

## Music in American Cultures: An Anthology of Autobiographies

*Mark DeWitt*

In the spring of 1996, my colleagues Rajna Klaser, Chan Le, and I were teaching an undergraduate survey course at the University of California at Berkeley entitled "Music in American Cultures," when the editors of *repercussions* approached me with the idea of hand-picking some students' autobiographical essays for publication. I agreed to collaborate on this project for several reasons. First was that two other articles in this issue of the journal, by Fred Everett Maus and Paul Attinello, offer somewhat similar personal stances, albeit with more sophistication. The students' work complements theirs by offering perspectives on music from life-paths that do not lead to careers in musicology.

Importantly for us as teachers and ethnomusicologists, we found the autobiography assignments very exciting to read, as they gave a rich and complex portrait of our students and the music they listen to, a snapshot of our musical times. Our urge to share the best of the essays with a wider readership was strong, although for reasons of length we could include only eight of them here, and even those have been shortened for this anthology. Forthcoming from Klaser is a paper that treats student autobiography from the "Music in American Cultures" course in greater depth.

The idea of presenting an assemblage of persons' written accounts of what music has meant in their lives resonates with two ideas current in the field of ethnomusicology. In her book on zouk, Jocelyne Guilbault commissioned informants to write entire chapters of the book, and noted that while such a practice is rare in ethnomusicology, it has its precedents in

anthropology (Guilbault 1993: xx). Just because ethnography has traditionally treated informants as lacking in literacy and analytical acumen, we should not ignore such skills when they possess them.

So, if this collection of student writings presents reporting by informants as some sort of unorthodox ethnography, to what research aim are they informing us? Guiding us may be the spirit of the Music in Daily Life project (Crafts, Cavicchi, and Keil 1993), a set of interviews "in which people talk about music in their lives." According to Charles Keil, "The puzzle for readers is that each person seems so unique, not conforming to the *Billboard* chart categories at all, pulling together diverse musical resources to shape a personal identity..." (Keil and Feld 1994: 334-335). So often in writing about music we devote all of our attention to the composer or musician and make simplistic assumptions about the listener's needs, motivations, or thought processes. What the Music in Daily Life project showed in interviews and what this present collection provides in prose is a higher-resolution picture of how both musicians and nonmusicians listen to and use music to serve their various individual purposes and needs.

The institutional context of the University of California at Berkeley and its American Cultures requirement frames the complementary topic of group identity, which we also asked the students to consider in their essays. In the fall of 1991, Berkeley began requiring that all undergraduates take an American Cultures course, following the recommendation by its Special Committee on Education and Ethnicity for a breadth requirement to "elucidate such major concepts as race, ethnicity, class, and gender and their influences upon the ways that Americans think about themselves and approach issues and problems that confront their society." The "Music in American Cultures" course, designed for first- and second-year students with no prerequisites, has been offered at least once a year since the inception of the requirement.

Race is paramount in the framing of the requirement:

The courses which the committee envisages are integrative and comparative. We intend that each racial or ethnic group be studied in the larger context of American history, society, and culture. Such courses should substantially consider at least three of the five main racial/cultural groups in American society: African American, American Indian, Asian American, Chicano/Latino, and European American. To be adequately comparative, no one of these groups may be the focus of the greater part of the course. (Simmons 1989:4)

This is not a “minority studies” requirement; European Americans are placed right alongside the other groups and receive equal treatment via comparative study. The requirement challenges teachers and students to think both in terms of cultural differences and in terms of amalgamation. When teaching the “Music in American Cultures” course, we privilege neither assimilationist nor ethnic separatist ideologies, but we discuss a range from one to the other.

We give the autobiography assignment right at the beginning of the course, as a way for us to become better acquainted with the students better and to get them working with some of the central concepts. We ask them to write three to five pages, not to provide a complete life’s story but to develop examples of how music has been important in their lives and how they thought their sociocultural backgrounds might have affected their musical lives. To aid them in this effort, we each presented our own autobiographies in ten-minute lecture form on the first day of class, and we assigned them to read both the five-page summary recommendation for the American Cultures requirement quoted above and the introductory chapter to Ronald Takaki’s *A Different Mirror*. In class we sought to reinforce Takaki’s encouraging words:

...The people in our study have been actors in history.... They are entitled to be viewed as subjects—as men and women with minds, wills, and voices.... Sometimes they are hesitant to speak, thinking they are only “little people.” “I don’t know why anybody wants to hear my

history," an Irish maid said apologetically in 1900. "Nothing ever happened to me worth the tellin'." But their stories are worthy. (Takaki 1993: 14, 15)

In the context of the kind of large lecture course that we were teaching, students are often made to feel like "little people." One purpose of the assignment and of the course was have them think and learn not only about other people but also about themselves.

When I read eighty of these musical autobiographies, the indissoluble tension between the discovery of similarities among a group of students and of individual differences rose to the fore. The essays that appear here are representative in that they at once invite and refute generalization. Most of the essayists are in the 18-22 age bracket. For many, the theme of rebellion is prominent, but the object of resistance can be parents, environment, peers, or ethnic stereotypes, and some do not feel compelled to rebel at all. In two cases, music often viewed negatively by the society at large receives a more positive interpretation: Gonsalves credits rock with providing him the means to think independently, while Abdulla calls rap a "sanctuary" and a "space for dreams" for herself. In Kwong's tastes for older musical theater and big band music and in Jacobs's for progressive rock and free jazz, we read of the authors' sacrifices of peer group support as they follow their own personal paths. On the other hand, music also still serves as a means for bringing people together, whether in Ko's high school band, Nezami's or Gonsalves's rock bands, or Irons's visit to a black Los Angeles church.

