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The Role of House Concerts In Modern American Culture

A house concert is a musical performance that is presented in a home, or other noncommercial building, that is attended by a small group of people. The tradition of the house concert is deeply embedded in the roots of American music; in fact, playing intimate acoustic performances in the home was the most common way for the music of pioneering communities to be spread and preserved. The sounds of families and neighbors getting together in a home to play and celebrate music could often be heard flowing out of the living room, off of the front porch, and into the lush fields of rural America. Although these musical gatherings have evolved throughout history, some of the primary American values associated with these homegrown events are still being represented in the house concerts of today. Through the use of historical and ethnographic research, I will exhibit how contemporary American house concerts reflect the specific timeless American values of self-sufficiency and sense of community.

In order to give a clearer picture of what takes place at a house concert, I will first briefly illustrate what these events have consisted of in years past in America, as well as give a general overview of what typically occurs at the house concerts of today. For many farm families living in the early 1900s, gatherings that revolved around music became a regular part of their recreation. During the Great Depression, getting together to play music, share stories, dance, and laugh, helped to emotionally nourish the rural community. However, it was not just local members of the community that would partake in these events; itinerant musicians would also perform at these musical gatherings as a means to sustain a living. Growing up amongst the mountains of Tennessee during the 1930s, one man recalls some of his experiences with house performances through a discussion with folklorist and historian Charles Joyner:

> There was a very good fiddler and guitar player who travelled all over the country, and they came to our house every year. [The musicians] played for their food and

> lodging; they might even stay a week; and we would have people come in and they would play for everyone, and some of the local people would play, too. (211)

As time moved forward and advancements in technology were made, the regular occurrence of intimate events like these drastically diminished. With the advent of the automobile, radio, television, and recording industry, the ways in which people heard music became diversified, as they were no longer limited to only hearing the sounds that came from within their own community.

Although advancements in technology initially weakened the house concert tradition, the latest technological trends are now being used to this tradition's advantage. The Internet has sparked a revival of sorts for house concert performances, with many websites being established that encourage active participation in preserving the house concert heritage. Because of this, the number of house shows to spring up across the country has greatly increased within the past decade or so.

The typical house concerts of today are most often held in living rooms and are attended by approximately 25-50 people. Not only do families and neighbors come together to celebrate music at these gatherings, but largely thanks to the internet, these performances are now often attended by mixtures of strangers as well. Typically there is usually only one artist who performs two acoustic sets in front of a living room full of people who are keenly intent on listening to the performance. The intermission between these two sets is often used to socialize, eat a snack, speak with the artist, or purchase the artists' merchandise. Some house concerts even feature a pot-luck dinner before the performance begins, and typically one-hundred percent of the donations made by the people that attend these events go directly to the artist who is performing.

Again, I will be using historical and ethnographic research to show how these get-togethers reflect the timeless American values of self-sufficiency and sense of community. Before conducting the ethnographic research with regular participants of house concert events, a number of sources were researched for information that would help to give additional insight into the social significance of these intimate gatherings.

The first of these sources, "Southern Music, American Music," written by traditional music historian Bill Malone, attempts to explain why certain social classes gravitate towards certain types of music. Malone depicts music as being inherently class conscious, describing musical preference as a

means of "social and economic distancing from one's neighbors (Malone, 11, 1979)." The majority of contemporary American house concerts keep with the tradition of celebrating "roots music," a term that is often synonymous with "folk music," but also includes musical forms such as blues, bluegrass, country, and gospel. Malone's insights will help to explain the connection between this type of music and musical performances done in the home.

Distinguished historian and folklorist Charles Joyner further illustrates the connection between musical preference and social class in his book, "Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture." Joyner explains that the appeal of country music lies in its ability to "express an understanding of the peaks and valleys of everyday life," while using a down-to-earth lyrical approach that speaks to the working-class (Joyner, 203, 1999). Also strewn throughout Joyner's discourse are examples of the self-reliant mentality often associated with working-class ethics. He shares stories of people that had a desire to make music but could not afford to buy an instrument, a circumstance that resulted in them creating an instrument for themselves. This self-sufficient nature is a topic that will be discussed in relation to contemporary house concert performances.

