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The Influence of Technology on Our Relationships with Music

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## ABSTRACT

People no longer have meaningful relationships with music. Although music is embedded in nearly every activity, or found anywhere if you leave your house, it's not as meaningful as it used to be and doesn't serve the same purposes it did 50 years ago. This is due to the ways in which technology is altering the everyday life of the average American. The creation of the smartphone and streaming services have revolutionized how music is made accessible to listeners, but consequently changed the relationships we build with it. Today we use music as a secondary activity, something to enhance what we're already doing. We listen in the shower, while doing homework, or mindlessly grocery shopping for the week. Record companies are keeping track of this as well. As technology changes how we listen to music, record companies track what's popular through trends and social media so they can continue to make money on the industry. Our poor relationships are also affecting how we listen, or more importantly, how much we don't listen. Is anyone actually listening anymore?

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Although, it definitely came with its struggles. Transferring at the beginning of a global pandemic left me in what I like to call “involuntary isolation,” not knowing anyone at a new school and not necessarily being allowed to meet anyone either. I was worried about finding a professor willing to take my thesis on such late notice, having not met me formally with only about a year to find an idea and execute. So, I have to deeply thank Professor Jeffrey Nealon for agreeing to be my thesis supervisor. I seriously lucked out with having his assistance throughout the writing process, only to find that he is just as enthusiastic about music as I am. He gave me free access to his book, titled *I’m Not Like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music*, which was the major backbone of where my thoughts and arguments would end up leading (and a major recommendation for anyone who is actually reading this). It also gave me a perspective into his own individual experiences with music, which was helpful in understanding others relationships with music outside of my family and friends, particularly before streaming. Professor Nealon pointed me in the right directions, gave me encouragement and tips when I really needed it, and helped me create a thesis I’m proud of. For that, I am so incredibly thankful.

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## Chapter 1

### “Trembling on Some New Beginning”: Introduction

Who doesn't listen to music? In today's world, music seems almost as inescapable as death and taxes; if you're someone who leaves your house or uses the internet, you're bound to hear some tune somewhere. Grocery stores tend to play whatever is topping the charts, venues blast music with up-beat rhythms to keep guests entertained until the main event, even elevators and public restrooms play some form of ambient music to break the awkward silence between strangers. You can pop your Air Pods in to avoid any (but not all) conversations in public. However, regardless of whether or not your music listening habits are intentional, music is an art that engulfs everyday life.

Nowadays, music can be used for anything. If you decide not to make your own playlists, Spotify and Apple Music has you covered with their own, curated for any mood you are in or wish to be in, as well as any experience you need music for. Currently, I have been using my own classical music playlist, or a soft jazz playlist on Spotify called “Light Jazz in the Background” in hopes to stay inspired and transcribe convoluted thoughts to comprehensible prose. “Lo-fi beats for studying” is another very popular playlist category for students and somehow continues to come in first for my top genres on Spotify Wrapped. However, I have found it harder to find people, especially in younger generations, who listen to music as its own experience. It seems as though college kids only really listen to music when they are walking to class or doing homework; and, when they are listening to music, it's the same rap or pop songs you hear at every frat party or bar downtown. The whole idea of my thesis revolves around two

questions: why do we not have meaningful relationships with music anymore, and why do these relationships vary so much from one listener to another?

The answer is simple: technology. Ultimately, artists are going to make music and people are going to listen for whatever reason that may be simply because music is a commodity and people are going to have it. However, technology has changed the ways in which we consume and interact with music. The smartphone has given everyone access to an individualized music collection without the bulk of one, the time commitments to listen to an entire album, or the patience to wait for your favorite song to come on. Music today can be as convenient and thoughtless as one wishes it to be.

There is no doubt that the developments of technology have made music so easily accessible and widespread today, as well as contributed to the increased commodification of music. As a twenty-two-year-old woman living in a digital world, I had to (embarrassingly enough) call and ask my dad how he discovered music as a kid. After laughing in surprise for a hot second in my utter confusion, he reminded me of the radio, an object that seemed so far in my distant past. The radio and CDs were a dominate feature in my early formative years as a child, but now I couldn't even remember a world prior to having a music library at my fingertips. YouTube wasn't created until I was about five years old; and my favorite streaming service, Spotify, until I was six, and I distinctly remember being completely digital when I was about 12.

Streaming services in particular fascinate me. You can come across practically any song of any genre from any time period. People who use Spotify have access to a "Discover Weekly" playlist that generates an entire selection of music you may enjoy based off your listening habits, as well as thousands of other playlists designed to elevate particular moods or experiences. With

about 406 million users worldwide, the amount of data that Spotify and musicians have access to must be inconceivable and help determine what kind of music to create next.

The creation and rise in popularity of social media sites also adds fuel to the fire. With an importance placed on individuals to be popular, viral, or recognizable on the internet, it can be argued that a mass culture is starting to form in various different ways. People on the internet choose to participate in trends simply because it is something popular gaining attention and could potentially lead to internet fame. Tied in with consumerism, it is astounding how many people buy trending products just to review them and offer opinions of their worth. The same works for new music, or songs that are trending. When advertised through social media, it allows for people who listen to feel popular, or fit in with the targeted crowd in their algorithm.

