

Authenticating Identity: The Quest for Personal Validation through Authenticity in Music

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“Music City, U.S.A.” celebrates many cultures and music, but often Nashville is identified with singing cowboys with southern drawls. Some are quick to call this country-western image “inauthentic,” pointing out that middle Tennessee’s forested hills were never home to cattle ranches or Gene Autry. Indeed, the labels of “authentic” or “inauthentic” have become widely used in contemporary society to denote whether a thing is essentially true or untrue. In his evaluation of the 1960s music “myth” in which folk music was deemed authentic and pop music inauthentic, sociologist Simon Frith argues that the central issue was less about the music itself and more about the communication of a person’s identity through that music. An examination of the concept of authenticity as it has evolved through history and presented itself in recent scholarship and a survey of Nashville residents and college students reveal that the quest for authenticity in tourism and consumerism is closely linked to the construction of identity. While the concept of authenticity is demonstrably problematic, it retains its power because it provides a framework against which individuals can define themselves in an increasingly global world. The quest for authenticity in music, then, becomes a quest for truth about oneself for which there is no objective answer. Authenticity is fundamentally a question of perspective. Who can say whether Nashville is authentic or not? All that can be said is simply that Nashville *is*.

Nashville, Tennessee, otherwise known as “Music City, U.S.A.,” may be a city of many cultures and music, but, largely, the city is known for its ties to country music. Throw on some cowboy boots, let out a southern drawl, and take a walk down lower Broadway to experience the full force of Nashville’s country-western image. Flashing neon lights invite eager tourists to bar after bar as hopeful street musicians strum guitars on every corner. Some have called this country-western image of Nashville “inauthentic,” pointing out that Middle Tennessee’s rolling, forested hills were never home to cattle ranches or Gene Autry, rather to the music industry that capitalized on the idea of the singing cowboy. Indeed, the labels of “authentic” or “inauthentic” have become widely used in contemporary society to denote whether a thing is essentially true or untrue. In observing the “myth” of rock and folk music in the 1960s, the sociologist Simon Frith (1981) noted that the assumption of authentic or inauthentic “focused on aesthetics.... The folk experience was ‘authentic,’ rooted in the experience of creation; the pop experience was unauthentic, [involving] only the act of consumption.” Frith (1981) went on to point out that the central issue was less about the music itself and more about the communication of a person’s identity through that music. Like New Orleans jazz in the 1920s and 1930s, the British rock ‘n’ roll invasion in the 1960s, and now Nashville’s country twang, music continues to be a source of “an emotionally intensified sense of self” (Frith, 1981). In this way, the problematic quest for authenticity in music or place becomes an extension of a person’s search for self-knowledge or self-validation.

The concept of authenticity is ancient, but its recent appropriation into academia and popular

culture creates unique problems in how certain music or places are understood. In her discussion of authenticity, the European studies scholar Regina Bendix (1997) traced its origins to the ancient Greek word “*authentes*,” meaning both “one who acts with authority” and “made by one’s own hand.” Yet as history has progressed, authenticity has increasingly accrued symbolic meaning to society. Bendix (1997) noted that people began to find the “expressive culture ... the poetic manifestation of authentic being” and the solution to corrupt civilizations. Thus, as creativity became increasingly revered and relevant to people, authenticity became loaded with unspoken meaning beyond merely what is true or untrue. Now “authenticity” can mean what is superior, untainted, worthy of respect – in a sense, what is sacred. While, as Bendix (1997) pointed out, the concept of authenticity is not new to modernity, the geoscientists John Connell and Chris Gibson (2003) asserted that its recent adoption into academia reflects this loaded idea of authenticity. In the field of musicology, searching for authenticity has led to a broadening of ethnomusicological studies that “recognize and celebrate the diversity of musical production in both ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ contexts” (Connell & Gibson, 2003). Yet the academic recognition of only music deemed authentic in its isolation from other musical influences created new problems by failing to consider the authenticity of cultural interchanges and dialogues. Identifying some of these problematic terms and ideas – such as authentic music being spontaneous or “of the people” and inauthentic music being manipulated or commercial – Connell and Gibson (2003) argued that authenticity of music cannot be determined scientifically like that of a museum artifact. Rather, they aptly noted, the very

definition of authenticity is “constructed in relation to how continuity and change are perceived” (Connell & Gibson, 2003). Indeed, perception is proven to play a large role in the concept of authenticity.

