

Remix Culture: The Folk Process in the 21st Century

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John Egenes
Otago University
Dept. of Music
Dunedin, New Zealand

Artistic Relationships

I have made my living for most of my life by playing music for audiences. I still enjoy the connections I have with my fellow musicians onstage, and with the audiences out in the venues. The connection between audience and artist is changing to form a new kind of relationship, one that is fostered by our digital domain. While that digital world is not new, it still remains alien to many.

Music has always been about musicians connecting with each other—physically, in the same space—and sharing our ideas, techniques, chops and riffs so that we might mirror our creative reflections back to ourselves. Like minds and souls attract. But musicians form a different sort of relationship with an audience than we do with each other.

There is an invisible wall separating the performer from those who come to see him. This invisible barrier sits at the edge of the stage, or wherever a performer's personal space is defined. It is as if there is a sign there that reads:

*I'm the artist, you're the layperson.
I decide what, when and where to perform.
You are a passive consumer and simply take in what I have to offer.
It is okay to interact with me from a distance
Dance, applaud, scream and whistle where appropriate,
But in any event, DO NOT come onto the stage with me.
DO NOT invade my personal space.
It's okay for me to invade yours, but stay away from mine*

We take this scenario for granted, and have for quite a long time now. This disconnection of artist and audience is now diminishing. The lines between producer and consumer are blurring. The audience is becoming the artist; the consumer is becoming the producer; software's end user is becoming its developer. We are steadily transforming from a "top down" culture to one that is "bottom up".

The internet has given immediate and unprecedented open access to artists, with fans now demanding even more. Fans now want to be able to communicate directly with the artist, to give feedback (both positive and negative), and to receive personal communication from the artist. With internet access they can do just that, but fans want more than personal contact with the artist. They want to take control of the artist's music. And content in digital form allows this control.

The artist no longer controls when, where or how artistic content is consumed or used. These things are fast falling under the control of the audience. The barrier between artist and audience is fast disappearing. In a traditional musical scenario there are two types of people:

*There are those who create music, and those who respond to it.
There are musicians, and there are audience members.
You are either one or the other.
You either create the music or you respond to it.
You either play or you listen.*

But all of that is history now. Today's audience is just beginning to wake up to their own options, and as they do they will quickly demand freedom and more control over how they relate to the music and art they like.

People have quit listening to albums. The consumer of today and tomorrow downloads single songs and creates her own playlists. An album is simply a group of songs that can be broken down into its individual components. In that regard, an album is no different from a playlist. People now think of songs individually, and not as "the third song on side two" of an album. We have disconnected the song from the album, and are in the process of disconnecting it from the artist, as well. Toward this end, the next step then is to break down the songs themselves into their component parts—to recreate the music to suit ourselves.

Remix Culture and the Folk Process

Our newfound power as consumers, coupled with new software and technologies, has created today's Remix culture. Remixing signals a fundamental shift in our way of thinking. For more than a century now, music has been a commodity, something to be produced, packaged, marketed and sold. In a remix culture music and art become more a *means* to an end, rather than the end itself. We think of an artist creating a *product*, but in digital media they create a *process*.

Albums are to playlists what singles are to remixes. An album is a *product*; a playlist is a *process*. Products are artifacts. They are static, completed things. Processes are malleable, ongoing things.

The remix process gives authorship of the music back to the audience, where the original folk process was born. Remix culture signals the beginning of a new folk process. The idea of remixing goes back a long way. Anagrams have been around the better part of three thousand years and are probably one of the first examples of remixing, as we know it. Remix culture questions an artist's right to control intellectual property, employing an outlook that views intellectual creations NOT as *individual* property, but as *communal* property. I use the term "communal" here when referring to a *many-to-many* culture, and the term "individualist" when speaking about a *one-to-many* culture.

And so, what does all of this mean? The consequences of remix and digital culture are significant, and while a description of them lies outside the scope of this paper, the general effects might be summed up as such:

- *The author's name will no longer be larger than the book's title because, within a digital culture, the original creator of intellectual content becomes less and less important, over time.*
- *Artistic content itself gains in intrinsic value but loses its economic value.*

The “folk process” has been described by Katherine MacDonald as “the process by which cultural artifacts are changed, whether minutely or in significant amounts, to form new cultural products” (*emphasis mine*).¹ In terms of music, this means that songs change over time, as people forget lyrics, chords or melodies and change them to suit themselves. A song is passed along and changed with each performance by a new singer. This works in the same way as the iteration of a joke, changed to fit the storyteller’s style and situation.

Pete Seeger’s father, musicologist Charles Seeger, coined the term “folk process” and used it to describe not only how artifacts are changed, but also how cultures are continually reborn. The retelling of a joke from person to person, over time, does not simply change the joke. A new version of the joke changes the culture in its own small way.

