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Music in American Culture

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Our group started with the question if a countries culture defines its music, or if the countries music defines its culture. We decided to analyze the effects that different genres of music have had on the American culture. We investigated different regions of the country and the music genres that were found dominate there. We then further studied the way that the musical genre had started there, whether it is from an influence of the culture or if it helped to influence the culture. We specifically looked at the genres; Country, Folk, Salsa, Jazz, Rock and Roll, and Hip Hop. We look at the regions around them and the cultures that affect and are affected by these genres in our research.

Country music today has shaped different cultural regions in the United States. So much of music is subjective that people can have very idiosyncratic responses to the same piece. Some music sparks various emotions to different types of people. Country music seems to appeal to a certain type of people in the United States. This unique type of music known as Country has been beloved by the people in the Southern States of this country for a long time. Why is it though that this music greatly affects and shapes these people of Southern America? Why it is that generally speaking Country music is associated with “The South”?

Dr. Daniel Levitin says that the reason behind individuals liking a certain type of music has to do with memory association with a particular song. People are going to enjoy particular lyrics of songs if they can relate to them and associate something from their life. For example, Country music draws a select audience because only certain people can relate to this type of music. Country music talks about lessons that everyday people can relate to. These lessons typically involve the outdoors, Southern food, and the Southern way of life. Also Country Music is plain, simple, and sweet to the ears. This music appeals to people from the South because the music sounds very simple and people from the South are easy going people.

To typical Southern women Country is the only genre of music that offers songs about situations that she has faced in her life. The message that lots of Country songs portray is: no matter how challenging our lives are, someone who cares for us will be there for us in our time of need (Lay 1). This shows how country music plays a big part of Southern people’s lives. Because they can relate so much to this music the music becomes entwined with their culture. Moreover, Country music tells stories about the Southern way of life. This music reminds people of their own lives and inspires or motivates other people from the South to live their life in a easier going manner.

Music is better able represent the complexity of human emotional states than languages can (Carmichael 1). Country music is able to spark so many emotions of people from the South based on the fact that the music describes people’s lives and thing’s Southerners go through in a day to day basis. This leads to the feeling of arousal people’s minds because it jogs their memories of past experiences. Country Music is the South because when Southerners hear it they feel a part of many of the songs.

Country music has to deal with a certain brand of people. It does not appeal to the rest of the people in the United States, but rather one particular region. Country reflects the Southern region of the U.S. because if its laidback and simple melodies. Without Country the South won’t be able to listen to soothing music that describes their culture and way of life. Country represent’s the Southern way of life. But at the same time the South represents Country music because the songs relate to people’s everyday struggles in the South.

Among the many types of music genres, American rock and roll music was refined by the British who then changed it to their own liking. After this reached back to the United States, some say that it was actually improved. Music groups like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones were spoken of, and when this British music traveled to the United States, fashion did as well. Examples would be items such as the miniskirt, long hairstyles on men, and the “Twiggy” body type. Because this

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music traveled to the U.S., Americans started gaining interest in hit British television programs and performers. On the other side, Britain started welcoming American restaurants and customs. Because British rock and roll music started becoming popular in the United States, plays, sports, and other activities became mutual interests of the two cultures.

Rock and roll included instruments such as the saxophone, drums, piano, bass and electric guitar. Not until 1964, the music was renamed to "rock music". Not only does music have the ability to change one's mood, but also it can affect how people act, dress, speak and live. It creates a lifestyle in which people feel comfortable. Music of a country can show a lot about what its culture will be like. Rock music, one of the world's most popular types of music, has socially called to young people in particular. It can express the aggravations of youth but also it can celebrate it as well.

Rock was initially thought of as a rebellious kind of music. This rebellious label faded away though as it got more popular, and it eventually gained the respect of being known as an art form. Mentioned earlier, rock caught the attention of the younger crowds. Now, rock is preferred by all ages. The social impact of rock music became so intense that rock performers gained statuses such as "rock stars". The worshipping of these stars turned out to be acceptable and people still do it today. Celebrities are followed and watched by millions of people every day because of the technology and paparazzi that has developed.

Linked with drugs, suicide, violence, and other risky behaviors, rock music did come with some negative connotations in which parents disapproved of their children listening to it. Despite this, people still listened to it. According to Levitin, "We tell ourselves that if we only listen to it enough times, we may begin to understand it and to like it as much as our friends do. Yet, we recall other times in our lives when we invested hours or prime listening time in an artist and never arrived at the point where we 'got it.'" He explains how even if people of a certain group or age don't particularly care for the music, it can be a way of finding a niche or a label in life that they feel a part of. The followers of rock also tried to imitate behavior similar to those of rock performers. This included the way they dressed and activities that they sung about. Looking rebellious was key. Ripped jeans and long hair, part of the image of being a rocker, was vital in feeling included in the culture of rock music.

Folk music has changed drastically in American culture over the past few hundred years. During the time of the civil war, folk music represented pride for our country and for our troops, such as the song "The Rebel Soldier," which was a Southern Appalachian folk song, where the singer leaves his family and home to fight as a rebel soldier (civilwarmusic.net).

