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Review: Tradition and Authenticity in Popular Music: Reviews of Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity by Richard Peterson; Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs by David Grazian; and Music and Gender: Perspectives from the Mediterranean edited by Tulia Magrini

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Tradition and Authenticity in Popular Music

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Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity

By Richard Peterson
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997
320 pp. \$24.95 (cloth); \$17.00 (paper)

Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs

By David Grazian
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003
328 pp. \$32.50 (cloth)

Music and Gender: Perspectives from the Mediterranean

Edited by Tulia Magrini
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003
392 pp. \$66.00 (cloth); \$24.00 (paper)

Authenticity has been a central issue for scholars and critics of popular culture for decades. Early critical theorists juxtaposed the supposed purity and authenticity of folk and traditional culture against the plastic and inauthentic cultural offerings mass mediated and mass marketed for an increasingly homogeneous consumer society. Walter Benjamin (1935), for example, warned against the homogenizing forces of mass production and mechanization when they threatened to colonize the autonomous world of art and music. Frankfurt school theorists (see Adorno 1991) posited that the rise of the culture industry led to the standardization and pseudoindividualism of popular culture. Business interests, marketing departments, and corporate boardrooms increasingly guided the production, distribution, and performances in their quest to profit from the sale and consumption of mass culture. The rising influence of modernization, industrialization, and bureaucratization on social and cultural life, these theorists argued, led to the mass production and consumption of products guided by bland and standardized formulas.

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With the rise of “pop” culture and its related industries in the contemporary period, fans increasingly have sought out folk and traditional music as an “authentic” alternative. Folk or traditional culture, it was argued, by its very nature mediated through aural and oral traditions, grew from the grassroots and was a genuine reflection of the voices, lives, and experiences of people in ways that mass and “pop” culture was not. Today, authenticity is frequently tied to identity and articulates the desire of consumers to differentiate themselves from the masses. Lawrence Grossberg argues that this “ideology of authenticity” (Grossberg 1992, 1993) has driven the aesthetic and political judgment of rock music since the late 1950s (and of country music since the 1920s and 1930s, as Peterson [1997] demonstrates). Subsequently, this ideology has guided the production and marketing of popular musics spanning various genres by distinguishing between pop music and its more “soulful,” “real,” or “authentic” alternatives. Authentic music is thus often viewed as transgressive and political compared to inauthentic “pop,” which is viewed as “co-opted and superficial” (Sloop and Herman 1998:16).

Listeners often view the “authentic” in popular music as something new, fresh, and exciting, something that grew from the grassroots (usually in a band member’s garage) and from an untainted cultural tradition (e.g., Appalachian) and whose performers were “discovered” before their introduction to mass audiences. As the rise of punk rock and independent record labels illustrates, authenticity in rock and other forms of popular music is often constructed by their subaltern position in relation to the culture industry. However, as Sloop and Herman (1986) point out, authenticity is an unstable construct, especially in the world of popular music. Even for the punk or independent, what is viewed as thoroughly authentic can be co-opted and become the next moment’s “sell-out” (pp. 16–17).

The three books reviewed in this essay shed light on the construction of authenticity and the performance of traditional musical and cultural forms in contemporary spaces. They offer an examination of the underlying politics of negotiating tradition and authenticity in situations in which the contemporary audience has certain expectations of what constitutes a “real” Mediterranean, country, or Chicago blues experience. They also follow Rosenberg (1993) in examining the various ways that musical traditions are necessarily transformed when performed for contemporary audiences in contemporary contexts. All three books demonstrate through diverse musical and cultural traditions that the performance of authenticity is often a rhetorical accomplishment, guided by the needs, wants, and desires of their audiences. And all three shed light on the complex interplay of cultural institutions, musicians, and audience in the construction of a perceivably authentic performance of tradition whereby that tradition is remade in ways that sometimes compromise its integrity but also provide a political stage on which actors transcend traditional roles and restrictions.