A recent survey conducted primarily of Vanderbilt University students and local Nashville residents revealed that the idea of authenticity is closely linked to the perceived truth of a reputation. When asked to describe “Nashville’s image,” the overwhelming majority of participants discussed music, or more specifically country music, with southern hospitality coming in far second. One respondent put it this way: “Nashville is perceived as a touristy place where you can go to hear great music. Locals consider many of downtown’s attractions to be ‘inauthentic’ while outsiders tend to view Nashville (even downtown) as very authentic” (Green, 2010). This same participant, who has lived in Nashville a little over two years, went on to argue that a place’s authenticity is derived from its organic, unplanned, and original existence. Many of the survey responses focused on history or roots as a condition of authenticity, although one respondent argued that an image is authentic “if people believe it and live it” (Green, 2010). Overwhelmingly, however, the participants argued sincerely for Nashville’s authenticity or inauthenticity with no consideration of the problematic and loaded nature of the term.

As this study demonstrated, the search for authenticity in Nashville goes hand in hand with the perception of authenticity in country music. In part, as Connell and Gibson (2003) observed, the connection between country music and Nashville is founded upon the “tendency to search for links between sites and sounds, for inspirations in nature and the built environment.” This connection is no accident, according to the communications scholar Joli Jensen (1998), who pointed out that Nashville has intentionally linked itself with the production of country music, both economically and ideologically. Even at the beginning of this marriage of music and place, consideration was given to authenticity and the best, not necessarily obvious, way to tell the story. Jensen (1998) argued that “part of what makes country music seem authentic is its imagined origins in live, communal performance.” Connell and Gibson’s (2003) evaluation of folk music’s “authentic” image further emphasizes the importance of perception, demonstrating that a person’s belief that folk music is continuing a tradition gives the genre credibility rather than the veracity of the belief itself.

So while country music has made the shift “away from the Opry to Music Row ... away from the communal world of the barn dance toward the more commercial world of the studio,” the carefully told story of country music’s origins and the enactment of hillbilly traditions throughout Nashville continue to preserve the illusion of country music’s “authenticity” (Connell & Gibson, 2003).

The significance of the fusion of music and place in Nashville’s soundscape derives from music’s powerful ability to connect with individuals. Bendix (1997) pointed out that throughout American history, “Song has held a special place.” The ethnomusicologist Sara Cohen (1995) agreed, pointing out that “social practices involving the consumption and production of music also draw people together and symbolize their sense of collectivity and place.” Music’s reflection of “social, economic, political and material aspects of the particular place in which it is created” forms a unique bond with the listener that enables a place to hold emotional significance (Cohen, 1995). Thus, both music and place have the power to become meaningful to an individual or group, a fact that becomes increasingly relevant as individuals search for authenticity.

The quest for authenticity in tourism and consumerism is closely linked to an individual’s or group’s construction of identity and search for self-expression. As the businessman Russell Belk (1988) asserted, “A key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, we regard our possessions as part of ourselves.” Self-knowledge, according to the sociologists Joseph Hermanowicz and Harriet Morgan (1999), requires groups or individuals to “‘announce’ their identities ... by engaging in social practices that highlight their symbolic place in the world.” Whether through the experience of tourism or music, the anthropologist Nelson Graburn (1989) noted that humans use these moments “to embellish and add meaning to their lives.” As Bendix (1997) observed, the individual is embarking on a fundamentally “emotional and moral quest” that is “oriented toward the recovery of an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity, and whose recovery is feasible only through methods and sentiments created in modernity.” The sociologist Judith Howard (2000) suggested that the struggle to find and maintain an identity is perhaps unique to modern times. In the past, society would largely assign identities. Now individuals have options and “the concept of identity carries the full

weight of the need for a sense of who one is, together with an often overwhelming pace of change in surrounding social contexts” (Howard, 2000). In his analysis of music and identity throughout the 20th century for The European Music Office, the communications scholar Keith Roe (1996) found that music largely defined “generational identity” in the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1970s and 1980s, music became used to denote “group identity,” and finally, in recent years, music has been used to frame “individual identity.” Roe (1996) went on to argue that “since at least the 1950s it has been evident that music plays a central role in the process of identity construction of young people. This process includes not only elements of personal identity but also important aspects of national, regional, cultural, ethnic, and gender identity” (Roe, 1996).