Race and ethnicity receive many takes in this anthology. Abdulla self-consciously embraces rap music as part of her African-American identity and chooses to focus on the positive images of women that hip hop culture provides. Gonsalves consciously rejects the music of his acknowledged ethnic group as "just not my style." On the racially diverse Berkeley campus, where ethnic student associations are quite prominent, Irons's

claim to have no ethnicity at all is a relatively common one among white students. Ko's essay pulls together issues that recur in many of the essays by East Asian and Asian American students: the relationship between musical training and upward class mobility, the forced piano study, the concentration on Western art music to the exclusion of other forms. Kwong's experience both amplifies Ko's points (as with her association of the violin, piano, and flute as stereotypically "Asian" instruments within the Western instrumentarium), yet she stakes out her own territory by choosing to study the trumpet instead. Nezami initially present himself as an immigrant who carries on the music of his homeland, then modulates to an assimilation story in which the old music sounds "weak" and the music of his new environment "strong." Whitney, who immerses himself for a time in rap music, seems well aware of the ironies and hazards of assuming the identity of a group not one's own.

The research agenda may not yet be so clear after all. Keil himself doesn't seem to be able to decide what is most interesting—the wide variety of individual differences or the trends, however exception-ridden, that appear. Perhaps some vagueness of purpose can be forgiven, at least temporarily, as we seek methods for interpreting what people tell us. The most important promise of such work, in my opinion, is that it provides a testing ground for assumptions about listeners, ethnic identification, age stratification, and a host of other topics that are legion in folk speech and in scholarship about music of all kinds. It reveals *Billboard*-type categories for the convenient fictions that they are, and invites us to invent better theories of the use of music in everyday life.

## Works Cited

- Crafts, Susan, Daniel Cavicchi, and Charles Keil, eds. 1993. *My Music*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Guilbault, Jocelyne. 1993. *Zouk: World Music in the West Indies*, with Gage Edouard Benoit and Gregory Rabess. Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology, eds. Philip V. Bohlman, and Bruno Nettl. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Keil, Charles, and Steven Feld. 1994. *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Klaser, Rajna. "The Development of Listening and Collecting Habits Among the College Student Population." Paper to be presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology (in Toronto, 31 October to 3 November 1996).
- Simmons, William S., Chair. 1989. "Proposal for an American Cultures Breadth Requirement: Report by the Special Committee on Education and Ethnicity," 2-5. Berkeley: U.C. Berkeley Academic Senate.
- Takaki, Ronald. 1993. *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co.

\*\*\*

### *Aliya Abdulla*

Not having grown up in New York, the cultural mecca into which rap was first born and popularized, I was among the legions of youth whose earliest encounter with rap was a bouncy, danceable twelve-inch by the Sugar Hill Gang called *Rapper's Delight* (Sugar Hill Records, 1979) that my older cousin would "pump" in his room at full volume all day long. It was this single that announced the debut of an art form—worldwide.... I had been exposed mainly to the progressive rock and funk of my other cousin's record collections, my love of music was just developing, and this jam made an indelible impression on me. I was told by my parents many years later that whenever my cousin would play this song, an inevitable smile would always appear on my face. It must have been the

rapid beat of the song that first grabbed me, bellowing in the background while the “gang” flowed with their lyrics. Or it could have been the hook that repeatedly answered each verse of the song that I enjoyed the most. I was even heard constantly humming it in the shower. Even years later, after the song had aged so much that the term “old school” was now used to refer to it, I remember taping it off the radio, playing it, rewinding it, playing it some more, and being able to recite most of the nonstop rhymes. Little did I know when my cousin was playing it daily that rap, and *Rapper’s Delight*, barely scratched the surface.

...I just knew what I heard on the radio or what my cousin “pumped” in his room—Grandmaster Flash, Funky Four Plus One, Kurtis Blow, Bambaataa’s *Planet Rock*, and Newcleus’s *Jamonit*. Thanks to the influence of my older relatives, my musical tastes were rounded off by David Bowie, Bob Marley, Parliament, Talking Heads, and the Clash.

It was not until elementary school, while I was entrenched in punk, new wave, and reggae, that hip hop really began to affect me, opening up perspectives beyond the music and into the culture of the streets. KRS-One supports this view in his 1996 release “R.E.A.L.I.T.Y.”: “Reality aint always the truth / Rhymes equal actual life in the youth / ...When I kick the rhyme I represent how I feel / The sacred street art of keeping it real.” I realized for the first time that hip hop is the poetry of life. It is a medium of expression which unites different segments of the population to a common cause. It is a tool used to educate, to expose the ills of society, or to plead for an end to our grievances as a people. In the late 1980s, Run-D.M.C. burst out of the underground with such singles as “Hard Times,” “Rock Box,” and “Sucker MC’s,” creating a defining moment in my life. To me, Run-D.M.C. represented the most original, alternative, supercharged music I had ever heard. As it turned out, their big beat-blasting sound also recalled the raw feel of hip hop parties in parks and community centers in Los Angeles....

Rap evokes the drums of Armageddon, but from the gangster fairy tales of N.W.A. (Niggas with Attitude) and Ice Cube, "The Nigga Ya Love to Hate," to the rampant black nationalism of Public Enemy, its appeal to me and to the youths of the nation rivals even that of rock 'n' roll. While addressing the hopes, dreams, and frustrations of belonging to a minority race in America, rap became for me the music of a whole generation, breaching barriers of race and class.

