

# Belonging and detachment: musical experience and the limits of identity

Keith Negus<sup>a,\*</sup>, Patria Román Velázquez<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths College, University of London,  
New Cross, London, SE14 6NW, UK*

<sup>b</sup>*Sociology Department, City University, Northampton Square, London, EC1V 0HB, UK*

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## Abstract

In this essay, we offer a critique of a trajectory of thinking about the relationship between music and identity and argue for the adoption of approaches that are able to embrace more nuanced and less reductionist notions of how music may connect with, become part of, or be totally irrelevant to our sense of self and collectivity. We initially focus on enduring tension between so-called reflection and construction theories of identity and suggest that the “mutual constitution” of musical and social self might allow for retention of insights from both perspectives. In the second part, we argue for a move outwards from a focus on the vocabulary of identity. In doing this, we highlight some of the problems of thinking about musical practices via notions of community and solidarity and suggest that equal attention should be paid to instances when music is associated with ambivalence and detachment rather than belonging. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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In recent years the study of popular music has been dominated by a particular notion of cultural identity. It brings with it all manner of assumptions about the sentimental bonds of attachment, solidarity, and psychological affiliation that might come into being, and the dynamics of difference that might be activated, when music is made, mediated, and received. Central to numerous writings have been an enduring series of assumptions about significant correspondences between the characteristics of individuals, groups or places, and musical styles (readily apparent in labels such as Irish music, Latin jazz, gay disco, folk music, women’s music, and, of course, black music).

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\* Corresponding author.

*E-mail address:* cos01kn@gold.ac.uk (K. Negus).

We wish to use this essay to raise some critical questions about the limitations of assuming such necessary links between music and cultural identities. In putting forward our argument, we are not suggesting that the numerous books and articles that have engaged in theorising about music and identities have not provided valuable intellectual insights, nor are we overlooking their important political role in the struggle for various forms of social and institutional recognition. However, what once seemed an exciting series of debates and set of possibilities seems to increasingly resemble a narrow collection of received ideas, even clichés, that are being used in a predictable and habitually uncritical manner, not only in the conference room and academic essay but in more general discussions and writings about music and identity.

In critiquing a trajectory of thinking about a particular notion of identity, we are not attempting to position ourselves against or outside some of the major tendencies that have informed writing within this field of study. Indeed, it is from reflecting on our own research and writings that we have both become increasingly aware of just how much “the term ‘identity’ often provides only simple cover for a plethora of very particular and perhaps non-transferable debates ... concerning the status of the ‘subject’, the ‘individual’ and the ‘person’” (du Gay et al., 2000: 2). We have begun to think that a theoretical and methodological preoccupation with identity carries all manner of assumptions that might conceal as much as they reveal. Too often “identity” is the end of a road well travelled, when it should really be the beginning of a journey, a point of departure. Too often identity seems to be a conclusion to be illustrated through a case study rather than an idea to be interrogated, explored and then expanded, or perhaps even abandoned. We are arguing here for a need to move beyond a particular approach that is most apparent when identity is imputed from that which is visibly enacted, displayed, performed, outwardly embodied, gestured, and “reflected”. We suggest a move away from concepts of identity derived from observing the veneers and shells of surfaces and utterances (skin hues, mannerisms, clothes, performed actions, vocalised imaginings) and towards thicker and more nuanced, less reductionist, less determinist notions of how music may connect with, become part of, or be totally irrelevant to our sense of self and collectivity.

This essay is very much an attempt to think through a set of issues and we approach these rather tentatively and partly in a speculatively manner. Our stance here is not intended as an elaboration of a “model” or theory, nor do we have a fully worked out “position” that we might wish to stake out. Neither is this intended to come remotely near to a “survey” of significant literature in this area of study. Instead, we hope that this essay may be read as a constructive attempt to identify or open up a series of questions and issues that might inform both further debate and empirical research. We shall start by focusing on an enduring tension featured in discussions of identity over recent years—that between what are generically called “reflection” and “construction” theories of identity. We point to both the endurance and relevance of these approaches, whilst highlighting their problems. We suggest that constructivist approaches are probably the most useful, but they are often not as “anti-essentialist” as is sometimes assumed by those who deploy them against the presumed essentialism of reflection theories. We would want to retain some sense of