In referring to remix culture, I have mentioned digital culture here. A digital culture is an aural culture, and an aural culture is a *communal* one. Aural/communal cultures have these things in common:

- *They are non-linear, “bottom-up” societies, directed by the community*
- *They augment the folk process*
- *They are in turn stimulated by the folk process*

We have been living in a print culture—an individualist one—for the past several hundred years. An individualist culture is a visual one, and individualist/visual cultures share these things in common:

- *They are linear, “top-down” societies, directed by few*
- *They are Newtonian and logical*
- *They eventually suppress the folk process by elevating the rights of the individual*

Digital media is rapidly moving us away from the print culture of the past several hundred years toward a new digital culture. The print culture, being an individualist one, has steered us away from our original nature as a primarily *aural* creature toward becoming a primary *visual* one.

Print is a decidedly *linear* medium. One reads a book by starting at the beginning and continuing, literally, in a line, until she comes to the final sentence. Print has moved us from a communal culture to one in which the individual is paramount. But this new digital media demands that the individual give way to the community. It runs against everything we’ve been taught about the sanctity and inviolability of an individual’s rights. It allows that people who reuse the artistic works of others are not, in fact, pirates, but are instead, contributors to cultural rebirth.

We are moving away from a very long industrial era in which intellectual creations are called “property”, and have are considered a commodity, toward a new paradigm that suggests the idea that when recording a new album we are not creating a *product*, we are creating a *process*. This can be a hard concept to get your head around.

A simple comparison:

- **Encyclopaedia Britannica: *Product***
 - *Top-down; written by few, distributed to many*
 - *once printed, the content is not changeable*
- **Wikipedia: *Process***
 - *Bottom-up; written by many, distributed to many*
 - *content is changed continuously by the community*

This is not to say that one is better than the other. Britannica in its print form cannot survive in a digital, bottom-up culture any more than Wikipedia could have survived in a print, top-down culture. Digital culture has not pushed print out; it is in the process of *absorbing* it. With this in mind, music and all other artistic content will follow \int , many-to-many model within the digital culture. The idea of production falling into the hands of the consumer is uncomfortable for those who cling to the traditional models of ownership and control.

High Speed Networking at Albany St. Studios

At Otago University's Albany Street Studios we have recently upgraded our main studio control room, refitting it with a new SSL C-200 mixing desk, built by Solid State Logic, in Oxford, England.

We are in the process of connecting it to New Zealand's KAREN high speed network. KAREN (Kiwi Advanced Research and Education Network). New Zealanders often speak of being affected by the "tyranny of distance", and this 10 gigabit national network that connects Kiwis to the rest of the world is a giant step toward removing it. Through links with AARNET (Australia's Academic and Research Network), we now connect to Los Angeles, Seattle, and countries around the world via other high speed networks.

The SSL console features 64 channel strips capable of streaming 128 channels of analogue, and 512 channels of digital I/O running through its Centauri core, via single mode fibre optic cable, with control data passed via ethernet.

I won't go into detail about the recording aspects here, but its features include dual faders per channel strip in a classic inline configuration, 12 Main Busses, 24 Aux Busses, 12 Stereo FX returns, and a complete, dedicated system of EQ and Dynamics DSP emulators. It has full 5.1 surround mixing capabilities built into it and is completely automated via the Centauri core.

It connects to microphone and line inputs via either of 2 Stageboxes, each with 48 inputs and controlled via fibre optic cable. These are the key to our future long distance recording capability. The system sends data via MADi (Multichannel Audio Digital Interface) (up to 64 channels) Control data is carried between the desk and the stageboxes via ethernet, which creates problems for us when trying to work over any significant distances.

Basically, the signal routing goes something like this:

- *Microphones or outputs from venue's mixing desk are connected to the stagebox, which is on site*
- *stagebox is connected via its MADi connectors to single mode fibre*
 - *(no control data yet)*

- *fibre is connected at other end to the Centauri core*
- *Centauri is connected to the C-200 desk, via fibre and ethernet*
- *a redundant fibre (supplied) may be used as a comm. link*

Once the problem of control data over ethernet is solved, the desk will have remote control of the stagebox, with the ability to adjust input gain, mutes, and other functions. With proper controls in place, it will be possible not only to record at a distance, but also to create a two-way flow, giving musicians the opportunity to play together in real time.

Our challenges, as we see them now, include:

- *working out distance limitations (if any) on sending MADI over fibre*
- *developing protocols to allow us to send control data over fibre, hopefully combined with the MADI data*
- *developing methods to compress multiple sets of MADI data (64 channels each, with 6 sets of MADI connectors) and to decompress them at the other end*

We are researching ways to use 6 sets of MADI connections, each with 64 audio channels, along with sideband communications feeds, video, and machine control data, with an aim toward collaboration in realtime with minimum latency. We are looking at various methods of clock sync over distances, including the use of GPS satellite tracking as a clock source. The ultimate goal is to create a protocol with which all of this can be used with musical collaborators globally.

We know this is not a new concept, and in fact that is a large reason why I am here at Internet2. We certainly don't want to reinvent the wheel, and are hoping to build upon work already done, and to forge collaborative ties with those doing research in this area.