"It's grape shot and musket,
 And the cannons lumber loud,
 There's many a mangled body,
 The blanket for their shroud;
 There's many a mangled body
 Left on the fields alone,
 I am a Rebel soldier
 And far from my home."

In the present day, however, mainly country music has taken over the roll of discussing war and American pride. Folk music has morphed into a more backwoods sound, followed by a more "to the earth" type of person. The main thing to look for to identify music as folk is banjo, fiddle or accordion music, which does not occur all the time, but is very well known for the sound. Though some songs stay engrained in the ever-changing folk culture, like "Blackjack David," which was originally a gypsy hymn, as the culture of our society evolves, so does the music, keeping it alive throughout time. The lyrics have expanded as well, talking about everything from living off of the earth, to broken hearts, to finding enlightenment. In the song "Awake My Soul," by Mumford and Sons, Marcus Mumford sings,

"Lend me your hand and we'll conquer them all
 But lend me your heart and I'll just let you fall

Lend me your eyes I can change what you see

But your soul you must keep, totally free.”

The modern day folk culture is what many people would consider “mountain” culture, with more humble living situations and my artsy influences. You can see a strong tie between the culture and the music in the fact that both are quite calm and somewhat quirky. Folk music is very melodic and calming, rarely increasing feelings of rage, hatred or anger, mirroring the culture filled with love and understanding. When I listen to bands such as Blind Pilot, it makes me feel as though I should be skipping and running through fields of flowers or through the woods, which is another reason music, as a whole, affects groups so much. The tone and sound of the music related to that culture can physically affect the actions and emotions of different people, and since folk music is calm, so is the culture.

Personally, I believe that folk is one of the few types of music that is timeless and ageless. It is more of a cultural sound that a representation of a certain age group. Folk music has brought people together over the last few hundred years and will continue to do so into the future because folk is not necessarily a specific sound, but more of a morphing entity that continually changes with the mountain culture. It’s not as much of a genre as it is a feeling that brings families and communities together in a way that has been lost by much of the United States today with all of the anger and hatred that exists.

The word “salsa” is a perfect metaphor for a genre of music that emerged as a result of mixture: Cuban-based rhythms played mainly by Puerto Ricans in New York City! The meaning behind the word “Salsa,” is a sauce helped to describe the cultural and musical make-up of New York City during the 1960s and 1970s; what it is not is a rhythm. Salsa carries connotations of the spiciness common in Latin and Caribbean cuisine. More recently, salsa acquired a musical meaning in both English and Spanish. In this sense salsa has been described as a word with “vivid associations” but no absolute definitions, a tag that encompasses a rainbow assortment of Latin rhythms and styles, taking on a different hue wherever you stand in the Spanish-speaking world”. The precise scope of Salsa is highly debatable. Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican immigrants in New York have used the term analogously to swing or soul, which refer to a quality of emotionally and culturally genuine music in the African American community. In this usage Salsa connotes a frenzied, “hot” and wild musical experience that draws upon or reflects elements of Latin culture, regardless of the specific style.

Salsa is essentially Cuban and in stylistic origin, though it also has styles mixed with pop, jazz, rock, and R&B. Salsa is the primary music played at Latin dance clubs and is the “essential pulse of Latin music”, according to Ed Morales, while music author Peter Manuel called it the “most popular dance music among Puerto Rican and Cuban communities, and in Central and South America”, and “one of the most dynamic and significant pan-American musical phenomena of the 1970s and 1980s”. Modern salsa remains a dance-oriented genre and is closely associated with a style of salsa dancing Manuel (1988).

Salsa music is a diverse and predominantly Spanish Caribbean genre that is popular across Latin America and among Latinos abroad. Salsa incorporates multiple styles and variations; the term can be used to describe any form of popular Cuban-derived genre, such as chachachá and mambo. Most specifically, however, salsa refers to a particular style developed in the 1960s and ‘70s by Cuban and Puerto Rican immigrants to the New York City area, and stylistic descendants like 1980s salsa romantica. The style is now practiced throughout Latin America, and abroad; in some countries it may be referred to as **música tropical**. Salsa’s closest relatives are Cuban mambo and the son orchestras of the early 20th century, as well as Latin jazz. The terms Latin jazz and salsa are sometimes used interchangeably; many musicians are considered a part of either, or both, fields, especially performers prior to the 1970s.

Various music writers and historians have traced the use of Salsa to different periods of the 20th century. World music author Sue Steward has claimed that Salsa was originally used in music as a “cry of appreciation for a particularly piquant or flashy solo”. She cites the first use in this manner to a Venezuelan radio DJ named Phidias Danilo Escalona; Max Salazar traced the word back to the early 1930s, when Ignacio Piñeiro composed “Échale Salsita”, a dance song protesting tasteless food. Though Salazar describes this song as the origin of salsa meaning “danceable Latin music”, Ed Morales has described the usage in the same song as a cry from Piñeiro to his band, telling

them to increase the tempo to “put the dancers into high gear”. Morales claims that later in the 1930s, vocalist Beny Moré would shout salsa during a performance “to acknowledge a musical moment’s heat, to express a kind of cultural nationalist sloganeering and to celebrate the ‘hotness’ or ‘spiciness’ of Latin American cultures” Morales (2003).

