

off our backs

a women's newsjournal

Cultural Appropriation

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Cultural Appropriation

Most accounts I have read of this year's Michigan Womyn's Music Festival have asserted that this was a quiet year on the land -- no major controversies, no painful issues, all quiet on the home front. Perhaps it seemed that way to some, but my experience was different.

Because each woman's experience is a subjective one, it doesn't surprise me that the incidents which affected me were all ones involving music. Most years the music is kind of a backdrop to the larger drama enacted by women inhabiting a feminist space. This year the political issues that struck me sprang directly from a musical performance and a musical instrument.

During the first afternoon concert of the festival, on the "acoustic stage", Gwen Jones, one member of a duo called "Raindreaming" who performed "original music for traditional instruments" announced that she had been requested not to perform using an aboriginal wind instrument called a "didjeridoo" (and sometimes referred to as a "yidaki"). The request was made by an aboriginal Australian woman on the land, who stated that it was the sacred instrument of her culture and that only an aboriginal had a right to play it. Kirsch announced from the stage that out of respect for the aboriginal woman's culture, she had made the painful decision to honor the request. She did, however, add that she had found the instrument to be a very powerful healing tool in her own life, and that many others had told her that hearing the instrument played had been a healing experience for them as well. Her sorrow at being denied the use of the instrument was evident, as was her openness to considering the feelings and the position of the aboriginal woman.

Raindreaming then performed the piece Kirsch had written for the didjeridoo on an instrument she had built herself out of a five gallon plastic jug attached to a fretboard and strings. It had a low pitched, eerily distorted vibrato sound, evoking a haunting effect somewhat similar to the sound of the didjeridoo.

This incident caused me a lot of pain, fear and anger. I had a very hard time accepting that one musician has a right to forbid another musician to play any instrument. I suppose I have always felt, as a (white) musician myself, that if you put the work into learning an instrument, the love into playing it, and the courage into performing on it, you have earned the right to make it your own. I also felt extremely threatened, if the aboriginal woman's premise was valid, that at any point, others could exert pressure on me to say I had no right to my own musical implements, be they instruments, tonal styles, language or subject matter. Does this mean, for instance, that no one should learn songs in other languages? Does it mean none of us should expose children to the songs of other cultures -- is it wrong to make our repertoires diverse? Is each of us supposed to stay in our little cubicle and never try to exchange cultures? I got more angry and fearful the more I tried to think about this issue.

Several days later, on the "Day Stage" I heard the Klesmer music of "Vilde Khaye" (Klesmer music is the Yiddish songs and instrumentals performed in Eastern Europe by Jews.) A group of

women in the audience jumped up and began dancing traditional Jewish circle and line dances under the hot sun. A long chain of women, flinging arms and legs into the air, looking beautiful and joyous. It was a scene right off a goddess greeting card. I looked at those women and I thought, this is their family music. Many of them learned this as children. It probably conjurs up some happy times for



by jenny yates

at least some of those women. I felt a tremendous sadness and despair because I wanted to be able to have the right to share some spontaneous, instinctive ritual with others of my kind without anyone pointing at me and saying -- "you're trespassing." I suspect that some of the dancers may not have been Jews. But there was no attempt to exclude anyone from that moment. I suppose it didn't threaten anyone. They were women unthreatened on a beautiful day.

The key to understanding the problem in the didjeridoo incident lies in the fact that indigenous peoples have had their territory (land) stolen, their society displaced, their culture suppressed; all with little avenue of redress. So it is not at surprising that an aboriginal would consider it entirely inappropriate for a non-aboriginal to take even that which has a negligible money value (compared to mineral rich land, for instance) -- namely, a sacred ritual instrument. Even approaching the musician's dilemma from a business angle is illustrative of the aboriginal's point: Manufacturers of western incarnations of instruments such as guitars, pianos and horns can protect their product with patents, trademarks, and in the case of composers, copyrights. These give the inventor control over who has access to these products, and it also yields the inventor money.

A didjeridoo, on the other hand, is made from a log about four feet long and three inches in diameter which has been hollowed out by the work of termites. Perhaps this phenomenon only occurs in a limited geographic area, and most likely



by jenny yates

the quantity of these logs is also limited. The rarity of an item increases its value. In western cultures this means it costs more money. In indigenous cultures perhaps that translates into having a higher sacred value.

When land is stolen and a people is abused, this has the effect of depriving a culture of its safe space in which to practice its religion. When the tools of a culture's religion are appropriated into the mainstream, and used by members of the dominant race themselves, it is reasonable to assume that an aboriginal person would feel pain and anger. To make an inadequate but relevant analogy, if heterosexual women began wearing labryses, I think many lesbians would feel culturally ripped off, since the labrys is not only a symbol which helps us identify each other, but also stands for the struggle we have endured in a heterosexist society. Occasionally I hear of a heterosexual person who claims to be wearing a pink triangle in solidarity with gays and lesbians. A friend of mine met a German gentile who wore a Jewish Star of David for the same reason. These well meant gestures are nonetheless confusing at best; annoying or co-optive at worst.