Another subject of discourse in Joyner's book deals with the effects that family, significant others, and community structure have on the shaping of one's viewpoint of tradition. Of course, the extent to which one is exposed to a certain tradition and how it is viewed in childhood will largely influence how that individual perceives that tradition later in life. Relating this to musical performances done in the home, many of the participants in my ethnographic research described music as playing an important role in their home and family life while growing up. Along with this, Joyner discusses some of the tensions that arise when dealing with the concept of tradition, pointing out that all "throughout history there would seem to have been a creative tension between satisfaction and dissatisfaction, between pressures to keep things as they are and pressures to seek a newer way (Joyner, 224, 1999)." As with anything, house concert performances have evolved throughout history. What were once gatherings solely solicited by word-of-mouth communication, are now events being promoted with bits of technology, as people continue to take advantage of the tools they currently have at hand.

Just as Joyner speaks on the topic of tradition and the role that family and community play in its preservation, "The Influence of Family in the Preservation of Appalachian Traditional Music: From the Front Porch to Performance," examines this topic in great detail as it relates to music. Written by Wright State University graduate student Kathy Q. Hayes, this thesis reveals just how important performing music in the home was to the people of the Appalachian Mountain area. Hayes emphasizes that music was a part of everyday life for the families of Appalachia, and the preservation of their traditional songs were of the utmost importance to their heritage. In conjunction with this, Hayes describes the Appalachian people as being very self-sufficient in regards to daily living rituals and entertainment, which is a trait that I will be linking to the behavior of house concert participants.

Similar to Hayes' thesis, the book "Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers," another source written by traditional music historian Bill Malone, alludes to the self-sufficient behavior among those associated with various forms of roots music. Malone calls attention to the working-class mentality and traditional values that surround the culture of this music, while also taking note of how participation in this culture can "revive [a] sense of rustic virtue, domestic warmth, and tradition that seem absent from modern urban life (Malone, 115, 1993)."

Not only can contemporary American house concerts be related to the history and development of roots music, but the values that drive people to participate in these events can also be traced back to the very beginnings of America. "American Beliefs: What Keeps a Big Country and a Diverse People United," a book written by University of Arizona English professor John Harmon McElroy, brings to light the work-related beliefs that were born out of the European settlers' experiences during the colonial settlement of Jamestown in this country during the 17th century. After a difficult start to their settlement concerning a lack of food, the colony's "proprietors" back in England granted each of the colonists with three acres of land in which to grow their own food and feed themselves. Those who were not willing to put forth an effort would consequently not be able to eat. Among the work-related beliefs to spring out of these experiences include the ideas that "everyone must work" and "people must benefit from their work (McElroy, 2000, 37)." These two beliefs are displayed through the actions of house concert musicians, working to support themselves and sustain a living through their craft.

Also commenting on primary American beliefs, "The Rise of the American Way of Life," a chapter excerpted from a book by pioneering anthropologist Francis L.K. Hsu, directly expresses that pioneers were self-sufficient because they had to be. The necessity to work in order to provide for themselves laid the foundation for a country which stresses self-reliance. In addition to discussing this American mentality, Hsu brings up that "no individual can be completely self-reliant or completely independent. Human existence requires that the individual ego achieve an adjustment or balance between the inner and outer environments (Hsu, 1981, 131)." Therefore, the people and community that surround an individual also play a critical role in that person's life. A common thread that will also be discussed, which is exhibited through the following ethnographic research, is the importance of a sense of community among those individuals involved in these musical gatherings. Now we turn our attention from the survey of literature to the analysis of the role that house concerts play in modern American culture.

