

Beatboxing, Mashups, and Cyborg Identity

Folk Music for the Twenty-First Century

TOK THOMPSON

ABSTRACT

This article discusses two new artistic musical traditions, beatboxing and mashups, in terms of their communal, changeable forms as displaying hallmarks often associated with folk music. Investigating the relationship between aesthetic choices and identity concerns highlights the central theme of the man-and-the-machine, the cyborg, and the inter-connected cognitive functioning of man and machine—all increasingly a part of reality at the beginning of the 21st century. KEYWORDS: mashups, copyright, music, cyborg, posthuman

INTRODUCTION

I begin this article with a look at beatboxing, a very popular musical form I have witnessed being performed in many parts of the world. Despite its popularity, beatboxing remains, for the most part, out of the realm of the recording industry, record charts, and copyright offices (with some important exceptions). Beatboxing, I will show, has moved into the global realm, with global signification, in large part due to the Internet. As such, beatboxing makes an interesting starting point from which to examine the processes, functions, and aesthetics of computer-mediated musics. It further provides useful context toward understanding the new artistic forms that are both computer generated and transmitted, and with which it often blends: mashups. Mashups are an

Tok Thompson is Assistant Professor of Teaching
(Anthropology) at the University of Southern California.

enormously popular musical form, with hundreds of pieces being created and uploaded to the Internet every day. Like beatboxing, mashups too fall outside of usual definitions: neither copyrighted nor reproduced by the media industry, mashups have become a sign of our times, speaking volumes to the Internet's potential at allowing the "common man" to produce new artistic forms and new aesthetic choices, as well as to promulgate new identities that are both global and deeply connected with the basis for the globalism—the computer.

BEATBOXING

At first glance, beatboxing might seem like an odd choice to observe the cyborg, as it is often encountered as a live performance. If one travels to any major city in the world, one may well encounter the sounds and performances of the tradition performed in the street, the train, or indeed just about anywhere: the sound effects coming straight out of the performer's mouths, the *thump-ka-thup* beat, the occasional inclusion of sounds that resemble electronic sampling, the mimicking of the "scratching" of a phonograph needle grating against a vinyl LP, and so on. Sometimes, someone else might be in the performance, perhaps rapping over the top of the one-man rhythm section. Or perhaps an accomplice passes the hat around the audience gathered in the street. But most often one person will be alone, *acapella*, creating all this sound; that is, one person and, at most, a microphone.

I was led to the topic of beatboxing by my undergraduate students during a lecture on folk music. I was showing various examples of folk music from around the world on *YouTube*, while explaining and discussing the different aspects of folk music. I explained that for music to be considered folk music, the music must display all the hallmarks of folklore as per Dundes' famous definition of folklore as evidencing "multiplicity and variation" (1999:vii) and Ben-Amos's performance-aware "artistic communication in small groups" (1972). I further added that folk music should be, for the most part, unauthored and uncopyrighted, and outside the realm of the culture industry.

One of my students asked, "What about beatboxing?" I typed it into the search engine, and, lo and behold, there came a return on *YouTube* of over 35,000 entries, many of which had been viewed tens of thousands of times (some into the hundreds of thousands of times, and even into millions of times). Once I heard the familiar strains, I immediately realized that I'd heard this genre before—in streets of Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Marseilles, Dublin, and, indeed, in nearly every

cosmopolitan area I'd visited for any length of time. Also, as my initial foray in the class had quickly revealed, many of the performances (and even more of the viewings) of beatboxing take place in cyberspace, mostly on *YouTube*, or similar sites featuring user-generated content. *YouTube* is not only a method of distribution, but additionally another site of performance, where the music can be watched and commented upon, absorbed, and recreated.

Although *YouTube* displays recordings, it is not the same as a television or movie. The Internet is a "pull" technology, meaning that people have to seek out the videos. Furthermore, the vernacular emphasis of the videos reveal *YouTube* as a place where ordinary people can engage in critique by leaving comments and responses, becoming an "active audience." A "hit" video is always noticeable due to the large number of "hits" as well as the ratings and comments. Cyberspace, like any space, provides opportunity for performances by people.¹ People perform and create art, and people observe the art and give feedback. In terms of beatboxing, there are good performers and not-so-good performers, popular pieces and not-so-popular pieces. Yet the tradition is highly stylized and highly traditional in its aesthetics. Most of the same elements can easily be witnessed in the various versions, even though the versions are literally from all over the world. How did this come to be?

Pasts and Presence

The first "historical" moments of beatboxing are dated to 1980, when performer Doug E. Fresh (Doug E. Davis) claimed to have invented the genre. During the early 1980s, Darren Robinson of the Fat Boys (originally The Disco Three), brought beatboxing to the national stage. Others, however, state that beatboxing arose in the multitudes of anonymous artists, as authors TyTe and Defencial stated on their website article, "The Real History of Beatboxing: Part 1":

The history of Beatboxing is blurry. It appears, like graffiti, to have begun its life as an urban art form. The beginnings of hip-hop are well known—DJs spinning the breakbeats in records with MCs rapping over the top. When MCs starting to rap over drum machine (beatbox) beats, in the ghettos such as the Bronx, drum machines and synthesisers could not be afforded (samplers were at this time well out of the reach of even well-paid musicians). Necessity is the mother of invention, and without machine-supplied beats to rap over, a new instrument was created—the mouth—and thus human beatboxing was born.²

Since the term “beatbox” originally referred to an early drum machine, the modern genre of beatboxing clearly owes a great deal to hip-hop culture, and to the development of a specific genre of “rhythm-speech” with stylistic and aesthetic concerns linked closely with hip-hop culture. It was through the commercialization of this hip-hop genre that beatboxing reached its largest, most mass audiences, and hip-hop still flavors, to varying degrees, the production of “beatboxing” around the world.