The fact that Kirsch composed a piece for the didjeridoo certainly indicates that she had a deep love and respect for the instrument. I think she got into her predicament innocently -- that is, she meant no harm -- but like all anti-racism work, once your mistake is pointed out to you, there's no going back to ignorance with an easy mind.



by jenny yates

I have considered carefully, since then, under what circumstances it is okay to incorporate the music or the instruments of other cultures into one's own music. I immediately thought of Pete Seeger. Here is a man who has been travelling around the world for many decades, adding the folk songs of numerous cultures to his repertoire. He has shared the stage with numerous peace/justice activists, of many races, for half a century. I have never heard anyone complain that he co-opts other cultures. Apparently there must be a way to do it acceptably. Perhaps the answer is that if you give as much as you borrow, and you identify where it came from, you're playing fair.

I have always considered it the rock bottom rule of performance to give credit to the writers of the songs you sing. It's very rude to sing someone's song and let the audience think you wrote it yourself; or even to neglect to inform the audience where they could hear more of a song they liked. I think the same is true of styles of music, although perhaps musicians do take their sources for granted these days, when virtually all popular American music is built upon the blues of African-Americans. It's also worth mentioning that one of the differences between the music of indigenous cultures and that of most white middle class Americans is that the former learn their music from their families and the elders of their communities, while the latter (with only some exceptions) learn their first music from radio, t.v., records & tapes, and from extremely expensive concerts. So they have access to a lot of music which doesn't originate in their part of the country or their culture. This is an early education in how to consume what you and family had no hand in creating.

Consider the difference in the learning process: One person takes a guitar into a private room, puts a record or tape on a machine, and listens to a particular song over and over again until she can duplicate it on her instrument. Another person must seek out a musician she values, ask that person to sing or play her a song, and she must relate to that person while she learns the song. Perhaps the people in the latter example play music together for a while, creating a bond, making it possible for them to play together again in the future. The person in

White Woman Drops Rap

Dear qob:

I want to tell readers about an incident that occurred about one year ago at the E.C.L.F. (East Coast Lesbian Festival) after I played my set on the night stage. As some womyn know, I have been performing on sidewalks and at certain times at festivals across the U.S. a style of musical poetry which up until about two years ago I described as "rap" - I dropped the term for a number of reasons. Anyway it is a style that is largely influenced by African music/poetry styles.

Firstly, let me tell you the facts - I am a 32 year old working class white womyn who was born in London but whose cultural roots are predominantly Celtic. I have a small amount of Jewish blood in me too.

At the E.C.L.F. after my set a Jamaican womyn of color told me she found my work to be "disgusting" and to constitute "plagiarism". In fact she felt my stuff was a poor attempt at emulating Lillian Allen the popular Jamaican dub poet.

At the time the criticism occurred I was shattered and barely able to respond - what I said was "I needed to hear this." I believe that as a white womyn attempting to put out a political poetry with an obvious African influence I need to tread lightly and actively respond to comments and criticisms particularly from lesbians of colors.

This was the first time any criticism from anyone had been directed to me and it caused me to look deep inside at my own racism.

After one year and based on the work I have done examining my conscience and dialoguing with some lesbian friends - womyn of colors and white womyn, I wish to announce a public apology for what I now see as perpetuating racism in the lesbian community. I now see that some of the work I presented that night is a rip off of African culture, particularly those pieces that try to emulate Jamaican words and accents. Fortunately not all of the pieces have been recorded on either of my tapes and some songs have been dropped from my set altogether.

I have thought hard about whether or not to continue to sell my tapes at all and to date I have decided to continue to

do so but with the following changes. A) That each tape contains a written acknowledgement of the influence of African music and poetry on much of my work and B) An explanation that any profit derived from the sale of the tape goes to benefit organizations that primarily benefit lesbians of colors.

My reasons for continuing to sell the tapes are 1) The support from some lesbians of colors and white womyn to do so. 2) The fact that not all of the content is African influenced. 3) The amount of time and heart that went into self-financing the tapes that do (whatever their shortcomings) contain sincere messages of unity amongst womyn, rage at the patriarchy, and reinforcement of messages of sisterhood.

In spite of the personal pain of the journey of unlearning my racism and this journey is a life-long one I believe - there have been good things to come from this - not least is a more active exploration of my authentic cultural roots. As a Celt of Scottish descent musical poetry and chants in oral tradition are truly my cultural heritage and my aptitude for rhythm comes from here I believe - my mistake was to emulate a sound from a culture that is not my own.



The Women's Show/cpf

I wish to say that being in an ongoing anti-racism workshop is helping me get to the truths about my racism - I strongly recommend all white womyn do something similar to decontaminate ourselves of the subtle and overt racism in us. Any response to this letter is welcome.

Thank you to my friends and supporters -
In Sisterhood
Marilyn T

Write to Marilyn T. c/o K.Kelleher
3130 N. Broadway #2C
Boulder, CO 80304

cultural appropriation

continued from previous page

the former example has learned a new piece of music, but has not forged any kind of personal connection with the sources of the music.

