

Banjos and Beats:

The creation and distribution of bluegrass and hip-hop through selection systems

Bluegrass, drawing on the traditions of Celtic music brought to America by early Scotch and Irish immigrants, was appropriated from rural Appalachians and popularized by radio shows in the 1930s and 40s. Likewise, hip-hop music, containing elements of traditional African American sounds fused with Caribbean beats, was widely distributed in the 1980s and 90s by cable television stations like MTV. This essay will connect the creation of bluegrass and hip-hop as “genres” and the commercial distribution of music through the framework of selection systems.

Bluegrass music has been called a “characterization...a representation of traditional Appalachian music in its social form.”¹ It was played first in 1946, on the radio barn dance the *Grand Ole Opry* by Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys, a five piece string band, and has since been widely imitated. The *Grand Ole Opry*, with its roots in the minstrel and medicine shows which persisted in the rural South until the 1930s, was originally a radio barn dance first broadcast in 1925 from a hotel room in Nashville to the rural audiences of middle Tennessee. When Bill Monroe joined the *Opry* fourteen years later, in 1939, the show had acquired network status and a national reputation, having embraced the entire southern tier of the country with a fifty-thousand watt, clear-channel transmitter and a travelling caravan of *Opry* performers. But its emphasis was still on the old-fashioned rural music, what most people knew then as “hillbilly music,” represented on the program not only the original string bands but by accomplished and colorful professional and semiprofessional musicians.²

Hillbilly music was the social and domestic music of the rural South, of Appalachia particularly. It was an Americanized strain of English and Scots-Irish traditional music, shaped by Afro-American rhythms and tonalities and³ rich with deposits of nineteenth century popular songs, especially those of blackface minstrels.⁴ Though not yet fully evolved into the driving and brilliant form which came ultimately to be called bluegrass, Monroe’s new music, with its high pitches, speedy tempos, and athletic instrumental breaks, its eclectic use of traditional,⁴ gospel, sentimental, and blues songs, epitomized hillbilly music, almost to the point of parody.⁵ Radio has the power to transmit its message over geographical and cultural boundaries; concomitantly it has the capacity, particularly on large commercial stations (like WLS, which carried the *Grand Ole Opry*) to gather together messages of widely diverse origins and kinds, presenting them as emanations from a common source. Drawing scattered elements of culture, attitude, or opinion into consensus, amplifying the audience’s consciousness of its own identity, or even defining it, radio was hugely influential.⁵ While the *Grand Ole Opry* was originally intended to address a specific local audience,⁶ the broadcast transcended that particular audience and aroused a broad awareness (in some cases, longing for) of places distant from and ways of life markedly different from his or her own.

Widely considered the father of bluegrass,⁶ Bill Monroe entered professional music after having left rural Kentucky for the promise of wealth in the industrializing North. This experience repeated that of many others like him, who had left Appalachia for life in the factories of the

Midwest. This was in itself a national myth⁷— the expulsion from the idyllic South into an urban and technological wilderness in the North.— The *Grand Ole Opry* commercialized Monroe and other folk personalities, providing a musical haven for the downtrodden of the Great Depression.

In the early 1940s, bluegrass as a genre was not yet part of the cultural encyclopedia. It was not until after World War II when Bill Monroe's band lineup solidified into Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys that bluegrass became an identifiable and holistic genre. Regularly appearing on the *Grand Ole Opry* in 1945 and 1946, Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys were the catalyst for an explosion of this style of music.⁸— Over time, bluegrass became 'genre,' taking its name from Monroe's band.

The relationship between the creation of bluegrass as a genre and its distribution on radio, particularly on the *Grand Ole Opry* radio show, is a blueprint for what was to happen in the 1980s and 90s with the distribution of hip-hop music. Hip-hop originated in the social conditions facing African American inner city youth in the 1970s and 1980s. During those decades, manufacturing industries left the cities for suburban or foreign locales, where land values were lower and labor was⁹ less expensive. Unemployment among African American youth rose to more than 40 percent.—

In the context of urban blight, African American youth forged hip-hop through fusing traditional African American music with Caribbean immigrant sounds. Mostly in New York City, hip-hop included distinctive¹⁰ styles of visual art (graffiti), dance (acrobatic break dancing), music (rap), dress, and speech.— Like bluegrass before it, hip-hop began as an expression of local identities. Even today, rap and hip-hop music contains references to often obscure references to particular neighborhoods, features of the urban landscape, and social groups and networks.

In early 1982, with the release of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" hip-hop began to win acclaim from mainstream music critics. With the success¹¹ of Public Enemy in the late 1980s, it became clear there was a big audience for hip-hop.— Significantly, the audience was composed of people who had never experienced life in the urban ghettos.¹² They "relished...the subversive 'otherness' that the music and its purveyors represented."— Sensing an opportunity for profit, major media corporations signed distribution deals with the small independent recording labels that had formerly been the exclusive distributors of hip-hop CDs.