In *Creating Country Music*, Richard Peterson masterfully narrates the commercial history of country music through its marketing, production, and institutionalization in early-twentieth-century American popular culture. Starting with the genre’s

commercial emergence in the form of recordings of old-time and traditional Appalachian mountain music, he traces the marketing of “country” and its eventual codification as a distinct musical genre. Traversing three distinct symbols of country music authenticity—the old-timer, the hillbilly, and the cowboy—Peterson traces the evolution of the music alongside fluctuating public demands for different types of rural musical authenticity. As structural, economic, and cultural forces in the music industry changed in concert with American society, so did listeners’ tastes, wants, and desires. Peterson explains the underlying industry structure that supported the development from “hard-core” country music performances of the early barn dances and fiddle contests to the more commercially popular “soft shell” artists characteristic of most modern country music.

Despite attempts by record producers and corporate executives to push country music to the margins of the American music industry and despite its associations with poor, rural southern culture, country survived and continues to flourish. Peterson constructs authenticity as a rhetorical resource enacted by performers, producers, and marketing executives. As such, he examines how artists and industry leaders package and market these “natural” characteristics for mass audiences looking for the soulful and authentic. Through their dress, voice, origin, instrumentation, packaging, and lyrical topics, performers negotiated the often difficult terrain of appearing “authentic” in the eyes of a shifting public.

In addition to the fascinating historical narrative of the early country music industry, Peterson’s most valuable contribution to the study of culture and social life is his presentation of authenticity as a socially constructed “renewable” resource that is revived and resuscitated with each era and development in popular musical production. Responding to these changing circumstances, the meaning of authenticity, Peterson argues, emerges from a careful negotiation among fan, performer, and producer. Authenticity, Peterson argues, is not inherent in the recording, presentation, or performance that is designated authentic; it is a socially agreed upon construct:

Authenticity in a living art form can have a number of meanings, but . . . in popular culture, where experts and authorities do not control the particulars of the word’s meaning, the definition centers on being *believable* relative to a more or less explicit model, and at the same time being *original*, that is not being an imitation of the model. Thus, what is taken to be authentic does not remain static, but is continually renewed over the years. (P. 220)

Producers and performers of popular culture can tap into the seemingly endless storehouse of America’s cultural past to evoke more or less authentic representations in the present.

Despite these valuable contributions, Peterson’s historical analysis of the country music industry is viewed through the narrow lens of country music production, marketing, and distribution. A proponent of the production of culture approach, Peterson focuses on the institutionalization of country music as a distinct and continually emergent musical genre. However, I found his mechanical, manufacturing metaphor quite limiting for a thorough understanding of musical authenticity. Though

the audience member was implied in the marketing and production perspectives, Peterson's argument could have benefited from a more comprehensive examination of the social and sociological conditions and motives that gave rise to the audience's taste or desire for authenticity. I was left wondering why fans of country music have continually constructed this notion of "authentic" country and why this symbol has had such enduring appeal.

A major limitation of this study is that Peterson does not fully unpack the commercial reality of country music in the contemporary period. In fact, such an analysis could undermine some of his major claims. Peterson claims as a baseline that throughout its rich history, country music has "maintained its distinctive sense of authenticity" (p. 9). However, the period in which his analysis ends (the mid-1950s) is considered by many scholars and casual listeners to be the end of "authentic" country music. Though he makes claims that country music authenticity is a renewable resource that continually regenerates itself with each development in the genre, the face of contemporary country music can be viewed as anything but authentic. Packaged and promoted for consumption by mass audiences, country, many argue, has been stripped of its authentic roots, as illustrated by Hank Williams Jr.'s theme song for ABC's *Monday Night Football* and countless other artists who have provided sound tracks for advertising such products as Pepsi Cola and Chevrolet trucks. By stopping short of discussing the rampant commercialization of contemporary mainstream country music, Peterson discounts the revivals of bluegrass and folk musical traditions as an alternative to what many fans perceive as hypercommercialized and thus inauthentic (see Gardner 2004). By failing to confront what has become "soft shell" country music, Peterson ignores what could be a fruitful analysis of the contemporary rift between perceived inauthenticity of commercial country and the move toward authenticity by performers such as Ricky Skaggs and Dolly Parton and new acts such as the Dixie Chicks who have returned to or perhaps have found "hard-core" bluegrass roots. Rather than delve into the murky debates of authenticity that would likely emerge from a focus on bluegrass music (which receives little direct attention), Peterson opts to end his analysis in the 1950s, with Hank Williams's rise and fall as the ultimate symbol of country music authenticity. Despite these shortcomings, he provides readers with a rich treatment of authenticity as a cultural commodity, particularly as it is controlled and manipulated by record producers to sell a particular brand of country music.