Technology isn't a bad thing, and it certainly isn't ruining music— without the smartphone and my own “Discover Weekly” playlist from Spotify, I would be hopelessly lost and stuck listening to the same songs over and over again. It's simply altering the ways we are interacting with music. However, there are times when technology negatively affects the relationships we hold with specific songs or genres. Not everyone listens to pop music or buys into the targeted algorithms on social media, just like how not every artist makes and sells music just for the money. There are particular songs and genres created for a targeted audience, and when these songs get recognized on a large level, they can very easily be appropriated, misused, and misunderstood. Technology isn't necessarily the bad guy, but if our relationships continue to alter in this way, what will music and listening look like another 50 years from now?



## Chapter 2

### “Raise ‘Em on Rhythm and Blues”: Understanding Codes

First thing is first: not everyone enjoys the same things, and not everyone understands why some things are enjoyable or amicable. Factors behind cultural and social backgrounds can help someone figure out what it is they like, identify with, or understand; but these factors do not restrict you to what you can like or dislike. Music specifically is simply a set of different fields, or genres, created by various codes. When an individual can understand these codes, then they can appreciate (or depreciate) songs and genres of music.

Merriam-Webster defines a code as “a system of principles or rules” (“code”). You as an individual may have your own set of codes you live by that influence your everyday life. This could be a commitment not to steal, never taking another human life, or being respectful to all people. This is especially prominent for religious practices who have their own rules to live by. Christians follow the Ten Commandments as rules from God, such as not stealing or not using the Lord’s name in vain. Codes in your personal life answer these questions— who are you; and what makes you, you?

However, your personal codes are not the ones that form music. While your own codes may influence (but not always) the music you enjoy, there are different codes that form distinct kinds of music. Pierre Bourdieu speaks of this in cultural studies, that there are artistic fields organized by certain codes (Nealon, “Re”). In music, these fields would be genres of music and codes would be the characteristics that make it unique. For example, folk music and hip-hop are fundamentally different “fields” of music because there are atypical features that create the music. Folk music typically entails acoustic instruments and simple musical structures such as

chord progressions, scales, and melodies. The lyrics of folk music tend to be quite simple and sentimental or have some underlying story specific to the artist yet relatable to the audience (Empty). On the other hand, hip-hop uses samples to create its music, along with heavy bass lines and drums to create a beat. Likewise, hip-hop has substantial lyrics important to the artists (Ward). If you are someone who understands and appreciates meaningful lyrics in music, then folk music and rap music may make sense to you. However, preference can separate in terms of how the lyrics are portrayed. People who understand meaningful lyrics may not understand cadence or “rhythm-and-poetry” of hip-hop, but sentimental acoustics register easily. On the other side of the spectrum, folk music can sound boring or too easy, so the challenge of producing rhymes may make more sense. Codes register differently for people, and for those who do not enjoy folk or hip-hop simply lack the codes to understand what the genres are about and consequently, are “lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms” (Nealon, “Re”).

Understanding codes of music then helps one pick which music it is they prefer, as well as the ones that they do not. These codes, then, can transform into something called taste cultures. In a study conducted by William S. Fox and Michael J. Wince in their article titled “Musical Taste Cultures and Taste Publics” they understand Herbert J. Gans’ idea of taste culture as “values and choices of cultural content that reflect these values” (Fox, 199). When you can understand the codes that create fields of music, you then start making cultural decisions specific to your own tastes. These tastes reflect the codes that you can understand because they produce meaning and interest to you. If you can understand substantial lyrics, cadence, and bass lines of hip-hop, then you’re bound to make musical preference choices that follow the understandings of these codes, and listen to a lot of hip-hop.

Taste cultures serve to “entertain, inform, or beautify” the life of the individual, or to enhance the life they are living (Fox, 199). Like genres, there are a variety of taste cultures you can find yourself buying into. These can be directly influenced by the own codes you live by; if you value one thing in your life it may transfer over to thing that you value culturally. However, studies have shown that this is not always the case, and an individual simply has to have the “cultural competence” to understand what it is that makes the art special to then create a meaningful relationship with it (Nealon, “Re”). As a white woman from the sticks of Pennsylvania, my cultural and social backgrounds do not restrict me to liking just country music, and it is my “cultural competence,” or understanding of codes of music, that allow me to make musical preference choices outside of a restricted box.

Once a taste culture has been found, then one can join in on the taste public. In the Fox and Wince article, Gans defines taste publics as “people who make similar choices of cultural content for similar reasons” (Fox, 199). Those who find themselves within a particular taste public in favor of a particular genre of music must understand the codes that make the genre what it is. Then, a group identity is formed and then circulated and celebrated among the few that appreciate the art. Fans are a wonderful way of describing a taste public, a group of people who support and enjoy a particular artist. People who love Kendrick Lamar and rally around his music have a collective understanding of the codes that go into his music, as well as the codes behind hip-hop and rap. However, it is important to make the distinction that a fan is more than just a common listener. Merriam-Webster defines a fan as “an enthusiastic devotee (as of a sport or performing art) usually as a spectator” (“fan”). You can like music without being a fan of someone or something in particular, but it is the fans that make up the taste publics of that certain

taste culture. For example, you may find a new song you enjoy from your Spotify “Discover Weekly” playlist, but to say you’re a fan is to say that you understand all the codes and contexts behind the song and the genre.

It is also important to highlight that taste publics are not the massification hypothesis that will be talking about next. Taste publics can be found within the masses, but it more or less points to smaller, individualized groups of people who value specific things. For the sake of this thesis, taste publics will represent the fans of particular genres or artists. A taste public can transform into a mass culture, but that would have to be on an incredibly large scale, something that is arguably being accomplished through social media technology.