My early memories of childhood and growing up in the "hood" were always infiltrated by a keen sense of music. For every feeling I possessed, whether it be sadness, loneliness, happiness, or confusion with life, hip hop was present to answer my questions, to comfort me. I listened to it so much that every night it was my usual habit to fall asleep to the voice of KRS-One, Cypress Hill, or Das Efx. They would also wake me up in the morning with their harsh beats and brutal, realistic lyrics. They were present in all I did whether it was homework, exercise, chores, anything. The primary reason hip hop endeared itself to me was perhaps the fact that I could so easily relate to the artists and the emotions they expressed through their words. My youth was characterized by a "ghetto" life, one where the children were discouraged to dream of escape and a better life for themselves and their families. Dreams were immaterial and did not exist in the cruel reality of everyday life. It was in hip hop that I discovered a place where I was allowed to pursue my dreams. It was a sanctuary, an abode where no one could interfere with my fantasies. hip hop was something solid that I could grasp in difficult times, for in it I could listen to someone else telling me that life was not as harsh as it seemed to be. It is because of the fact that I embraced hip hop so deeply that I am successful to this day.

Rap bloomed in the depths of the ghetto, a place characterized by overarching poverty, violence, and crime. This fact demonstrates its awesome and unyielding power to flourish. Though currently reflecting a diversity of lifestyles, opinions, and feelings, rap responds directly and indirectly to the trials

and tribulations of life at the bottom, and for the most part remains true to the gritty reality of the streets that produced it. The raw creativity, however, has been honed into a precise art by a generation of young blacks. They create dialogue and often controversy, while testing the boundaries of art. This is evident in KRS-One's song "Ah-Yeah": "Don't call me a nigger... Call me a God cause that's what the black man is... Black women you are not a bitch, you're a goddess." Though the voices are varied and the topics endless, at its most basic level rap represents communication, instruction, and expression—all relayed through music. This is why KRS-One's revolutionary view found refuge in the music of hip hop. This music unites the black community—my community—which is a burgeoning nation. hip hop is the foundation from which the rap community is able to progress to a new level of self-awareness. It makes me proud to belong to such a community.

•••

### *Ken Gonsalves*

"You're just a prisoner of rock 'n' roll, and you've got a life sentence," Bruce Springsteen shouted to the crowd at Winterland Auditorium on 17 December 1978, fourteen days before the legendary rock palace was to be permanently shut down, in a concert that lasted four hours.... Of course, I had already been well aware of my imprisonment years before The Boss had pounded down the gavel on that famed winter night.

As I am one of the older students in this class, my musical journey has taken me on numerous avenues. The range of music started with the religious and ethnic songs of my family and continued into the various phases of rock 'n' roll that have had such a major influence on my life.... My curiosity about music has led me to explore many other musical styles, such as

reggae, blues, jazz, classical, and country. Throughout this journey, the one constant...has been the rock 'n' roll that captured my spirit....

...My first recollection of music came in the form of religious songs that my grandmother and great aunt sang so eloquently. I come from a Portuguese, working-class family with ties to Catholicism and a strong sense of tradition. Over the Christmas holidays, our family gatherings included the singing of the traditional holiday tunes with our throng of relatives. Our springtimes and summers were spent attending various Portuguese festivals throughout the Bay Area where we were forced to march in the parades and listen to the traditional music that included the "Alva Pumba" and the "Shamarita." The former is a Portuguese marching hymn while the latter is an ethnic folk dance song where the participants form a circle and exchange partners. I am very proud of my family heritage; however, I came to realize at an early age that this type of music just was not my style.

That did not sit well with my family and when a traveling music instructor hit town with his accordion, my cousins and I were forced into taking lessons with the promise of being able to take up guitar, once the guitars arrived. The accordion is one of the main instruments in Portuguese music and when this "Harold Hill" squeezed out a dance number for the relatives, it was all over for my cousins and me. I mastered the simple tunes that we had to learn but was chastised for playing too fast. The rock 'n' roll rebel in me just could not help it.

The guitars never did arrive and we were relieved of the accordion when our parents realized that we were not going to be the next great Portuguese "Shamarita" band. It was around this time that the rock world was being hit with the British invasion. My older brother, sisters, and cousins helped greatly to guide my musical tastes. My sister introduced Bob Dylan into our house while my brother was more interested in Motown. I began to form my own tastes in rock and tended to drift to the more rebellious music of The Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix,

and The Who. Dylan was too difficult to understand at the time, but I knew exactly what Mick Jagger was saying when he asked, "Well then what can a poor boy do, / Except to sing for a rock 'n' roll band?" (The Rolling Stones, "Street Fighting Man," *Beggar's Banquet*, London Records, 1968).

During the mid-seventies the rock world became very dreary. I was lying awake late one night in 1975 listening to the radio when the D.J. played a demo of the yet-to-be released "Born To Run" by Springsteen. That song stabbed a hook into me that has never been removed. Not knowing where my future was heading in my small hometown of Benicia, California (pop. 6,000 in 1975), I was especially captivated by the lines "Baby this town rips the bone from your back, / It's a death trap, / A suicide rap, / We got to get out while we're young, / Cause tramps like us, / Baby we were born to run," (*Born to Run*, Columbia Records, 1975).

From that point on I realized that there was something else beside the mainstream garbage such as Boston and The Eagles. I began to explore new musical avenues by spending countless hours in record stores. That is when I met Gregg Hill. Gregg worked at Tower Records and introduced me to a wide range of new artists such as King Crimson and Tangerine Dream and a new group called The Talking Heads...[as well as] The Ramones, The Sex Pistols, and The Clash. We formed our own punk band called Max Trash. Gregg had taught himself how to play guitar and with his aid I began to learn a few chords myself. We played in various clubs around the Bay Area, including the infamous Mahubay Gardens in San Francisco, a Filipino restaurant in the early evening and a punk palace all night long.... We never gained commercial success,...but we had more fun than most young men should be allowed.

