

**CATEGORIES OF IDENTITY IN MUSIC:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE ST ANDREWS FOLK AND TRADITIONAL MUSIC SOCIETY**

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Introduction

In my ethnography I am going to explore categories in the context of genres, stereotypes and labels within musical culture and how musicians identify themselves with them, using informants from the St Andrews Folk and Traditional Music Society, also known as ‘the Folk and Trad Society’. This is a group of St Andrews students who meet for weekly folk music sessions and bi-weekly folk music workshops in St Andrews.

When conducting my interviews I began by asking how people got into the Folk and Traditional Music Society and folk music in general. I tried to leave the discussion as open as possible to see what interesting points came out. Musical categories and descriptors and how people related to them came out in all of the interviews in some way.

Breaking down the labels: ‘folk’ versus ‘traditional’

I will begin with some discussion of the categories ‘folk’ and ‘traditional’ and their implications. One informant, Rachel, implied there was a difference between these two labels. She said piping, which she had always done, was:

‘Very much traditional music and not folk music to what most people think. So certainly highland pipes, that’s traditional music cause they, we’re a bit weird, and we kind of play- we go and we do competitions, but only with other pipers and do all that kind of nonsense and it feels like this separate little enclave for pipers. But I really like when pipes get combined and they become like folk and not just traditional.’

She referred to ‘folk music’ as a wider genre and implied that piping fitted into the ‘traditional’ category as it was related to the tradition of one area – Scotland - rather than the wider ‘folk music’ category including many ‘traditions’ from many areas. This distinction is also noted by Chapman in his work on Celtic music. He claims: “‘Folk’ music now exists, as a genre, recorded, performed, published, sung and listened to, in the nearly complete absence of any “folk” to provide the [...] social context...(Chapman 1994:42)’.

Rachel felt that when piping is mixed with other instruments it fits into the wider category of 'folk', having moved out of its initial traditional context as a lone instrument. The diversity of the umbrella term 'folk music' was referred to by Craig, another informant:

'Well one of the things I think people also forget about folk music in the U.K. specifically is that it's very variable with location. So with spatial location whether you're in Aberdeen or whether you're on the Isle of Skye or whether you're in Newcastle or whether you're in [...] London or Glasgow or wherever, you get a very different style of playing, and Shetland is another place. They all have a very different way of playing sometimes the same tune.'

The category of location affects the instrumentation and style of music produced. Craig mentioned this when he said that in Northumberland where he was from they had 'their own type of bagpipes'. He explained that people have their 'local tradition' and everyone has a different background, saying:

'That means you can [...] express yourself more in it, you can express your upbringing, your surroundings, your cultural centre, you can express that through the music. Which you can't do as much in classical music. This is something that I think makes it quite special is that [...] it means something to people because it's their local thing. People get very defensive of their local [tunes], their local tradition.'

He mentioned that, 'being proud of your local heritage is very much a part of folk music,' explaining how the category of location is important in a folk music context to create the freedom and different styles of playing characteristic of the genre. The pride in your local heritage he refers to provides a counter argument to a claim by Stokes in *The Musical Construction of Place* implying that music is now as a ritual form 'peripheralised' (Stokes 1994:2). In the context of folk music, music is a ritual way to express one's local heritage and far from peripheralised. It fits another piece of Stokes' analysis more closely, where he argues, 'music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides means by which people recognise identity and places, and the boundaries which separate them (Stokes 1994:5)'. Folk music's strong connections to identity and places make it socially meaningful.

In playing weekly with other similarly minded musicians, people feel part of a larger category of 'folk musicians' because of the 'session' environment they are playing in. The context of a folk 'session' is a ritual which creates a sense of belonging for participants as they express a traditional practice. Craig refers to an important distinction when he mentions 'tunes'. A folk 'tune' is different to a 'song' or a classical 'piece'. It is a tune which has been created within a local music tradition and passed down through generations, usually fairly simple and open to interpretation. Folk music includes both these 'tunes' and 'folk songs' with lyrics.

Places and Spaces

The 'session' and the 'workshop' created two categories of space which people related to differently.

In the weekly sessions, in a pub, everyone sits in a circle and someone will begin to play a tune; others will then join in, improvising to accompany the initial players. Folk musicians from outside the student body attend these sessions. There is a relaxed atmosphere in which people are welcome to play or not as and when they wish. The emphasis is upon feeling comfortable and enjoying the experience of folk music with others. These sessions are, as described by one of my informants, very 'open' in that anyone can join in, in contrast to the type of folk performance run by a bar near his home in America, where the same band performed weekly and it would be strange to ask to join in. He explained, 'it's more just like there's a band playing and you're listening,' saying the St. Andrews sessions have 'a totally different vibe.' Despite what might seem like quite a randomized set up, the same tunes will be repeated as certain tunes are more popular than others and different tunes appear with new musicians. When asked about the difficulty of picking up tunes on the spot, one informant pointed out, 'after going to quite a lot of them you realise they seem to be playing the same tunes every time...' and said that when someone new comes 'they play different tunes and it's exciting,' implying an element of repetition in the song choices made improvisation easier. The open, accessible setting creates a social space where it is easy for people to feel they belong, even if they cannot turn up every week. If someone new comes carrying an instrument everyone will widen the

circle to include them, physically expressing that they are welcome and can 'belong'. Inclusivity is valued over what level of musical prowess people can demonstrate.

