

## Bluegrass in an ephemeral world: personal reflections on a musical form

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**Abstract:** Bluegrass is a musical form that grew out of Appalachian culture, but surprisingly this genre has had a wide geographic appeal. Time and distance separate the hearth area from the prairie audience but the psychological and symbolic elements of place as represented in music of the American South resonate with the Canadian prairie audience. Canadian listeners respond to a nostalgic longing for the past, as bluegrass combats the anomie of “placelessness” by establishing connections with the past and to the complexities of place. Nostalgic associations offer the security and assurance that our fragmented and “placeless” society cannot.

### Introduction

Blue moon of Kentucky keep on shining  
Shine on the one that's gone and proved untrue  
Blue moon of Kentucky keep on shining  
Shine on the one that's gone and left me blue  
It was on a moonlight night the stars were shining bright  
When they whispered from on high your love has said good-bye  
Blue moon of Kentucky keep on shining  
Shine on the one that's gone and said good-bye  
(Munroe, *Blue Moon of Kentucky*)

On the Canadian prairies, the Winnipeg Folk Festival is a showcase of folk music from across the country, continent and the world. For four days every July, more than 30,000 people immerse themselves in this musical event. In the evening, after a long day of concerts and workshops, festival goers can be found sitting around a campfire in the nearby campground plucking out simple melodies on a guitar and singing soulful harmonies. On these nights, the blue moon of Kentucky and the cotton

fields of Louisiana become more than places in a song; on these nights the images resonate with the players and singers who repeat each refrain, and the music and lyrics embody the very values we have come to associate with the South. It might seem contradictory that people would find meaning in this music on the Canadian prairies, a region so far removed geographically and ideologically from the Deep South of the United States. How then, does an urban Canadian middleclass find resonance in century-old music of mountain dwellers?

To answer this question, I will explore several aspects of music geography, a subfield of cultural geography first explored over thirty years ago by Peter Nash (1968) in *Music Regions and Regional Music*. Since then, the geographical study of music and musical phenomena has grown into a diverse field that includes various approaches and themes of study. In *Music Geography*, Carney (1999) describes the field as being comprised of ten general taxonomies (para. 5). The approaches employed in the following discussion align themselves with the fifth and eighth of Carney's classifications which identify the symbolic elements of place, or a sense of place or place consciousness as interpreted through musical means, and the relationship between these place perceptions and the natural environment as valuable areas of study within the field of music geography. Specifically, this discussion will delve into the psychological and symbolic elements of place as represented in music of the American South and how it unites cultures and regions by responding to a nostalgic longing for the past. In order to understand these connections, it is first necessary to consider the nature of bluegrass music itself.

## Bluegrass: A Brief Definition

Sometimes called "'mountain soul music', 'old time pickin' and singin', and 'folk music in overdrive'" (Carney, 1987, 160), bluegrass music has its origins "in the rural upland South [of the United States], particularly the Appalachians" (Rosenberg, 1985, p. 6). The 1940's saw the rise of this organic music with Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys, generally thought to be the founders of the genre. Bluegrass grew out of the hillbilly tradition, and is wholly acoustic, performed on string instruments, usually including a bass, guitar(s), mandolin, and banjo and is characterized by a nasal, high-pitched singing. The authentic Bluegrass sound is enhanced by vocals that are often described as the high lonesome sound, incorporating up to five-part harmonies. These harmonies are so ingrained in the genre that unison singing is rarely found in bluegrass music at all (Rosenberg, 1985, 7). The lyrical themes of bluegrass revolve

around the depiction and description of place, which evoke feelings associated with representations of “downhome country” where *country* refers to a physical place, a rural landscape with a handful of people, and *downhome* refers to a spirit, a sense of place evoked by a style of music (Titon, 1994, p. xv). References to family, the old home and a simpler, happier time and place reinforce this place consciousness and the nostalgic undertones readily found in both the lyrical and musical content of bluegrass music. Although more than one-half of all music geography focuses on various aspects of American country music (Carney, 1999, para. 4), a lyrical analysis reveals that unlike other forms of country music, bluegrass largely avoids themes and images of adultery, divorce, trucks, and alcohol. Instead of directly addressing these concerns, the lyrical content of bluegrass most often reflects contrasting images and themes symbolic of down home and simpler times. Although bluegrass portrays themes and images that are distinctly Appalachian in origin, their symbolic nature ensures that they are more widely accessible to people from very different cultural environments who relate to bluegrass as art, or, a musical form, much like they would to a Viennese waltz or New Orleans jazz riff (Rosenberg, 1985, p. 8).

