embracers think they are not—some “other.” Folk music is thus especially challenging to our sociological endeavor of probing the relationship of artistic genres and social boundaries.

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