All the same, beatboxing has been received—and subsequently produced—differently in different parts of the world, at times blending with other cultural forms of rhythm speech and other forms of folk music. Musicologists have documented a worldwide distribution of mouth rhythms, or “rhythm-speech” as Atherton (2007) dubs it. African-American hip-hop performers themselves drew upon a long-standing cultural legacy of mouth music, found in barbershop, jazz (scat) singing, and much more, including where vocalizations were used to mimic percussive instruments. Early blues performers such as Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter) can be heard inserting vocalized percussion sounds in some of their live performances. Similarly, around the world there are many examples of “rhythm-speech,” perhaps most famously in India, with its *bol* form, and in “Celtic” regions, with the *port beil*, or “mouth music,” much of which was specifically percussive in nature. Atherton (2007) cites other example genres in Ghana and Australia.

Regardless of any possible links with these traditions, beatboxing may still be difficult for people to conceive of as a folk music. For one thing, it is an urban development, and as Bohlman, in *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World*, stated, “Urbanization topples one of the most sacred tenets of folk music theory: the distinction between the rural and the urban” (1988:126-127). The rural was, of course, the home of the *volk*, linked by writers such as Herder to specific places, and whose removal from modernity helped to create the fictional unities of the early nation states (Anntonen 2005; Wilson 1973).

A search for “folk music” on *YouTube* brings in a total of 85,000 entries, most of which seem to be recordings of traditional folk music, from Nepalese to Azerbaijani. While not labeled as such, and not showing up on the “folk music” search, beatboxing is all the more interesting because it fits all the definitions of folk music without being widely recognized as such. Why this is so has a great deal to do with the past of the discipline, particularly in Europe, where the notion of folklore was contrasted to the urban, literate realm. It also frequently carried (and carries) notions of ethnic and national identity.

Ethnic and national identity was thought to be "natural" descending from Herder's formative ideas. Many times, romantic ideas of folk music are explicitly held to geographical "roots," and folk music is occasionally referred to as "roots music." To be "rootless" is therefore, by this logic, an inherently bad or inauthentic aspect.³ In the case of much of the research on "folk" or "world" music, to be rootless is equated to being inauthentic. To be divorced from the geography of the tradition's genesis was to be "schizomogenic" as Steven Feld (1994) put it. Anthony McCann, in an article addressing the cultural codes of transmission in Irish folk music (which he holds are based on the "idea of gift"), asserts that "the further that music moves from its register of origin, the more likely, it seems, it is to be commodified" (2001:95).

The negative views of rootless music have been summarized, and challenged, by Steve Jones in his article on computer music:

Much writing in popular music, academic and journalistic, fixes on the notion that geographic location of a particular group or sound is a good thing, for, at the very least, achieving a kind of specificity, an anchor, within which to understand a particular socio-historical moment. When movement is invoked, it is largely used to denote a dispersion and diffusion of values, a loss of aura and authenticity. (2002:213)

I agree with Jones. Not only is this the overarching paradigm for many conceptions of "roots" music, but this formation is ill-equipped to deal with the new realities of global communication and emergent vernacular musical forms. As Stokes noted, "Music does not then simply provide a marker in a prestructured social space, but the means by which this space can be transformed" (1994:4). In this case, this space is the new frontier of cyberspace.

Computers, Music, People

There are many emergent artistic forms on the Internet, and a great deal of overlap with computer-generated music, but one of the things that interested me about beatboxing is that it is not, in the main, computer generated. For the most part, it is a form that is performed live with, most often, nothing more than a microphone and an amplifier.

Beatboxing occupies an interesting position in terms of people, computers, and music, as the genre is generally geared towards live performances, including street performances, creating a semi-professional avenue for aspiring musicians. It mimics the sound of computer-generated music; it parodies the computer in live performances relying

on the human voice alone. Yet it also blends seamlessly with computer distribution and computer-generated music, and the cut-and-paste pastiche of many of the new digital-based user-generated art forms. In my research on the web, sometimes the music was performed explicitly for the production of web-distributed videos, at other times the music was performed in some other public venue and filmed by an audience member who later placed the video on the web.⁴

There has been a good deal written on “global music,” or “world music” (Erlmann 1998; Feld 1994), which I’ve touched on in previous research (Thompson 2003); yet my main interests in this paper lie slightly apart from much of the previous literature. What interests me most about “world music” in this context is in what so many scholars assume as natural—usually, again, that a traditional form of music, firmly rooted to place, has been disrupted and cheapened by global distribution.

What can one learn, then, by examining global music that also reflects a distinctly postmodern (the imitation of samplers) and urban aesthetic? This question implies different answers—and additional questions—than can be explored by a historic-geographic outline of oicotypical variations of folk music; different, even more so, than can be explored by noting long-held notions of folk music as reflecting long-seated ethnic and/or national identity (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 1996).

Still, some questions that scholars of folk music have been asking carry over well, and these, I propose, are the ones dealing with aesthetics and its relation to identity negotiation. Earlier, in my paper on emergent musical forms in Alaska (2003), I proposed that aesthetics is a mediating step between expressive culture and identity concerns. Although identity concerns could easily be discerned by the researcher, for the most part they were not cited as influences by the performers. Rather, the performers engaged in the forms they saw as “fun” or “cool” or otherwise aesthetically pleasing. Let me restate this thesis: aesthetics is a mediating step between expressive culture and identity concerns, and it is this mediating step that is most widely and consciously recognized by the performers and audiences of the tradition.⁵ By and large people sing songs because they like them, not because they feel compelled to proclaim their identity.

Following this, then, I will ask in this paper, what are the aesthetics of beatboxing, mashups, and more, and how do these point towards concerns with identity? As many have argued (Dundes 1983; Oring 1994), folklore and identity are inextricably linked: scratch the one, and you find the other.

