

I Want the Signals, Not Static

Tuning In to Traditional Music

by Christopher Ford

Music, as a form of expression, carries with it an omnipotence that few other media do. This power has existed for as long as there have been molecules to transmit energy through vibration, producing what we perceive as sound. So when does sound become music? And when does music become art? Here is a definition of music I came up with, as a test: Music is art based in sound, specifically sound that displays *deliberate* tonal and rhythmic patterns. And for something to qualify as art, it must communicate a unique perspective from one individual or group to others, sharing something that would otherwise remain hidden.

Close your eyes and imagine Bob Dylan (otherwise known as Blind Boy Grunt on [Broadside Ballads, Vol. 1](#)) on a stage in 1964, or better yet transport yourself to somewhere a bit more remote, to the scene of a recording of your choice from the [UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music](#). Perhaps you'll find yourself following Dylan's blues influences back to *An Anthology of African Music*, listening to a Nzakara mother comparing her child to the "moon of the winged termites" on "Lullaby" on [Central African Republic](#). Maybe his ballads lead you to the simply titled [Ireland](#), which collects recordings of traditional Irish music made from the 1930s to '80s, and the voice of a sixty-two-year-old housewife, lamenting a victim's wounds reopened in the presence of the murderer. Picture that housewife now as a radio transmitter, sending out pulses of thought to any receiver that can tune in. You are the receiver, and when you tune in and pick up on the signal, the communication is complete. Art is realized.

But what if you can't tune in? Or if, when you do, all you get is static? Or hints of a thought jumbled in noise? Most of my work is with what is generally referred to as contemporary music, and I spend a lot of energy trying to discern signals from static. In a broad sense, everything I work with could be defined as music. So often, though, I wonder what is transmitted. Like the conundrum "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is

around to hear it, does it make a sound?” I hear a song as just sound until the connection is made.

As a musician, I work in an industry in which ambition is often rewarded, yet creativity is overlooked. If you are an evolutionary biologist looking for a case study of interspecies competition, may I offer up any local music scene as a suitable microcosm? From being invited back to an open mic at a coffee shop to winning a GRAMMY for Artist of the Year, it’s all the same game, an ongoing “battle of the bands,” though the stakes may change.

It’s important to pay attention to the way we define musicians’ success and consider the consequent dominance of aesthetic branding in the marketing of music. I’m referring to everything from album design, photos and videos featuring the artist, and how the artist dresses to the attitudes, opinions, and behaviors the artist displays. Does the branding create unwanted noise that distorts the transmission of a *unique perspective* from the artist?

Since the dawn of the recording industry at the turn of the twentieth century, record labels have been plastering dramatic imagery of artists like Al Jolson and opera star Rosa Ponselle on advertisements. Album covers came next as the Depression ended. Alex Steinweiss at Columbia Records led the charge in introducing high-minded design to the industry, a seemingly worthy investment, as evidenced by the dramatic increase in sales of Bruno Walter’s recording of Beethoven’s *Eroica*, made more attractive by [its cover design](#). Think of the covers of some of your favorite albums: how would The Ramones sound if they looked like your accountants? You know the story from here: increasingly elaborate costumes and stage productions, music videos, TV appearances, and anything else you might imagine, all became part of the brands of musical artists.¹

So much of the music we consume is accompanied by this blinding aesthetic of music marketing and manufactured artist identity that it makes one wonder what the real intent of most music-based art is, or if a unique perspective can effectively be communicated through such a haze, especially if the artist is misrepresented through such tactics. What is the balance between creating a song that truly transmits an original thought to the listener and promoting the song so there is a listener to hear it?

German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) wrote in his *Critique of Judgment* that “art can be termed beautiful only when we are conscious of its being art, while yet it has the appearance of nature.” Traditional music seems to offer a glimmer of hope in this regard. In my own experience, listening to such music has served as a reminder of

where my creativity comes from. It reinforces the perspective that music was born with a purpose and can continue to serve an audience beyond the original culture; furthermore, when it does, it becomes the fine art that Kant wrote of. What music sounds more like nature than “[The Water Drum](#)” on *Cameroon: Baka Pygmy Music*, seems as free as “[Mvrole ensemble: Voices](#)” on *Central African Republic: Banda Polyphony*, or appears as unstudied as “[Three Katajjait from Baffin Land](#)” on *Canada: Inuit Games and Songs*?

Here, contenders play a vocal endurance game, face-to-face in close proximity, ending only when one can go on no longer and finishes out of breath or in frustration (or is it laughter I hear?).

The artists at work here are unlikely to be editing themselves in output or appearance for the sake of a perceived potential audience. While this music serves a distinct purpose for the community in which it is created, its relationship with the recording industry has expanded its audience. Such works in Smithsonian Folkways’ [UNESCO collection](#)—as well as the pioneering efforts of people such as [Alan Lomax](#) with his contributions to the Library of Congress Archive of American Folk Song and [Harry Smith](#) with his [Anthology of American Folk Music](#), along with such releases as the Explorer Series by Nonesuch Records—do more than sharing the beauty and endless complexity of humanity on a global scale. These recordings also provide a reference point for those of us making music as art and working to transmit it, to promote it, to *sell* it.

The music of traditional artists is powerful to me because they are not preoccupied with their constructed image in the eyes of their audience. And I simply pick up the signal, which carries sincere expressions of emotions, beliefs, and imaginations, flaws and all.

The good news is that even in the competitive world of contemporary music, I can assure you *there is art*. Unique perspectives exist on the GRAMMY-winning album and at that open mic, and someone is tuning in. Imagine, though, how many more connections could be made if the walls of marketing aesthetics were torn down—or at least lowered a bit—so more people could get a peek of what’s on the other side.

I’m reminded of the tale of the Tower of Babel. Independent and major artists alike realize the power of branding to sell records and themselves. If we continue to build our brands to the stars, reaching for success and recognition, will it all tumble down in mass confusion? Will we be left with an inability to communicate through one of the most powerful forms nature has offered us, sound?

We humans are part of a much greater history than we can fathom, and within us reside the knowledge and experience of our species and much, much more. Artists and those working to promote them have the opportunity and ability to share part of this through music. I'd urge my peers to look to the [UNESCO collection](#) as an example of the potential of our work. And to my fellow music lovers out there: when you put on a record, listen closely—take the rest of the package with a grain of salt—and try to tune in.

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¹ Sean Wilentz, *360 Sound: The Columbia Records Story* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2012).