Something I have found particularly interesting in my research is the fact that cultural components of an individual’s life are increasingly less important when it comes to enjoying particular styles of music. I have failed to find any research past the year 2000, so a lot of the studies are incredibly out of touch with modern day society, and it would be interesting to see this research conducted again in current times.

The man who created the base for American taste cultures, Herbert Gans, believed that socioeconomic factors, particularly social class status, was the primary distinction for taste cultures in America, and created a five-stage taste culture in correspondence with that belief (Fox, 200). While this may have been a dominant factor in the 1970s, American sociologists have started to depict that social class status is of declining importance, and that American society significantly prefers merit to social background (Katz-Gerro, 630). Gans also expresses the importance of education within these social classes. Social classes and education make up the primary taste publics within American society, and then can be broken down into smaller publics

based on “ethnic, religious, regional, and, especially, age differences among Americans” (Fox, 200).

Fox and Wince take what Gans created and transformed it into a modernized study of their time of 1975. They focused on “refined and valid measures of musical tastes and memberships,” “clusterings” of musical tastes, and background characteristics in relation to musical tastes. For their sample pool, they took gender, age, size of hometown, religious preferences, annual income, and father’s occupation and education into account when determining the background and cultural factors of musical preference.

These factors are not suitable for today’s America, yet it would be incredibly interesting for a new and improved experiment to take place and to take new factors into consideration. The times have changed, and things today are not as black and white as they were fifty years ago. It would be important to take gender fluidity into account, as well as education and occupation for both parents, not just the fathers. It would be interesting to see how these factors weigh into current musical preferences, if they even do at all anymore.

In the end, a person’s own individual codes may not directly influence what they do or don’t listen to, but they could help one understand the codes behind what makes genres of music unique and enjoyable. Similarly, someone’s own codes do not restrict them to specific genres either. Being an older woman does not restrict her interests only to classical music, she may also enjoy other genres like djent or alternative R&B. In George H. Lewis’ article titled “Taste Cultures and Culture Classes in Mass Society: Shifting Patterns in American Popular Music,” he articulates how taste cultures are shifting to culture classes, in which are “people who share similar consumption patterns but not share traditional indicators of taste culture” (Lewis, 45). A

new study may help find more indicators towards musical preference, or even how social and cultural backgrounds are not as important as they used to be.

### Chapter 3

#### “Something Wretched About This”: The Media and the Masses

I received my first MP3 player when I was in third grade, maybe at like 8 years old. I remember it very distinctly: it was ridiculously small, and essentially just a USB flash drive, however I cannot find it anywhere online or remember what brand it was exactly. It was silver and black in color, and I sported some cheap black earbuds that always tangled and broke way too easily. I know that I’ve always had musical sophistication from even an early age, but I can only remember one song on that device: [“Milkshake” by Kelis](#). I downloaded the songs the same way that my family and I would burn CDs on a disk for long car rides, but I will plead the fifth on how exactly it was done. (Did anyone ever *legally* download music in the early 2000s?)

By the end of elementary school, I upgraded to a larger Coby Mp610 in red. This little thing was the *pièce de résistance* and just as good (and much cheaper) than the Apple music players on the market. With a digital screen, I was able to see what song was playing, visibly select the next song I wanted to hear, and also see the album art displayed on the play screen. I remember I used to have a lot of Linkin Park on this device, and unfortunately for my parents it wasn’t just a phase.

In middle school, I bought my own iPad with money that I somehow earned, and my parents gifted me a pair of Beats by Dre headphones, the huge ones that go over your head and around your ears, for Christmas. At this point, I was still finding ways to listen to music for free, but I cannot remember what app it was that I used that allowed me to download music listen to it offline. I know that using this app I was able to feed my recently discovered (and not yet cured) Hozier addiction by watching [Vevo’s official video for “Jackie and Wilson,”](#) but I also know that

it wasn't YouTube I was using either. Whatever app it was, it really struggled to allow me to listen to music offline, and it would never allow me to skip, or it would freeze trying to force an ad on me that wouldn't load offline.

And thus, my complications with the nameless app launched me into the Spotify community where I still hide out today. I started using Spotify at the recommendation of a friend when I was twelve years old, but only the free version where I could pick the first song I wanted to listen to, then suffer through the relentless voice of "Want a break from the ads?" It wasn't until college that I was finally able to buy the premium version, thanks to the student discount, and it is because of the four years of premium that I will continue to prioritize a Spotify subscription for years to come. Spotify allows you to access any song you could ever want to listen to without audio watermarks or worries of piracy. You can create your own playlists to tailor to your likes, and easily remove songs you no longer want to listen to. Additionally, you have access to thousands of playlists based off mood or genre when you're in the mood for something different, and Spotify also creates an immensely popular wrapped playlist at the end of every year with information regarding your top songs, genres, and artists.

The point I'm making here is that music listening habits are constantly evolving, and my own experience with music in particular evolved pretty steadily over the course of six years. What my parents have seen, on the other hand, is a different story. Where I have only experienced the development of new apps that allow for the free downloading of music, my parents cognitively witnessed the birth of the iPhone, and other smartphones to come. They went from starting out on records or the radio with their parents, to the cassette tape and the Walkman, to CDs, to MP3s, all the way to the personal, multifunctional device of the smartphone. The way



in which people listen to music continues to evolve, and it is becoming evident that the relationships people hold with music are starting to change as well.