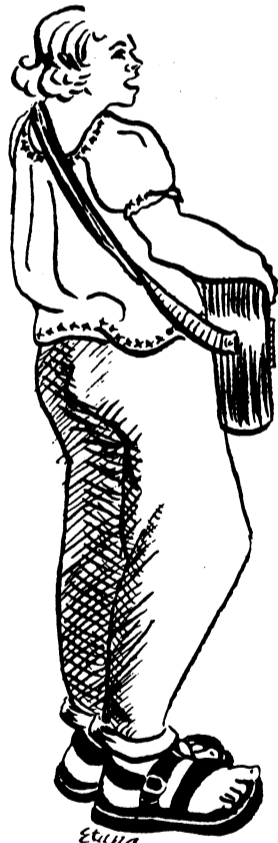
Which of these two students is more likely to feel a responsibility to the source of the music in her future dealings as a musician in the world?

I am not rejecting the usefulness of modern technology for musicians; I learn music like the person in the first example most of the time. But I prefer the other way, and I must work hard to recreate the humanity of the musicians whose music I learn.

I also have musicians in my life whom I interact with, and I have a set of ethics regarding their music in my repertoire. It consists of giving proper credit when performing their music, and often, it entails asking their permission to add one of their songs to my repertoire.

Drumming is another subject of contention these days. Most cultures seem to have some form of drumming, connected with either war or dance. As drumming has become popular at festivals among women who are not of color, the importance of respecting women of color space has continued to be an issue.

In the over-40's camping area at the Michigan festival, a certain space was alive each night until after midnight with a very diverse group of women (white as well as of color) who drummed together. Often well known performers would join these women - an unusual phenomenon - and what was truly wonderful about it was how open it was to anyone. Unfortunately, in their exuberance they were violating the "lights out" curfew in "over 40's", and angry sleepless women demanded arbitration. They worked it out, and the drummers moved down the road to a more remote location. My point in all this is that it was encouraging to see that it is possible for there to be safe space for



by etana c. finkler

specific identity groups (such as the women of color tent), and also there can be "bridging" space, where white women can be introduced to the healthful and pleasurable experience of making percussion. I think frequent drumming sessions available to anyone who wishes to do so can only hasten the day when communication and connection are familiar to everyone and are a regular tool in our day to day living with each other.

But it's not reasonable to make music in the tradition of a culture that has been oppressed by your own, and assume you will be accepted. So we have to deal with the inequities on a continuing basis to

keep ourselves honest. And if white women want to drum, they must drum as white women. Not pretending to be Native Americans, or pretending they belong in a women of color circle, or pretending they can be part of a Japanese Taiko group. Perhaps they should investigate the drum traditions of their own ethnic group, for starters, to understand where they're coming from.

It is a leap for musicians from dominant cultures to learn to be sensitive to the realities of musicians in other cultures. It is critical that the former become aware of their own cultures - everyone has at least one! And each culture, no matter how pervasive dominance and oppression have become in it, has some beauty and meaning in it. It isn't easy to look beyond the guilt and shame of discovering the tradition of oppression many of us are a part of. But it is essential and it is worth it.

I agree with Marilyn T. (see her commentary on this page) when she says that examining one's racism is a lifelong process. Because of this, speaking as a musician, I need to find a way for it to be all right to incorporate my influences (from other cultures) into my present work. Without that freedom, the climate is too limiting for an artist to continue to grow. I see the real issue to be one of acknowledging injustice, working to change it, and continuing to examine one's own work to assure that it springs from a healthy and just consciousness. Given those guidelines, I reserve the option to choose music, instruments and styles as sources to design my own style.

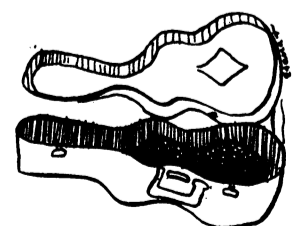
For the real problem is the unjust treatment by dominant cultures of so many indigenous peoples. We know that white musicians of parallel class or status work out the acceptability of borrowing from each other's work by economic arrangements. And "unprivileged" musicians have equally effective social ways of dealing with the issue, such as verbal agreements or peer pressure. White

musicians need to find similar ways of compensating indigenous cultures for what we take so unthinkingly. The compensation could be educating others as to those people's issues; it could be contributing time and energy to fundraising for specific projects; it could be as simple yet ongoing as bringing an educated consciousness to their daily lives, in every situation where they encounter racism. And in some cases, it might mean refraining from using the instrument until one feels one knows the right thing to do, as Gwen Jones decided at the Michigan Festival.

When I was reacting with anger and insecurity to the painful issues being presented to Raindreaming, I was still under the delusion that being a musician (or an artist, or a poet, or a photographer - fill in your own blank) exempted me from any involvement in oppression because making music is a positive thing. But I have learned from this incident at Michigan that any work which sits upon unchallenged racist roots is bound to cause hurt eventually to someone. Learning to perceive the structure of racism can only make one's work more fruitful.

Gwen Jones deserves much support for the constructive way she reacted to her challenger. It's unfortunate that while music is said to be a great healer, in this case, pain was the best teacher.

by joanne stato



by etana c. finkler