The bi-weekly workshops focus upon learning tunes. These are run in other spaces such as the Students' Union. There is a similar set up to the pub sessions in that everyone sits facing each other in a circle. Here, however, the emphasis is upon learning a tune, which one or two people will teach and the accompaniment will be slowly worked out by instrumental groups as they go along, rather than improvised on the spot. Improvisation was cited by many of my informants as a key part of folk music, as was a general 'chilled out' attitude. This attitude seems to stem from the improvisation culture and being able to in some way make the music 'your own'. To quote some of my informants:

'...with classical music and orchestras and stuff it can be kind of quite formal [...] Folk music is just chilled out, it's great.'

'...folkies are so chilled out. [...] We definitely have an inherent way of thinking, [...] which is quite relaxed...'

'Like if we just gave people "here's a tune" on paper, "this is how we're going to play it," or "these are the chords for the tune. This is how we're going to play those." [...] It would be like, we play it in the folk style and everything, but it's still just a piece of music, like it takes a bit of improvisation to take it from being a piece of someone else's music to being your own music.'

One of my informants explained to me that whilst he enjoyed the sessions, he felt the 'melody' instruments were prioritised over 'rhythm' instruments such as in this context the guitar, so as a guitarist felt less valued here. Others cited the difficulty of picking up the music in such an informal situation, but it was also mentioned that whether you could play it or not was unimportant. Due to the 'chilled out' atmosphere the sessions aimed to create, 'it's just a relaxed thing you join in if you can. If not you make something up or just sit and enjoy it and listen.'

The 'workshop' is a place people can learn how to improvise and play folk music outside of the session environment, where it can be difficult to pick things up. Also referred

to as 'big band', it is a recent development. According to Rachel, it has changed the social scene of the society and given people more of an opportunity to socialise and play together:

'Before [...] there was no big band, so I joined a couple of people last year because I was in a band with them and that was kind of about it. And somebody emailed the Folk and Trad society at one point last year saying, "we're having an open mic night if Folk and Trad want to play." And it was just a case of the president at the time phoning up or getting in touch with a few members that she knew of and saying right we'll go and we'll play something. Whereas now for that kind of thing we're able to say, "well we can go to big band and say this has happened –does anyone want to go play?" [...] people [can] just to get to know each other and [...] socialise and actually know who else is in Folk and Trad because that wasn't really the case last year.'

Having this new category of space outside of the session environment has allowed members of the society to socialise more, and increased social cohesion in the group.

How do musicians see themselves and others?

When talking about people in the context of the sessions, often what instrument people played became an identity marker, with references to 'the older guy who plays fiddle or banjo,' or, 'the American guy who plays the guitar looking thing.' I discovered whilst talking to people that how they categorise themselves or others in a musical context, based on what music they listen to or play, is something they are quick to mention. What instrument they play is a significant marker of musical identity that affects how they view themselves in any musical context. Instruments themselves are categorised and have identities, as discussed by Chapman, 'The piano accordion, for example, has become a *Scottish* instrument in the minds of many...' (Chapman 1994: 38)

Daniel explained that he played mostly rock:

'In high school [...] when I was playing with people I was always pegged as "the metal guy" Trying to play with people like that, people always assume that's all

you know how to play, which is just totally false. It's what I like to play but it's not everything.'

Whilst he viewed his playing style as 'eclectic' he felt others defined him as one particular type of guitarist, which he was keen to avoid. He said that, 'one of my friends says I play the acoustic like I'd play an electric, like I'm very clearly an electric guitar player.' But he also expressed a wish to make his playing sound more like 'Celtic sounding guitar,' implying that if his playing style fitted this label it would fit in better in the 'folk' context. Rachel identified herself by her instrument as a 'piper' saying that, 'I was a piper [...] pretty much as long as I can remember and then I started getting into more folky stuff on the guitar.'

Craig discussed how his instrument had an effect on the musical identity others placed upon him and the categories of music he was expected to play, 'I played the cello, which isn't considered by most like a folk instrument.' This refers to the way people are identified by the instrument they play and expected to play in a certain 'style' and fit into a certain category as a result of this. These instrumental expectations differ place by place, as the 'tradition' of different locations differs but all of these traditions can feed into the wider 'folk music' genre. When asked if there was folk music where she came from, another informant, Genevieve, answered, 'a different type yeah, much more fiddles and banjos than fiddles and... cellos apparently. And bagpipes.'

