The New Cosmopolites:
Activating the Role of Mobile Music Listeners

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ABSTRACT

This essay suggests a way of understanding emerging behaviors of mobile music listeners by positing two hypotheses: 1) that geolocation is weakening as a factor in determining personal identity and 2) that musical taste as a general rule is becoming more eclectic. These two tendencies set up the potential to better activate the role of mobile music listeners and the opportunity for designers to facilitate this active role.

Keywords

Musical identity, mobile listening habits, taste aggregators, urban musical experience

THE WANING RELEVANCE OF PLACE

By 2007, the number of global urban dwellers will equal rural dwellers for the first time in history [15], and soon after that urban life will become the predominant lifestyle of humankind. We can look at patterns of urban life, therefore, to extrapolate longer-term global trends and begin to outline design challenges these trends hold for us. In this paper, the focus is particularly on patterns of urban music listening habits as a clue to larger global patterns.

In rural experience, place of origin is typically a strong factor in establishing personal identity. If we go back far enough, the physical area that a person came from was a primary means of self-definition, often even determining name. A wide slate of cultural attributes varied by place — diet, fashion, language, song style, etc. "Who are you?" could often best be answered first with a reference to where you came from.

The modern day urban experience is changing the answer to that question. Ease of global travel has eroded the role of place in determining personal identity. Global air travel is rapidly becoming a commonplace and mundane activity. Place of residence is perceived as a more fluid and flexible factor. Wide-ranging home relocation is practically assumed, perhaps even several times during the course of self-development.

Global communications technology has also eroded the importance of place in establishing self-identity. Walkie-talkie cell phones connect partners in LA and NY in real time. Phone cards make it more affordable for immigrants to communicate with the home they left behind. Blackberries allow busy urban professionals to roam untethered in the evenings. Mobile phones are the quintessential statement of "I am where I happen to be now" rather than "I am at home" or "I am at work."

Global audio-visual documentation further uproots the individual from any specific place. An average person is exposed to a wide range of the world's cultural diversity at an early age. There is less sense of being bound by where you come from and more a sense of being availed the vast array of options the world's cultural systems has to offer. Each person can feel they know the world because they have seen it on film or television or heard it on CD.

Factors like these make all of us more worldly, less parochial; more uprooted, less dependent on place to define self. The question evolves from "Where is your home?" to "What makes you feel at home?"

Nowhere is this truer than in the city. The urban experience seeks to subjugate the natural environment to human needs. As technologies for doing this are developed, these best practices are imported to other cities, lending urban experience a kind of predictable consistency. One can go from building to building the entire winter day in frigid Minneapolis and remain indoors, just as one must do the same in Miami's summer heat. For a host of new cities in the 500,000 population range now being planned in Asia, urban planners will borrow from tried and true best practices the world over, inevitably transplanting some of the placeless, general feeling that is coming to characterize modern urban life. There is a quality of cities that gives them a same-ness, and their residents, a feeling of transience and restlessness. It is in this climate that the desire for a mobile identity is born.

In the city, we most directly confront the realities of overpopulation. It is in these overcrowded

environments that the incentive for mobile private listening thrives [2]; as an adaptation to urban life that makes it more livable, that makes individuality more possible amidst the crowd.

GROWING ECLECTICISM

New World urbanites have enjoyed dining a-la-carte from the menu of the world's cultures for quite some time now. The juxtaposition of cultural styles that happens on a daily basis on the streets of the city has become commonplace. This experience is becoming familiar to more and more people as we improve access to burgeoning archives of cultural output. The opportunity of choosing one's musical culture, as opposed to inheriting it, is becoming more and more the norm.

I have found this to be the case in the fieldwork for my "Walkman Busting" radio documentary series [11], which I have conducted exclusively in New York City. In this radio series, I tap into the portable listening devices of consenting subjects in public and conduct an interview with them about their musical tastes. People are less able to answer the question "What kind of music are you into?" meaningfully since just about everyone will say "Everything. I'm into everything." You have to dig deeper to find more detail on what special mix of genres each listener is truly focused on. In their song libraries, rarely does one genre comprise more than 20% of their overall collection — more often there are many splinter genres that make up less than 5% of the collection. Was this the case even a few decades ago, when people could more or less align with the handful of available music genres to express their musical taste? Today's listeners, it appears, do not want to pigeonhole themselves in a particular style or group of styles. They consider it an expression of personal freedom to range between genres and piece together a complex collage of their musical taste of the moment. The more relevant question becomes "What are you listening to now?"