Jazz music emerged down in the city of New Orleans in the early 1990s. Ragtime and the blues influenced the music. Jazz music was the face of a part of American culture appearing in all forms of art other than music, those of which included poetry, works of fiction, painting and photography. The period in American history after the First World War is often called the Jazz age. Daniel Levitin wrote that no human culture now or anytime lacked music. The years soon after the abolishment of slavery were still bad for African Americans in the United States. Segregation divided the nation in many ways other than black and white. Jazz music brought with it a message a democracy that included freedom and equality.

The music preached liberation from hatred, which was what the people of the time were crying. For one of the first times in history music was used as a tool in spreading a movement. Jazz was originally perceived as discordant and uncivilized, but its breaking of the rules set by classical music merely went hand in hand with the people breaking from the classical American culture, which was dominated by white America. It was once said that the three things that American culture will be known for are the constitution, baseball, and jazz. Before jazz there hadn’t really been a music that was solely associated with America. Jazz was rebellious, like the people of the time.

Jazz played a significant role in unifying the Nation. Where once African Americans had not been allowed to use the same bathroom, famous African American jazz musicians, like Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong, were breaking the barriers and gaining popularity among blacks and whites. These African Americans were the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement, and the music was right there with them. Levitin would say that music appears where human culture appears. The years between the abolishment of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement are a major part of human culture in the United States and jazz was a part of that culture.

Since the early 1970s, a cultural movement has been created and enjoyed through hip hop music in the United States. According to Shabazz, “Hip hop music for the most part is itself composed of two parts: rapping, the delivery of swift, highly rhythmic and lyrical vocals; and DJing and/ or producing, the production of instrumentation either through sampling, instrumentation, turntablism or through beatboxing, the production of musical sounds through vocalized tones.” Listen here: [music](#). Hip hop originated in the Bronx (New York City), where people gathered together to create a culture to share their common interest in this new hip hop lifestyle. “The Bronx became a music magnet for Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans, Dominicans, and black Americans from the surrounding areas” (McBride). Hip hop music was a joining force that allowed people to express their thoughts, as well as give them an alternative for the violence and drugs in their society.

The hip-hop culture was based on four pillars outlined by DJ Afrika Bambaataa, which are disc jockeys (DJ), master of ceremonies (MC), break dancing, and graffiti writing. Since the emergence of hip hop music, it has been the disc jockeys that generate rhythmic beats by “looping breaks (small portions of songs emphasizing a percussive pattern) on two turntables, which is now more commonly referred to as sampling” (Adaso). This is how the culture of hip hop works: The DJ plays records on two turntables while another person serves as the MC. The DJ creates the hip hop beats as he moves the record back and forth under the needle to generate a “scratch.” According to James McBride, “Usually the DJ would drop the needle on the record where the beat was the hottest, playing “the break” over and over to keep the folks dancing” (McBride). McBride goes on to further explain, “The MCs “rapped” over the music to keep the party going. One MC sought to out-chat the other. Dance styles were created —“locking” and “popping” and “breaking.”

Hip Hop music has influenced a lifestyle that is inclusive of many other elements, including an original form of dance, language, and art. “Break dancing (also known as “b-boying”) is the main aspect of the dance element of hip-hop, ahead of popping, locking, crumping etc., and can also be very competitive” (Shabazz). Click here to see: [b-boying](#). Hip hop has a distinctive language or slang; for example, the word ‘homie.’ “Due to hip hop’s commercial success in the late nineties and early 21st century, many of these words have been assimilated into many different dialects across America and the world and even to non-hip hop fans” (Shabazz). Artists, who were immersed into the hip hop culture, spread the word about their music by creating “elaborate and pervasive forms of the practice in areas where other elements of hip hop were evolving as art forms, with a heavy overlap between those who wrote graffiti and those who practiced other elements of the

culture” (Adaso).

Hip hop music is also credited with helping to decrease the amount of inner-city violence by replacing the physical violence with dance and artwork battles. “Hip hop culture became a way of dealing with the hardships of life as minorities within America, and an outlet to deal with violence and gang culture” (Adaso). After years of gang violence, city teenagers were looking for new and safer ways to express themselves. The break dancing and graffiti battles gave the teens an alternative from getting into trouble on the streets. Tony Tone, a member of the pioneering rap group the Cold Crush Brothers, noted that “Hip-hop saved a lot of lives” (Shabazz). Hip hop culture has influenced and saved many lives not only in the United States, but around the world.

While researching for this project our group found that a region or cultural environment influence and defines the genre of music. People have shaped music through their cultures in all the genres that we researched which included; Country, Folk, Salsa, Jazz, Rock and Roll, and Hip Hop. Overall we established that the culture is what defines the music in a country. And a country can have many sub-cultural groups that take a part in developing the overall genre of music that a specific country is known for. Our selection of a wide and very different amount of genres helped to further emphasize the differences in the sub-cultural groups in America. We believe that Levitin would agree with our findings and find them to be correct through the background we found in our research.

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