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This ethnographic research was conducted through the use of an electronic survey. Through a form sent through email communication, contemporary house concert participants were asked a series of six short-answer questions. A total of twenty-seven house concert participants were asked to partake in this survey, fifteen of those being hosts of these gatherings, and twelve of those being musicians who regularly perform in homes. Using information found on their websites, those asked to take the survey were selected based upon their regular participation in these events. Although the questions slightly varied between the group of hosts and the group of musicians, both sets of questions mostly dealt with their motivations behind participation in these homegrown musical performances. In total, ten surveys were received back, as six house concert hosts and four house concert musicians shared their thoughts regarding this topic.

Although I will be showing how contemporary American house concerts reflect the timeless American values of self-sufficiency and sense of community, I will first start off by discussing the reasons for the prominence of roots music at these performances. Again, roots music if often synonymous with folk music. It is commonly performed acoustically, and a few musical forms of roots

music include the blues, bluegrass, country, and gospel. All of the individuals that were surveyed participate in the perpetuation of some form of roots music.

To understand why this is, we can first look at the music to come out of the postcolonial era of our country. As a result of the American Revolution, in which the original thirteen colonies banded together to break free from the rule of the British crown, Americans began to create their own culture and identities, and in doing so, began asserting their newfound freedom and independence. However, even though the colonial period was over and Americans were now asserting their own way of life, they could not escape the initial influence that European culture had on them. European instruments like the piano and fiddle, along with English and Scottish folk ballads, were making their way into the homes of many American families. Also adopting European instruments were African Americans in the South, placing into the instruments the timbre and spirit of blues music, "in favor of a more expressive emulation of the human voice (Joyner, 1999, 196)."

The perpetuation of folk ballads in American music can further be attributed to the social elitism that traditional music historian Bill Malone speaks of in his book "Southern Music, American Music." According to Malone, "the opportunities for the poor to have heard actual concerts or recitals of high-art music during the colonial era would have been rare (Malone, 1979, 10)." With their lack of resources to hear what classical and other high-art musical forms even sounded like, and the difficulties associated with travel that kept most people bound to their own community, the common people's own musical traditions of this time ended up becoming perpetuated.

Concerning the instrumentation associated with various forms of roots music, such as the guitar, fiddle, and banjo, the reasons for these selections were also born out of historical circumstances. While both the guitar and fiddle possess European origins, the banjo is a very unique instrument, combining the features of an African stringed instrument with elements of a European guitar. For many pioneer families, buying any one of these instruments would have caused a lot of financial strain in their home. However, this burden was combated in the early 1900s when the Sears-Roebuck and Montgomery Ward mail-order catalogues introduced inexpensive guitars, fiddles, banjos, and a slew of other instruments, to people who would otherwise not be able to afford them. Largely due to the accessibility and low-cost of musical instruments brought on by these two

companies, the number of people that began to create music all across the rural plains of America quickly grew (Carlin & Carlin, 2000, 55).

Not only did the increased attainability of certain instruments help to popularize them, but the portability of lightweight, stringed instruments such as the guitar, fiddle, and banjo, also helped to spread their prevalence in America. For this reason, all three of these instruments were ideal choices for traveling musicians and members of the community that would play music in one another's home. However, being the most flexible out of the three in terms of acoustics, the guitar quickly became the most favored instrument for voice accompaniment (Carlin & Carlin, 2000, 55). To this day, the acoustic guitar remains the most preferred instrument to use in performances of roots music.

Reflecting the conventions of the traveling musicians that came before them, each of the four house concert musicians that were surveyed through the ethnographic research use the guitar as their main instrument with which to perform. Furthermore, all of them use acoustic guitars in their performances, although sometimes their instruments may be amplified at a low level for increased volume. Just as the country-blues musicians of the past traveled from house to house, playing their collection of songs on an acoustic guitar in order to sustain a living, these house concert musicians also use their musical abilities to provide for themselves, and in some cases, their families as well. For this reason, among some others, participation in house concert performances can be associated with the primary American beliefs that "everyone must work" and "people must benefit from their work (McElroy, 2000, 37)."