...Gregg is now married and raising a family in Seattle while I am in the pursuit of my education. I still play the guitar on occasion and while I enjoy many types of music, nothing tops rock 'n' roll. Rock did not save my life but it certainly helped change me and guide me into the direction of being

able to think for myself. I have been able to look at life with an entirely different perspective than my relatives and peers. Rock 'n' roll fuels my drive to succeed, eliminates stress, and helps me to maintain my youthful enthusiasm. It was the godfather of punk, Lou Reed, who stated in the song simply titled "Rock 'n' Roll," "Despite all the computations, / You could dance to the rock 'n' roll stations, / And it was all right," (*Rock 'n' Roll Animal*, RCA Records, 1974).

•••

### *Laura Irons*

Unpacking in the U.C. Berkeley dorms this fall revealed that there were many differences between my roommate and myself. Like most students, there were the characteristic items in our suitcases including sweatshirts, photos of friends, and desk lamps. I unpacked these articles along with my music collection. Actually, "collection" is too broad a term; all I really unpacked was one tape (Kenny G's *Breathless*) that I planned to play on my small clock radio.

In contrast, across the room, my Russian roommate set up one of the largest tape/radio/CD players I had ever seen; she calls it a "boom box." Next, there was a Walkman, and finally, a carrying case filled with over 50 CDs! "Great," I thought, "now there will never be peace in this room!" She owned tapes and CDs ranging from heavy metal music to motion picture soundtracks, and in between lay popular songs recorded in French, Russian, and German...and she only spoke one of these languages! I thought to myself, "This is definitely going to be an issue between us."

Characteristically, I have always leaned towards music best described by the adjective "soothing." The last thing I want to listen to is a pulsing, loud rhythm and obtrusive lyrics (played

by a “boom box”) while I prepare in the morning for a hectic school day or attempt to work through a mathematical proof! Melodies which form the background to an event rather than the primary sound are my favorites. These are tunes which one hardly notices while dining in an elegant restaurant in the evening: the melodies seem to mold themselves into the quiet conversation of couples and the slight “clink” of silverware as one returns it to the plate edge....

My seventeen-year-old sister derogatorily refers to this genre as “elevator music.” She states that the songs are “boring” and that they “make [her] want to sleep.” I find her comments surprising, considering our music-listening experiences at home. As I was growing up, if Mom or Dad had the radio on in the house, it was tuned to either a Christian talk-radio channel or easy listening music. The Christian talk-radio station usually featured a child psychologist answering callers’ questions and sometimes a passage was read from the Bible. More often, the small house radio would play easy listening instrumentals and other soothing songs such as Richard Marx’s “I’ll Be Right Here Waiting for You.” These tunes resembled the music that my mom would listen to while working as a secretary. And although my dad listened to country music (as did most of his blue-collar friends) while he worked on a construction site, that was his “work music” and at home we rarely listened to anything like it.

Although I never fully realized it before, the music that I heard at home reflected more than just my mom’s desire to have “pleasant” background noise playing while she cleaned house or curled her hair in the mornings. The radio stations reflected a very non-ethnic, white background.... The easy listening station played songs primarily by white composers including Neil Diamond, Barbara Streisand, Richard Marx, and Amy Grant....

This homogeneity of ethnicity and culture also encompassed another facet of my life and musical background: religion. From my earliest memories, I was immersed in the

tightly knit community of my family's small, conservative Baptist church. Particularly dominant in this community was the belief in the rigid division between "secular" and "spiritual" things; the former were clearly frowned upon. Interestingly, my church did not condemn "The Star Spangled Banner" or the children's song "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider" for these tunes' lack of holiness, but rather chose to attack other secular music; most often, pulsing rock 'n' roll lyrics came under attack. Consequently, my parents forbade me from attending school dances. The idea of "worldly" music being played at these events was bad enough, so I am sure that the thought of their twelve-year-old swaying closely with another twelve-year-old of the opposite sex (and even the opposite denomination) made them shudder!

Although the agony of being left at home on school dance nights felt unbearable sometimes, I still enjoyed the church service on Sunday mornings.... The pleasure came from participating in rituals that I had been a part of since birth. The hymnals and ceremony of the morning were familiar, therefore comforting. I knew all the words by heart, knew that the lady in the front pew would always sing a little louder and higher pitched than the rest of the congregation members, and knew that even when I stood really close to my father I would not be able to hear words coming out of his mouth...even though his lips were moving!

All church services began with the customary prayer and then the thirty person choir (all Caucasian, resembling the rest of the congregation), dressed in royal blue robes, solemnly entered as we concluded with an "Amen." Then, under the direction of the music leader (who always seemed to be at least seventy years old), the congregation and the choir sang hymns to the deep, steady, solemn chords of the large organ.... Although the choir director referred to the hymns by the title and the number position they held in the hymn book, few needed his directions because most, like myself, had memorized "Amazing grace / how sweet the sound...."

Entrenched in the tradition of this ritual, I could not imagine that other Baptist churches would conduct themselves any differently. A week-long mission trip when I was fourteen challenged this notion. In the inner city of Los Angeles my church youth group had the opportunity to visit one of the largest churches in that neighborhood. The differences between this Baptist church and my Baptist church were black and white, literally. Whereas my church in Riverside had no members of color, black members comprised 100% of the Los Angeles congregation.

My friends and I felt like we were in a completely different world. In comparison to my church, this sermon struck me as more charged, the service length prolonged, and the prayer less sober. Affecting me most, however, was the chasm between the music in the Los Angeles church and in my congregation. This "new" sound was free, loud, and made me want to move my body to the swinging beat of the guitars, drums, and tambourines. People clapped, stomped their feet, and shouted "Amen." Although a part of me found this experience exhilarating and I longed to join in with this "new" style of singing hymns, the dominant part of me stood with my mouth open. I stood in awe of the fact that these people were Baptist, and so was I! I returned home from this trip appreciative of the differences between cultures, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds. For such a crucial appreciation, I find it unfortunate that I had to wait fourteen years to gain it.