Where Peterson leaves off, David Grazian's *Blue Chicago* picks up with a brilliant exploration of the social world of Chicago blues clubs. In an evocative style true to the Chicago school tradition, Grazian takes readers into the nocturnal spaces of the urban club scene to understand how performers, club owners, and audience members negotiate the delicate terrain of the "authentic" Chicago blues experience. In this, the most clearly ethnographic of the three texts, Grazian canvasses Chicago blues performance from the perspective of performer, audience, promoter, tourist, and club regular to provide a multisided analysis of the "problem" of authenticity. Like Peterson, Grazian explains how club owners, tourist guides, and

musicians manufacture, package, and sell an authentic blues experience to the consuming public. However, Grazian's approach gives voice to all of the actors in ways that *Creating Country Music* does not. Casting his analysis more broadly across multiple subject positions in the Chicago blues scene, Grazian runs the risk of merely skimming the surface of the deeper issues implicated in a study of authenticity. But he does not do so. By incorporating discussions of the racial history and social structure of Chicago's changing urban neighborhoods, the institutions guiding these changes, and the interactions that give rise to constructions and expectations of authenticity in the blues club itself, he finds that blues authenticity eludes any stable or uniform usage in the club scene.

Chicago is known by many as the "home of the blues." When tourists and residents alike flock to the city to encounter an "authentic" blues experience, they bring with them a set of expectations about what a "real" blues musician, blues club, and blues song should be. Grazian points out that authenticity has two distinct but related attributes. First, he asserts, authenticity "can refer to the ability of a place or event to conform to an idealized representation of reality; that is to a set of expectations of regarding how such a thing ought to look, sound, and feel. At the same time, authenticity can refer to the credibility or sincerity of a performance and its ability to come off natural or effortless" (p. 11). Though socially agreed upon and constructed, authenticity, Grazian demonstrates, takes on different meanings in different contexts and with different expectations of the audience.

For Grazian, the search for authenticity is necessarily a futile one. He contends that there is no static, unchanging, culturally fixed reference point by which an authenticity of a particular performance can be measured. Often consumer stereotypes about what *is* or *is not* authentic about a particular performance are little more than "collectively produced fictions." (pp. 11–12). Following Goffman, he argues that since all social life is performed and staged, the performance of authenticity is a contradiction in terms. Here Grazian questionably presumes that the performance of authenticity is always a self-conscious, rhetorical one. When extended to the musical performance, it is important to note that not all "authentic" musicians strive for authenticity.

By challenging notions of authenticity that imply an inherent quality in an object or performance itself, Grazian, like Peterson, offers a view of authenticity that highlights its status as socially negotiated. Not all participants experience the performance in the same way, and as Grazian found, they often disagree with core markers of authenticity in the blues club setting. Clubgoers often imagine the "authentic blues" as represented by bands of male black blues musicians playing for a racially integrated audience of primarily local, working-class men and women in dank, dingy, and dilapidated blues dives on the fringes of the urban metropolis. These urban adventurers often find their "black and tan" expectations unmet when they encounter a white blues band playing rock-and-roll covers for a largely white, well-to-do, cosmopolitan audience complete with camera-clad, out-of-towners and members of a local college fraternity. Grazian points out that audiences frequently

see blackness as connoting “an extreme sense of authenticity” or “soul” and that they frequently “demand to hear performances based, in part, on preconceived notions regarding the authenticity of the stereotypical black blues player” (p. 36). To be sure, white blues musicians and the cast of regulars at Chicago’s various blues clubs understand blues authenticity quite differently than does the “slumming” cosmopolitan couple or the naive tourist.

Often these expectations of the “real” blues experience are tied to identity. Grazian demonstrates that tourists and residents seek out their “nocturnal selves” at clubs such as B.L.U.E.S., the Checkerboard Lounge, Blue Chicago, and Kingston Mines. In the process, they search for something authentic, different, outside of the norm as they seek escape from their workaday world through often idealized and romanticized notions of the blues experience. Each of these clubs offers blues consumers a different slice of Chicago blues history and tradition and, therefore, more or less fulfills their expectations. As attested by the number of times stage musicians receive requests to play “Sweet Home Chicago,” “Everyday I Have the Blues,” “Mustang Sally,” and other well-worn blues classics, many of these clubs project their authenticity as a cultural commodity that can be packaged for, sold to, and consumed by an often nondiscriminating audience.