These beliefs, having been brought on by the European settlers' experiences during the colonial settlement of our country in the 17th century, have propelled generations of Americans to become self-sufficient in order to provide for themselves and their families. University of Arizona English professor John Harmon McElroy describes the typical American work ethic when he asserts that "America was from the beginning, and remains to this day, a society of workers, most of whom may be said to begin life with little more than a willingness to work and an ambition to be at least self-supporting (McElroy, 2000, 49)." Giving some evidence to this assertion as it relates to musicians, after the abolishment of slavery with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment of the United States in 1865, many African Americans had difficulties in finding enough work to sustain a living. In response

to this, some turned to music as a means of income, filling juke joints and homes with the sounds of their guitars, and making just enough money to be able to provide themselves with food to eat (Carlin & Carlin, 2000, 103).

Concerning the self-sufficient musicians that perform at contemporary American house concerts, many have been enabled to sustain a living that they otherwise would not be able to if only performing in conventional venues. Once a business gets involved with an artist, a great amount of money is usually taken away from that person in exchange for the business's services. The vast majority of house concert hosts today, along with all six of the hosts that were surveyed, reject this convention by giving one hundred percent of the money brought in from those in attendance to the artists who are performing in their homes. With this being the customary behavior of hosts, one regular performer of house concerts avows, "House concerts are close to my heart––and my pocketbook," as these homegrown performances are seen as a way to remove the hassles associated with businesses, and revert back to simplified musical performances that benefit those who are directly associated with them.

Along with house concert musicians exhibiting self-sufficient behavior, the hosts of house concerts also display this value through the work they undertake in order to put on these events. All of the hosts who participated in the ethnographic research take matters into their own hands when it comes to organizing a show. Taking a direct approach to the recruitment of musicians to perform in her home, one host from Nashville declares "I just call folks and invite them to play," while one Northeastern Tennessee couple reveals:

> We initially started booking by looking at the tour schedules of musicians that we like to see when they might be traveling near us, then suggesting a concert date that they were showing as open. We'd offer them a place to stay on their tour and a gig where everyone listened and paid a modest donation to hear them.

Along with methods such as these, a few of the hosts also recruit musicians through involvement in their regional folk alliance chapter. The hosts use the annual conferences associated with these chapters as a way to hear roots musicians perform. These folk gatherings also provide an opportunity to get to know the artists, and inquire about them possibly playing a show in a host's home.

Furthermore, self-sufficient behavior is also exhibited through the hosts' methods for recruiting people to attend these shows. Promotion for these events is often carried out by the hosts themselves, with the majority of them using the internet as their primary recruitment tool. Social-networking sites and email lists are often utilized to attract attendees, and one host even sends out press releases to his local entertainment papers in order to get the word out.

With these instances of self-reliant behavior exhibited through the individuals associated with house concert performances, one way that their behavior can be analyzed is to view them as challenging the power structures of our society by going around established organizations. In “The Rise of the American Way of Life,” a chapter excerpted from a book by Francis L.K. Hsu, the pioneering anthropologist discusses a typical American ideology regarding the rejection of certain structures, by expressing that “The self-reliant man can…join an organization he likes better or form an organization of his own. The ‘going into business myself’ ideology is at work here (Hsu, 1981, 135).” In other words, dissatisfaction with commercial venues in one way or another has propelled some individuals to establish their own outlets in which musicians can perform, such as one house concert host who proclaims that performances in homes are “a better opportunity for performers and the audience to interact. [There are] no distractions during the performance, like a waiter dropping off a beer, or some guy in the front hitting on a waitress.”

On the other hand, although a slight aversion to established organizations might be the drive for some individuals to begin creating their own musical events, the more that I learn about the people involved in house performances, the more I see that it is not so much of an anti-commercialist attitude they possess at all, but rather a pre-commercialist attitude that is focused on the preservation of tradition and the development of community. To first discuss the concept of tradition as it relates to these musical events, distinguished historian and folklorist Charles Joyner reveals in his book, "Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture,” that “the extent of an individual’s interest in folklore performance is probably shaped by the extent of his or her exposure to traditional expressive culture; providing exposure is partly accomplished by the family…and partly by the community structure (Joyner, 1999, 259).”