Many more changes in my musical life occurred during the early years of my teens. My musical tastes began fluctuating along with the status of my love life at the time. I began to feel the heartache, longing, and various other heightened emotions that the popular ("Top 40") singers portrayed. My radio dial then rested on the pop music station 102.7 KIIS-FM instead of 90.1 K-LORD.... However, as "normalcy" returned, my dial returned to the Christian and easy listening stations. Thus, this state of "normalcy" was the one in which I arrived at U.C. Berkeley this fall. I unpacked my vestiges of home (Caucasian,

middle-class, conservative Baptist) across from a Russian woman, living in America on refugee status, with her immense “boom box” and greatly varied collection of tapes and CDs. I felt the anxiety start in my stomach and work its way up my chest; I wondered how I was ever going to live, and enjoy living, with someone who seemed so different than I. But then, I recalled the black choir singing “Amazing Grace” in Los Angeles—they sang to a faster beat, clapped their hands (more than would ever be acceptable in my church), and danced to the music. In the end, however, we all wanted to achieve the same end, to worship God. Things were not that different between my roommate and myself, my inner voice said: we both came here to achieve the best grades we could, to make friends, and to explore life away from our parents. The appreciation that I gained from the different culture of the Los Angeles church proved exhilarating, and so far, my dormitory experiences have elicited the same sensation.



### *Whitney Jacobs*

...[My father] could scarcely be more musical, a fact which in large part explains my musical upbringing and current propensities. A composer and professor of electronic music at the University of Tennessee, he was responsible for sparking my interest in music, both directly, through instruction, and indirectly, through passive exposure to the music he played and listened to. The direct instruction, which took the form of piano lessons at the age of about seven or eight, was wholly unsuccessful: I lacked motivation, lost interest, and to this day have not learned to play an instrument or to read music. I did, however, sing in my elementary school chorus, in which I excelled on account of my powerful voice and perfect pitch.... It

was my musical exposure through listening, though, which proved most successful at sparking a long-term musical interest.

...I have never been able to discern any similarity between the wide variety of music to which my father listened during my childhood (and indeed throughout his life) and his own compositional style. This variety, as it happened, became the bread and butter of my early life as a music listener; my father's eclectic record collection—supplemented with whatever struck my fancy on the radio—became my official source of musical stimulation. His collection consisted primarily of works from the Western classical tradition, as well as a great deal of rock, pop, soul, and R&B albums.... Out of the thousands of hours of listening I did on my father's stereo growing up, the only things I distinctly remember having heard were the songs "Peg" by Steely Dan and "Sexual Healing" by Marvin Gaye, and the ballet suite *Les biches* by Francis Poulenc. Clearly this was an unusual combination, one which foreshadowed my future eclecticism....

A major life transition occurred in my tenth year, with ramifications physical, psychological, and musical: my parents divorced. This was an extremely traumatic experience for me, producing both emotional and residential dislocation.... As little as I thought about it at the time, this was an important period of my musical development, for it marked the first time in my life that my choice of listening material was guided by social relationships, rather than by my father's tastes. One of the last things my father gave me before our relationship disintegrated was a cassette of Tchaikovsky's compositions, which I still have. This tape formed a staple of my listening during the years following my parents' divorce, when I had been cast adrift from my father and his record collection, and served to remind me of my "roots" in the Western classical tradition. Aside from it, however, the music I listened to and bought came to my attention through friends and from the radio....

It was not until high school that my musical interests came to be self-guided, though it took some time for this to happen.... I soon found myself listening to what was popular with my high school peers: “classic” rock.... Of this classic rock,...the groups which interested me the most were the so-called “progressive” rock bands: Yes, Pink Floyd, Genesis, King Crimson, and Emerson, Lake & Palmer, among others. What fascinated me about them was their incorporation of elements from classical music, primarily complex structures and virtuosic playing. Unfortunately, as my interest in progressive rock grew, I found myself increasingly alone. Most of my friends stuck with the more mainstream classic rock acts, put off by the pompous and cumbersome tendencies of “progressive” rock. Nor did any radio station in the state play what I wanted to hear. Clearly, it was time for me to strike out on my own.

Around that time—my junior year of high school—two developments influenced my musical life. The first was my adoption of a simple practice for finding music without the benefit of having necessarily heard it: having first heard, and liked, some piece of music, I would buy other recordings by that band or by its members. This worked well in that it produced a snowball effect of ever more and increasingly obscure recordings, and the practice still serves me well today. Its downside is the expense involved. The second development was my discovery of jazz. I no longer recall when I first heard “true” jazz—as opposed to the pop-fusion my father had sometimes listened to—but I recall it holding immense fascination for me. Though the dynamics of jazz tended to be similar to those of rock, there were many superficial differences between the two styles, including the increased rhythmic complexity of jazz, its different instrumentation, and, of course, its lack of words. This last characteristic is an important one, for I have long had a problem with song lyrics. This is due, I feel, to the fact that when I hear music it tends to trigger strong, emotionally charged, and composition-specific mental imagery, which may

change with repeated listenings. The presence of words in a musical piece, I have found, tends to constrain this process by diverting attention from the music—which I may hear differently from one listening to the next—to the lyrics—which have concrete meanings that I always hear the same way. I find it necessary, therefore, to listen to music that is fairly complex, thematically abstract, and impressionistic in order to be repeatedly stimulated by it. One of the unfortunate consequences of this necessity is that I have had to develop my musical tastes in a social vacuum.... My discoveries of various artists and works has had to depend, in large part, upon my own initiative and perseverance in hunting down obscure titles in the (fortunately) well-stocked record stores of Berkeley and Oakland. Needless to say, my enjoyment of music is at this point a largely solitary and increasingly esoteric pursuit, though not purely by choice.

