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Nationalism and Hindrance in the American Music Industry

It was the night of the American Music Awards when sat down to watch this pop culture presentation unfold. I spent the evening taking in several impressive performances like P!nk's ballet performance while belting her newest hit, amongst with even more lack-luster performances (cough, cough, Ke\$ha). However, aside from the speakers, performances, and awards presented my thoughts wandered to a completely different aspect of the music awards. It was my reaction to the finale of the awards show which made me dive into deeper thoughts about the American music industry and frankly, I was surprised by how I immediately acted on my immediate, outright judgment. As the awards show concluded with its final act of the evening, at that moment I sent out a sarcastic and at the time, seemingly witty tweet "I find it interesting that they end the American Music Awards with PSY #seewhatididthere". As I was typing my tweet, while figuratively patting myself on the back, I did not foresee the depth that I would contemplate about the meanings behind what I had said. My initial embarrassment came when I noticed that the tweet was published without being properly read over and edited, being that the sentence appeared to be awkwardly tensed. However, looking back, in order to appear to be completely ignorant I should have emphasized the word "American" by caps locking the word or hashtagging it or perhaps I should have shortened the word to spell it like the redneck lingo version, "MERICA". Or I could have possibly made the tweet clear that PSY was the popular "KOREAN" singer of the song "Gangnam Style" to show further that he had no business in closing the "AMERICAN" Music Awards. And at the moment I sent the tweet I felt the intense

feeling of nationalism for my country, and in a way protective of “our” awards show. All of these thoughts and additions would have been much more effective in driving home my point but also driving out any sense of poise I had for myself and my level of rational thinking. However, out of all of these possibilities and thoughts, the main issue was that I spoke and formed an opinion about America and the nationalization of this country’s music without truly contemplating the topic. So that is where I will begin to attempt to redeem my last shreds of intelligence, by diving in deeper to the impression of American music and global music with the basics of the industry in America.

The American music industry is comprised of a wide variety of artists, genres, influences, instruments and so much more. In terms of the American music industry as a media outlet, it is said in the academic journal article, “Does the Music Matter? Examining Differential Effects of Music Genre on Support for Ethnic Groups” that “Music consumption accounts for as much as 28% of Americans’ media use” thereby showing that in terms of all types of media, music plays a large role in our country’s consumption (LaMarre 150). However music is more than just a consumed media medium that is acknowledged as a pass time, taste, or hobby; it is a commentary about our society at large. The music industry and music itself is part of peoples everyday lives, whether it be listening to a radio station in ones car, working for a recording label, or taking instrument lessons. The music industry in America engulfs our society and therefore is bound to have a profound effect on our nation as well as conveys small depictions of music all around the globe. Therefore, due to the global effect of music and the music industry one first needs to see the diversity of popular music in American to even begin to understand the intricacy of the global and American music industry.

When I observed the Billboard Top 100 Chart, I first noticed that the number one hit on the chart is Rihanna's song "Diamonds". The pertinence of this fact is that Rihanna herself was not born in America; in fact she was born and raised in Barbados (Reid). Additionally, of the top twenty music hits currently in the United States four of the twenty artists are foreign, making the ratio of popular foreign artists to popular native artists 1:5. Furthermore this ratio would translate that approximately 20% of just the pop culture music in the country is foreign, not including other genres of music that are not taken into the Billboard chart. This shows that the diversity of music in American is undeniable; that foreign artists are widely known in our popular music. And these facts should perhaps lead one to the idea that "American" music is one in the same with global music because of the amount of foreign artists and the global influence that is a part of every American music genre. However, as previously introduced, the popular music industry is not the only way one can observe the global impact on music within this country.

In terms of music education, a class most students have to take at some point in their academic careers, the diversity of music is shown in this area of society as well. It is no secret that our countries people are diverse. The United States is made up of the clichéd "melting pot" of vastly different people with different backgrounds and cultures. Therefore, in many schools and university's the teaching of music must be done in a global way as well. A professor writes about the diversity of the current class he is teaching, "But this year, there's a different mix: a student from Cambodia, another from Mali, two students from Peru, five Mexicans, two Taiwanese, and an American Indian. Maybe it's happened gradually; maybe not. But this is what America looks like, and music educators, largely trained to teach students to play in the Western classical tradition, have to adjust" which conveys several important points that must be highlighted as key aspects to keep in mind throughout this essay and beyond in the study of a

global music industry in America(Powers). First, he addresses that “there’s a different mix” every year he teaches, which emphasizes the constant change and fluctuation of culturally different people inside the United States and to the United States. Second, he acknowledges that regardless of whether or not this influx of diverse people occurred steadily or rapidly, it is now the norm in America and therefore adaptations to things like teaching styles or popular culture will imminently occur.

