

What is Music?

By: Dr. Jerry P. Galloway

Music was becoming even more important to me. That is, Glenn and I, as a group were becoming particularly important. I missed the freedom to play the way I wanted. I missed the friendship and my sense of creative potential. I missed the original band in Indiana but that seemed completely lost. Getting together with Glenn was still possible.

Too, I was focusing more on my own role as a solo vocal artist. I was developing my repertoire and my performance ability. I was clearly improving and it was becoming more important to me. This was not at all incompatible to that of playing drums with Glenn. Clearly, we could build our show anyway we wished and we have.

I had been looking at the notion of musical appreciation for a number of years. I had given it a lot of thought. I believed I had developed some insight and understanding about many musical notions. In these cases, as in areas of philosophy and religion discussed earlier, I typically think I have hit on something that perhaps most people have not. Regardless, such notions are new discoveries for me and, like consulting the Oracle at Delphi or going to the mountain top, such awareness and perspective are products of many years of meditation and contemplation as I conduct personal inquiries and seek a deeper understanding. My views on music are another such area. **So, what is music?**

An important question related to this is "what is subjectivity?" Chapter 57 above explored this question to some extent. One listens to music and likes this or likes that and it may not match someone else's preferences at all. So, we might say that this is subjective. Indeed, such aesthetic preferences can be so. But, our tastes are not necessarily reflective of true quality. Subjectivity suggests that attributes do not exist independently – intrinsically. That is, if I think the Mona Lisa is beautiful, that characteristic exists entirely in my mind. The Mona Lisa, being a painting, being an arrangement of colors, is intrinsic to the thing. It doesn't matter what I think. But, being beautiful is whatever it is entirely because I think so. You might think it is ugly. Again, such is not intrinsic to the painting. When you and I cease to exist, so do the attributes of beauty and ugliness. They do not reside in the painting. That is subjectivity.

So, I want to suggest that, to a great extent, a song can exist intrinsically. I do not refer to the technical realm of disturbed air in turn vibrating our ear drums. Obviously, unless we are delusional, perceiving such technical phenomenon is a direct experience with a real thing that does exist. Hearing sounds is not a subjective experience. But, I am suggesting more than that. I am suggesting that the song itself exists independently of our subjective impressions of it. As such, it can have an ideal or single best version of itself. A sculptor will often refer to his (or her) artistic accomplishment as having created nothing. They may describe their art as the process of perceiving the shape and image within the marble and then removing the excess material from around it. In other words, they do not create the sculpture as much as they discover or reveal it from within. It is as if the target shape exists intrinsically, independent of the artist who wields the hammer. If an expert with great insight proceeds with faulty equipment and limited tools, their rendition may be less than perfect. It may fall short of the ideal, the intrinsic shape within. If a mediocre artist with limited insight uses ideal, state-of-the-art tools, their skill may yield less than perfect results. In fact, as all humans are flawed beings, all of us may inevitably fail to find the perfect shape within perhaps leaving extraneous material or removing too much. Such failings, however inevitable they may be, do not mean that the intrinsic perfection does not exist independent of our perceptions.

I believe this to be true for songs or other pieces of music. Once packaged, they are the artist's best attempt at revealing that intrinsic perfection. In explaining this notion to a recent student, I explained that whether or not a bag of popcorn is a desirable meal or not is subjective. But, the fact that it is nevertheless popcorn is not subjective at all. That seems obvious; but hide the popcorn away in a closed bag where we cannot see inside. You may believe that the bag contains marbles. I may believe that the bag contains walnuts. Fred may believe that the bag contains popcorn. As we each share our opinions and the rationale behind our so-called educated guesses, we may never know for sure. If we are never able to open the bag or find a definitive proof in some way, we are stuck with the process of sharing opinions and



rationale. It is important to understand that, just because we cannot ever know for sure and are thus forced only to share opinions, it is not subjective. There is something real in the bag. I might be entirely wrong but have good insights. Fred might be right entirely by accident or coincidence. But, if Fred is in the popcorn business and has particular insights about such cases, he might be more in touch or relate better or in some fashion be in closer contact with the truth of the bag. To discover truths, the best choices, the right answers, we must endeavor to be closer to the bag and objective. We must strive for an open mind with a sensible, logical and insightful awareness. But, it is important to believe that a real, intrinsic truth exists independent of our opinions of it. Such opinions, then, are not self-indulgent make-believe but genuine attempts to identify and chisel away the extraneous material and discover and reveal the truth within. When I hear a song, I find there to be a kind of perfection implied. I evaluate the rendition to determine how close it might be to that perfection. This is a very difficult, defective and convoluted process as I am inevitably an imperfect and flawed sculptor. It is, nevertheless, an important aspect of listening to music.

