

Art as Dialect

Problem Statement

Over the past year, I have chatted with a lot of people about music, movies, and books. A few conflicts have resurfaced, which I failed to understand or resolve. I want to pull at the skeins which bind them together, figure out where the tangles block mutual understanding and appreciation of certain bands, certain songs or movies, books, painting, and sculpture. My efforts here do aim to shine a light on how people engage with the product of artistic effort, but they do not try to change folks' opinions about the particular.

A number of conversations about art hit a brick wall when we talk about artistic expression along the axes of taste, genre, specific artists, or the defining attributes of that expression. For the sake of this discussion, I am going to confine my focus to music, in particular popular western music spanning the last century. By constraining the scope, I will not cover every eventuality, but I will also not wander into arenas of which I am ignorant or unable to discuss particulars. Nor will this be a technically deep conversation, because I want to comment on shared experiences born of live performances, tangible commodities, and digitally distributed works.

Onsatz

This effort grew from a number of amiable disagreements with a coworker who had returned to my favorite flavor of rock and roll after many years. After having shared many samples of punk rock with my colleague, I found myself puzzled by the disconnects I perceived between what he seemed to like and what he turned out not to like, once he listened to some of the bands or recordings I directed him to listen to as either follow-ups to or context around, music or artists we'd previously discussed. In particular, I found myself scratching my head when our conversations ended on one of three rocky shores:

1. Taste: when someone doesn't like something, there comes a moment when he, she, or they no longer want to discuss it. It's frustrating because no further understanding is possible when one person just shrugs and says, m I dunno, it's boring/annoying/too...
2. Genre: when people say I don't like country/rap/jazz/folk and consign something that is more amorphous, it often feels as if the bridge over the river kwai has been blown up and no further analysis is possible.
3. Attributes: I used to get hopeful when folks started to list specific details they found objectionable – I don't like the tempo, I can't stand her voice, or the tuning of the guitar. If we could isolate a specific attribute, we can find a piece of music by this artist that got recorded in a different key, or with the vocals pitched differently. Or maybe this artist's other band recorded something you enjoy. But when one drills down into the particulars of a band, an album, a song, the complainant is likely to move the goalposts or add more attributes that give offense. The result is the same – analysis shuts down and obstinacy forms a brick wall to more understanding.

Tackling the Problem

I mentioned above that I am not out to change folks' minds. I want to understand better why folks respond to some music – this artist and not that. It's not just a question of whether the band plays fast, because folks who complain about being bored when something is slow might shrug when exposed to an even faster composition. It's not just that a record is folk music, because all popular music is effectively folk music in either technical or thematic terms. And it's not that something rubs them the wrong way, because invariably they will tout something even more abrasive. When I asked my coworker for clarification, he shrugged and said, I don't know any music theory, so I can't explain it technically. But many of the musicians he likes knew next to nothing about what made their music work when they started – they plugged in a guitar and strummed it until it made the sounds they needed to express their anger, their frustration, or their yearnings for a better tomorrow.

For my part, I felt frustrated because I felt we were talking at cross-purposes. I would play a band like the Cramps or the Sonics, and he'd tell me that wasn't punk rock. He'd tell me the Damned weren't really punk rock because they sounded too conventional, not angry and fast like Minor Threat, the Teen Idles, or Screem. I would select a number of Damned songs I felt demonstrated not only the punk energy and spirit, but indeed which Minor Threat, Teen idles, or Screem had copied. Look, here's a lyric or a chord change! Listen, there's a chorus, a recurring musical motif. Nope., sorry, I don't know music theory, so i can;t hear what you're pointing out, but i'm pretty sure that's not punk rock. Not like Minor Threat!

I've used one friend as a recurring example, but it wasn't just him. People I dated, friends I went to school with, even folks I met at shows demonstrated this obstinacy and it confused me to no end. Don't folks want to talk about what they love, what they are excited by? Don't they want to find more of what they love? Often, I hear, no, I know what I like, I'm not about to go looking for more, now that I found what I like. I don't want to hear folk, rap, country. I don't want to listen to this artist, that band, those songs. Why not? They're not <<my kind of music>> or they don't elicit <<my kind of response.>> They don't play hard, loud, melodiously, or in the right mode on the right instruments. One can phrase it however one likes, but it all adds up to gatekeeping. Genres, tempos, time-frames, instrumentation, or arrangements are not hard and fast qualifiers, so how did we ever get to this point? Why do we draw these hard lines?

Origins of the Problem

I think we can point to three major root causes of the toxicity that gatekeeping leaches into our cultural soil. One is class division. We are taught in school that music like Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and Mahler are de facto better than Louis Armstrong, Bessie Davis, and Ella Fitzgerald, which by inference, are better than Ma Rainey, Robert Johnson, and Ledbelly. All of these, we are taught, are vastly superior to Hank Williams, Buck Owens, or George Strait, and in turn, they are better and more worthy of study than NWA, Naughty by Nature, or Tupac. There is so much going on here – not just class snobbery, but racism, misogyny, and homophobia.

By the time we get to Rockabilly, rock and roll, disco, or heavy metal, the lines of what sells, what merits a record contract, and how they are arranged in record stores reflect those prejudices. Classical Music used to have its own quiet room on the second floor of the DC Tower Records – sort of a sanctum sanctorum. Contrast that to the arrangement and display of Go Go records at the Wiz or Kemp Mill on F street in the seventies and eighties. Growing up in the District of Columbia, we knew that Go Go records were utter gems that reflected the happy collision of caribbean percussion, big brass arrangements, and solid american funk, but I challenge you to find Go Go records outside Washington, DC and (perhaps) New Orleans. You might find some in Baltimore, Norfolk, or Richmond, but I can't guarantee it.