Like Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys, Run-DMC – a trio consisting of three MCs – was perhaps the most influential act in the history of hip-hop. The members were college educated, raised in a middle class neighborhood in Queens. They introduced a hard-edged, rock influenced style of hip-hop that was to influence profoundly the sound and sensibility of later rap and hip-hop. Run-DMC¹³ was the first rap group to headline a national tour and most importantly, to appear on MTV.— This allowed them to popularize rap among the young, predominantly white audience for rock music; gave the genre a more rebellious image; and introduced hip-hop fashion – hats, gold chains, and untied Adidas sneakers. (The now familiar connection between hip-hop and athletic wear¹⁴ was established in 1986 when Adidas and Run-DMC signed a \$1.5 million promotional deal.)—

Run-DMC's 1986 song "Walk this way," a collaboration with the popular hard rock group Aerosmith, was the first hip-hop video to be put into heavy rotation by MTV.¹⁵— The video gave a visual substance to the musical image of a tense conversation between the worlds of rock and rap, but indicated common ground in overt male sexuality. (The lyrics to "Walk this way" reference horny cheerleaders and high school locker room voyeurism.) The success of the 1986

breakout of Run-DMC led MTV to incorporate other hip-hop acts like the Beastie Boys, LL Cool J, and Salt-n-Pepa.

Hip-hop videos quickly became a staple of MTV's lineup. In 1988, *Yo! MTV Raps* debuted, launching the network's first show dedicated entirely to hip-hop music. The pilot was hosted by Run-DMC, but the show was later headed by Fab Five Freddie Braithwaite, Dr. Dre, and Ed Lover. *Yo! MTV Raps* immediately attracted the largest audience in the network's history and was soon broadcast on a daily basis.¹⁶ *Yo! MTV Raps*, and 1988 more broadly, was a watershed moment for hip-hop. Because MTV was able to reach a wide audience, hip-hop became part of everyday terminology. This was not without controversy as the 1990s gave rise to "gangsta rap" – a backlash to the pop conscious, commercialized hip-hop style of M.C. Hammer, Vanilla Ice, and their contemporaries.

Paleo and Wijnberg have proposed that commercial distribution is essential to the creation of a music genre; equally so is the case of bluegrass and hip-hop. Genre is reinforced by fulfilling an economic function by signaling, certifying, and classifying competing aural goods. The framework¹⁷ of "selection systems" allows for a better understanding of these economic functions.—

Selection systems describe competitive processes in terms of those who are being selected (the selected) and those who are doing the selecting (the selectors). In every industry a particular selection system can be identified. There are¹⁸ three ideal types of selection systems: market selection, peer selection, and expert selection.— The selectors identify which products to take into consideration, and then proceed to evaluate these selected products on the basis of certain criteria (either explicit or implicit). Their evaluations will determine which products and producers are successful, how value is captured and¹⁹ communicated, and the price that the consumer will be willing to pay for a particular product.—

When broadcast media (in this case, radio or cable television) act in the third economic function identified by Paleo and Wijnberg, they serve as expert selectors. By choosing to include certain artists in the given program they are offering these artists a chance to present their wares to the public – the live performances as well as, indirectly, their recordings. Inclusion of an artist also implies an evaluation of the quality of that artist's work, which might have an impact on the decisions of consumers of music in contexts other than the broadcast itself (for example, in a record shop or online music store).

The expert selector economic function can have more wide-ranging effects than just on the career prospects of individual artists; by programming in a particular way the broadcast implicitly categorizes artists as belonging together, producing the kind of aural goods the producers expect will appeal to their audience, which means meeting a particular set of criteria. The *Grand Ole Opry* and *Yo! MTV Raps* utilized selection criteria in a similar pattern; using widely understood narratives about lower socioeconomic classes as a template, both programs presented music as part of that narrative to serve commercial means. The selection criteria solidified disparate sounds into "musical genres" in each case. In this sense, the classification function of radio and cable television is similar to that of other institutions making up a number of cultural industries, namely the music festivals, critics, and awards.

Classification systems play an important role in competitive processes. The main economic significance of classification²⁰ lies in its effect on evaluations by selectors and the resulting consumer behavior.— If a classification system is accepted by selectors, it provides the criteria the selectors will use to evaluate product quality. For example, the set of criteria used to evaluate

the quality of a country music recording will be different from that applied by the same selector to a rhythm and blues recording. Therefore, the classification function is fundamental to the economy of genres.

This explains why two seemingly dissimilar genres were generated in strikingly similar fashion. Brevity limits its extended discussion here, but compelling comparisons can also be made between the content of bluegrass and hip-hop. Themes of crime, corruption, family life gone awry, and drugs and alcohol are frequent in each genre. As well, instrumentation and tonality in each find a common heritage in traditional African American music.

Bluegrass music remains a kind of musical icon which embodies traditional Appalachian music, though it is not itself traditional; likewise, hip-hop has become the music of a people, embodying traditional African American sounds. The pattern of sound appropriation and genre creation through distribution described herein suggests future, emergent genres, including bluegrass/hip-hop hybrids, which may in turn become the embodiment of a people or tradition.

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- 5 Cantwell, *op. cit.*, p 42.
- 6 Willis, *op. cit.*, p 120.
- 7 Willis, *ibid.*, p 111.
- 8 Ledgin, *op. cit.*, p 22.
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- 10 Brym, *ibid.*, np.
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- 12 Negus, Keith. *Popular Music in Theory*. London: Wesleyan University Press. 1997

[13](#) Starr, *op. cit.*, p 420.

[14](#) Starr, *ibid.*, p 421.

[15](#) Starr, *ibid.*, p 413.

[16](#) Starr, *op. cit.*, p 415.

[17](#) Paleo, Iván Orosa and Wijnberg, Nachoem M. "Classification of Popular Music Festivals: A Typology of Festivals and an Inquiry into Their Role in the Construction of Music Genres." *International Journal of Arts Management*. Montréal: Winter 2006. Vol. 8, Iss. 2. p 50-63. Accessed via ProQuest online database, Nov. 2007.

[18](#) Paleo, *ibid.*

[19](#) Paleo, *op. cit.*

[20](#) Paleo, *op. cit.*