I hope that a brief review of some of the forms observable on *YouTube* will prove instructive, although it should be noted that this is only a partial sampling, since beatboxing exists outside of *YouTube* as well, in the streets, subways, school basements, parking lots, churches, and concert halls of the world. Nonetheless, *YouTube* has proved to be a valuable resource in terms of user-generated documentation of performances, and an important means (although certainly not the only one) of diffusion of the tradition.

First, we might examine the “traditional” beatboxing in the street.⁶ Someone “sings” the part of the drum machine plus sound effects, and someone has made a recording (with or without the knowledge of the performer) and placed it on *YouTube*. Such examples come from literally all corners of the world: Korea, Algeria, France, Australia, Iran, Ethiopia, Samoa, and Greenland, among others.

One thing we can note right from the start of our investigation is that beatboxing is now a widespread, if not fully global, form of vernacular music with a strong sense of traditionality alongside its variations. No matter what the continent, what the country, the examples are all clearly recognizable as belonging to the same genre, with the same “*thump-ka-thump, ka-thump kish*,” imitating the drum machine, plus the imitations of samples, sounds, and effects. Very often these examples blend these generic markers with their own cultural forms of mouth music and “rhythm speech.”

Also highly noticeable is a strong aesthetic of combined human and computer: in this case, the human is attempting to sound like computer-produced music. A “beat box” originally referred to a “drum machine,” a machine that created drum patterns from sampled sounds, and was often critiqued as being “soul-less”—the “drummer in a can.” Yet, these performers are using that same aesthetic and broadening it with some crucial human performance elements.

Although modern beatboxing may have started alongside rap as a street performance, with shared beginnings of sampling, it has been embraced by a wide variety of performers in a wide variety of contexts and has been a natural for *YouTube* videos. We can also easily notice the other performative qualities—the hand movements, bodily movements with the rhythm, etc., which also help guide the viewing experience.⁷ The performer often appears to manipulate invisible machines (including “scratching” vinyl LPs) and the audience plays along with this noisy miming. In beatboxing, machines are an omnipresent absence.⁸

The idea is a simple one that many people can attempt to perform. Beatboxing is global, and therefore it makes sense that it speaks to global rather than local concerns. In this case, the concern is man and machines.⁹ There are no language barriers and few barriers as to different tonal or rhythmic systems. The equipment required is minimal, and thus there are few economic barriers. Yet this is not to say it does not have a traditional form—one of the most striking things about beatboxing is the coherence and cohesiveness of the genre. The same sounds, in the same manner, are being performed in all the corners of the world.

Further, it has achieved a high level of performance qualities and has been taken in by a staggering demographic of people as an enjoyable musical form: for example, one *YouTube* beatboxing video had listed over 20 million views.¹⁰ Has this entered the market? Of course: as have most folk musics. It has also been accepted by other musicians, and brought on stage in hybrid formats all over the world.¹¹ In 2008, Vodafone France released a television ad featuring French beatboxing star Joseph “Poulpo.” Indeed, beatboxing is such a global phenomenon that you can watch and appreciate and yet not be entirely sure where the music, or the performer, is “located.” It quickly becomes apparent that this is the wrong focus: the music is not just somewhere, it is many wheres. It is on the web, and on the streets of the world. If before one could tell one’s nationality, perhaps ethnicity, perhaps even language, by hearing one’s folk music, with beatboxing, emergent vernacular forms no longer carry conspicuous signs of geography and, hence, ethnicity.

Recordings and Performance

Although in the first section I discussed beatboxing as a live performance, perhaps in part to fulfill some imagined criteria for “folk” music, I’d like to expand this discussion beyond mere recordings of live events. Indeed, much of what passes for “recordings” can hardly live up to the term. Ever since Les Paul pioneered multi-tracking, and the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper* expanded this idea to new musical heights, most musical releases from artists are not recordings of live performances, even if many of them continue to mimic the aesthetics of live performances.

Like geographical place, “live performances” have often been viewed as a criterion for authenticating folk music. This harkens back to the idea of simple, unmechanical folk, who ideally crafted their own crude instruments, and shunned the degenerative influence of modern technology, preserving for the rest of us some romantic, hazy, agricultural Eden. I have to say I’m not a big proponent of this idea: yes, folk

musicians did often fashion their own crude instruments, but this was usually due to poverty, not because they were Luddites. Folk music in Ireland, for example, readily and eagerly incorporated new instruments and new technologies (Johnston 1995). Similarly, while beatboxing may have emerged from a desire to imitate expensive drum machines cheaply and easily, the aesthetic concerns were nonetheless completely modern.

While beatboxing involves an aesthetic concerning machines and computer-produced sounds, at other times beatboxing and other new musical genres incorporate computer-produced sounds, rather than simply imitating them, often in a cut-and-paste montage.¹² Is this acceptable? Although one may not see it performed in the street, I believe that this shows the other side of emergent musical global genres. While man and machine is a central aesthetic, I don't think it is man *versus* the machine, but rather man *as* the machine. That is to say, the new identity is a global, human one, but I think it is not only that. I think it is also one of negotiating a new sort of man-and-machine identity, a synthesis between human and computer. Beatboxing has much in common with the aesthetics and generic styles of hip-hop sampling.¹³ However, it is somewhat separated from these other forms due to its human-produced sounds which imitate sampled sounds (which imitate live performance). A circularity, from live performance to computers and back again, complete this feedback loop, spilling out onto the web and onto the streets of the world, among those who are interested.

This is a far cry from the Herderian notions of folklore and folk music, and this is precisely my point. At one time songs were performed in physical space and people didn't travel that much, and at that time folk music could reasonably be correlated with geography. But this has changed dramatically. New technology—user-generated content—has created new opportunities for artistic expressions, dealing with global identity concerns. The “place” of this music is the World Wide Web; the “roots” are virtual roots. We are now in the realm of “Folklore 2.0.”