how people have, at some level, pre-existing physiological and psychological characteristics that precede musical expression, whilst acknowledging that a known sense of self and social identity often is only realised through a musical experience. Hence, the “mutual constitution” (for want of a better phrase) of musical and social self might allow for retention of insights from theories of reflection and construction. However, from this issue, we then move on to question whether this in itself tells us very much about how the subject and collectivity are mediated through musical experience. The latter part of our essay is an attempt to argue for a need to move away (or outwards) from a particular focus on the vocabulary of identity. In doing this we highlight some of the problems of thinking about musical practices via notions of fellowship and solidarity. On this point we want to ask if it might be useful to direct our attention towards the way that music is associated with ambivalence and detachment rather than belonging. Finally, we ask what the temporality of musical experience means for notions of identification, musical community, and escape. Underlying our discussion is a more general concern that current discussions of identity seem to force us into thinking about music and the self in a restrictive manner. It is not that questions of subjective identity and identification are insignificant; we may just need to broaden, or loosen, the way we approach the issue and rethink how we interrogate and move outwards from a narrow focus on identity.

We start with arguments about the reflection, representation, and construction of identities through music. Here socially significant appearances (class styles, skin colouring, sexual actions, learnt mannerisms) are taken as indicators of more profound ontological conditions—a connection that is usually assumed in a conclusive way, rather than explored in an open manner. Such theorising starts from what seems like a significant and obvious question; what gives a *music* (a style or individual piece) its identity label (what makes a music Irish, Latin, Parisian, Chinese, bourgeois, African, or gay)? Are there enduring qualities shared by all music that is labelled in the same way and which enable them to be recognised from the *sound* alone? Inevitably the answer to such a question soon leads away from the music and towards the people who make that music, and to those who are observed, or assumed, to listen to and dance with that music. Two issues soon become interwoven and tangled; the identity of the music and the identities of the people and places associated with that music.

It was not that long ago when the most familiar explanation of such relationships entailed some version of reflection theory; the idea of a “structural homology”, or correspondence between people, places, and musical sounds. Male rock music was judged to be a reflection and an expression of the qualities and characteristics of a particular group of male performers and audiences (Frith and McRobbie, 1978; Frith, 1990). Black music was taken as an expression or reflection of the qualities, characteristics, essential traits or experience of black people (see the critiques of Tagg, 1989; Gilroy, 1993). Salsa was characterised as a musical form which expressed, first, the “voice of the Puerto Rican barrio” (Duany, 1984) and, then, a type of pan-Latino consciousness (Padilla, 1989). Subcultural forms (rock’n’roll or punk music) were analysed as a homological reflection of the subcultural class experience (Hebdige, 1979; Willis, 1990).

As has now been widely recognised and acknowledged, there are two essentialisms here that fuse the idea that individuals, collectivities, and places possess certain essential characteristics and then link these to a further assumption that these can be found *expressed* in particular practices and cultural forms associated with those people. There is, or was, as Simon Frith (1996) has pointed out, an assumption about “a necessary flow” from social identity to musical expression. Yet, as Frith has also observed, as soon as we start listening to music, we find that it continually subverts our assumptions about a relationship between “cultural position and cultural feeling”. There is, in short, no such essential connection between a musical sound and a social identity. Hence, Frith (like many of us) has opted for a position influenced by the popularity of existentialist, poststructuralist, and postmodernist reasoning; the idea that cultural identities are not fixed in any absolute way but are actively fabricated, made-up, created via collage, combination, appropriation, and re-definition. Cultural identities are never finished, always in the process of becoming, always open to change and transformation (a point repeatedly made by Stuart Hall in his influential later writings).

The adoption of this stance tends to result in a reversal of the music-identity relationship. Instead of music “reflecting” pre-existing identities, it now constructs them. As Frith (1996: 109) puts it: “The issue is not how a particular piece of music or a performance reflects the people, but how it produces them, how it creates and constructs an experience.” We do not really know who we are prior to cultural activities; it is only through such practices that we get to know ourselves as groups and individuals. Music, according to this argument, seems to organise and create our identities for us: “Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginary cultural narratives” (Frith, 1996: 124).