Population density in urban environments could be factor for this growing eclecticism. Sociobiologists have postulated that birdsong variation is correlated to songbird population density [3]. When songbird population density is light, the song repertoire tends to be more homogenous. As population density increases, it becomes necessary for songbirds to vary their songs in order to differentiate themselves. This idea can be applied to explaining idiosyncratic urban songwriting and performing styles. I believe it also carries over to music listeners. As population density increases, so does the desire to differentiate personality. Music listening is one way to construct a unique identity. Listeners are creating dialects of personal listening habits that relate to large-scale listening patterns like slang does to official language. When there is so much choice, it is a creative act to choose what to listen to. People "sing their unique birdsong" through their personal music collections, differentiating themselves from the crowd and mapping the unique topography of their personal musical terrain.

ROLE OF MUSIC IN DEFINING IDENTITY

Music is an especially strong way of defining one's identity. Historically, this identity has been inherited. In the era of recorded music, we are in a position to choose our musical background or, as Tia DeNora puts it, "compose our musical identities."[8]. DeNora cites the role that music plays in defining moods and recalling memories in building the case for musical choice as personal identifier.

The sense of 'self' is locatable in music. Musical materials provide terms and templates for elaborating self-identity – for identity's identification. Looking more closely at this process highlights the ways in which musical materials are active ingredients in identity work, how respondents 'find themselves' in musical structures. [8, p. 69]

As place weakens as a personal identifier, cultural constructs such as musical taste replace it. The function of music in personal identification helps explain the current emotional force behind the demand for better means to search, discover, sequence and carry music.

UNIQUE MUSICAL SIGNATURES

Listeners need better ways to differentiate themselves. Listeners want to create their own musical signatures expressing the uniqueness of their personalities. Massive digital collections, smart playlists, personal ratings and playcounts form the musical DNA of portable identities.

These idiosyncratic personal expressions — these unique musical signatures — are one outcome of the eroding sense of place as cultural identifier. Listeners have an incentive to distinguish themselves based on the special taste "gumbo" they concoct – be it 23% salsa with 17% jazz with a dash of classical for romantic evenings or some other recipe for a musical self. Having this musical signature with them in the crowded city not only blocks out the din of others but also is a badge of uniqueness, the comfort of knowing that their special environment is with them and accessible as they move through the various places and moods of their day to day lives.

When conducting "Walkman Busting" fieldwork, I found a distinction between the deep catalog mobile listener (i.e. carrying iPods and other mp3 players) and the listener with a previous generation portable device, be it for tape, CD or radio. Among the old format listeners, music has a slightly different function. It is what they have with them that day. It is a partial expression of their personal identity, the totality of which resides somewhere else. As a result, the attachment they feel to what they have on them at the moment is hit-and-miss; they may have the perfect thing for the moment and for their mood, or they may

not. We usually end up talking about what really defines their musical taste.

By contrast, the deep catalog listeners have it all with them. There is the palpable sense that they have their musical ID on them, and they are ready to show it to the authorities on demand (in this case, the authority is the radio program). Playlists come out with friend's names on them, with addresses of places they have lived, with functions of life such as commuting or exercising. Many playlists are associated with moods – the "I'm pissed off" playlist or "I need to mellow" playlist. I get a tour of each listener's musical taste, complete with color commentary — a walkthrough of each listener's musical identity.

THE NEW COSMOPOLITES

As the people of the world move to the city, they are offered the advantages and challenges of cosmopolitan life on a mass scale — that is, the ability to behold aspects of many cultural systems and embrace some as one's own, in varying degrees of attachment. This is what cosmopolitanism has been to date – the worldly sense of the urbane, who are exposed to the world's cultural delights and freely pick and choose among them. The recent wave of global urbanization is bringing its wake what I call the "new cosmopolites," that is, 21st century citizens of the world — mobile, multifaceted, diverse, uprooted and eclectic samplers of world culture who choose from the global palette to construct their cultural identities.