MASH IT UP

Mashups are a combination of two or more digital songs, videos, or images that are mixed together in new ways.¹⁴ One might have Johnny Cash vocals over, say, the music of the Ramones. One could then use that soundtrack and put in some other videos over the top: perhaps samples of a commercial movie, or a “home” movie downloaded from the Internet. Digitization has allowed each tiny little piece to become disassembled and reassembled into an endless variety of new productions. This is one

of the most popular new art forms, with hundreds of mashups being released, usually for free, every day. This is not to say that they are all masterpieces, of course, but it *is* to say that there is a widespread interest and participation in mashups, most of which has no commercial aspect.

Mashups cover a wide variety of styles and examples. Some are audio only, while others focus on audio-visual material. For those audio-visual (movie) examples, there are many different styles and approaches. Sometimes video material is simply dubbed with new audio. Very often, these examples overlap with the mashups composed of various pastiches. There are numerous examples playing off the contrast between “children’s” characters such as Ernie and Bert, Barney the Dinosaur, the Teletubbies, and so on, and more adult themes.¹⁵ For example, the child-oriented *Sesame Street*’s Ernie and Bert characters are often provided with dialogue portraying them as a gay couple. There are many videos and stills off of the “Bert is Evil” theme, portraying Bert with Hitler, Osama Bin Laden, and others. Sometimes, the use of two similar videos can be very artful, both amplifying the other in unique ways, such as Divide & Kreate’s “Sharp Dressed Party” mashup of Pink’s “Get This Party Started” and ZZ Top’s “Sharp Dressed Man.”¹⁶ Interestingly, not all popular culture is selected for mashups, but those elements that are selected—including *Star Wars*, *Lords of the Rings*, *300*, *Teletubbies*, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, and *Sesame Street*—seem to be being embraced as iconic characters, plots, and themes in the new art culture.

Mashups are commonly used for political commentary, humor, and critique. At times, politicians’ recorded words or videos are mashed up with other components. Examples include a popular mashup of Sarah Palin and the movie *Fargo*, playing on Palin’s disastrous first interview with Katie Couric along with her accent (similar to that of the characters in the film),¹⁷ Senator Ted Stevens’ famous declaration of the Internet as a “series of tubes,”¹⁸ or the mashup-produced theme of George W. Bush “beatboxing.”¹⁹

Alongside commercially produced material, user generated videos or sound may also become very popular (“going viral”) and become the basis of numerous other compositions. These can be combined with or follow a certain theme, providing intense networks of authorship and collective creativity. A further development was introduced by Ophir Kutiel, better known as Kutiman, at his site, *Thru-you.com*. Kutiman developed a series of artful music videos in which the music and film are drawn from a pastiche of user-generated music videos on *YouTube*, from all ages, nationalities, and musical backgrounds. The result is a stark

question to prevailing notions of originality in art and authorship, and his videos have drawn great attention.

Who's in Charge, Here?

Mashups challenge our current ideas of authorship and, by extension, copyright. Who is the author of such hybrid products? Johnny Cash, the Ramones, or the person who put them together in his basement? Interestingly, how well some songs fit together with other songs makes one question the whole notion of "original songs" altogether. Mashups operate in the grey areas of the law (and very frequently will be removed from sites like *YouTube*, due to possible copyright violation after a complaint by one party). In a sense, they are, like beatboxing, also an extension of some of the issues that arose with early sampling techniques (Demers 2006); although with mashups it is not just using one sample, or video, but often creating new works entirely out of the works of art of others.

It is refreshing to see vernacular forms arising from people's artistic impulses, rather than being slavishly dominated by the "culture industry," as the Frankfurt School had at one time feared. Indeed, these new musical forms often find themselves in direct conflict with the culture industry, particularly regarding the issue of copyrights. This has caused great headaches for the recording industry and the copyright regime as a whole; both of these closely followed the model built to deal with the effects of the printing press—the same technological innovation that was supposed to spell the end of folklore. Before the recording industry, there was no distinction between popular music and folk music: they were one and the same. With the recording industry, the radios, and all of the rest, this changed. Folk music was supposed to exist outside of these realms, however much this "outsider" cachet was marketed and commercialized by the industry (Peterson 1997; Roy 2002; Stivale 2003). But the industry is having a harder time now controlling these new emergent forms. Now (and once again) cutting-edge popular music and emergent folk music are hard to distinguish.

Increasingly, the idea of *a* copyrighted work, not to be altered, is becoming obsolete. People enjoy taking what they know and reconfiguring it in new ways, giving it that lively "multiplicity and variation" that folklorists all know and love:

The Beatles' publisher, EMI, has threatened producer Clayton Counts with a multi-million dollar lawsuit in response to his experimental album

“Sgt. Petsounds.” Released under the name The Beachles, the album mashes up the Beatles’ Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band and, yes, the Beach Boys’ Pet Sounds. EMI has also demanded that Counts turn over the IP addresses of the hundreds of thousands of people who downloaded the mashup record.²⁰

Several of the top scholars on these new art forms have seized upon examples such as this to decry what they see as the overly litigious and restrictive use of copyright. Lawrence Lessig, in his book, *Free Culture*, makes the distinction between “read-only” culture, and what he calls “read-write” culture:

Read-only. Passive recipients of culture produced elsewhere. Couch potatoes. Consumers. This is the world of media from the twentieth century. The twenty-first could be different. This is the crucial point: It could be both read and write. (Lessig 2005:37)

Indeed, as Lessig points out, some of the most exciting new art forms are just this: “mashups” embracing “read-write” culture. New art is developed using pieces and bits of other pieces of art. Works are often collaboratively formed, collaboratively improved—sometimes with attribution, sometimes without. Lessig is one of the leading legal scholars on these notions, yet I believe that his formulations still could be improved by turning his lawyerly gaze towards folkloristics and to the “read-write” culture, outside of copyright, that has long defined folklore and folk music.