There is an important insight and significant methodological shift being signalled here. In supporting his case for this shift, Frith draws on a particular aspect of Philip Bohlman’s (1991) writings on the performance of chamber music in Israel and how this doesn’t simply reflect a specific pre-given “German Jewish” identity. Frith argues that a particular identity is constructed by or through the music, and it is this that allows for the articulation of cultural values and the enactment of a collective commitment. Hence, in a similar way, “black music” is no longer heard as a reflection of any essential traits of people who have a prescribed black identity. Instead, a sense of black identity is realised as it is formed and constructed through the experience of music. This sort of approach is particularly illuminating for highlighting how many people acquire a heightened sense of their own identity, history, and destiny through musical experiences and for proposing that self-knowledge is realised by forging links between cultural identities and specific genre practices. This has clearly been so in salsa music, as we have both argued, albeit in slightly different ways, in writings elsewhere. In general terms, Negus (1996) has argued that we should not seek “authentic” forms of spontaneous and unmediated working class or ethnic expression and “the cultural mirrors that might reflect social identity”. Rather, emphasising processes of symbolic construction, he has argued that we should examine how particular musical codes and signs are used and claimed as

expressions of particular social and cultural identities. The emphasis has been on the visibly and audibly semiotic. More specifically, and from ethnographic observation, Patria Román Velázquez (1999a,b) has suggested that salsa is embodied by dancers, musicians, and DJs whose practices involve the enactment and signification of particular Latin identities. However, what now concerns us is that the “embodiment” of a musical form may involve considerably more than what is signified to the researcher via observation (of dancing styles, sensual actions, learnt mannerisms, clothing, and appearances) or accessible via interviews with participants. Whilst a semiotic sense of “Latiness” is clearly signified in such circumstances, it is not necessarily clear that a deeper sense of “Latiness” is experienced through such musical practices.

Furthermore, to make arguments like this, we have to know of the identity groupings that are associated with the music. We have to know, or make some sort of categorical assumption, that it is “Jewish”, “black”, or “Latin” music which is contributing to the construction of a certain “Jewish”, “black”, or “Latin” identity. Despite a move towards a “constructivist” position, the argument is not quite as open or non-essentialist as it might seem. In many ways, we simply have a reversal of the previous homology argument. Instead of folk music (or Latin music) being produced by the folk (or people with a Latin identity), the folk (or Latin identities) are produced by and through the music. We get to know, or we are able to actively “construct”, our identities through the musical practices. There is certainly a value in this argument, both political and sociological. It does pose a challenge to previous essentialist assumptions, and it points to how we might get to know ourselves through music and how we can use music for the construction and communication of specific identities. It highlights, in an existential manner, how musical sounds can precede any expression of social identity. An emphasis on the contingent and constructed character of identity can also show, in Richard Peterson’s (1997) terms, how “authentic” identities can be quite actively and self-consciously “fabricated”.

Yet, it is precisely on this point that we surely have to assume that it’s “folk” music, or “Irish” music, or “Latin” music, to be able to argue that it’s constructing us with a particular “folk”, “Latin” or “Irish” identity. For, if both sides of this equation were to be equally non-essentialist, then we would have to accept that *any* type of musical sound (however categorised) could “construct” us *any* type of social identity. If we push this point a little further, such an argument cannot deal with the full implications of the claim that it is the music, or musical practice, that constructs our identities. Particularly, if we cross the connections a little bit. If music can construct identities then what identity is being constructed when white people listen to black music? There is a long history of white people avidly listening to black music (right back to jazz, blues, gospel, and up to soul, r’n’b, and hip hop). This can be viewed as an act of appreciation and of inspiration. It has also been interpreted as implying certain forms of material solidarity and imaginary identification (and this has clearly been politically significant on certain occasions). But, it has also involved cynical and derogatory forms of imitation, casual appropriation, and outright exploitation. The question of “identity” is clearly only one issue within a matrix of

musical, cultural, and social factors. Here's a more flippant question (which is intended to make a serious point): if we listen to and dance with "Cuban" music or "Korean" music (as we have been invited to do), would we even presume that the music might construct us a Cuban or Korean identity? Perhaps the question would not sound so strange if we were born of Cuba or Korea.