Media: Building Opportunity

And why do we even want to do this? There are always naysayers who point out the seemingly insurmountable difficulties with realtime performance over great distances. And frankly, some of my colleagues simply see no need for it. To them, music is something to be played by people in the same room, something not done at a distance, and high technology is something best left to the experts—or better yet, best left alone.

But the question isn't why we NEED this. Twenty-five years ago I could not have convinced a single friend or colleague that they NEEDED email. None of them knew what it was, and most thought it bit odd that anyone would be excited about it. It wasn't needed then, but our needs change.

The question becomes one of *opportunity*. As humans, we respond to the opportunities our environment provides. Many pass off our behaviour as "human nature", but I tend to agree with Clay Shirky when he says that we respond to opportunities, to the ways in which our environment and our media *allows* us to behave, and not to some general myth that we do so because "it's just human nature"ⁱⁱ. A change in human nature didn't transform my friends and colleagues from technophobe to Facebook addicts. A change in *opportunity* caused that.

When a new medium comes along to replace a previous one, those who hang on to the old media suffer the greatest hurt.ⁱⁱⁱ When the automobile replaced the carriage, all horse related industries suffered. When we talk of digital downloading and its effects upon artists' rights we see impending loss of income and intellectual control. Some of us want to stop it, while others want to foster it. But those on both sides are numbed by the new medium and focus entirely upon its content so they miss the very nature of the digital medium itself.

In 1910, we focused upon the destruction of the horse industry by the automobile. We did not focus upon the very nature of the automobile itself. Being blinded by a new medium, we did not foresee the real ways in which the car would change our world. Cars did not simply replace the horse and buggy, but fundamentally changed who we are, and the world we live in. We saw them as symbols of status, but they were really about power—the power to take us places. They created highways, resorts, and suburbs all over the land that were not only alike, but were equally available to all. They levelled the social structure and drove home (literally) the concept of standardisation.

The automobile broke up family life, separated work and domicile, exploded cities into suburbs, and extended its urban roots out along highways and into rural areas. It put an end to the countryside as we used to know it, and it destroyed the city as a casual environment in which to rear a family. Cities became places that catered first to cars.

The car created shopping malls and drive-in movies and housing tracts, and has generally refashioned all the places that have historically united and separated men. We didn't think of any of this, back in 1910.

I use the car as an analogy to the computer today, because as we now focus upon immediate and foreseeable effects from the computer while we fail to understand its very nature. And I submit that part of its very nature is this:

- *it is a communal, bottom up medium*
- *it is fundamentally changing the way we interact with our music, art, and any other creative content*
- *it will change our views on intellectual property and its ownership and control*

The top down structure that now controls our artistic creations is simply untenable in the face of new technologies. It is no accident that industries controlling the creation, production, distribution and consumption of our artistic and intellectual property are suffering greatly at the hands of digital technology. They continue to grasp onto the old media in vain attempts to maintain the status quo. We now see them turn to the new media with an eye toward its control. Whether or not they succeed in leveraging control of our digital networks remains to be seen.

The folk process has always been a decidedly bottom up thing. The new folk process will employ what has been called the “new anarchism”. It will present us with new problems and challenges, but also with new opportunity. It permits us to explore new ways of making and sharing music, incorporating an old folk process into a new digital culture, allowing us to re-school ourselves in evolving musical traditions and to create new and exciting environments for ourselves.

The use of digital media drives us toward a more communal—and less individual—culture.

As John Barlow put it, “the ‘containers’ for intellectual content are melting away”.^{iv} Networks are the fire that is melting them. Higher speeds in networking increase the fluidity of ALL media. They serve to simulate real world conditions, and as speeds increase they move us ever closer to “actually being there.”

As our free time, or our “cognitive surplus”, as Shirky refers to it^v, shifts away from one-directional media such as television and radio, and moves toward multi-directional high speed networks, what USED to be created by experts and delivered to consumers is now created by those same consumers and delivered to each other. We’ve gone from broadcasting to distribution. High speed networks are dissolving boundaries and obstacles, making our connections to each other both seamless and effortless. This is where our opportunities lie. You here, who devise, build and maintain these networks, are creating those opportunities, and this is what will change our so-called human nature.

Our digital networks allow us to form new alliances, bonds and attachments, and as we go about our separate ways we can now find ways of coming together with others outside our normal domains.

Simply put, music is the fundamental language. It’s something we all share on some level and it affects every one of us. Digital media is already changing our musical world, and it is changing our music. Within the many-to-many culture that digital media fosters, our music will flourish to enrich not only the lives of musicians, but also the lives of those who listen.

Endnotes:

i Macdonald, K. (2005) “Reflections on the Modern Folk Process”

ii Shirky, C (2010) “Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity In A Connected Age” p. 122

iii McLuhan, M. (1964) “understanding Media: the extensions of man” p 240

iv Barlow, J. (2008); foreword to “Content”, by Doctorow, C. Tachyon Pub. San Francisco

v Shirky, p 23-34

Further Reading:

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