During the formative years of bluegrass, audiences who easily identified with the “down home” themes and sound were “blue-collar workers, farm families, and other working-class people of rural origin” (Rosenberg, 1985, 6). Malone (1979) further pointed out that this audience was not representative of a particular race, but that there existed “a folk pool shared by both blacks and white...as long as poor blacks and whites shared a milieu that was rural, agricultural, and southern...the two groups...often overlapped” (p. 5). At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the symbolic content and authentic feel of southern music has found resonance with an entirely new audience, one far removed in time and place from life in the American South.

## Values Statements in the Bluegrass Form

In order to understand why bluegrass music appeals to a new cohort of listeners unfamiliar with the land, social class and life that gave rise to this southern musical form, a summation of the values and attitudes characterized by the lyrics and music of “The South” is useful. As previously mentioned, images of “down home” pervade the simple melodies of bluegrass music. In secular bluegrass music, these images evoke feelings of nostalgia for the known, the secure, and the unchanging nature of the past.

Back in the days of my childhood  
 In the evening when everything was still  
 I used to sit and listen to the fox hounds  
 With my dad in the old Kentucky hills  
 (Munroe, *I'm on My Way Back to the Old Home*)

In Munroe's *I'm on My Way Back to the Old Home*, Kentucky is associated with a working class view of childhood, with calm, peace, and family. These images shape a listener's perception of the south, regardless of the validity of the images; Kentucky becomes a slow, rural southern place with strong ties to the land and family. The listener associates these perceived southern values with an authentic Kentucky scene.

Religious themes are also found in bluegrass music, from old spirituals to more recent gospel music. Interestingly, the lyrical content more often depicts a persistent spirit or simple heavenly rewards rather than lofty aspirations to glory.

Each day I'll do (each day I'll do)  
 A golden deed (a golden deed)  
 By helping those (by helping those)  
 Who are in need (who are in need)  
 My life on earth (my life on earth)  
 Is but a span (is but a span)  
 And so I'll do (and so I'll do the best I can)  
 (Munroe, *A Beautiful Life*)

If the lyrics of bluegrass music typically depict a sense of simplicity and steadiness in life, its rhythms, melodies and harmonies serve to reinforce these sentiments. The un-electrified nature of the music suggests an organic, grassroots origin from a time and place where such characteristics were valued. Indeed, the rigid, established tradition of the genre has set bluegrass apart and through bluegrass music, audiences have come to an understanding of the American South. In sum, bluegrass embodies values of stability, hope, persistence and order, values that by extension, its audience assigns to the geographical region in which bluegrass originated.

Having discussed the musical genre and the fundamental values it has come to represent, we return to the question at hand. How is it that a Canadian urban sophisticate is attracted to the mountain music of the uneducated working class of the Deep South?

## **An Ephemeral Context**

In a society where “meaning making” has become fragmented and where tradition is no longer communicated or maintained across generations, people have lost vital connections to place and the past. Technology and communication are moving forward with such speed that the traditional means of attaching significance to experiences, institutions and practices are no longer functional. Whereas fifty years ago the norms of the time would have dictated that a community, neighbourhood, or family would function as a unit, today such norms have been altered, and in some cases extinguished; they are now being replaced by a fragmented conceptualization of space and identity that has change society’s relationships to place and each other. In Winnipeg, for example, it is no longer necessary for children to attend school within their own community; instead, they may choose to travel to a more prestigious school across the city. This is just one local example of the increasing globalization of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, where a communication of choice outranks a communication of tradition.