She also said that as someone who fitted into the category of a singer rather than an instrumentalist, she sometimes found it 'awkward', saying:

'It's a little bit weird to be a singer in a Folk and Trad thing because you're not playing an instrument so people are definitely really welcoming, like no one makes you feel weird or feel bad but [...] you have to be willing to make weird noises when it comes to improvising and things like that.'

She spoke as if there is a dichotomy between 'singers' and 'instrumentalists' in the society and said that the improvisation aspect of a folk session could be difficult and make one more self-conscious as a singer.

In some cases people categorised themselves and their instrument differently depending what musical context they were in. Lydia provided a good example when she explained, 'if I go to somewhere where it's folkly then I'll be like, "I play the fiddle," but if I'm in an orchestra definitely I play the violin.' The instrument here is the same but is categorised differently in the context of a folk session than in the context of an orchestra. This reflects upon a wider dichotomy in how people view the genres of 'folk and traditional' music and 'classical' music, which came up in several interviews.

Lydia referred to 'proper folk musicians that've grown up with it and stuff' as a differing category to people such as herself, saying she had 'always had classical lessons' which she felt affected her identity as a musician. Even when in a folk music context she still felt like 'a classical person just playing tunes' rather than one of these 'proper folk musicians'. She explained it as a difference in approach, saying, 'If you showed a folk tune, like some music, to a classical musician, they'd just play it straight.' She elaborated by explaining that by playing it 'straight' they would just play the notes on the page and not put in the improvised accent and ornamentation of the folk playing style, claiming that in folk you could 'make it your own thing' more. This distinction was also discussed by Craig, who also felt musical upbringing was important to playing style:

'One of the things we notice in running the Folk and Trad Society is the thing that people who want to play folk music but have always only played classical music find so hard is to just pick up their instrument, learn a tune by ear, and just play it.'

He, like Lydia, implied that being taught in a 'classical' way was a different type of musical education to that gained from folk music, saying that 'the whole idea' of 'sitting in a circle of people like we do in our little workshops and just getting your instrument out and just jamming, just playing improvisation with no intention of a tune for like ten minutes' was 'alien' to people who had been brought up playing in a classical way, being told the notes and how exactly they should be played.

Lydia said she felt this affected her identity as a musician, saying, 'I'm still more classical, because I don't, like, practise folk music, I just do it. But yeah, I kind of practise in a classical way.' The type of music she practises more is what she sees as the musical category

she best fits and which musical adjectives she feels she can label herself with. Craig did not refer to himself as either a 'classical' or 'folk' musician but explained his relationship with the different categories, by claiming that for him classical music could provide a way to 'push himself' that folk music did not:

'I really love [...] the relaxing kind of chilled attitude of folk music but I also have always like tried to push myself sort of, I guess it's kind of that classical music's the more academic side of music so it's like [...] I think it's more challenging. That can be depending on what you do with folk music; some folk music can be really quite challenging and really push you but I've found on the cello that the way I had to push myself in school was sort of orchestral music because that was where the teaching was.'

Rachel talked about how she had learned 'classical guitar' but never anything fitting the category of 'orchestral' and said she felt this could be a disadvantage, referring to a situation where she was in a music class with people she identified under the label 'classical musicians' and noticed how different her approach was to theirs, saying: 'they've done all this training and all of these weird techniques, you know they're professional musicians and [...] I don't know what's going on here.'

Whilst she said she could 'understand' the theory of music discussed in the class she also felt there was a different attitude towards 'classical' music caused by a different attitude to training and practising in the two music categories. She said, 'You're just expected to, like, produce folk music, I dunno. God knows what goes on with that,' implying a more relaxed attitude to formal musical training amongst those who identify as 'folk musicians' than those who identify as 'classical musicians'.

Conclusion

Whilst I had aimed to study the contrasting backgrounds of people in the Folk and Trad Society, what ended up being highlighted in the process of my interviews was how they identified themselves and others in a musical context. Labels in the context of descriptors people give themselves and how and why they choose to identify themselves by these particular labels turned out to be crucial to the musicians I spoke to in how they develop and talk about their musical identity; categorise themselves and others; and relate to spaces

in which they play. Categories have a strong connection to 'difference'. Different places and spaces, like the 'workshop' and the 'session' and different ways of approaching a discipline create categories within the discipline.

Another thing I became aware of was the depth of the term 'identity' and how many levels of musical activity it permeates. To quote Frith: 'The experience of identity describes both a social process, a form of interaction, and an aesthetic process.' (1996:110)

Identity is not merely composed of descriptors, it is how people experience and relate to those descriptors. Categories of identity are very important in the social setting of a musical group, in order that people can identify and relate to themselves and others as part of a specific musical genre such as folk music.

Bibliography

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