Today, we have access to any song from any time period of any genre at the touch of a button or a quick Google search. To discover new music, all you have to do is dive into a playlist you're not familiar with or entertain yourself on Spotify's "Discover Weekly" playlist that finds music specifically for your listening habits. Music is easy and accessible, and not anything like it was fifty years ago. To find a new song, you heard it on the radio and either hoped it would play again in the next hour, or luckily caught the name or artist of the song so you could go buy the whole album. Even at that, after purchasing an album, you would have to sit and listen to the whole thing, unless you were lucky enough that the song you were looking for was at the beginning of the track list. No one, or at least hardly anyone, sits and listens to albums anymore. Every now and then, it will be trendy to listen to an entire album to give your opinion about it, like the highly anticipated *Donda* album released by Kanye West in August of 2021. However, for the most part, we find songs by chance and mindlessly add them to the extensive playlists we have of our own without having any connection to an artist or their other works. When musicians we love release albums then one might sit and listen to the whole thing, but artists only release full studio albums after years of work. Albums are not listened to in their entirety like they were required to be years ago.

Additionally, music in general is not an independent activity anymore. Specifically on Spotify, the app encourages you to listen to playlists for specific activities such as making dinner or going for a drive. In an article titled "Ubiquitous Listening" by Anahid Kassabian, the author sees that music is heard as a secondary activity (Kassabian, 1). Ubiquitous listening refers to the

fact the music is everywhere and a quality of our environment which makes us pay attention less considering our comfortability with music in all areas of life (Kassabian, 8-10). Music is used to serve purposes of filling empty space or supplementing whatever your main event may be. There are some genres such as opera or symphony, like the author suggests, where listening is an integral part of the experience; however, it is not the genre that is important but the way in which it is being listened to. Ultimately, all music is meant to be listened to, and the only way you can really understand or enjoy music is to hear it but listening becomes integral to the experience based on the situation. If you're listening to opera at a physical opera show, then of course, listening is important because that is the experience alone. However, there is nothing stopping you from listening to the same opera you heard live in concert while you're making ramen on a Saturday night. Listening to music is only ever the main event whenever you're physically attending a concert or show. Otherwise, it's just meant to keep your head busy while you're preoccupied with other tasks.

As technology has changed the ways in which we listen to and interact with music, it has also altered the ways in which we are exposed to it. With the rise in popularity of social media, music can be advertised on a global level, hitting nearly anyone with an Instagram or Twitter account. In 2022, it's hard to think of any part of the world or any person that is not influenced by mass media in one way or another.

Cultural and social backgrounds are reportedly becoming less important to taste cultures, so now there starts to be a case towards an advancement of the massification hypothesis. As defined by Richard A. Peterson and Paul Di Maggio, the massification hypothesis and the term "mass culture" are synonymous, meaning that it is "a dynamic, revolutionary force, breaking

down the old barriers of class, tradition, taste, and dissolving all cultural distinctions. It mixes and scrambles everything together, producing what might be called homogenized culture” (Peterson, 497-8). This means that some force brings together a large group of people under one common theme, regardless of what taste cultures they find themselves in. The point of massification is to show how cultural diversification has trickled away to nearly nothing, grouping people based off of the “lowest common denominator” (Lewis, 40).

However, according to Peterson and Di Maggio’s article titled, “From Region to Class, the Changing Locus of Country Music: A Test of the Massification Hypothesis,” the concept was initially derived from a 1930s study on the effects of commercial radio, music, movies, and magazine circulation on cultural traits. It was shown to promote diversification rather than simulate a mass culture, giving proof of culture classes over massification (Peterson, 498). Once again, this study was conducted about 90 years ago, and even the Peterson and Di Maggio study of 1975 showed a fulfillment of the massification hypothesis with country music through commercialization and mass media of the time (Peterson, 500).

In my opinion, current social media popularity is the leading explanation and evidence for the massification hypothesis. In a survey conducted in 2021, it was reported that 72.3% of the United States population uses social media, totaling about 240 million people (Dean). In an article by Ivo Josipović titled “The Mass Media and Musical Culture”, individuals of the time are said to consume about 6 hours of media a day, which is before social media platforms were created (Josipović, 42). He also says how mass media tends to be the main or only source of information for an individual and affects their decision making, attitude patterns, and

individuality (Josipović, 42). The majority of the US uses social media and is influenced by it in one way or another.

Ivo Josipović goes on to describe what mass media is and what power it has in relation to the music industry. Written in the early 80s, after the internet was born, social media was not a concept, nor was internet even used in the home at the time. Thus, mass media was more concerned with magazines, newspapers, television, and the radio. Josipović defines mass media as the means to convey messages to a seemingly unlimited number of people, as well as the means to manipulating the individual and being an obstacle to humankind (Josipović, 39-40). However, mass media is not inherently evil itself, rather it is aesthetically and ethically neutral. Its employment and usages are what make mass media positively or negatively connotated (Josipović, 40). The ways in which mass media are used is what makes them good or evil, and it can be pretty obvious that social media can be a really good thing or a really bad thing. Facebook and its subsidiary Instagram have recently come under fire in the last year on how they are damaging to society. Whistleblower Frances Haugen, former Facebook product manager, came forth to declare that Facebook was willingly jeopardizing consumers as the social media site is “dangerous for our children, for our public safety, for privacy and for our democracy” (Romo). Facebook is said to have infiltrated and influenced the 2016 election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Instagram targets younger children, especially girls, with unrealistic body and life standards (Romo). We can see how social media is incredibly damaging to American society.