These types of questions lead us to a directly related issue. This concerns the cultural movements that have been described with reference to the notion of diaspora. Notions of diasporic cultural forms are used in a way that suggests that cultural identities are carried from one place to another. This is implied in the metaphor of "flows" (in the writing about the so-called global flows of people, flows of images, cultural flows). So, for example, it is asserted that someone from a Caribbean island moves and, in the process, they carry their Caribbean cultural identity with them to this other place:

New York has become a Caribbean city, especially since the 1980s, when its Caribbean population reached a sort of critical mass of over two million. It is now the biggest Caribbean city and the second biggest Jamaican, Haitian, and Guyanese city. There are more people from Nevis in New York than there are in Nevis itself. Dominicans have become the dominant community in Washington Heights, as have Puerto Ricans in Spanish Harlem and the Lower East Side and English-speaking West Indians in Brooklyn and Queens (Manuel, 1995: 241).

Peter Manuel's observations are not that unusual and establish very clear assumptions about culture, place, and identity. He assumes that the piece of land you are born on defines your identity and your culture, and that you then carry this identity with you and take it somewhere else. He explicitly *detaches* the notion of the Caribbean from a specific geographical region, and then simultaneously re-connects it to another place in terms of a notion of origins: New York City becomes Caribbean simply because people have come to the city from the Caribbean. He also assumes some sort of unity to identities, that we can talk of a Caribbean identity that is shared by the various groups who have travelled with their cultures (identified here according to their nationalities/islands — not class, or gender, or the multifaceted complexities of Caribbean ethnicity).

There are a number of problems here. The first concerns the notion that people are "born" to a culture and then participate in its reproduction through migration. As Román-Velázquez' (1999b) study of Latin Americans in London clearly shows, people (in this case Latin Americans) do not simply "carry" culture with them (or flow with "their" culture). Instead, a sense of Latin identity is created anew in a different location, continuous with history but in relation to a new set of circumstances. In addition, it is more than Latin Americans who contribute to a "diasporic" Latin identity. Local British musicians, entrepreneurs, DJs, and dancers also play a part in the "making of Latin London". Thus Latin identity is not exclusively produced and reproduced by Latin Americans. Hence, we might assume that if New York (or significant parts of it) has been re-made as "Caribbean", then we cannot

simply explain this identity in terms of the essentialist characteristics of particular people who have dispersed from Caribbean Islands. Many other people, particularly entrepreneurs and commercial interests whom are not from the Caribbean (record producers, gallery owners, restaurant managers, commissioning editors for publishers, journalists, and radio broadcasters), have also been involved in producing a sense of Caribbean cultural identity, both within and without the geographical place that is known as the Caribbean.

A further issue here concerns a reductionist stance on ethnic and racial particularity and the presumed similarities of selfhood and musical practice. The labelling of people is not the same as the creative acts of those people. Just because someone is categorised as Latin, black, Turkish, or Jewish doesn't mean that this has much to do with his or her music or cultural practices. This applies to listeners and viewers as much as it does to artists. Turkish people in Britain do not inevitably feel the desire to watch Turkish television programmes, and when they do so, they do not watch them in such a way that cements their sense of connection to some broader Turkish "community" (Aksoy and Robins, 2000). Equally, artists who are socially labelled as "black" or "white" or "Italian-American" may justifiably feel that this social label has very little to do with their music. The prevalence of these sorts of assumptions becomes clear when people feel the need to highlight the exceptions. For example, over the years, it seems that whenever Larry Harlow has been mentioned or profiled in articles about salsa he has almost always been described as "Jewish", as if it is somehow a novelty that a "non-biologically" Latin person could be involved in producing some of the most influential Latin music of the twentieth century. Presumably the label would be less of a problem if he was considered to be only an "imitator" (on the question of imitation, see Hosokawa, 1999). But as one of the "originators", reference is continually made to this identity label. One problem here is that the same terminology (ethnic origins) is used as part of the vocabulary of critique, so the Latin particularity of salsa is critiqued or acknowledged with reference to the Jewish particularity of one of its producers. Yet, essentialist assumptions about "ethnic" origins underlie both observations. This point is recognised by Angel Quintero-Rivera, and it becomes an awkward issue due to the way that he wishes to maintain the argument that salsa was "led" by Puerto Ricans and expressed "within" a Puerto Rican community:

With discordant harmonics by that "marvellous jew", New York piano player, Larry Harlow, I take the opportunity to clarify that, though I want to argue that the salsa phenomena can be perfectly well situated in specific geographies and times—as the product of the Caribbean in its (im)migration to New York in the second half of the twentieth century in which Puerto Ricans have had the leading role—this should not be confused with any form of essentialism with respect to the individual ability of a musician. That is to say, you do not have to be Puerto Rican nor, more broadly, a Latin Caribbean person to play salsa well. A few of the most important musicians in salsa history have been Jewish Americans from New York, but working or expressing themselves within the (im)migrant Puerto Rican community (Quintero-Rivera, 2002).