The most effective move that Grazian makes in the book is that he does not attempt to define “authentic Chicago blues.” Instead of simply distinguishing the authentic from the inauthentic blues experience, Grazian delves deeper into stereotypical expectations to uncover how regulars, employees, musicians, and club “characters” perceive their role in the commercial manufacture of “authentic” blues. Outside of the gaze of the tourist and the urban hipster, these clubs often take on quite different flavors, thus highlighting how authenticity is often created in the eyes of the beholder. I found little to criticize in *Blue Chicago*. It took me directly into an urban social world with which I have limited experience. I especially enjoyed Grazian’s masterful weaving of field notes, interviews, thick description, sociological theory, and the social, economic, and historical context of the Chicago blues scene. At times, I felt intimately connected with the various characters and musicians introduced throughout his narrative and at times could envision myself seated at a barstool next to Grazian, sipping a Budweiser while listening in on his conversations with clubgoers.

Both *Blue Chicago* and *Creating Country Music* focused on the manufacture and consumption of authenticity in American popular cultural traditions. *Music and Gender* provides a strikingly different take on the contemporary performance of musical and cultural traditions in a diverse and complex geographic region. In this book, Tulia Magrini offers a selection of essays that explore the politics of performance in traditional music and dance. In an increasingly postmodern, global society, traditional music and dance is often performed for audiences, like those Grazian discusses, who bring with them expectations of tradition and preconceived ideas about gender.

Though the collection does not focus explicitly on authenticity, the various authors expose implications for scholarly debates on the authentic in popular music

and culture. The essays raise a number of central questions: What role does authenticity play, for example, when audience expectations of “authentic,” traditional performance are in stark contrast to the emergent and increasingly flexible gender roles of modern society? What can be said of traditional music and dance when its performers enact outmoded and restrictive gender performances? What are the larger political implications of performing roles that transcend gender and sexuality in what many consider a sexually restrictive culture? In answering these questions, various authors draw out the implications of these performances for the political futures of women in the Mediterranean region. Magrini argues that gender plays a central, yet theoretically undeveloped, role in musical activity and cultural meaning. As such, the essays in her book fill this gap in the scholarly literature on traditional music and culture.

For many Mediterranean traditions, the boundaries created by typecast gender roles have been crossed and challenged through musical performance. Modernization and migration coupled with the transition from countryside to city, the disbanding of large households, and the movement of women from the household to the workplace have altered these traditions and disrupted their modes of transmission. As a space of ritual performance, the public stage of traditional music and dance allows performers to transgress traditional roles to explore, critique, and present alternative versions of gendered interaction. Though many of these performed behaviors would be restricted in everyday life, the public stage of the traditional folk culture provides a space where the politics of gender can be explored and given voice.

For example, the practice of Corsican polyphonic singing, Caroline Bithell explains, creates legitimate public spaces for male togetherness and homosocial male relationships in which men soldier-singers cultivate a sense of intimacy and spiritual bonding. Bithell demonstrates how, in the past, women have co-opted these traditionally male performances to challenge their associations with militarism, nationalism, and militancy. In another example, changing power relationships between men and women in Flamenco tradition, dancers enact these changes in and through dance. Joaquina Lobajo demonstrates that through dance, women began “progressively appropriating dances and attitudes previously reserved for men” (p. 7). As Gail Holst-Warhaft shows in her study of the Rebetika tradition, male and female tavern performers took on the elicited, sensual, uninhibited personae of roguelike characters and behaved in ways that were customarily restricted in mainstream Greek society. These bohemian performances provided bourgeois audiences with a “taste for the forbidden” and a marginal, oppositional homosexual underworld. The spaces of performance in dingy hashish dens and taverns simultaneously provided both homoerotic spaces of performance for men and more masculine, yet still marginalized, enactments of gender for women.