Along with this communication of choice has come a reordering of society’s normal connections to space and place. With communication tools that expose us to images, information and resources simultaneously around the world, our perceptions of home as a constant, identifiable place begin to lose meaning. Home, and the way we construct our experiences, and ourselves becomes the synthesis of a much more involved process.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people were more likely to define themselves in terms of their family, their neighbourhood, their work, and their land, aspects of their lives that directly influenced their person. Mahyar (1999) explained this “‘rootedness’ as the most natural, pristine, unmediated kind of people-place tie.” He further pointed to Tuan’s (1980) explanation of “‘rootedness [as] an unselfconscious, unreflectively secure and comfortable state of being in a locality - so much so that one’s immersion in place is such that one is not even conscious of the flow of time, nor of the world beyond one’s immediate surroundings’” (1999). Today, a throwaway society has changed our process of self-definition. Every aspect of present western society has become disposable; from plastic lawn chairs to food storage containers, products we use every day are designed to be thrown out. As a disposable society becomes the present reality, how do people attach meaning to the world around them, to place, to themselves? When post-modern fragmentation disrupts the natural process of attaching meaning to that which surrounds us, we feel a sense of what Relph (1976) called “‘placelessness.’” To deal with a loss of meaning in the present, we often turn to the past.

Conveniently, the rapid pace of change driving our throwaway society provides an endless supply of nostalgia for the past. The power of reinvention in advertising and marketing has meant that virtually anything can be subject to nostalgia. Examples abound in every day transactions: a paper coffee cup at Tim Horton's on one day, might feature a different graphic or promotion the next; McDonald's "Spell to Win" Scrabble becomes a nostalgic event as soon the next Disney-endorsed marketing campaign begins; or a Top 40 radio song heard at the beach in August strikes a chord when shovelling the walk in December. Similarly, events of global scale – the war in Afghanistan, famine in Sudan, and the SARS virus epidemic - filter in and out of our consciousness at an increasingly rapid pace. Just as the world around us is constantly redefining its terms, so too, people can redefine themselves on a daily basis. It becomes possible to discard ways of being in the belief that it is possible to recreate yourself in any terms you choose. In today's society, longstanding norms that have previously provided the means by which we can establish self-identity have been uprooted and replaced by a norm of change. Where it was previously possible to take comfort in those unchanging standards and norms, society today has only the assurance of certain change.

Though the promise of change can bring a measure of comfort, I would assert it is in the nostalgic associations with the past that security and assurance is found. With constant change comes the anxiety that nothing is stable, nothing is secure. "Mistrust of the future...fuels today's nostalgia. [O]ur misgivings about what may come are...grave" (Lowenthal, 1985, 11). The threat that any place, thing or concept with which we attempt to create meaningful bonds in the present will undeniably change, forces us to look for those connections in the past. As we will see, those connections are found through mediums like bluegrass music.

## Using the Past

The concept of "inventing tradition" or finding "usable pasts" has been widely discussed and debated. In *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983) posit "[it is] the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that [results] in the 'invention of tradition'" (p. 2). In *Usable Pasts*, Tuleja (1997) referred to Michael Kammen's observation that "traditions are commonly relied upon [to invoke] the legitimacy of an artificially constructed past in order to buttress presentist assumptions and the authority of a regime" (p. 1). In this context, the authority of a regime can be

considered to be the societal norm of change. Individuals “invent tradition” and create “usable pasts” to address their individual sense of placelessness and loss of meaning. By extension, we can understand how middle class Winnipeggers appropriate the values embodied by bluegrass music in an attempt to construct a “private heritage” of meaning to establish security and a lasting and usable identity. But with this construction comes a question. How can this manufacturing of tradition or heritage be authentic?