As the formation of identity is increasingly linked to music or place, authenticity becomes used to denote the legitimacy of the individual or group whose identity is at stake. Essentially, the search for authenticity becomes a search for self-validation. Bendix (1997) observed, “Declaring something authentic legitimated the subject that was declared authentic, and the declaration in turn can legitimate the authenticator, though here such concerns as social standing, education, and the ability to promote one’s views also play a role.” Bendix (1997) equated seeking authenticity with seeking “unmediated genuineness,” which cuts through “what Rousseau called ‘the wound of reflection,’ a reaction to modernization’s demythologization, detraditionalization, and disenchantment.” Music and place, then, become means by which individuals can express, distinguish, and validate themselves. The philosopher Theodore Gracyk (2001) noted:

Musicians project an identity by situating themselves in relation to other musicians. Listeners derive meaning and value from popular music by contributing cultural capital to the process – which seems to imply that their own identity as members of a certain audience depends on the ability of others to employ cultural capital situating them properly. For both musician and audience, the construction of a meaningful identity demands a historical perspective on the music as a dialogue with the past, not just with the present scene.

The search for authenticity can then become a negotiation with the past to create a present in which

the individual can have some part. The desire for the “authentic” rests in the individual’s desire to be “legitimated.” As Bendix (1997) aptly pointed out, “a very thin line separates the desire for individual authenticity and the calling to convince others of the correctness of a particular rendering or localization of the authentic.”

In spite of the prevailing understanding and use of authenticity to mark contemporary life, the very idea of authenticity is contradictory. Often, what is being questioned in the search for authenticity is the ideology rather than the music or place. Frith (1981) observed that the “spontaneous folk creations” celebrated by the American folk revival were simply “the result of musical judgments made by outsiders,” and that the real issue was “a definition of ‘the people.’” Similarly, the case study on perceptions of authenticity in Nashville revealed that preconceptions shape respondents’ ideas of authenticity and therefore their view of Nashville. One respondent defined authenticity as originality, and by that definition deemed downtown Nashville with its colorful, exaggerated bars inauthentic. Another, however, believes authenticity requires being “true to oneself,” and in that light considers Nashville’s historically country image authentic (Green, 2010). While it becomes clear that questions of authenticity in music or place are closely related to an individual’s definition of the term, Bendix (1997) argues that the very idea of authenticity is to be mistrusted, asserting that “the notion of authenticity implies the existence of its opposite, the fake, and this dichotomous construct is at the heart of what makes authenticity problematic.” Indeed, this delineation of genuine and fake practices is at once presumptuous and misleading. Recent scholarship has consistently demonstrated that musical styles are exchanged and appropriated regularly and organically into various cultural groups (Bendix, 1997). Limiting authenticity to only homogeneous music is unfounded and limiting to both to music and the individuals affected by it.

In spite of its flaws, authenticity retains its power in modern society because it empowers individuals to reinforce an identity based upon constructs of truth and value. As individuals must face a increasingly global world and define themselves culturally, politically, and spiritually within this larger framework, music, and often places, become personal markers of their identities. The quest for authenticity in outside factors becomes a quest for truth about themselves, and in aligning themselves with specific

values, genres, or locations, individuals frequently pass judgment on the “other.” In the survey about authenticity in Nashville, one participant said he found Nashville’s image to be “authentic” because of the reality of the music industry and the number of artists who live or found their start here. Another said no, because the performers downtown are not singing their own music. One participant found Nashville authentic because it is unique and unforced, but another saw it as inauthentic because downtown is too contrived and unoriginal (Green, 2010). Thus, the question of authenticity is fundamentally a question of perspective for which there is no objective answer. Who can say whether Nashville is authentic or not? All that can be said is simply that Nashville *is*.

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