Why refer to Larry Harlow as Jewish if we are to adopt a non-essentialist approach to musical identities? Why not a piano player, or a New Yorker, as Quintero-Rivera does, or a man, or who knows what else besides? There is no easy way out of this dilemma. Although it is now generally acknowledged that a cultural producer does not have to be working class to create “working class art” or that a singer does not have to be black to create “black music”, the retention of the category seems to undermine any attempt to move beyond the endurance of exclusivist categories of both musical and social identity. Ultimately, we wonder whether such references to origins, “background” or ethnic label tell us very much. Perhaps Adorno (1999: 9) was right when he once wrote; “Neither a composer’s origins nor his life history, nor even the impact of his music on a particular social stratum, yields any compelling sociological insights.”

A similar problem applies to discussions of sexuality in music. Why should our sexual activities incline us to particular types of cultural expression, whether as performers or fans? Even if we accept that a sense of the social self is realised and affirmed through various ritualistic musical activities (Small, 1998), does this mean that the music is anything to do with these activities? Furthermore, how do we understand the involvement of people in sequences of rituals which are not mutually exclusive? When someone dances to *Dancing Queen* by Abba at a gay disco, as many of us have, no matter how we might label our own sexuality, are we really to assume that there is a relationship between the dancer’s “identity” and this song? If the same person then visits a Latin fiesta the following afternoon and stops to watch a brass band concert in a park on their way, are we to equally assume that these musical rituals have anything to do with a sense of self “identity”? Music is surely something else besides or other than identities, and identities are something more (or less) than music.

This point can be taken further by focusing on one of the key assumptions in much of this thinking about placed and dispersed identities; that of belonging and solidarity, and how music can express affiliations, bonds, and a sense of belonging (i.e., the material or psychological bonds which unite people in a shared sense of class, race, gender, or nation). A number of writers agree that music can do this but disagree as to whether the sense of belonging precedes or follows the music. John Blacking (1995: 36) once argued that “Music cannot *instil* a sense of fellowship. . . The best that it can do is to confirm situations that already exist.” Frith’s later writings pose a challenge to such a position. Not only does music assist in the production of self, it can provide a sense of “imaginary” alliance, enabling “us to place ourselves in imaginary cultural narratives” (Frith, 1996: 124). Frith stresses the imagination, as does Martin Stokes in his writing on “the musical construction of place”. Stokes (1994: 4) argues that a “private collection of records, tapes and CDs illustrates the ways in which music can be used as a means of transcending the limitations of our own place in the world.” An obvious counter to Stokes is provided by Richard Barnet and John Cavanagh (1994: 36–37), when they comment on a similar sense of spatial fantasy; “A pop song can carry an anxious 12 year old from the slum streets of a Rio to a fantasy world of luxury and thrills. . . you can lie on a straw mat on the dirt floor of a Bangkok shanty town listening to Michael Jackson and imagine



yourself living another life.” The point being that the straw mat will remain whilst the music is playing (even if the surroundings are temporarily forgotten). The straw mat will remain as the melodies become a memory.

In arguing that “identification is always imaginary”, Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (2000) have suggested that not all forms of “musically articulated identity” are the same. They have made what we take as a useful distinction between four patterns. On one side they refer to “purely imaginary identification”, what they call “psychic tourism through music”. In contrast are musical identities which come “after the fact ... driven by sociocultural identities that are ontologically and sociologically prior” (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000: 35). This latter is in keeping with Blacking’s stance, the former is the type of musical teletransportation which Stokes is referring to. Between these poles Born and Hesmondhalgh suggest that the musical imaginary may “prefigure” potential emergent forms of sociocultural identity and culture. Music can provide intimations or an impetus which can contribute to new forms of identity. Born and Hesmondhalgh also argue that musical identities may be constituted in a more restrictive manner and used to reinforce existing identities and to impede change and cultural transformation (a process which often involves the active political intervention of oppressive states). These are useful distinctions but they are still bound to the assumption that music is implicated in imaginary forms of identification, social belonging and solidarity.

