Sarah McRae

The Social Life of Music

Assignment #3

Due: 4 November 2014

Bluegrass + Folk = Me

 How do I begin to describe the journey of becoming myself? Do I start by telling a story of my childhood experiences with our neighbors and family; or of school in suburban Cincinnati and of my friends since kindergarten? All of these shape who I am, but what I find is the basis of most of these memories is music. Music is often the forgotten element when talking about identity. It most likely is always present, just in the background. When I least expected music to influence me (my early childhood years) was the time when it influenced me the most. But somehow I had no idea. I feel like that is how most discoveries of identity pan out, we stumble upon memories from the past and we realize how influential and valuable they are to our present selves.

 My earliest memories of music in my life are of simple things such as bath time songs, little rhymes for bedtime (when pulling the blanket up my mother would always say “over the ear and under the chin, now that’s the way to get tucked in!”) and of my mother calming me down after I was sad. She would always sing “You are My Sunshine” to me after a rough day at school, a fight with my brother, a nightmare…the list goes on and on. Her singing became a habit. As Turino describes, “…we develop habits without much direct awareness of them as *habits*. They develop so early or so slowly, often through socialization (modeling ourselves on those around us), that they seem natural, normal, and commonsensical.” (Turino 100). In my case, this specific habit developed early in my life and slowly over time.

My mom bought me a stuffed animal unicorn that had a music box in it that would sing “You are My Sunshine” to me when she could not be there to comfort me. This unicorn became part of me as a child. I created an iconic relationship with my stuffed animal because in my mind she represented my mother; she would sing the song and I would instantly feel better and my stresses would go away because I could picture my mom and everything was alright in that moment. Little did I know this at the time, but the music played by the music box and sang by my mother would be the key I would need to distress about exams, relax and put me to sleep, and cheer me up after a tough day with my friends. This song was becoming an integral part of my identity.

But I still had no idea this phenomena was taking place. It is obvious now that the development of identity through music can begin so early in a child’s life. Development of identity can even begin before a child is born. My parents grew up in Indiana where they led pretty different lives. My dad was from the country and learned the mandolin and guitar while my mom was a religious girl from the city who learned the piano. It was almost as if my identity was already half there when I arrived into the world. My parents provided the history of their identity but left a little gap for me to fill in. But what would I fill it in with? I would need to develop a sense of self.

Turino defines ‘self’ as the body and the total set of habits that constitute the individual. Therefore, one cannot simply have a single habit. My musical habits developed at such a young that I cannot remember listening to certain music for the first time; I just remember memorizing CDs and soundtracks with my brother on road trips. One that sticks out in particular is the soundtrack to the movie “O Brother Where Art Thou?” My brother and I knew the soundtrack by heart and could sing every song (even with that bluegrass twang), but we had never seen the movie until a few years ago. Perhaps this is because we listened to it on every road trip longer than thirty minutes? Or maybe it is because bluegrass is in my blood.

 I was born in Kentucky and moved to Ohio the summer before kindergarten, but it is clear that in that time, I developed a love for the genre of bluegrass. After learning to play the harp, I took a different route than most of the people in my family (they chose guitar, mandolin, fiddle, etc.), but I still wanted to be a part of the bluegrass. One of my favorite things today is to improvise with my dad while he plays mandolin and create our own little bluegrass jam session.

 My family and I frequently try to keep our roots with Kentucky by going to festivals, listening to “The Music from the Hills of Home” on WNKU 105.3 every Sunday, or playing our usual “O Brother Where Art Thou” soundtrack. We just attended a festival in the middle of nowhere in Kentucky called the Wool Fest. We semi fit in with the cultural cohort that was taking place at this festival with Bluegrass playing over scratchy speakers, listening to bands that were made up of a whole family with the eleven year old girl as the singer and the granddaddy as the bass player, and eating homemade ham and bean soup made by the elderly church ladies that morning.

But, what was at the core of this festival? What was taking place every hour and had people up dancing and carrying on? Music. Music is central to the expression of group identities. This particular group that I associated myself with last month formed a cultural cohort because they shared the same habits based on a part of them. Turino discusses nested cultural formations in that ones can form in groups as small as families. “Any given individual belongs to a variety of *nested* cultural formations of lesser to greater size, specificity, and intimacy” (Turino 116). At the festival we were a part of a cultural formation. Kentucky is known for bluegrass and horse racing (two things of which I love, therefore I am part of a cultural formation).

These cultural cohorts and formations have not changed since arriving at college. My family took fall break to Red River Gorge in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. On this trip, bluegrass was the only thing that played in the car. But nobody complained because we were happy to take the time out of our busy lives in the city to reconnect with what helped develop our identities. Back before I could even notice our identities and personalities were evolving when my grandparents were young, they listened to the same music; Earl Scruggs back then and Ricky Scaggs now (funny comparison of last names). I think my friends would describe me as down-to-earth and easy going and I think that is reflected 100% in my taste for music. Some of my cultural cohorts are based on bluegrass, but most are based on the more general overarching theme of music.

Sometimes I am afraid to tell people about my love for bluegrass and Kentucky because of the stereotypes that are associated with it. So I tell people I am into folk, pop, and jazz. However, when Bluegrass is analyzed, we can determine that stylistically, the roots were derived from many types of music, but folk and pop were the standouts in my mind. I consider myself lucky that I can keep in touch with my habits and cultural formations because they make up who I am. Going to Kentucky for Fall Break was a great decision after a stressful first few weeks of freshman year in college. Why? It’s the hills of home where bluegrass music runs deep in the culture of the people with whom I share common habits and cultural formations.

Bibliography

Turino, T. (2008). Why Music Matters. In *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press