The *Oxford Dictionary of Current English* defines “authentic” as: genuine, of legitimate or undisputed origin (Allen, 1984). Here lies an interesting juxtaposition. We choose to identify with the values represented in a musical form like bluegrass because the stability of those images appeals to us in a changing society; but we also choose to identify with bluegrass because it does not form any part of our actual or un-imagined identity. Because we are removed from the place and time that shaped the musical form, and which the form had a hand in shaping, we feel free to romanticize the place, time and values we draw from the music. In other words, the physical and psychological divide that separates middle class urban dwellers on the prairies from the original audiences in the hearth area, is doubly significant. The physical and symbolic detachment allows people otherwise removed from the experience of the music to accept the authenticity of the form and content of bluegrass as fixed, or definite; the same geographic and cultural barriers mean they lack the contextual indicators to disprove the image of the south that bluegrass creates. In fact, new audiences feel free to embrace the music and the images even more as an outsider than those who have lived it do, the latter having a framework from which to judge the music’s authenticity. It follows then, that the construction of an imagined heritage through bluegrass music is no less valid or compelling than any “real tradition” of the past. Tuleja (1997) notes that “if Faulkner was right that the past is neither dead nor past...making histories means making them up, recasting the lines (or lyrics) as we go along” (p. 12).

## Availability of Traditions

“Yet we can no more slip back to the past than leap forward to the future. Save imaginative reconstruction, yesterday is forever barred to us...in recent years such nostalgic dreams have become almost habitual, if not epidemic” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 4).

As Lowenthal relates, nostalgia has become such a consuming passion of present society that it is a consumer product. The capitalist spirit that invented a throwaway culture and massive communication networks has

managed to commodify and market our search for meaning, for place and for identity. Etching out an identity is a complicated progression; it evolves in response to these external societal pressures, which in turn mediate the process of self-ascription and tradition (Tuleja, 1997, p. 6).

Through self-ascription, bluegrass music becomes available to middle class urban sophisticates as a means of appropriating the stability and order of a time and place through the simple exchange of money. In the new system of consumer capitalism, currency has replaced tangible experience, so that the means of production, the sweat, effort and process that formerly asserted ownership, is now equated with dollars. This system has led to the commodification of everything from quality of experience to quality of tradition or heritage. As Lowenthal (1985) states, “the remembrance of times past is a burgeoning business” (p. 6).

Perhaps surprisingly, society does not protest the influence of the mass media and mass consumerist culture on its interpretation and manipulation of place, of the past, of their identity. “[Society] use ‘spurious’ and ‘capitalist’ resources with the same delight as ‘genuine’ and ‘resistant’ ones in the creative reconstitution of their ... expressions” (Tuleja, 1997, 11). North American society is content to leave matters of authenticity to scholars while they put their Bill Munroe bluegrass CD on the shelf next to the Beastie Boys – an instantly accessible nostalgia to be employed as needed.

## Conclusion

We were waltzin’ that night in Kentucky  
 ‘Neath the beautiful harvest moon  
 I was the boy who was lucky  
 But it all ended too soon  
 As I sit here alone in the moonlight  
 I can see your smiling face  
 And I long once more for your embrace  
 In that beautiful Kentucky waltz  
 (Munroe, *Kentucky Waltz*)

The genre of bluegrass music has proven resilient over the last half century, despite its rigid rejection of advances in musical technology. As such, it stands as a metaphor for the past society longs for, a time and a place where longstanding norms of family, hard work, and “down home” still exist. The present fragmentation of meaning making wrought by the rapid pace of a society exercising a communication of choice in place of a communication of tradition, has made the organic, authentic feel of

bluegrass music even more evocative, as anxiety regarding the uncertainty of anything but change takes hold. Bluegrass is, in part, nostalgia for the certainty of the past, and a yearning for the simplicity, stability and hope represented in the lyrical descriptions and un-electrified music of the South.

The study of place, its perception, and the accessibility of the perceived values and experience exemplified in bluegrass music is only one example of how the interdisciplinary approach of music geography reveals insightful cultural phenomena indicative of a changing fragmented society. Other musical forms offer equally valid responses to, and criticisms of, social life and societal crisis in various geographical and cultural contexts. Carney (1999) asserts, “music is a significant surrogate measure of culture and, therefore, is of importance to cultural geographers” (para. 16). Slowly, music geography is being acknowledged for its contributions in this regard, with each investigation into the reciprocal relationship between music and various cultures a step towards a better appreciation for this important geographic tool.

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