Taking folklore (including folk music) into such account is easy enough—before the printing press, there was little concern with copyright. Copying was an enormously difficult and expensive undertaking when manuscripts were copied by hand. It was only with the development of printing technologies—the “Age of the Book”—that copyright issues were defined and delineated (Eisenstein 2005; Rose 1993). As time went on, this included music, whether on player piano rolls, gramophones, LPs, or other forms. The production and distribution of art was consolidated into large corporations. Fewer people then produced art; it was mass-copied, and many people consumed. Many people—including academics—associated these developments with the end of folklore. Who needed folk music when you had Elvis and the radio? Although this notion was gradually and painstakingly revised by showing the persistence of folklore in modern times, it nonetheless helped place folklore in the minds of most as a pre-modern, or at least marginal, form of entertainment.²¹ Now, there would not be multiple versions and

variations, but rather one mass-produced version, controlled from the top by ever-more-powerful media corporations.

Still, limits remain: for example, Disney cannot presume a copyright on *Sleeping Beauty*, or *Cinderella*, because folklore has long been considered un-copyrightable. Lessig reveals the Disney corporation's remarkable successes in copyrighting, perhaps nowhere as apparent as in the case of Mickey Mouse, who began his career in "Steamboat Willie" (even though, as Lessig (2004) points out, "Steamboat Willie" was a direct knock-off of Buster Keaton's "Steamboat Bill"). One cannot publish a "new" version of Mickey Mouse without risking direct legal conflict with Disney. But one *can* write all the stories one wants about *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Hansel and Gretel*, and the like. Even Disney could not write the Grimms out of the history books, and the Grimms make it clear that they were not the authors of the tales, simply the collectors and editors. Nor were their informants the authors: rather, their informants were copying, creatively, the stories they had heard from other storytellers, mashing them up a bit, and retelling them anew.

In terms of music, authorship and copyright has followed the pattern set by the printing press and the culture industry. Classical composers long relied on folk music for inspiration and melodies, and the trend continued into popular music released in the new media formats (from player piano to phonograph and beyond). Stephen Foster, the "father of American music," relied heavily on folk music—particularly African-American folk music—to create his wildly popular songs. It is unclear to what degree Foster "created" his songs or merely adapted them, and this is true for a great deal of the use of folklore in authored mediums. Nonetheless, work produced in the folk medium is often thought of as uncopyrightable, while the "authored" work produced from folklore is now more heavily protected than ever, a position that has led to a great deal of legal wrangling throughout the world (Brown 2005; Demers 2006; Gudeman 1996; Hafstein 2001; Lessig 2004; Noyes 2006).

PERFORMING THE CYBORG

It is now possible to use the machine, the computer or any and all electronic and physical devices, without the dichotomy, to join the mechanical power of the machine to the nuanced and "subjectivizing" control of the human performer. This, ultimately, is itself an aesthetic value for our new age.

Guy Garnett, "The Aesthetics of Interactive Computer Music" (2001)

The "subjectivizing" control mentioned by Guy Garnett is of crucial importance in understanding performance. Theoretical understandings of folklore have frequently turned to studies of performance in order to attempt to understand the relationship between the personal and the social, the embodied and the mental, and the creation of the subject through repeated, and internalized, performances (Bauman 1992; Fine and Speer 1992).

The creation of the subject overlaps a great deal with the creation of identity, although there are differences. Identity has an institutional feel about it, as identity can frequently be imposed from outside, and one is not always free to take on new identities. Further, having an identity does not, by itself, imply any agency—one can have an identity as a purely passive (even brain-dead!) being. But being a subject implies something different: it implies having a subjective relation to the world, becoming aware of one's own subjective stance vis-à-vis that of others. Human subjectivity is a reflective stance as well, as we are all aware that we are surrounded by other subjects, other rational, thoughtful humans. As Elizabeth Fine and Jean Speer wrote, "Performances link us to 'the Other' through aesthetic experience, not simply cognition" (1992:7). Subjectivity is not free from institutional constraints by any means, yet implied in the word is a self-actualization of identity concerns. Subjectivity, or the awareness of being a subject, is perhaps a preferable term here to "identity," since identity so frequently is used in terms of official status, or objectively imposed descriptions. Subjectivity, meanwhile, includes at once the idea of having identity, and also of engaging in the world in an aesthetic, individualized reaction, in the phenomenology of corporal existence, and an epistemology of selfhood, group identity, and their interactions.²²

Much work has been done on understanding the performance of identities and subjectivities, including ethnic identities, gender identities, national identities, and more. For example, Fine and Speer also wrote that "performance . . . makes or constitutes cultural identity, as well as imitates it" (1992:9). Performances allow for the display of at once both group and individual identities, displaying both agency and restraints. Through performances, of all types, the subject self-actualizes his/her identity concerns. As de Certeau has pointed out, one may be enmeshed in a system from which there is no real escape, yet one still has agency as well—in de Certeau's terms, these are the "tactics," employed by the relatively disempowered, to attempt to maximize their rewards from the confines of the larger system (1984). Performances

can be seen as symbolically powerful tactics. Performances can both proclaim and disclaim identity, establish subject positions in the greater milieu of other subjects and institutions, and appeal for public recognition, legitimation, and other rewards for the performer and/or for the symbolic implications of the performance.

Performance Online

Due in large part to folklore's intense interest in performance, folklorists were quick to take note of the Internet as yet another site for performance. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett put it as early as 1995, "The new media challenge disciplinary assumptions of face-to-face communication, oral transmission, performance, community and identity" (73). Although in the mid-1990s the technology and the lore were somewhat limited, since then the technology and lore have been expanding at a dizzying pace. Now the folklore spread on the Internet is not just text-based, in the form of jokes, urban legends, and the like, but has become something else, something more. More and more people are performing on the web, in more and more genres.