There was a song called "House of the Rising Sun" that was recorded by a group called "The Animals" in 1964. The real origins are uncertain and extend at least back to the early part of the 20th century. But, The Animals put the song into the pop culture of modern music. Theirs was, at least on pop music charts, the original. So, many people develop an affinity on that basis. This usually includes the notion that the prototype is the best and everything else, being a copy, necessary falls short of that original. But, that rendition involved particular tools by particular artists. It is an attempt to find that ideal shape within the chunk or block of sounds from which it was chiseled. But, in 1970, Frijid Pink, a Detroit-based group, redid the song and changed the usual 6/8 time to 4/4. Most distinctly, Frijid Pink's guitar and drums took over from The Animals' organ and provided an entirely different sound and feel. The power and the haunting "angst" in the sound seemed to better capture the essence of what the song needed than did the original. This is a case of a different artist, with different tools, and perhaps greater aesthetic insight, getting closer to that ideal within.

It is important to listen to music with the right frame of mind. I hardly choose to do so as I am unable to avoid it. Music for me, is like a drug and once applied, I am unable to avoid or resist its effects. If I am unable to attend to it and it is supplanted by other sounds in the foreground, I am tortured by its plea. It calls to me to be heard. Music is not like a massage by unknown forces in the dark where we move between desirable sensations and avoid others. Music is communication. It is a language. Songs are stories or other expressions of meaning and importance. Like listening to three different conversations coming at you, it is distracting, frustrating and bothersome to try to make sense of any of it. Perhaps I am more susceptible to this conflict than most. Perhaps I am more easily bothered by the conflict than most. That would be fair to say. But, if it is because others fail to recognize the meaningful and important communication going on, then it is their loss.

Music is a language. It is not like Spanish or Russian or Zulu although it does involve a technical production and includes a syntax. Too, like many languages, it typically follows a system of rules which, together with syntax, allows it to be interpreted. However, unlike Spanish to English, it cannot be translated. One cannot ask what is the word in Spanish for "Table." It is not possible to translate sounds to words nor words to sounds. It is not that simple. Words can describe love and tragedy. Music can describe love and tragedy. Both mediums can tell their stories, express the ideas, the pain, the joy and more. But, it is being done, then, with two separate languages that cannot be directly translated one to another.

Nevertheless, music expresses ideas. Naturally, they are musical ideas. Imagine a planet where beings have no language as we normally understand it. They fashion no words for objects. They use no subject-predicate structure and have no verbs. They do not speak in past tense, future tense or present progressive tense. They use no pronouns. They communicate about love, hate, death, play, fun, children, difficulties, triumph, failure, trivial little nothings and all the other things that make us emotional and sensitive beings. They communicate and document their society, their history and more, entirely with music. When looking in on such a civilization, it would be ridiculous to attempt to substitute mere words in place of their songs and tunes. We can speak of similar experiences with our language, English. We can meaningfully translate that into Spanish or Chinese, to allow another culture to understand the experiences. Not so with music.

Most people do not listen to music in that fashion. The details of communication are ignored in favor of a more holistic experience assuming they tend to it at all. It is important to identify the theme being presented. What other musical ideas are expressed? How do secondary themes interact with the primary? What instruments are being used? What sorts of sounds come from those instruments? How does that musician on that particular instrument interpret through their performance their notion of this ongoing communication? I am talking about making a dynamic evaluation of these and countless more things on a second by second basis. The chorus of sounds that come together exist linearly. That is, they are presented like a corridor with an entrance and an exit. Listening involves traveling the path down the corridor and being constantly open to understanding the communication as it occurs. The guitar is playing a repetitive riff. But, an organ plays a counter theme that tends to play with the guitar riff. The bass may provide a repetitive drone which is a foundation providing a base or context against which to interpret everything else. The guitar and organ continue to play off of each other but an earlier notion is repeated now in the background by violins. It would be a serious mistake to

miss the way cellos are used with those violins which may only occur at one particular point in the song. Failing to listen and hear all of these sorts of things and dozens if not hundreds of other elements is a kind of ignorance in the language. One might listen and experience a consequence like a child reacting to a curious noise but the real communication, the real meaning that is being conveyed is missed.

Certainly, the Rock-and-Roll revolution of the 50's and 60's brought into society a new style of music and created drastic cultural differences. But, one of the most significant changes at that time, was how the voice was treated. Before that time, voices were typically viewed in a lead position. Voices were thought to be beautiful. Some people were described as having beautiful voices. In fact, one's ability to sing in a beautiful manner was a prerequisite to any notion of success. Bing Crosby, Jim Reeves and other similar performers are good examples. Movies of the 30's and 40's and even into the 50's, if including music as a theme, inevitably had a classic male tenor who could sing some sort of beautiful song. In such music, those voices were in the foreground and the music played a supportive, secondary and subordinate role. Music was background and there to support the primary element, the voice.

The Rock-and-Roll revolution of the 50's and 60's changed that. The music was brought to the foreground to hold equal footing with the voice. The voice was then viewed as just another instrument. One doesn't sing so much as they "play" their vocal instrument. The guitar and the voice may play off of each other just as between any other instruments.