Instagram and Facebook are capable of creating polarizing worlds, places where you're on one side or the other: the right or the left, the vets or the newbies, the hot and the not. These

are examples of massification at work, the capability of creating large masses of people based on the lowest common factor grouping them together.

The easiest way to understand why this is happening is profit. It is incredibly profitable to market culture to consumers (Josipović, 41). This realization creates a market for organizations to compete against, selling the coolest products or having the coolest representatives in their field to show consumers how impressive the product is (Josipović, 41-42). We can see this in luxury brands: Matthew McConaughey with Lincoln cars, George Clooney and Nespresso, Jennifer Garner and Capital One. Consumers will be quicker to buy with endorsements from celebrities they admire or could even call a “friend” thanks to social media.

The same thing works for music. Big name record companies are going to advertise music and have their artists create music in a way that appeals to the desirable trends and sounds of mass culture. They’re going to continue to release music that sounds similar to songs that are already enjoyable or have a similar aesthetic value (Josipović, 46). There will also be a continuation of the fetishization of the people who work in the field (Josipović, 42). Pop music lovers are going to continue to love Taylor Swift and Ariana Grande, quite literally and oddly no matter what happens. There are entire mass cultures around these two pop stars because of the fetishization of the artist. Record companies see this and attempt to milk their product for all its worth in any way possible, such as buying the rights to music or signing people who have similar aesthetics and sounds. But this isn’t the new concept here. Technology just makes tracking consumer demands incredibly easier, consumerism in music has always been around.

## Chapter 4

### **“It’s Always Corporate Infrastructure Over the Structure of Your Face”: Consumerism**

The United States has been overrun by capitalistic tendencies since the Industrial Revolution. So, it should be no surprise here to say that people who work for record companies are simply just trying to put food on the table. The main objective for record companies is to sell products for maximum profit. To do this, they look at what’s trending and who’s popular. Ultimately, it is the consumer who decides what thrives and what flops, so companies have to appeal to the desires of the masses to make money. Technology and the accessibility of information is pushing music even deeper into commodification rather than expressive art.

Of course, this isn’t applicable to all artists, especially those who release music independently or under smaller labels. The people who have complete control over their music, like Frank Ocean, get to reap the rewards of their music alone, as well as get to make all the stylistic choices. The big record companies, like Sony, Universal, or Warner are the ones that have teams of people who need to make money. They must conform to what will sell, sometimes at odds with the creative ideas that the artist wants to pursue. Again, this isn’t always the case for musicians who profit off of their unique style. Tyler, the Creator is a perfect example of this. Tyler has complete control over the production of his music and has outwardly expressed that he does not look to conform to the demands of what makes a good pop song, or any song for matter of fact. He is praised for the art he makes, his unique sound, and personality, and it sells (which is the important part). Columbia Records, owned by Sony Music Entertainment, released his sixth studio album IGOR in 2019, which oddly enough went on to win the Grammy Award for best rap album in 2020 although it was not a rap album. Tyler gets to make what he wants

because he's good at his job and brings in the money and the awards. Smaller artists under similar labels may not have the same artistic freedom or success.

Music is an incredibly profitable industry, and it's always been a commodity to be sold and owned. According to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), the recording music retail revenue of 2021 is up 23% from 2020, for a grand total of \$15 billion.

For the first time ever, they also included revenues from the TikTok app, which arguably contributes to a handful of music advertisements and discoveries. Music is an important feature of apps like TikTok to make videos more entertaining. A lot of trends to participate in on TikTok include some sort of musical accompaniment that makes these trends easy to find and easy to watch. As someone who could only stand to have TikTok during quarantine, a popular song was Curtis Roach's "Bored in the House" which highlighted individuals doing random things while trapped in their houses for a couple of months. Some artists like Doja Cat who has seen a lot of commercial success recently, gained a lot of her popularity through TikTok and other social media sites. The RIAA analyzes that 9/10 social media users partake in music related activities on the internet ("Facts and Research"), so TikTok is a great place to start.

While permanent digital downloads like buying an album or track straight off iTunes are down, older means of listening like vinyl and CDs have seen a significant increase in sales. Vinyl in particular reached \$1 billion in sales, which hasn't been that high since 1986 (Friedlander). Social media has made buying vinyl so popular that its sales reached an all-time high since the late 80s. Although the trend of buying vinyl may more or less be for interior design aesthetics, social media has the capability to persuade people into buying things they normally wouldn't or listen to things they wouldn't usually find through their own means.

Spotify is the highest grossing streaming service, accounting for roughly 20% of recording revenue in 2020. They also have paid out a total of \$23 billion in royalties since they got started, with \$5 billion of that amount just from 2020 alone. Spotify not only gives millions of people access to music worldwide, but also has started an initiative to help artists make a living off of their music by using Spotify as their platform. Spotify would allow for their songs to be put in generated playlists or easily discovered through the “New Artists Discovery” playlist for the “freshest acts out there.” Additionally, the amount of data that musicians have access to would be helpful to gain momentum as well, such as seeing what songs are topping the charts, who’s popular, what trends are out there, and what songs people like the most out of their own (*Loud and Clear*).