Discussions of music and identity have, in general, always involved notions of solidarity, consensus, and belonging. This has been most apparent when musical practices are theorised in terms of the communities (real or “imagined”)—the migrant Puerto Rican community (Quintero-Rivera, 2002), the country community (Negus, 1999), subcultures (Hebdige, 1979; Willis, 1990), scenes (Straw, 1991; Cohen, 1999), or “taste cultures” (Lewis, 1991). Similar notions inform genre categories used for marketing and promotion by the music business which also make the same assumptions about the type of music a person buys and their sense of affiliation to other people; that they inhabit genre worlds (Frith, 1996) or genre cultures (Negus, 1999; Toynbee, 2000).

Why should purchasing, listening to, or dancing with the same piece of music imply a profound sense of belonging to and participation in the creation of a scene, subculture, genre culture, or imagined community? In suggesting that this may not always be the case, we are not denying the place of music in the politics of solidarity. However, we do wish to highlight the neglect of the way music is often associated with disaffiliation, ambivalence, and disengagement. Music intersects with, can become an integral part of, or can produce, and be used—consciously or unintentionally—to produce a clear lack of belonging. This may perhaps be one of the often-overlooked potentials of music as a cultural form—its refusal to be tied to projects of identity (whether political, subcultural, commercial, national or transnational).

The issue we are concerned with here is not closeness, the bonds that connect the dispersed “communities” or “markets” or “genre cultures” of rock, country, soul or salsa, nor is it the concomitant sense of difference from other categories of music and people. As Tia DeNora (2000) has shown in great detail, music is used in ways which continually mark out boundaries, affirm a sense of “I” and “we”, and it can

be drawn into the most intimate sensual moments or played to cause antagonism during personal disputes. However, we are not just concerned with how music is appropriated when creating sonic walls and bridges. Instead, we want to point to the experience of *distance* from all available categories and the experience of distance between self and categories (of music and identity). The feeling of distance may well be experienced as anomie; estrangement from the tastes, norms, and values of others, a feeling of not being part of a group, of not-identifying with those who are “into” the music or not sharing anything other than a love of the music with the producers of that music. Or, it might entail a more profound sense of alienated distance from the social conditions, work, and leisure activities that have produced such music. At the same time, this may involve a critical sense of detachment, or semi-detachment, from what can seem like the bland, grey conformity of superficial cultural belonging. This becomes apparent when performers disrupt the expectations of their audiences—an occurrence which tends to occur infrequently. An obvious example would be Bob Dylan’s tours in the mid 1960s that were almost universally greeted with booing, heckling, slow hand clapping, and walk-outs. Music can also be greeted with ambivalence—a response that is far more common than one would assume from skimming through the writings on this subject. Those who have attended numerous clubs and concerts for years will be familiar with instances of mixed reaction to performances, tensions amongst listeners/dancers, and a detectable lack of unity amongst those involved. If a feeling of not-sharing, not-belonging can be apparent when listening to the same performance at an event in a specific place, then it must surely be pronounced when the same music and artists are experienced across spaces.

If what we do with cultural forms is as complex as we are continually told by those who have researched the complexities of reception and the “uses and gratifications” of audiences and if, as listeners, we actively bring all manner of interpretations to musical practices and events, then the time-space expansion (or globalisation) of music can never be simply about an extension of the bonds of communities, sub-cultures, or scenes. If we assume that listeners can interpret music in multiple ways and that music will be “appropriated” and reembedded into specific individual, familial, and localised points of reference, then music listening and the associated practices of consumption can never simply and unproblematically entail a sense of community, identification, solidarity, and shared affiliation. A similar point has been made by Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins (2000) in a study of the reception of television programmes amongst Turkish-speaking people in London, where they found that viewing did not so much involve and facilitate a sense of belonging and connection to home, nor to an “imagined” diasporic community, but feelings of detachment and ambivalence.