Interestingly, early instruments such as the violin were created to mimic human voices. Church music in the 15th and 16th centuries gave way to violins, violas, cello and bass. Played in groups, these instruments could mimic soprano, alto, tenor and bass voices. But, somehow the culture of the middle 20th century restricted musical expression to convey a very limited and idealized notion of human behavior. Perhaps beautiful voices meant beautiful souls. Or, pious and well-behaved vocals implied a more virtuous or reverent society. I can't really explain it beyond that sort of notion. But, as history has shown, rock-n-roll music comes along and is viewed as "the devil's music" by the earlier generation.

Technically, the voice, as an instrument, takes its place alongside the other instruments and is played according to its natural characteristics. Performers like Louis Armstrong, Joe Cocker, or John Fogerty did not have to pass a test of the "beautiful" voice in order to be a singer. After all, one does not criticize a saxophone for sounding as it does. It seems silly to say that one prefers a flute or clarinet sound to that of an oboe or tuba. Each according to its nature, they all play the part they play. They all serve a role and combine based on what a song needs. The most versatile instrument of all is the voice. But, it makes no more sense to criticize Joe Cocker for not having a "pretty" voice that it does to complain about a trumpet sounding like a trumpet. That is one of the most important advancements of the Rock-and-Roll revolution in pop music. The voice was diminished in its foreground role but liberated in its creativity and musical power.

The conversation of a song is much like that of normal people talking together. Some songs might give a speech but others beg interaction with the listener. Conversations express ideas which can unfold over time and develop. One may not grasp the full meaning initially until more is communicated. Like one might make a point or express something specific and meaningful, so too will music "speak" in this way. Language expresses an idea and begins to make a point and then it... it... well... [*delay, pause, tension and expectation builds...*] it might finally complete the idea. You would find it odd for a person to walk away in the middle of a sentence and not complete the idea. It can even be problematic for people to walk out in the middle of a paragraph or discussion before a summative point is reached. So, too, music develops and presents ideas methodically. Music will build to make a point. Tension can mount. Expectation and anticipation grow. Discomfort and dissonance can evolve quickly into a real need for resolution. Like waiting on the punch line to a joke, the tension can create apprehension, stress and even anxiety all of which demand relief and liberation.

An example that comes to mind is "*I Can't See Nobody*" by the Bee Gee's. It has a repetitive passage that follows a course and implies a next step. Much like reciting 5, 4, 3, 2, ___ ... one wonders where the one is. This pattern is repeated at least 3 times with the final punch line being withheld. Finally, after the repetitive teasing has created considerable conflict and tension, and through no over-dramatized exaggeration, the resolution reveals itself in a most poignant moment. Interestingly, with the under play of the volume and orchestration, many people might miss the moment. But, for me, it is overwhelming to experience the final resolution of that passage and it is achieved entirely through the structure of communication. From the beginning of the song, even hearing it for the first time, one anticipates and expects the resolution. Long before getting there, the listener has imagined that musical goal. Finally, it is sorely needed and the feeling screams out for that answer to the musical question that had been posed and building all along. Music asks questions. Music provides the answers.

Music will play with the listener toying with these feelings. How such tension is relieved, how such expectation is answered are all elements of that ongoing communication. It makes no difference whether we're speaking of Mozart or Beethoven, the Beatles, CCR, Buddy Holly, or disco, or country, or rhythm and blues, or any other sort of music. Try ignoring the lyrics and listen to the sounds themselves where the voice is just another instrument. Find the musical or tonal center and relate intervals of sound outward from there. Interpret the combinations of tones and understand – not

the meaning of lyrics which is more accurately a kind of poetry - but the way sounds combine and unfold to communicate “musically.” Ignoring such things, failing to accept the path the music leads us along, failing to engage in anticipation, have the need or experience the expectation as the music suggests we should, is a failure to engage in the conversation itself. Someone is talking to us and we do not hear. In moments of romantic tilt, I have suggested that music is the language of God.

I have wondered in more recent times about the notion of representation. That is, if we could throw a toaster into a matter transformation machine or, like the Star Trek Transporter, we beam it up to another planet, where it then pops out in the form of a song, then what song is it? Is there a song that, if not literally accommodating all that a toaster is, at least captures the essence of the thing? I would imagine such a song to be relatively simple and one-dimensional as toasters are not highly complex things. But, what if we place a person into such a transporter? As the person exits the machine on the foreign planet, where beings exist only as songs, what song will that person then be? What song would completely represent you or the essence of you? The notion of musical representation is an interesting element to entertain as I interpret the musical communication being conveyed. I have considered perhaps that it is a more sophisticated form of attending to and understanding the nature of the communication in a given song.

Incidentally, you are reading this autobiography and presumably learning something about me. Words are awkward tools. We need a lot of them to fully capture the simplest of notions. If you want to “see” me or “know” me in the form of a song, I will offer that my best guess at this point in time is a Paul McCartney song. (Play it loud, close your eyes and see me there.) Again, it has nothing particularly to do with the lyrics. I cannot even recall at this moment what the lyrics are and I don’t care. But, when I pop out of the transporter in the form of a song, I believe you will find that I am McCartney’s *“House of Wax.”* What about you?