Spotify also pays the rights holders of the music and not the artists themselves. For the smaller artists who use Spotify as their platform and don’t sell their rights to other labels or companies, their royalties go straight to their bank accounts. However, for artists who are contracted through labels, they may not be making much of anything from services like Spotify. This is where the record companies are making their money to stay hip with the times. The money no longer comes from making the music and physically distributing it but rather owning the rights to the music, so the streaming services or anyone wanting to use specific songs pay the label instead of the artist directly. This is especially the case for the older rockers like Aerosmith, Mötley Crüe, or Bruce Springsteen who received massive pay days for selling their catalogs to Sony, Universal, or the like (Banas). This is just another way in which record companies have to adapt with the advancements of technology.



Ultimately, record companies are going to do whatever they have to do to make money. If an individual's personality or art style is selling, then they'll provide the means to keep it going. If music is more profitable through streaming services, then they'll do their best to buy out the music rights of artists. All of their moves boil down to the desires of the mass public and how technology is documenting and adjusting to those wants.

## Chapter 5

### **“I’ll Tell You My Sins So You Can Sharpen Your Knife”: Appropriation, Misuse, and Misunderstanding**

We’ve talked about codes that create genres of music and how people find themselves liking particular songs over another, we’ve mentioned how music and technology has evolved over the years, as well as how social media deepens the connection between consumerism and music. I care so much about how all these individual aspects work because eventually they all come together and ruin the songs I love or construe them to portray messages the lyrics don’t actually shoot for. Sometimes the mass culture gets it wrong, and that leads to technology and record companies milking songs for all their worth, regardless of whether or not the songs are representing what they’re originally meant to. Some songs are meant for small taste cultures, but every now and then those songs can blow up and hit the pop charts for the mass media which can lead to appropriation, misuse, and the misunderstanding of music.

Living in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it seems that the term appropriation gets thrown around everywhere, especially if you’re active on any social media site. In a world where everything is documented online, you can see appropriation in almost any medium— fashion, pop culture, art, music, and more. Anyone can appropriate anything with cultural or artistic significance, and it can start some heated debates around moral and creative differences.

Certain things should not be appropriated; but regardless of awareness around the matter, it continues to happen. This is especially the case in fashion where the Native American headdress continues to be disrespected in festivals, magazines, and runways. Contrary to popular

belief, you should not wear a headdress and it's not just an accessory to add to your wardrobe. In "An Open Letter to Non-Natives in Headdresses," the *âpitawikosisân* blog surrounding the law, language, and culture of the Native Indigenous peoples explains why this is the case. They write that there are some symbols in various cultures that are restricted, meaning that they are earned by achievement and not through want or desire. This is completely understandable for anyone who's ever graduated college or earned a certificate of trade or award. The blog uses a bachelor's degree in the United States specifically as an example. You cannot claim to have a college degree in something when you do not as it gives you access to particular advantages or information to which you are not entitled. Additionally, there can be punitive consequences for people who try to pull these cons off, especially in fields like medicine or law. Elizabeth Holmes only got so far before she was found out, and now faces a possible sentence of up to 20 years in prison (Paul). Ultimately, for these symbols to be desecrated, you must understand what they represent to manipulate them. Similarly, the headdress is a restricted item, like a bachelor's degree, in Indigenous cultures. The headdress is given as an honor almost entirely to men for having completed specific things to earn them. Non-Indigenous people should not wear headdresses, just like how they should not claim to have a degree in a field they haven't studied, because it represents an honor not formally delegated to them ("An Open Letter"). There is no way to honor native cultures by wearing headdresses and there are obvious reasons as to why, yet there continues to be people who buy them online to flaunt at Coachella, and Amazon continues to allow a market for them in the first place.

Fashion isn't the only case where we see appropriation, but the line does start to get a little muddier when talking about appropriation in art's various mediums. In terms of visual art,

it is almost acceptable to use appropriation to create new situations or meanings. In an article titled “Appropriation” on a British art institution’s website called Tate, appropriation “refers to the practice of artists using pre-existing objects or images in their art with little transformation to the original” (“Appropriation”). This could look like using newspapers in paintings to represent themselves, which is what originally started the movement by Pablo Picasso, or taking the haystacks of Claude Monet and adding a stick figure trying to climb them (“Appropriation”). When appropriation is used to question the nature and definition of art, then it is an acceptable practice of creating pieces of work.

However, of course, there are definitive examples of how not to appropriate visual art. In the Netflix documentary *Made You Look: A True Story About Fake Art*, an unassuming math professor named Pei Shen Qian recreated paintings considerably similar to those of modern abstractionists like Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko. Qian took the techniques of these artists to recreate new, “original” paintings to be sold with a signature to match. With the help of two con artists, supposed “art dealers” Glafira Rosales and her boyfriend Bergantiños Diaz, Qian’s paintings were sold to the once well renowned art gallery Knoedler & Company in Manhattan. They covered their tracks by claiming the pieces were held in a private, anonymous collection that no one has ever seen before aside from the collector. The former director of Knoedler & Company, Ann Freedman, fell for this con (or deniably contributed to it) which led to the con artists’ multi-million-dollar profits on the fabricated artwork (*Made You Look*).

What makes this appropriated art lies in the intention of the artist and the con-dealers. Pei Shen Qian was a struggling math teacher living in Queens just trying to pay rent while Glafira

and Bergantiños saw the opportunity to make money through his work (*Made You Look*). The point of creating these pieces was to sell them and make money on them. There was no intention of creating a new meaning or offering different perspectives on the piece, and considering the art was signed as the professional artists adds to the case that money was the only objective. This is not an acceptable use of appropriation, but interestingly enough only Glafira Rosales was charged in the process. You cannot make your art under someone else's identity to reap the rewards of what their name offers.