...A psychologist doing longitudinal research would be intrigued to find that, having not communicated with my father in ten years, my character has converged with his to a significant degree, most notably in the area of music. Like him, I am a record (and mostly CD) collector.... I am also an audiophile, like him, with a stereo system of exhaustively compared and tested components that I have been collecting for several years. And, like him, I have almost ludicrously broad tastes in music—ranging from J.S. Bach to Gavin Bryars in the Western tradition and also encompassing elements of indigenous musics from countries as different as Japan, Tunisia, Brazil, India, Norway, and Kenya.... One significant difference between us, however, is in our unequal preferences for jazz. Where my father as I recall, never really listened to it, I listen to jazz more than anything else....

•••

*Margaret Ko*

...I was brought up in a very musically active environment. My father is in the speaker business in Taiwan and...many of my relatives are either famous violinists or pianists. Naturally my music experience started very early. The majority of middle- to upper-class parents in Taiwan provide their children with either violin or piano lessons. This is because Taiwanese society has the great image that children involved in classical music will become sophisticated and well-mannered.

Like many Taiwanese children, I started my music experience in kindergarten by going to group lessons in Taiwan. We learned children's songs and some basic music notation. Then, when I moved on to elementary school, I started my private piano lessons. It was very difficult for a playful child like me to sit in an hour-long lesson and practice every day. I hardly learned how to read music because of laziness, but instead memorized how the piano teacher played.... There was no motivation for me to practice what my piano teacher assigned me, and my parents were very strict about my practicing. Even with my enthusiasm for music,...my music experience wasn't very joyful.

However, my piano experiences gave me a lot of advantages in elementary school. When I was in the fifth grade, the school band started to recruit students. I easily went through the audition and made it into the band as a student conductor. It was fun to conduct the whole student population [singing] the national anthem in the daily ceremony, to see all the students standing straight, watching the national flag (and a little bit of me) with respect.... It gave me back some confidence with music making, and I appreciated having learned piano at a very young age.

I ended my student conducting when I graduated from elementary school and also ended my piano lessons due to academic pressure in junior high school. Since high school in

Taiwan requires a national examination, three years of junior high school preparation is crucial. Many people had to stop playing music for the same reason, unless they had already determined to be [professional musicians].... I really dislike the educational policy in Taiwan because they ignore not only students' talents, but also their nonacademic achievements....

When I moved to Los Angeles as a ninth grader in a boarding school, my limited English restricted me from most of the activities. Meanwhile, my massive homesickness and loneliness caused me to go into a depression. At this time, I tried to pick up the piano, starting with very slow sight reading in a little private practice room. It was a big disappointment how slowly I read music and how hard [it was] to finish one piece smoothly. I had lost a lot of the ability to express myself through music. This frustration turned me away from playing for a while and instead toward listening to music.... I learned to love music [whose] sorrow reflected my feelings.

...Later, in eleventh grade, I moved to the home of another guardian whose family had a grand piano at home. Watching my guardian work so hard just trying to pay off the loan for that piano and her fifteen-year-old daughter's piano lessons, [and watching] her daughter practicing piano for at least four hours every night and devoting herself to playing, I recalled my...lazy practicing and playing for my parents instead of myself. My enthusiasm for music never went down after almost four years.... I wanted to express my feelings through playing instead of listening with my imagination. I decided to learn to play the flute.

...I saved money for my own private flute lessons and went to many free flute recitals. This time I was playing for myself.... I also wanted to join the school band because I wanted to play with other people. After a year of lessons and working extra time over the summer,...I was recruited into the school band in senior year.

At the beginning, it was hard to imagine a band with all ethnic groups working together. In my high school, the

population of every ethnic group was about the same. There were a lot of Caucasians, Latinos or Chicanos, African Americans, and Asian Americans. Students separated themselves off in school. People grouped themselves by their ethnic groups on different parts of the campus during lunch or break, and very often I saw two groups throwing stuff at each other or having fights.

But later I realized people in the band enjoyed playing and practicing music with others.... There were mostly Asians and Caucasians, but other ethnic groups too. People in the band didn't care about others' ethnicities. Meanwhile people helped each other during the competitions or fund raising. It created a totally different environment from the rest of the school.

Later in my senior year, I joined the drum line, which had mostly African American members. Many of my Asian friends who were not in the band didn't think I belonged in the drum line, but I didn't feel awkward, nor did anyone treat me differently. I admired many of my drum line colleagues for being so talented.... When we performed, we created this great environment that everyone enjoyed and just forgot about who we were....

...

*Karen C. Kwong*

I am a Canadian by birth, born in the heart of Montreal, Quebec, and a first generation Chinese American. My family wasn't particularly musically oriented.... I do recall, however, my Mom singing many traditional Chinese lullabies to us that were intended to teach moral lessons. For instance, one song taught the importance of hospitality towards everyone. Another song was about a little, hungry dog who wanted a bone but

nobody would be kind enough to feed it. These sorts of songs made up my childhood memories.

Then I fell in love. I fell in love with musicals after watching *Singing in the Rain* when I was seven. In addition to falling in love with the very well-developed, charming, and light-footed Gene Kelly, I fell in love with the musical genre of the 1930s–50s. The typically giddy and upbeat musicals with their whimsical and clever lyrics appealed to me in an almost obsessive way....