These new cosmopolites are active listeners, who build a musical self by wading through the sea of sound offerings and select the special mix that best expresses who they are. While passports (based on place of citizenship) still mean much in the way of portable legal identification, the weight of emotional identification is carried by iPods and the like. Listeners create their expressive personal mixes and carry them with them as a form of ID, for both internal and external navigation.

The new cosmopolites are creative listeners. Their musical taste is a form of personal expression. Building a unique musical signature is a creative act, related to the creativity of the musician who selects sounds to make. They have to dig for their music like the best DJs do. A more conscious listening, akin to the listening powers of the best DJs, is required of music consumers in this era of overwhelming digital access.

The new cosmopolites defy genre. There have always been musicians who defy stylistic classification – only to be pigeonholed into a genre so their CD has a slot to fill at the music store. Active listeners are listeners that transcend genre classification as well.

The new cosmopolites are mobile listeners, who access the full expressive range of their musical identities from wherever they are, whether it is for private navigation or public sharing. In culturally inhospitable and highly diverse environments, they have their culture on them.

We have come about as far as we could from the aboriginal Australian notion of songlines (simplistically put, the direct and literal connection of song to place) [5], to a global society where we must learn to navigate the world's cultures unanchored.

NEW TOOLS AND PRACTICES FOR ACTIVE LISTENERS

If place and genre as self-identifiers for the musical listener are being eclipsed by unique musical signatures, then it is important to develop ways to enable listeners to make better, more expressive personal IDs. It is also important to develop ways of enabling idiosyncratic listeners to recombine into communities that transcend industry-created or academy-created categories like genre, style, sound or scene. How will listeners find new music that best fits their signature? How will listeners find each other? How will listeners rediscover the unity of listening together while still retaining the uniqueness of their identity?

Projects like tunA [14], from the Human Connectedness research group at the Media Lab Europe, activate the role of listener locally, allowing nearby users to see and access each other's playlists. This is a superb design concept that allows listeners a way to show and share their musical identity when out in public. In fieldwork for "Walkman Busting," I find the private barrier of the mobile listener is most times easily overcome due, most likely, to the intrinsically social nature of musical experience. As soon as the desire to connect is presented, the mobile listener is likely to explore the possible connection. iPod jacking [10] is a direct grassroots form of this. Strangers swap earbud jacks to offer a quick taste of their musical taste, indicating a need for social connection among mobile listeners and a willingness to share their musical identities in public.

Taste aggregators like Mobster [12] and Audioscrobbler [1] particularly take advantage of the concept of unique musical signature, as a way to help listeners find new songs and each other. These web-based services have collected thousands of personal listening profiles (specifically, the master playlist, playcount and ratings of each contributing listener). They then look for grouping patterns within these data that connect listeners with similar (but not identical) taste. They also are able to begin to identify the large patterns of listening habits and cross-stylistic groupings that transcend genre. They put the habits of the listener in the paramount position, using them as the key to understanding patterns of taste — as opposed to the top-down approach historically taken by the music industry of old.

Podcasting, or mp3 blogging [13], is another way of catering to the idiosyncratic mobile listener. Podcasting is an audio feed aggregator for iPods and

like mobile devices. It is an example of an edge-to-edge communications system that helps listeners to create richer and more specific listening signatures.

All of these projects and practices take as a baseline the eclectic, dislocated position of the listener who uses music choice as a form of personal expression, and then look for ways to enable expressive listening habits and reconnect these uniquely identified individuals into communities again.

CONCLUSION

We are at an interesting crossroads in the audience experience of recorded music. There is an opportunity to develop other models of the listener beside that of the passive music consumer. This model is a convenient one for a mechanistic view that sees music passing down from producer to end-user who consumes it at the end of the assembly line. Music has been by its nature interactive — a feedback loop between musicians and audience — from time immemorial. In varying degrees, the listening experience in pre-recorded musical culture has always been active. This was severed with the advent of recorded music. This is the spatio-temporal rupture between performance and listening moment that Sergio Freire describes [9]. We are now beginning to make music interactive *again,* in its new electronic form. Elevating our estimation of the role of music listener is a critical part of this process.

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