Donna Haraway has envisioned "cyborg identity" as a new, and newly important, facet of identity. In particular, Haraway was interested in the ideas of the cyborg as destabilizing gender identities and causing us to re-think our "natural" assumptions of gender identity. She further stated, "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction" (1991:149). This has been borne out in the development of the Internet, where identity has become much more fleeting, fragmented, and constructed. One can have an "avatar" (a formerly archaic word now rejuvenated for the new cyborg realities) of any gender or no gender at all. One may not be sure, in communicating with a person, what gender he or she is. Also, gender is not the only identity to be subverted by the subjectivizing performances on the web. Even more important, perhaps, is that the cyborg subject can leave *all* previous identities behind, or, indeed, invent new ones. Not only is one not sure of an online subject's gender, but also of the subject's nationality, age, wealth, and many of the other previously iron-clad subject positions. To perform the cyborg is to perform humanity, yet it is a different type of humanity (with different possible identities) and subject position that is being performed. And it must be performed through the computer—once one steps away, one is back to being gendered, aged, nationalized,

and all the rest. Of course, one *can* bring these subject positions online as well (Nakamura 2002), but this is no longer a requirement. Instead, performing the cyborg is performing a new way of being human, and perhaps the best demonstrations of this are in the new artistic forms performed via the computer. Beatboxing relies on the computer to establish a new style of folk music to be performed on the streets as well as the information superhighways; mashups and the like exist solely in the new communicative realm. Yet both of these new forms point towards novel aspects of performance, of subjectivity, of new ways of being human.

THE POSTMODERN LOOKS A LOT LIKE THE PRE-MODERN

In the realm of expressive culture, the postmodern seems to have many similarities to the pre-modern. In many ways, the reinvolvement in cultural production by the masses is very reminiscent of the folk culture that predominated life before the printing press and the mass, industrial production of cultural forms.

This is not to say they are the same, as other scholars have recognized. Jenkins dubbed this new phase as “convergence culture,” a coming together of all sorts of participants (commercial, vernacular, institutional, and others) in common themes and stories, together with what he labels “participatory culture.” He argues that “convergence encourages participation and collective intelligence” and points out that in the postmodern age “people are learning how to participate in such knowledge cultures outside of any formal educational setting” (2006:255, 259). This certainly has its analogues to the folk cultures of pre-modernity as well.

Robert Glenn Howard has outlined how web discourses are somewhat vernacular, and somewhat institutional—a hybrid sort of production. Howard states:

While mass-mediated communication technologies have empowered the institutional, participatory media offer powerful new channels through which the vernacular can express its alterity. However, alternate voices do not emerge from these technologies untouched by their means of production. (2008:192)

Further he points out:

Insofar as we engage with participatory media, either by consuming or producing them, we too are the agents of their creation. Just as we are vernacular, so too are we the institutions. More than ever before, it is the responsibility of researchers and critics to avoid romanticizing the

vernacular as some object held wholly separate from any taint of institutional power. Instead, the vernacular is now, more clearly than ever, hybrid. (2008:212)

There is a great deal of variety in cyber culture, with some websites or software programs not enabling participatory culture at all and others being completely based on participatory culture, from the planning stages through the distribution. While there has been an explosion of user-generated art on the Internet, bypassing much of the previous institutional limits on cultural production, the institutional is still always a presence in cyber culture, with regulation and enforcement of appropriate conduct.

Folklore is mostly ephemeral, existing in the performances and in peoples' minds. Web culture may be somewhat ephemeral, as well; very often, for example, mashups will be removed from *YouTube* or similar sites because someone (or some corporation) complained about possible copyright violations. One never knows, from one day to the next, what will be still available, and what will be mysteriously missing. Yet, there is an archival quality of the new media as well. Unlike the more traditional folklore scenario of telling jokes at the office water cooler, telling a joke online always has the possibility of being archived, copied, distributed to outsiders, or held open for examination.

The newly emerging forms on the Internet, often branded as illegal and as "outlaw art," are new forms of folklore for the twenty-first century. Like all types of folklore, these forms spread from person to person (or, one could say, "peer to peer"). The main differences between this ("Folklore 2.0") and classic ("analog") folklore is that digital communication is mediated through the computers: this allows for a variety of participants, serves to archive performances, and, perhaps more importantly, severs the long-assumed tie between (cultural) place, and (geographic) space. With audio-video connectivity on the rise, even "face-to-face" takes on a placeless potential. Cultures and cultural groups can exist in a hybrid of place and cyberspace, involving both the institutional and vernacular. Thus to track culture now involves more than geography of cultural forms, more than even the tracking of diasporas and transnational groups. It now also necessitates understanding information flow via the digital realm.

Production and consumption of culture in the age of modernity ("Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," to use Benjamin's terminology) crafted the important, legal distinction between popular and folk music (and other art forms). Copies became a commodity, and

culture is expressed through these forms. Today, we are undergoing yet another technological revolution, one likely to be even larger than that brought on by the printing press and mechanical reproduction. We are now looking at art in the age of digital reproduction, which is a new beast altogether. Mashups unselfconsciously turn the tide on the printing press regime, and usher in a new era of performance that has much in common with the old. Whereas before the author/composer could freely use folk music to create an "original" piece, now, artists are using previously published materials to create new folk art.

CONCLUSIONS: FOLKLORE 2.0

With the onset of digitization technologies, copying (especially including creative copying) came once again into the hands of the masses. This has shaped up as an epic battle between "the copyrighters and the copylefters." Although much excellent scholarly work has been done on this matter (Demers 2006; Lessig 2004; Vaidhyanathan 2001), I am more concerned in this paper with the impulse of people to create art, using the materials that form their lives, rather than the legal issues surrounding such actions.²³ Increasingly, our lives include sights, sounds, and scenes that the media industry has generated. Also increasingly, people are realizing that the power to (re)produce and distribute art, to manipulate these generated realities into new forms, is once again in their hands. Not only this, but it is occurring on a global, de-territorialized scale. If folk music is closely enmeshed with identity, then what sort of identity does this global, computer-mediated folk music herald?