Concerning the exposure of expressive culture that Joyner speaks of as it relates to the family and community structures, the majority of house concert participants that were surveyed affirmed that they grew up in an environment that embraced music. In one instance through the ethnographic research, a house concert host of nine years described the prominence of music in her childhood:

> I grew up in a rural community in upstate New York in my grandmother's house. My grandmother taught piano lessons and was the church organist. She also played for local minstrel and talent shows in which my brother, sister and I often performed as a vocal trio. My parents were active in vocal groups within our community.

Carrying on the traditions in which she was conditioned with in her childhood, the host is now a part of a faculty band at the school in which she teaches, while her husband is a full-time pianist, and her own children are all in acoustic bands. Just as this host recounted her musical past, one regular performer of house concerts also reminisced how music was a part of her everyday life while growing up in Michigan:

> Mom was a concert pianist and Dad played the drums. Mom loved classical and Broadway musicals. Dad loved Neil Diamond, Frank Sinatra and the Rolling Stones. My siblings and I took piano lessons when we were young and I learned to play guitar at age eleven. The music in our house came from the stereo mostly, but also Mom on the piano or Dad playing drums in the basement along with records.

This roots artist has gone on to play dozens of house shows over the years, preferring the low-key atmosphere of these gatherings over the typically non-personal performances occurring in larger venues.

The strong effects that family can play in the preservation of tradition is evidential in the previous examples, just as Wright State University graduate student, Kathy Q. Hayes, displays in her thesis, “The Influence of Family in the Preservation of Appalachian Traditional Music: From the Front Porch to Performance.” Coming from a well-known musical family, the Queen family, Hayes recounts from first-hand experience that the families of the Appalachian mountain region “preserved the music by performing in their homes for themselves and friends. As families moved from the area, they took their music with them and performed for others (Hayes, 2008, 4).” Living in isolated mountain

communities, the families of Appalachia often got together for social gatherings to learn songs from their neighbors and entertain themselves with various crafts. In this instance, we see both the family and community structures being responsible for the exposure of traditional expressive culture.

In present day, this idea of a musical community is one that we see being echoed through contemporary house concert performances. As previously mentioned, the desire for a sense of community is one of the key factors found through the ethnographic research that drives hosts and musicians to participate in these intimate performances. This idea is clearly displayed through the direct remark of one house concert performer, who expressed:

> The performer, whether it be on a large festival stage, or a small humble living room serves the same function, which is to be the vehicle for a unifying experience. The more I do this the more I recognize that it is not about the performer, and it is not even about the music – it simply is to facilitate community.

In addition to this insight, numerous other comments were made regarding the importance of music and community. From hosts who moved to a new area and just wanted to meet people with similar interests, to a social musician who prefers to have the ability to closely interact with an audience, these shows have allowed for closer-knit musical communities to form all over the country.

Not only does the small audience size make these gatherings more personal, but the physical space itself in which the performances take place also creates a strong connection between the audience members and the musicians. Being that all of the participants are usually condensed in a host's living room, many performers are situated very close to their audience. One musician's first house concert gig was performed in a room where the front row was less than three feet away. Since the physical boundaries are often blurred as a result of the space, another musician notes that "in a house concert, there is less emphasis on the performer being more 'special' than they need to be for the purposes of the event, and therefore more relatable to as people." The increased opportunities to interact with the performer before the show, during the intermission, and after the show, all attribute to the heightened sense of community that people feel when participating in these get-togethers.

The ways in which music is created, distributed, and performed has always said so much about our national identity. Driven by the same desires and mindsets that have governed our country

since its inception, the values of those associated with contemporary American house concerts reflect the timeless American values of self-sufficiency and sense of community. The lure of participating in these events that transport people back to pre-commercial days, has people from all over the country opening up their doors to musicians, friends, and strangers, with the goal of bringing the music that they love into an intimate setting within their own community.

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