Nobody in the family ever had any formal musical training until my brother, sister, and I enrolled in a voluntary music class when I was nine. It was typical that the few Asian students were expected to take up the violin, piano, or flute, which my siblings did. My preference, however, was for the trumpet. Ah, the trumpet; it was shiny, brassy, powerful-looking, and, best of all, it had only three keys. Naturally, my only choice then would be the trumpet. My music teacher and family spent weeks trying to persuade me to choose a more “sensible” and “ladylike” instrument. “Trumpets,” they claimed, “are a boy’s instrument.” Being somewhat of a feminist, I became even more determined to take up the trumpet, and furthermore, to take over lead trumpet within two years. Thus, I began my musical career pursuing a crusade for aspiring feminists and against ethnic stereotypes.

My trumpet lessons produced three results during the following five years: more respect and appreciation for woodwind instruments, the lead trumpet role in my third year, and a growing interest in classical and band music. Our orchestra performed mostly gentle, slow, peaceful, classical pieces from Haydn to Bach to Beethoven to Mozart. Sometimes we would attempt an impossible Wagner piece. I had to harass my music teacher to allow me to play more band and marching tunes, but few students could play Sousa’s “Semper Fidelis” or Gershwin’s “Strike Up the Band” with real pomp and circumstance.... It wasn’t until our family bought a stereo system that new genres of music were introduced to me.

I fell in love a second time. I remember the first song I fell in love with on the radio: Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade." I wanted to learn how to play as wonderfully as the band leaders Tommy Dorsey, Harry James, Louis Armstrong, and Count Basie. It happened to be a big band station I tuned into by accident, but I was hooked. Never mind the silly rock 'n' roll that was popular when I was growing up. My God, this was IT for me. It was hip, keen, swingin', and so swell....

...I got a job as a paper girl in order to make money and help out in the family. My four and a half years as an afternoon paper girl proved to be some of the happiest and most influential for my musical interests. Cultural stereotypes and economic differences should have divided my all-white customer route and myself. I recall the initial surprised comments during my first few weeks on the route: "Oh, you're Chinese (or Japanese or Korean). I've never seen you around. Are you a recent immigrant?" Eventually, after I gave them my life's history, they gave me some of theirs. The one important thing connecting us, besides a newspaper, was music. Have you ever seen middle-aged or older men gather and talk excitedly about sports like small children? Well, that's what it was like between my customers and me: many of them lived during the heyday of big band during the 1930s and 40s, performing in the U.S.O. or serving during World War II.

So this beautiful, symbiotic relationship developed. I knew a lot about big band music to contribute to our daily discussions and we occasionally swapped tapes or records. I was in high school by this time and, I'm ashamed to say, rock, rap, reggae, and heavy metal music came and went without my taking much notice or interest. I think my ignorance of my generation's music ruined my social life. I refused to date any fellow who didn't make some sort of effort to serenade me and croon outside my window like a Gene Kelly or Vic Damone. My twin sister, a rap, heavy metal, and classical music enthusiast, claims I missed out on a lot....

But during my high school days, I met one of my best friends, Bea, a substitute teacher who befriended me. During my breaks, we would have lively and delightful conversations about old movies, musicals, and big band. She was a volunteer in the U.S.O. and a dancer, and she grew up in a very racist South during the 1930s. From our talks, we began to analyze some of our favorite musicals [such as *South Pacific* and *Show Boat*] and the impact they had on our lives, socially and culturally....

["Ol' Man River" and "Bill, "] songs sung about black Americans and some by African Americans, made me re-examine many of the black musicians I admired. No longer did I regard music as only about love and happy endings, but as a serious translation of social or ethnic controversy, or an expression of deeper feelings.... One favorite of mine was Stanley Turrentine's seductive saxophone style in "Since I Fell for You." In my opinion, his rendition evokes an image of the instrument weeping in place of the human voice. It differed greatly from the big band or musicals I listened to. Instead of hopping around or tap dancing, moving to jazzy blues was more like being half asleep and completely taken over by the seduction of the melody. This was the only period in my life when I didn't use music as a means of escapism. Blues and jazz allowed me to wallow in self-pity and release negative tensions that the other types of music prevented.

...My parents and family often wondered at my particular taste for older music. My sister and I grew up bickering over whether to listen to Doris Day or Ice Cube, Tony Bennett or Skid Row in our room. My interests supplied her and others with endless mockery. I believe my interests were primarily a result of the company I kept: lots of folks in their sixties and seventies. Culturally, they thought it odd that a Chinese girl would show an interest: they just couldn't picture me as the female and Chinese version of Miles Davis. I think, in an odd sort of way, my listening to the music contrary to my peers was an expression of rebellion. I despised the music my generation

was listening to, so in my own way, I was rebelling against my generation....

•••

*Robert Nezami*

...I spent the first eleven years of my life growing up in my homeland, Iran, where I was greatly influenced by the sounds of classic Middle Eastern music. It was a very relaxing and serene sound, mostly involving wind and string instruments. I began to really enjoy listening to Persian music and I started learning how to play a popular Middle Eastern instrument, the Persian sitar. The sitar is very similar to the guitar, yet it is bigger and often played on the floor. My uncle taught me how to play the sitar at the age of eight, and I enjoyed listening to its unique sound.... I learned how to read Persian sheet music and went into numerous music stores searching for sheet music from other countries, such as Turkey and India. I wanted to try to play different sounds and to experience music from different cultures. Through playing the sitar, I grew to love and appreciate music from throughout the Middle East and Asia.

...My grandfather was a famous Persian singer. I would often go to concerts and watch him sing. The music which he sang had a strong dramatic sound: it was very powerful and moving. I really enjoyed listening to him sing. Memories of him singing at special family occasions often run through my mind. His inspiring words continue to influence my decisions in life....