Long story short, the commoditization of artistic expression devalues more working class music, and the compensation has rarely been fair or even. In his biography of John Lee Hooker, Charles Shaar Murphy describes how white store owners would set up recording booths, release records, and claim songwriting credit on so-called 'race records,' while musicians would drive incredible distances to record as many sides as they could to collect the \$20-100 that they knew would be all they'd ever see. They'd record under made-up names to squirm free of restrictive contracts that denied them royalties and exposure to larger audiences.

Meanwhile, at the factories, people are getting their heads beaten in for demanding fair wages and a few union organizers (the ones who don't get killed by the pinkertons) are telling their stories to troubadors with guitars. The chants, the calls for justice, and the rallying chants to keep people focused on making cars or smashing rocks on a prison gang, all make their way to the troubadors with songs like This Land is My Land, Who's Side Are you On, and Joe Hill establishing continuity and community. These songs don't really sell records en masse until the fifties and sixties, college educated kids wandering to the village or Berkeley. It takes a rock and roll fan from Minnesota to tie the strands of the blues to the pro-labor folk anthems together and smash the gatekeeping of white folk elitism (QV Newport Folk Festival, 1965).

I've left out so much – like the music of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Wanda Jackson, Elizabeth Cotten, Link Wray, and Sun Ra. They all broke genre walls, they all chipped away at the racism, sexism, and class prejudices that make gatekeeping a lucrative industry. When someone tells you they hate country, rap, or polka, I'll put money on the table that they've heard a safe sample that uses a short list of instruments, keys, and lyrical themes. I'll bet they would be shocked to learn Freddie Mercury was born in Zanzibar to Parsi parents. That Link Wray was Shawnee, but hid it in the segregated South of his childhood. That Thomas Dorsey, the father of American Gospel, co-wrote some of Ma Rainey's most ribald and rollicking songs (a fair few which advocated for openly queer lifestyles). In short, Gatekeeping does not help us understand or learn new music; as a class-reinforcing economic strategy, it not only keeps us from learning more of what we might love and embrace – it brainwashes us to resist the types of artistic expression that has set people free and broken all the stylistic rules meant to keep money in the hands of a few already rich people of privilege. This is one of the reasons I get frustrated when people stop discussing music on the basis of genre, so-called taste, or a few attributes.

How Do We Fix This?

Over the years, I have learned you can hand people books; you can tell them the history of certain musicians or musical communities (think Detroit's Motown, Stax Soul, New Orleans Second Line funeral performers, or the Bakersfield Sound, characterized by gritty and bluesy country), but you can not break the logjam that commoditized Gatekeeping has reinforced. For all those years, I have gnashed my teeth with the fact I don't have the language skills to open eyes and ears. I can not talk someone into hearing what they don't want to hear. A number of people have asked the very valid questions, "why do you care?" or "What business is it of yours if someone else doesn't want to hear the band you love?" and "Why can't you just let them enjoy what they love and listen to what you like?" All of these have merit in the context of letting folks enjoy the freedom of expression they prefer. What I want to change is folks' refusal to dig into why they have been reluctant to step outside their gatekeeping confines. Let's build bridges with the languages of passionate enjoyment and discovery. How do I build the bridge across the genre and context chasms we seem trapped by our socioeconomic and ethnic origins?

As long as I thought of genres as discreet buckets people clutch close to their chest, I could not build these bridges. While lamenting my absence of adequate vocabulary and syntax, I started thinking about dialects, idioms, and similarities between cajun, creole, and indigenous patois. At its heart, sometimes Appalachian blues sounds closer to the Bluegrass I grew up hearing, just as Chicago blues sounds more like Detroit "Proto-Punk" than the Mississippi blues of Son house and Charley Patton. Technically, we are not talking about a lot of variety (8 vs 12-bar blues and banjo vs guitar, for instance), but we are peering closely at the dialects and idioms of a language plucked, strummed, or stroked with a slide. There are things you can do with a plectrum that you can't with a calloused thumb, sounds you can make with a Vox amplifier that you can't with a National Steel guitar's resonator. The differences amount to idioms, and the dialects are often either regional or a matter of what the artist's skill levels permit.

If we can adjust our focus to look at various musical commodities and their artists as different accents we hear or linguistic variations, rather than hard and fast categories, what are the chances our dialogues focus on syllables or turns of phrase, rather than the whole paragraphs? Can we communicate about what we love and discover more if our conversations shift as subtly as the different shards of a kaleidoscope when we rotate it 15° in our hands? Do rap or Go Go records vary less significantly than the Billboard 100 charts have led us to think? I once saw Chuck Brown play variations on Duke Ellington for three quarters of an hour before an 808 State and the congas announced the advent of "Run Joe Run Joe." Another night, he riffed on Pink Floyd like psychedelia for a good half hour before keyboards funk'd up the mix. A twist of the kaleidoscope, a turn of phrase. These are the nuances that smash gatekeeping and bridge dialects of music. Will the words I have written change anyone's mind? Maybe not, but here's hoping someone's head will turn a few degrees like the Victrola Dog and hear music differently.