On this point it is worth considering the temporality of music, a significant and under-researched issue. A musical act can undoubtedly set in motion a play of possibilities, but by its very nature it is a performance of a particular duration (even the “performance” of listening to a recording). What happens when the music stops? What happens at the end of the performance when the crowd goes home? What happens when I turn off the tape? Do we “return” to the same condition, or do we

move onwards towards some transformed state of being? There is a temporality and impermanence to musical experience that renders links to the identity of a person, collectivity, and a specific time and place in an extremely tentative way, unless we are assuming a very temporary state of “identity” or sense of belonging.

The temporality of music may actually be one of the characteristics which does not so much allow an affirmation or construction of identity as a retreat from the social categories with which our sense of self must be negotiated. On this point, it may be useful to open up a space that will allow us to talk about and research the non-representational, non-semiotic, and “disembodied” aspects of musical experience and communication. Richard Middleton has made a significant contribution to finding a route in this direction with his “search for a theory of gesture” (Middleton, 2000a: 105). Middleton (see also 1990) is concerned with the link between bodily processes and musical processes; how music connects with certain corporeal movements, physical gestures, and neural processes. Yet, if we are concerned with the corporeal, then we should also be concerned with the incorporeal. For example, the moments of transcendence—the feeling of going out from, away from the body, and the sensation of going down deep inside into the body. These are sensational, experiential, phenomenological aspects of musical experience that are so often avoided and evaded in sociologies of identity and either left open to mystical explanation or dismissed, from an avowedly “materialist” stance, as dubiously ideological epiphenomena—for Middleton these seem to be symptoms of what he calls “musical alienation” (Middleton, 2000b: 59). In arguing that we should take these experiences of interiority and exteriority seriously, and actually research them (find out what’s going on psychologically, phenomenologically, physiologically), we are quite explicitly not suggesting a shift towards claims about the immediate sensory appeal of music nor any notion of the apparent autonomy of music. Instead, we see a value in attempting to grasp what is happening when music seems to connect with a sense of being external to or internal within the body. On this point, much of the writing about the body that has crept into the study of popular music mainly from cultural studies has, in general, been overwhelmingly concerned with the appearance of the body. Yet, there is also an important literature which is seeking to comprehend certain “internal” bodily processes and their consequences for notions of identity (see Csordas, 1994).

The “bodily” experiences we are referring to might perhaps be related to the way that music does not always contribute to the construction and reinforcement of identities but to the temporary release from identities. It is perhaps this that may be momentarily happening at the big concert and on the dance floor, or when listening to a recording allows for sonic immersion. The rock concert or rave or world music festival may unite people across class, race, gendered, national terms of reference and dissolve difference in some cosmopolitan manner, allowing an equal sense of solidarity and belonging. This has certainly been claimed by those attending such events and picked up on by various commentators. Likewise, the salsa concert may set up “contact zones” and enable forms of pan-Latin solidarity or sympathy to the plight of those in the neglected workers barrio. But these feelings of belonging may not always be realised. Musical practices also allow a retreat from identities. The

musical event can contribute to the temporary extinction of identity whereby there is not so much a sense of solidarity, but an experience of distance and detachment, or that familiar feeling of being “lost in music”, a loss of a ego and a retreat from socially made up identities. When you dance to music, you do not necessarily affirm a “we” feeling, that it is “our” music and that you are a poor working class immigrant of a particular “ethnic group” nor that you are a privileged middle class accountant of a liberal disposition who likes world music—you forget it.

Our final suggestion is that we retain a sense of musical experience as simultaneously involving expression/reflection *and* construction, belonging *and* disaffiliation, fixedness *and* temporality, the corporeal *and* incorporeal. In attempting this, if only as a way of exploring in more detail just how music intersects with a changing sense of the self and collectivity, then we should not be afraid of what Edouard Glissant (1989: 154–155) once referred to as the “opaqueness” which “allows us to resist the alienating notion of transparency”. We must move away from the obvious markers of identity towards those that are more complexly coded and less easily decoded. Perhaps what seems at first to be the very opaqueness of music might provide some cues for a more general renewal of discussions about culture, the individual, and the collective self.

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**Keith Negus** is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths College, University of London. A co-ordinating editor of the journal *Popular Music*, he is the author of *Producing Pop* (1992), *Popular Music in Theory* (1996) and *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (1999).

**Patria Román-Velázquez** is Lecturer in Communication and Media Studies at City University, London. She has published articles in a number of journals and edited collections and is the author of *The Making of Latin London: Salsa Music, Place and Identity* (1999).