When I was ten years old we left Iran and moved to the United States. It was then that my transition began. I slowly became acculturated to the Western style of music. My shift in music taste started with my introduction to the piano. My father had spent his college years in England and had become a

great lover of classical music. He continually played classical music throughout our home, both in Iran and America. Naturally, he wanted me to learn how to play Western classical music and enrolled me in piano lessons when we moved to America. He continually reminded me how lucky I was to be able to play the piano: he had always wanted to learn but never had the opportunity. Thus, he wanted me to fulfill his dreams for both of us by playing the piano and learning "great" European classical music. I went to the lessons, yet I never gained an affinity for the piano. I didn't have an "ear" for the music and it felt very awkward for me to play the piano after having been so accustomed to the sitar. However, I continued to play the piano in order to please my father for the next couple of years. I was no longer exposed to Middle Eastern music and no longer played the sitar, which I was unable to bring with me to America. I began to become acculturated to American music. I started to be influenced by the popular music of the 1980s that my older sister listened to: Billy Joel, Elton John, and Madonna replaced my grandfather and the serene sounds of the Middle East. Due to my father's influence, I also listened to classical pieces such as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, which I attempted to play on the piano.

When I was thirteen, I went through the classic rebellious phase against my parents and stopped listening to classical music. I refused to play the piano, which I had never particularly cared to play... Under [my older cousin's] influence, I began listening to classic rock. I really liked the new, stronger, and more electrified sounds. I discovered a whole new world... [with] tapes which we would blast in the basement of my house: Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, The Rolling Stones, and The Doors....

When I was about fifteen, my grandfather, my uncle, and his family moved from Iran to America.... One night, a few months after they had arrived in America, I went to their house and experienced a unique event. My uncle had gotten a few friends together and formed a Persian band, playing authentic

Persian instruments.... Though the sounds of the band were strange and unfamiliar at first, slowly as the memories of Iran flooded my mind, I readapted to it and enjoyed the band's sound immensely. My grandfather also sang while the band served as an accompaniment. My interest in the sitar was revitalized and I attempted to resume playing it.... Due to my Western acculturation, playing Middle Eastern music no longer came naturally—it had become awkward and strange. The music did not flow from me as it used to.... I realized that although I still liked Middle Eastern music, what I really desired and preferred was the stronger and more electrified Western-style music. Due to the American influence, the music which I loved as a child sounded weak and a bit tiresome; the various Middle Eastern songs sounded similar to me. It was also relatively hard to dance to Persian music....

When I was sixteen, I moved to a new school. I met a new group of friends, one of whom played in a band.... I would listen to his band practice in his home, and I went to see them play at a few, small local clubs. I started to really like the new type of music which they played and listened to: alternative music.... My growing interest in the electric guitar led me to ask my friend in the band to teach me how to play it. He began giving me lessons and I quickly learned due to its similarity to the sitar. Soon I purchased my own electric guitar and began "jamming" with the band. I had finally found my true love for an instrument: the electric guitar. It combined both of my worlds. It reminded me of my culture and heritage because of its similarity to the sitar, yet it was electrified and powerful, which was the sound I had developed a taste for.... [We played] some classic rock songs but mainly songs from alternative bands such as Pearl Jam, Nirvana, Smashing Pumpkins, and Stone Temple Pilots....

However, I have not forgotten my cultural roots. I continue to listen to my grandfather's tapes, attend an occasional Middle Eastern music concert, and see my uncle and his band perform on special occasions.... Thus, although I currently

mainly play and listen to alternative music, I have still held on to my musical past. Through music, I am able to experience both my Middle Eastern and American cultures....

•••

### *Gene Kim Whitney*

...“Gene, listen to this.” And with that I was introduced to rap music. A tape I still have, mind you; amongst its contents was a braggadocio so profound to a shy, reticent, 12-year-old child. I remember shutting doors, closing blinds, checking, double-checking to be sure my parents were nowhere to be found—then with all the skill of a stumbling sleuth I would emulate lyrics that I had transcribed and memorized, paralyzed by a fear that someone, anyone, would catch me. I thought of myself as something of a rhyming blacksmith though, ever perfecting my craft, refining my “skills.”

...102.7 KIIS-FM. The D.J. was called Hollywood Hamilton. It was a nightly thing—this “Rhyme Fighting Competition” as he called it. I remember calling from the cordless telephone at 7:50 P.M. for an off-air tryout. After performing a 30-second a capella tour-de-force, I waited. And waited. Hollywood Hamilton returned with a terseness that threatened even my unending exuberance. He sounded like he had done this “Rhyme Fighting Competition” one too many times—and it was apparent by his brutish brevity that it had long worn its welcome on the show. “You’re on kid. We’ll call you back in a half-hour.” I broke the antenna trying to punch it back into the hand unit too fast. But at that point I didn’t care.

The phone rang. I sprang like a tightly strung coil released. “Hello?” I said. “Are you ready?” he retorted. And to this day, it seems like a whirlwind. The chronology reads something like this: votes were tallied, I won, and they sent me a check for

\$100. Simple really—but Mom demanded a new phone. Here's a little anecdote: I got a call from the *Korea Times* of Los Angeles. They wanted to do a feature on *me*?

...So now they know—know that the straight-A student with the desk two seats back and adjacent to the window can rap. Somewhere along the way I connected up with a couple of other fellows who rapped as well, and we formed a group. It's all so much like a movie script. Ah, the making of a star. We performed wherever and whenever we could, which included dances, the talent show circuit, etc. "Do you guys have a tape or something?" We did. And we were called. An A&R (Artist & Repertoire) representative from [a record company] wanted to see us. We arranged a meeting.

The meeting was dull actually, almost anti-climactic. We exchanged the perfunctory "you guys have some talent." Blah, blah, blah. We left with little more than the assurance "Don't call us; we'll call you." The truly strange thing is that we did get called back—well, one of us at least.... It seems [the company] was in a rush to capitalize on a trend of Latino rap. I, however, was an expendable "string attached," and as such was placed to the wayside. I wrote his lyrics, you know....