Of course, not all humankind is linked in together in the cybernetic World Wide Web, and certainly not evenly so, but the various online communities' numbers are impressive: how many *YouTube* users? *Second Lifes*? *World of Warcraft* players? Online newspaper readers? Online professional or hobby organizations? The trendsetters of the world *are* highly interconnected via the computer, and the trend shows no sign of slowing. Cell phones are wildly popular in much of the third world due to their affordability. These are not telephones in the old sense of the term, but instead miniature computers in their own right, connecting even impoverished people to the World Wide Web, and to the discussions and movements occurring therein.

If it is true that identity is constructed and reconstituted by actors in performance rather than passively expressed through them (Bauman 1972), then I believe that identity concerns can be discerned by looking

at the aesthetic concerns with an artistic performance. In this case, the aesthetics in both beatboxing and mashups point to an identity concern with computers. In a nutshell, they perform this idea that we *are* the cyborg. We still have a sense of self, yet this now includes an interconnected cognitive function with the machine, and it is this new identity concern that is being negotiated by new forms of folklore, the realm of "Folklore 2.0."

In a sense, this should not be surprising. Other scholars in diverse fields have also pointed to the cyborg quality of modern life, and the resulting questions for notions of identity (Borgmann 1999; Ess 2000; Hayles 1999; Wiener 1961). Just as the printing press ultimately proved decisive for the development of national identity (Anderson 1991), so too will this new media provide for new identities and new subjectivities.

We have given birth to a new kind of cognitive functioning, a new sense of self. One of the best ways to witness the formation of subjectivity in action is through observing new vernacular musics like beatboxing and mashups: the aesthetic choices of people throughout the world point to new subject concerns, new negotiations about who one is. Only this time, it is not just humans in the mix. Welcome to the folk music, and folk groups, of the twenty-first century!

NOTES

1. I am aware of cogent and convincing articles (Lemley 2003) that argue cyberspace is not the same as actual place. Yet even Lemley acknowledges the power of this metaphor and the resulting ways in which people form their experiences. Compare this with, for example, Kibby's article "Home on the Page: A Virtual Place of Music Community" (2006), that fully embraces this metaphor, following the lead of its subjects, the John Prine online fan club.
2. <http://www.humanbeatbox.com/history> (accessed May 2, 2009).
3. For an extended discussion of the power of these biological metaphors, see Hafstein (2001) and Linke (1986).
4. For legal issues on such matters see Demers (2006), Vaidhyanathan (2001), Lessig (2004), and Brown (1998, 2005).
5. This assertion owes much to previous work on aesthetics, such as Erlmann (1998), who in turn utilized Kant's notions of aesthetic communities. Nonetheless, I take a different path in arguing that these concerns hold true for everyone, and not just for the (post)modern performers. Although I agree that some communities may be "aesthetic communities" only, I believe that all communities are engaged and enriched by aesthetic concerns and choices.
6. <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=A6BH2cxFABo>.
7. <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=jx8nKGtj99o>.

8. <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=H00ztJ8o-wl> and <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=ZwjelErzgbQ>.
9. <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=tQc30kqq1y8>.
10. Joel Turner's performance at <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=Ta-ATEOOo8M>.
11. <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=KWl5ACqAms0>.
12. <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=LVCb52iQrfo>.
13. There has been a great deal of excellent literature on sampling and hip-hop culture. See, for instance, Demers (2006).
14. There are also "software" mashups, in which programmers combine two or more software programs.
15. See, for example, the Teletubbies overdubbed with "Shake That Ass, Bitch" at <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=M2SFBLO12aQ>; Heavy Metal Charlie Brown Christmas at <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=4AC3sZB-v7Q>; and *Sesame Street* muppets overdubbed with rap at <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=21OH0wlkfb>, or heavy metal songs at <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=InZNBcJTmWs>.
16. Last viewed at [http://www.vjbrewski.com/videos/Sharp%20Dressed%20Party%20\(video\).wmv](http://www.vjbrewski.com/videos/Sharp%20Dressed%20Party%20(video).wmv).
17. <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=ZEidkJJlD9I>.
18. Examples include http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=_cZC67wXUTs and <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=EtOoQFa5ug8>.
19. Examples include <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=B8egDbULSIM> and <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=F-KnFadDGgo>.
20. <http://www.rollingstone.com/rockdaily/index.php/2006/09/12/the-musics-over-for-pet-soundssgt-peppers-mash-up/>.
21. See Anttonen (2005) for his extension of this argument into his view that folklore was a necessary "Other" against which modernity and nation-states were constructed.
22. Several philosophers have investigated cyborgs from these standpoints: Andy Clark (2003) asserts, as do I, that we are already cyborgs, as does Hayles (1999). An intriguing account of a cybernetic pioneer, Kevin Warwick, a professor of cybernetics at the University of Reading, who deliberately attempted to make himself as cyborg as possible, is related in his 2004 book *I, Cyborg*. Also see the work of Loomis (1992) and Biocca (1997), who point out that our selves as consciousness have always lived in a cognitive model *mediated* by our sensory apparati. In that sense, there is little difference between this and the sense of self as being influenced by other mediated stimuli, including computer-generated ones.
23. As Antonia Porchia wrote in his book of aphorisms, "We tear life out of life and use it for looking at itself" ([1943] 2003).