On the other hand, you can take the works of other artists if you're recreating them. Appropriation has dominated the subject of pop art and gave Pittsburgh pop artist Andy Warhol all of his fame. Pop art was an art movement that saturated the 1960s art scene all over the world in which all its inspiration roots from popular culture ("Pop Art"). Andy Warhol in particular is widely known for his contributions to pop art through the appropriation of Campbell's soup cans, Marilyn Monroe, and Coca-Cola. He would take images that someone else took, or the physical object itself (like the soup can or soda bottle) and use a technique called photographic silkscreen printing to make his art, although half the time he was not even the person to do most of the work. Specifically, in Warhol's *Flowers* series, he picked an image of flowers from a magazine and sent it off to a commercial silkscreen printer to be developed with precise instructions. After that, it was sent back to Warhol to be mass produced on his own or with the help from some associates ("Lesson 4").

Andy Warhol is the most influential pop artist of his generation, yet the majority of his creations were made on behalf of other people. If anything, Warhol was just the CEO that told other people what to do and sometimes got his hands dirty. Not to insult Warhol at all, his

museum in Pittsburgh is one of the coolest and most interesting I've ever been in, but to what extent is his art actually art? He used other's photography and had other people develop the screens and reproduce them as well.

Along similar lines of intent of the artist like I mentioned for *Made You Look*, Andy Warhol was trying to make a point of artistic significance. "The reason I'm painting this way is that I want to be a machine" ("Lesson 4"). He was not taking these works for his own personal gain, to become famous by using the works of other people. He is questioning what it means to be an artist and pushing the boundaries of what art is considered to be.

However, his techniques have without a doubt angered people. The Andy Warhol Foundation is currently on the docket headed for the Supreme Court over Warhol's use of Lynn Goldsmith's photos of Prince in 1984. Warhol created 15 prints using Goldsmith's picture before he passed in 1987, and it wasn't until 2016 when Prince passed away that Goldsmith became aware of his creations. It was when her picture of Prince appeared in a Vanity Fair article commemorating him, yet her image was claimed and reworked by Andy Warhol. This will be a huge case for the art community, assessing the fair use doctrine of copyright infringement, deciding whether or not Andy Warhol altered the image enough to be able to offer new expressions and meanings from Goldsmith's original picture (Liptak).

Finally, the minutiae of deciding what constitutes appropriation becomes considerably more difficult when analyzing music. In visual arts it can be easy to determine appropriation because you can physically see (or not see) a difference between pieces of work, but how does this work for sound?

Like Pei Shen Qian in his creation of imitation Rothkos, you can similarly copy songs from one to the next. Take the song [“Float On” by Modest Mouse](#) for example. The guitar riff that starts about fifteen seconds into the song and plays in between lyrical breaks is highly recognizable and an essential piece of the song. Now, listen closely to [“The Show Goes On” by Lupe Fiasco](#). The guitar riff played at the very beginning of the song is the exact same as the one Modest Mouse curated for their song, except way faster and maybe tuned to a higher pitch. They sound the same in the sense that it fluctuates between high and low notes at the same points.

This is the hardest part about analyzing music, it’s not the easiest to sit and listen for commonalities. Some things may sound the same at first listen, but after careful consideration they may have fundamental differences. Musicologists who study music specifically for appropriation cases are able to transcribe songs to find similar pitches and rhythms or anything to help determine what makes two songs sound related to each other or not. I, on the other hand, only have about three years of piano lesson under my belt but I do have 22 years of experience in simply listening, so it’s not entirely complicated for this case alone to know that Lupe Fiasco used Modest Mouse’s guitar riff.

But he didn’t steal it, which is the tricky part about music. Modest Mouse happened to be fans of Lupe Fiasco, and they had their song sampled and expedited to Lupe’s producer to be recorded (“LUPE FIASCO”). Lupe agreed to the track and made a song out of it. Sampling is common in the music industry, and defined as re-processing existing culture, much like how a collage would work (“Sampling”). Like appropriation, sampling strongly questions ideas behind authorship and originality. Sampling music is a lot like Warhol using pre-existing images for his

art, if not the exact same process. Both involve taking something existing and reworking it to make it look, or sound, entirely different.

Technology makes sampling easy, as simple as hitting a record button and saving the file. While in the past bigger artists just blatantly stole full songs or were “inspired by” smaller artists (nice try, British Invasion), today it may look more like stealing a sound or a lyric— something a lot less noticeable considering the ease of finding music today. The main problem of sampling without approval sprouts from wanting credit where credit is due, or just to remind the public that a smaller artist exists and created something that was capitalized by a much one (McCabe).

While you can flat out steal full songs or sounds, it’s more interesting to analyze how music can be appropriated through its uses and purposes. How many times have you heard a song that was used incorrectly in a specific setting, or knowing the history and importance of the song had it make absolutely no sense in its current context? This happens so often in entertainment, politics, and everyday life.