Now, several of these pervious points were reasonably understandable. It is easy to grasp the concept that foreign musical influence and genres can dissolve into other cultures through the spread of popular music or for the purpose of teaching and educating, but does it go deeper? The effects of global music in America and the American music industry have many facets which also affect a sociological aspect within people and additionally have a profound impact on the musical business of foreign artists.

In many ways music has always been seen as an outlet for people, whether it be for entertainment, to de-stress, or to convey emotions. However, more than just being a useful and classifiable outlet, music has also developed into a means to classify people. The scope of American music in general derives from the amount and variety of different influences of cultures around the world, but also this basic understanding is how all previously defined cultural music creates its own culture within the United States. In a study the researchers found that in the case of observing 7th to 12th grade students that their “self-selection of music genre aligned with their own racial background. Whites were more likely to report self-selected exposure to Alternative, Hard Rock, Classic Rock, Country/Western, and Ska/Punk than were African Americans and Latino Americans. African Americans listened to Rap/Hip Hop, Reggae, and

Rhythm & Blues/Soul more often than White Americans. Latino Americans favored Latin/Salsa more than the two other ethnic groups” and that this form of musical choice is called “self-categorization” (LaMarre 152). In this way American music appears to be more restrictive and stereo-type encouraging than how the American music industry would typically portray. While the variety of music available in the United States can be overwhelmingly vast and gives each American citizen the ability to have a wide range of tastes, in terms of our youth’s music consumption it is a different story. As a teenager in American society, the type of music one listens to is used as more as a social classification than an individual taste classification. A teenager will listen to the type of music that their friends (or the people they want to be their friends) are listening to in order to be accepted by people who are invested in artists who are just like themselves because that is what is comfortable. This in turn shows the backwards ways today’s youth are taking a growing diverse music industry but only tapping into their background specific genre of music. In addition, the point of this diversity within the American and global music industries is to challenge the listener. It is meant to have them make individual preferential choice, and perhaps the most challenging aspect, to put one’s self in the situation of interacting with someone whom is physically and culturally different but yet still share a common musical taste. This of course is an idealistic view of what the American music consumer should be like but in many ways and because of several factors, American society will likely take time and some push in order to develop passed these jaded ideas of music classification. Onto a different point, the music of American culture affects more than just the physiological and sociological well being of an individual; it affects the careers, dreams, and wallets of many musical artists.

Many young Americans grow up dreaming of one day becoming “a star”; these American idealist grow up with the idea that the United State is a country full of opportunity where they

can go stand in line to audition for a shows like *American Idol*, *The Voice* and *The XFactor* to become discovered and begin selling millions of records. However, this feat is not nearly as glamorous or as inspiring as it would seem. It should not be surprising for me to note that the likelihood of an individual “making it” in the music industry is completely minuscule, but let us observe just how much of a rarity it is. When looking at this issue from the perspective of a musical competition show the chances of winning are almost unbearably small. Within the auditions of *American Idol*, which is one of several competition shows, more than 10,000 people audition in each city only about 100 of those make it to Hollywood and in the end of the show there is only one winner who may or may not have gained a large enough fan base to succeed in the music industry (Rushfield). The only aspect of this dream crushing industry that is a bit more promising is the statistics of working as an everyday musician. From the United States Department of Labor, the occupational outlook of a Singer or Musician is shown as the following: the Job Outlook for anticipated growth in jobs in the music industry are at 10 percent while the average growth of all jobs is at 14 percent, meaning that careers as musicians are extremely low but are still more likely than winning a competition show (Musicians).