These examples argue for the idea that through cultural performance, dancers, singers, musicians, and actors enact the representation, assertion, or transgression of particular gender roles (see Conquergood 1992). Margrini’s collection explores how through performance—an occasion for the public display of relationships

between and among men and women—participants and audience members both read and deconstruct the encoded narratives of gender. However, because public performance has been used by many as a mode of critique and gender liberation, traditionally female voices have also been co-opted and taken over by male performers, as in the case of the globalization of Muslim *raï* singers. With the spread of *raï* singing as a “world” music, this predominantly female tradition has been taken over by a dominant cast of popular male performers. Marie Virolle questions the impact of this transition, especially in light of its transgressive potential in the modern Muslim world. Through *raï* singing, women challenged typical gender roles of both men and women by blurring distinctions between masculine and feminine in their often-androgynous performances of the female role.

I have barely scratched the surface of Magrini’s rich collection. It offers scholars of Mediterranean life and culture case studies that demonstrate the flexibility and fluidity of gender roles even in the performance of tradition. The essays in this collection highlight the complexity of gender negotiation, especially when confronted with the presumably oppressive boundaries of the Muslim and Mediterranean world. They provide an alternative to the “honor and shame syndrome” of the anthropological literature that defines Mediterranean women as “silent, passive, and marginal figures who were secluded in their houses, modestly covered head to toe, in order to exorcise the potential sensuality of their bodies, and removed from any outside activity or role” (p. 13). *Music and Gender* reconsiders this stereotypical representation of Mediterranean women by engaging their musical traditions as a site for female cultural and economic agency in their expression of “feelings, ideas, and protests through the symbolic forms of song, dance, and ritual” (p. 15). In this light, this body of work turns the tables on the homogenizing notion of honor and shame by viewing women in ways that demonstrate their agency and pride and thus adds complexity to common understandings of gender in a thoroughly diverse and varied Mediterranean world.

Magrini’s collection also offers a number of insights for scholars of the body. Many of the essays read the history and traditions of the Mediterranean region through the transgressive potential of the female body. These performances “break and remake” gender roles by providing a relatively free and uninhibited space to experiment with alternative social roles. Even in the context of a patriarchal society, through traditional song and dance, men and women take on roles that run counter to dominant ways of thinking about gender-appropriate behavior. To be sure, the performance of traditional cultures can also typecast men and women in gender-specific roles to which they have been tied for centuries. Regardless, through performance, these cultural actors can juxtapose and playfully critique and challenge these roles, especially when contrasted with a contemporary context that has afforded women greater voice and equality in Mediterranean society and politics.

Music and Gender canvasses a wide range of regional styles and cultural forms,

which made a thorough understanding of the material somewhat challenging. The book would have benefited from a CD or DVD sampler showcasing the major traditions, songs, dances, and figures that the various essays discuss. Also, most of the essays rely on a strict textual analysis of the various musical and cultural practices under review. On several occasions, I would have wished to learn how these performances were perceived, processed, and politicized by their audiences.

With the advent of postmodern culture, many fans of popular music have turned back to traditional forms of music and culture to satisfy their need for simpler, purer, and more honest cultural expression. They feel that by going to the root of popular forms of music they can escape the commodifying and co-optive forces of mass culture. The problem of authenticity in the postmodern period is that “the authentic” has collapsed and has been replaced with a “logic of inauthentic authenticity” (Grossberg 1992) supporting the idea that in modern, capitalist societies there is no true, authentic folk culture against which to evaluate the “inauthenticity” of popular culture (Fiske 1989). The three books discussed here challenge the notion that authenticity has collapsed in the postmodern period. Following Sloop and Herman (1998:3), the various authors address whether “authenticity as a concept [has] been evacuated or its meaning simply transformed.” Though commentators on postmodern life and culture have signaled the collapse of authenticity, these texts demonstrate that it is still alive and well in audience interactions with performances of cultural tradition. As Grazian (2003:40) points out, “arguments about authenticity often emerge during historical moments when the meaningfulness of traditional ways of life seems challenged by the force of modernity and its by-products, including the globalization of popular culture.” Despite their divergent approaches and topics, Peterson, Grazian, and Magrini demonstrate the various ways in which authenticity is a carefully crafted negotiation and reconstruction of various aspects of the past. These texts shed light on the underlying politics of authenticity when audiences consume musical and cultural traditions in contemporary contexts for contemporary purposes.

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