I remember a couple of days after my fifteenth birthday in 2014 I was folding laundry and listening to Apple music (don’t tell Spotify, Apple Music had easier means of discovering music back then). I normally like to stay on alternative radio stations, and I just so happened to discover Hozier that day and change the course of the rest of my life with one song. “Jackie and Wilson” quite literally changed my life, how exactly I can’t be too certain. This song continues to fall within my top ten songs on my Spotify Wrapped every year with 2019 and 2017 as the only exceptions. The last two years it was my number one song, and I swear I have listened to and discovered other songs in the last eight years. However, this one song sprouted a love and appreciation for a genre of music, as well as an artist, that I’m not sure I’ll ever kick.



So, of course I listened to the rest of the album immediately and discovered [“Take Me to Church”](#) at the beginning of the album list. This song was blowing up the Billboard charts and social media, I remember hearing it everywhere outside of my own personal listening. It was also fairly popular in my high school, but I don’t think they really understood what exactly the song was trying to say.

According to social media and the Internet, it seems that a lot of people didn’t get the message at first, basically older people or people who just really loved their church. Hozier says that the original message “flew under the radar” until it hit the charts, which grew in popularity over the course of one year (Needham). People genuinely thought this was a song encouraging people to go to church, regardless of the beautiful lyric, “I’ll tell you my sins so you can sharpen your knife” right out in the open (Hozier, “Take Me to Church”). Once the song hit the charts, that’s when it started to become analyzed, and people spread the terrible news to excited Christians hoping to gain more popularity for the church. Hozier has even expressed that he has received a handful of passionate letters from pastors who completely understand his lyrics (Needham).

This is an ongoing struggle for Hozier, and while “Take Me to Church” may be the most misunderstood song in the history of music, he must hold the title for the most heartbreaking misunderstanding as well. [“Cherry Wine”](#) is yet another beautifully crafted piece of his that makes it appearance quite often in weddings. From first listen, it is quite romantic sounding and sweet, which is the point, for the dark lyrics to come across as delicate and innocent. The lyrics offer a different narrative, speaking on domestic violence and how easy it can be to love

someone who hurts you tremendously. Weddings aren't necessarily the best place for this song, and every time it's played at one, a Hozier fan loses its wings.

This happens so easily because of the meaning of art itself. Hozier has no problem with people interpreting songs in their own way, he even prefers it that way ("Hozier"). Once a song is released, the intentions of the musician go right out the window and it's up for the listener to decide what it means to them. It's acceptable to interpret a song in your own way, but it's also important to understand the codes behind the song, as well as the people it's trying to reach. Especially on a public scale, it can be quick and easy to misunderstand and misuse a song.

If you're a "true" fan, you have to understand the code that he carefully picks out words for his songs. If you can appreciate reading Hozier's lyrics as you would a poem, you're no longer simply a casual listener and it becomes an infatuation from that point on. The English major in me really appreciates his work for the fact that it's not always just convoluted words or a simple story. It can be complex allusions or having to actually look up words in a dictionary. I've never heard a more romantic, yet hardcore lyric of ["If I was born as a blackthorn tree, I'd wanna be felled by you, held by you, fuel the pyre of your enemies"](#) (Hozier, "NFWMB"). His music is full of these "one liner" type lyrics that have you absolutely awestruck if you can understand the codes that makes his music so great. This is exactly why I appreciate Hozier so much.

## Chapter 6

### “Not an End, But the Start of All Things”: Conclusion

Technology, social media, and consumerism have deeply influenced the ways in which we interact with music, and I don't like it. While not everyone can like the same things, which is completely understandable, sometimes technology can make it feel like we're being thrown into a melting pot and forced to assimilate into liking certain sounds or trends. When we're not being categorized into one large group, it's still hard to find people who care about music beyond simply what it can do for them and how it accentuates their own life. I'm completely for having musical accompaniment with activities, and I myself also use music as a secondary activity, it would be nice to find someone who actual listens sometimes, like myself. As technology keeps advancing, it's hard to tell how exactly music will evolve in the next fifty years, but I definitely hope it's in a way that encourages thoughtful conversation and listening, although I highly doubt it. If anything, I hope this can encourage people to just read the lyrics of their favorite song and possibly create a deeper understanding for their own appreciation of it. It's not hard work to do, it's even kind of fun when you find something beyond just liking a sound but building a connection to it as well.

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### HOBBIES

Painting  
Listening to Music  
Yoga / Meditation  
Journaling

# MACKENZEE JESTER

### EDUCATION

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**The Pennsylvania State University, University Park [UG]**

English [BA] & Political Science [BA]

August 2020 – May 2022

Dean's List – Spring 2021, Fall 2022, Spring 2022

**The Pennsylvania State University, The Capital College [UG]**

August 2018 – May 2020

Dean's List – Fall 2018, Spring 2019, Fall 2019, Spring 2020

Women's Basketball Team – Fall 2018 to Winter 2020

CAC All-Academic Team – 2018 to 2019

**Ligonier Valley High School; Ligonier, Pennsylvania**

August 2014 – May 2018

### WORK EXPERIENCE

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**Rolling Rock Club / Chambermaid – Parlor Maid**

April 2018 – November 2021

The housekeeping and hospitality industry kickstarted my working career where I learned how to maintain a high-class country club.

Some skills I fortified here are organization, consistency, and attention to detail.

**Fat Daddy's Restaurant and Pub / Waitress**

June 2019 – August 2019

This was my first direct experience in customer service that challenged my memory, stamina, and time management skills. I waited, served, and bussed an 11-table dining room myself twice a week concurrently with my job at Rolling Rock.

### SKILLS

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Teamworking Skills and Collaboration

Working Independently

Time Management

Critical Thinking

Adaptability