Now, the previous examples were made about the likelihood of an American becoming a successful musician in America, now let’s turn the tables and contemplate the evident struggles a foreigner would experience when attempting to succeed in music in America. Many foreign artists are not permitted to compete in music competition shows like *American Idol* or *The Voice* because they are restricted to only United States citizens, as stated in the contestant’s eligibility forms. Furthermore, the Department of Labor only accounts for the job growth of American musicians not foreign. The astounding struggles of foreign artists in the American music industries and their journey to success is presented as an almost unattainable goal, “While

European acts like MC Solaar, Marxman, Stakka Bo, and Fun-Da-Mental boast aggressive hip-hop beats and stirring social commentary, marketing executives from the domestic labels licensing European acts view these artists more as distant cousins than as blood brothers to their American counterparts” which greatly affects musicians (Reynolds). Within Reynolds’ article he discusses many events like these where foreign artists have been rejected or dismissed by American record labels because they are unfamiliar and bring a whole new variety of music to the table. Moreover, he addresses that while other commentators qualify the rationale for hindering the growth of foreign musicians in America by stating ideas like, “Though Lynch cites foreign languages and cultural diversity as stumbling blocks to European rap's acceptance in America, she is optimistic” he still is confident that there is more than just a menial language barrier keeping these musicians on the outs (Reynolds). Now, the acceptance or lack of acceptance in the music industry of foreign musicians tells us a great deal about our country as a whole. The appearance of our great nation for many years has not been one of high regard whether it is our global power, our consumerism or possibly our stern conception of work ethic and success; we are not exactly a greatly admired group of people. However, this idea is especially shown when it comes to our lack of acceptance of diverse people.

This American shunning of diversity and change has become a direct hindrance to the growth and development of the music industry because it is no longer just about the ideal American culture. Within an article describing the weight of American culture and how it has been viewed in the past all the way to the present the author explains that, “American culture used to be the elephant in everyone's living room. Whether people felt uncomfortable with the omnipresence of America's high or popular culture in their countries, they could not ignore its

power or its appeal” showing the great influence American culture used to have around the world, however, that cultural power is shifting (Pells). The idea that American culture: film, television, and especially music being the great global fad or dominator, is no longer as great as it was decades ago. Music and culture from Europe, Latin America, and Asia have been engulfing our country with its tastes and influences and they are succeeding. These musical genres and these artists are the ones flooding the Billboard Top 100 charts with their culture and background and the fans love it.** As addressed earlier, the visibility of the diversity of the American music industry is apparent because of the popularity of the foreign artist, however popularity and success in this industry would never translate into saying that it was easy for foreign musicians to gain that success. As a society, we do not make it easy for our own artist, as shown by the Department of Labor statistics, so why would we ever make it easy for foreigners? Moreover, it is a sheer miracle that some have gained popularity and success when the odds are surely against them. We as Americans flaunt around the perception that we are a nation built on the promise of equality and multiplicity, but we have never been the type to aid in this diversity.** What is more, in all of these aspects there is always the overarching issue that the American music industry still has difficulty with acceptance within it. But as the tides are changing in the global music market, the American side of this issue is not the only one to be addressed. Pells writes “Yet far from reinforcing the impact of American culture, globalization has strengthened the cultures of other nations, regions, and continents. Instead of defining what foreigners want, America's cultural producers find themselves competing with their counterparts abroad in shaping people's values and tastes” in order to describe the successes of other countries (Pells). It is inevitable that other cultures are gaining a much louder voice in the global music industry and the American industry must begin to adjust to this evolving concept.

In many ways the function of American social acceptance needs to be revamped just as much as the specific advancement of the music industry needs to occur. In Power's article, he quotes a music education professor who proposes the beginning steps for the American society can prepare themselves for the increase in global culture and to become more open to these changes, "Form an environment that feels welcoming," Beagle insists."It begins with developing a knowledge base, with creating a caring and learning community."...Culturally responsive teaching is becoming more recognized and necessary in music education" (Powers). Furthermore, the issue goes farther than just being more welcoming, knowledgeable and sensitive to other cultures within education; it is about being an active and supportive consumer of a variety of cultural music, not just having the passive knowledge that it exists and is an issue. As consumers of music we all are aware of the facts that the future of music, this highly revered form of expressive art, is only enhanced by collaboration of musicians and the industries and the evolution of mixed forms. In order to ensure the growth of the global spread and development of music it is imperative that the American music industry opens up to new ideas and takes risk with various artists as well as the American society as a whole must begin to develop a more conscience attitude to think globally.

Looking back now that tweet showed my great American ignorance of the musical society in which I live, even though I am sure that I am not the most unaware bigot on twitter, though it felt that way for a while. Although, one thing I know I had right from the beginning was my American nationalist, stand-off, incapable of acceptance attitude, but as my views have

changed so is the hope that the American music industry will admit wrongs and thrive in the world as global music leader.

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