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso.
- Anttonen, Pertti J. 2005. *Tradition through Modernity: Postmodernism and the Nation-State in Folklore Scholarship*. Studia Fennica Folkloristica 15. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society.
- Atherton, Michael. 2007. Rhythm-Speak: Mnemonic, Language Play, or Song? Lecture presented at The Inaugural International Conference on Music Communication Science 5-7 December, Sydney, Australia. Proceedings available at <http://marcs.uws.edu.au/links/ICoMusic>.
- Bauman, Richard. 1972. Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore. In *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, edited by Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- . ed. 1992. *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ben-Amos, Dan. 1972. Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context. In *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, edited by Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Biocca, Frank. 1997. The Cyborg's Dilemma: Progressive Embodiment in Virtual Environments. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 3. <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/>.
- Bohlman, Philip V. 1988. *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Borgmann, Albert. 1999. *Holding onto Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brown, Michael F. 1998. Can Culture Be Copyrighted? *Current Anthropology* 39: 193-222.
- . 2005. Heritage Trouble: Recent Work on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Property. *International Journal of Cultural Property* 12: 40-61.
- Clark, Andy. 2003. *Natural-Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Demers, Joanna. 2006. *Steal This Music: How Intellectual Property Law Affects Musical Creativity*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Dundes, Alan. 1983. Defining Identity Through Folklore. In *Identity: Personal and Socio-Cultural: A Symposium*, edited by Anita Jacobson-Widding. Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology 5. Uppsala, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.
- . 1999. *International Folkloristics: Classic Contributions by the Founders of Folklore*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Eisenstein, Elizabeth. 2005. *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Erlmann, Veit. 1998. How Beautiful is Small? Music, Globalization and the

- Aesthetics of the Local. *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 30: 12-21.
- Ess, Charles. 2000. We are the Borg: The Web as agent of assimilation or cultural Renaissance? *Ephilosopher*. <http://www.ephilosopher.com/120100/philtch/philtch.htm>.
- Feld, Steven. 1994. From Schizoponia to Schismogenesis: On the Discourse of Commodification Practices of "World Music" and "World Beat." In *Music Grooves*, edited by Charles Keil and Steven Feld. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, Elizabeth C., and Jean Haskell Speer. 1992. *Performance, Culture, and Identity*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Garnett, Guy. 2001. The Aesthetics of Interactive Computer Music. *Computer Music Journal* 25: 21-33.
- Gudeman, Stephen. 1996. Sketches, Qualms and Other Thoughts on Intellectual Property Rights. In *Valuing Local Knowledge: Indigenous People and Intellectual Property Rights*, edited by Stephen B. Brush and Doreen Stabinsky. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Hafstein, Vladimar Tr. 2001. Biological Metaphors in Folklore Theory: An Essay in the History of Ideas. *Arv. Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 57: 7-32.
- Haraway, Donna. 1991. A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Hayles, Katherine. 1999. *How We Became Posthuman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Howard, Robert Glenn. 2008. Electronic Hybridity: The Persistent Processes of the Vernacular Web. *Journal of American Folklore* 121: 192-218.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Johnston, Thomas F. 1995. The Social Context of Irish Folk Instruments. *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Irish Folk Instruments* 26: 35-59.
- Jones, Steve. 2002. Music That Moves: Popular Music, Distribution and Network Technologies. *Cultural Studies* 16: 213-232.
- Kibby, Marjorie D. 2006. Home on the Page: A Virtual Place of Music Community. In *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, edited by Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee. New York: Routledge.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1995. From the Paperwork Empire to the Paperless Office. In *Folklore Interpreted: Essays in Honor of Alan Dundes*, edited by Regina Bendix and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt. New York: Garland.
- . 1996. The Electronic Vernacular. In *Connected*, edited by George Marcus. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lemley, Mark A. 2003. Place and Cyberspace. *California Law Review* 91: 521-542.
- Lessig, Lawrence. 2004. *Free Culture. How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity*. New York: Penguin Press.
- . 2005. *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity*. New York: Penguin.
- Linke, Uli. 1986. Where Blood Flows, A Tree Grows: A Study of Root Metaphor in German Culture. PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley.

- Loomis, J. M. 1992. Distal Attribution and Presence. *Presence* 1: 113-118.
- Lyman, Ray Patterson. 1968. *Copyright in Historical Perspective*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- McCann, Anthony. 2001. All That Is Not Given Is Lost: Irish Traditional Music, Copyright, and Common Property. *Ethnomusicology* 45: 89-106.
- Nakamura, Lisa. 2002. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Noyes, Dorothy. 2006. The Judgment of Solomon: Global Protections for Tradition and the Problem of Community Ownership. *Cultural Analysis* 5: 27-56.
- Oring, Elliott. 1994. The Art, Artifacts, and Artifices of Identity. *Journal of American Folklore* 107: 211-247.
- Peterson, R. A. 1997. *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Porchia, Antonio. [1943] 2003. *Voices (Voci)*. Translated by W. S. Merwin. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press.
- Rose, Mark. 1993. *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Roy, William. 2002. Aesthetic Identity, Race, and American Folk Music. *Qualitative Sociology* 25: 459-469.
- Seeger, Anthony. 1992. Ethnomusicology and Music Law. *Ethnomusicology* 36:345-359.
- Stokes, Martin. 1994. Introduction. In *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, edited by Martin Stokes. Oxford: Berg.
- Stivale, Charles. 2003. *Disenchanted Les Bons Temps: Identity and Authenticity in Cajun Music and Dance*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Thompson, Tok Freeland. 2003. "Ladies and Gentlemen: The Road Pounders!": An Inquiry into Identity, Aesthetics, and New Authenticities in Rural Alaska. *Journal of Folklore Research* 40: 273-288.
- TyTe, and Defenicial. The Real History of Beatboxing. <http://www.humanbeatbox.com/history> (accessed 2 May 2009).
- Vaidhyanathan, Siva. 2001. *Copyrights and Copywrongs: The Rise of Intellectual Property and How it Threatens Creativity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Warwick, Kevin. 2004. *I, Cyborg*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Wiener, Norbert. 1961. *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Wilson, William A. 1973. Herder and Romantic Nationalism. *Journal of Popular Culture* 6: 819-835.

Copyright of Western Folklore is the property of Western States Folklore Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.