

**LIVING THE HEAVY METAL LIFE:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLICATION OF MUSIC AS IDENTITY**

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ABSTRACT

To answer the question why do individuals choose a particular genre of music as a favorite, the lived experiences of music listeners were explored. The researcher interviewed five adults about their music listening. In-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed. Empirical phenomenology was used to analyze responses. Respondents experienced life-changing moments in the selection of music genre preference. Themes common to all respondents are described. Implications of music listening to health are discussed.

Keywords: Music, Transformation, Identity, Catharsis, Phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

For some, music is part of their daily experience. But what is music, and how can it mean something different to different listeners? Music, like communication, is created with intentionality. However, the experience of music is non-intentional, like being immersed in the world (Welton, 2009). According to Welton, “hearing music is the manifestation of the inner that makes possible all ‘intentional’ forms of hearing” (2009, p. 279). Music is on the “immediate level of affection” (Welton, 2009, p. 279).

Welton (2009) goes on to argue that audibility and visibility are manifestations of the affective layer of subjectivity. Nelson (1989) argues that the subject experiences bodily affective responses to the ‘tele’visual but does so often “in order to withdraw” from the world, or to “escape from the Self” (p. 394). Welton (2009), however, distinguishes the experience of the visual from the auditory in that music is not visible. Music affects listeners at a different, and possibly more primal level. “Music is about pure sentiments, feelings, suffering and joy” (Welton, 2009, p. 285). Listening to music evokes “definite, though perhaps less specific, mood responses” (Myers, 1927; cited in Meyer, 1956, p. 266).

What is less clear about the experience of music is how or when does the individual become aware of the connections between listening to music and its primal affect? Subsequent to that awareness, does music take on new meaning in the life-world of the music listener? If so, what is that effect?

METHOD

The phenomenological method has as its focus the lived experience of the individual (van Manen, 1990). It attempts to describe the lived-world at the pre-reflective state before the experience has been categorized. This method is interested in the description of phenomena as it is presented to the individual consciousness. The purpose of the method is to understand the meaning of the experience for the individual as opposed to the characteristics of the experience that may be manipulated.

To construct a model of the experience of music, I interviewed five adult males between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-nine. It is important to note that one structural element across all interviews was that of a particular mode of musical experience: taste in music. The purposive sample of five interviewees were chosen based on my familiarity with their interests in music listening through previous casual conversations. None of the five interviewees were involved in the academic study of music. To gather data, I used a guided, semi-structured interview protocol (Creswell, 2007). Each interview was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The interviewees' names have been fictionalized in the transcripts to protect their confidentiality. Following the guidelines of the American Anthropological Association, a researcher protects the confidentiality of interviewees in qualitative research by assigning aliases (Glesne & Pesjkin, 1992; cited in Creswell, 2007). All interviews occurred during October 1995.

I used the tripartite phenomenological approach of description, reduction and interpretation to analyze the interviews, as described by Lanigan (1988). Themes emerged from the transcribed data as common elements in the interviewees' discourse. In particular, reduction consists of locating phrases within and across interviewee responses that share common expression of lived experience.

DESCRIPTION AND REDUCTION OF COMMON THEMES

Three primary themes emerged in the review of transcriptions: Transformation, identity, and catharsis. Through reflection, I could see how the topic of the lived experience of music was important and brought to the fore as a topic of study out of casual conversations with the five interviewees who subsequently were approached for the study. In the course of the interviews it was discovered that myself, as well as the five interviewees, all experience music from the perspective as a listener and/or performer. All of the interviewees, except one, admitted to either dabbling or performing music on a regular basis. The lone exception expressed vicarious performance through interaction with a close personal associate who also performs music. I had, throughout my life, either performed as an amateur, or taken classes in music performance, though never with an intent to perform professionally.

Transformation

An experience common to all interviewees was an experience of time before and after in which music served a markedly different purpose. For all, an event marked a change in "awareness" of the important role music played in our lives. Before that event, music was a background

for other activities and was for “entertainment” purposes or as an “escape.” After the event, music became “big” and “essential.” One interviewee, John, put it this way:

When I was younger I probably listened to music as an escape. But not so much now. I mean sometimes, but it's not the same now.... Now when I was a teenager, I was introduced to the band Def Leppard, their High 'n' Dry album. And that opened a whole new world for me. That was probably my first metal experience.... I had never heard anything like it. So, that's what drew me to it.

Another interviewee, Sam, was more explicit in making a distinction between music before the event and music after the event:

I was just listening to all this stupid music for a while that really didn't make any sense to me. [I said to myself], “Wow, everything else is ridiculous. I don't know why I have been spending my time listening to it. This is what I need to listen to.”

The event typically comes in the form of an introduction, usually by a friend or family member. Although the individuals involved may play an important role in the lives of the music listener, the relationship each listener has with the music is an individual experience. A third interviewee, Devin stated:

There were a couple of kids that came down from Chicago...to my home town, and out of sheer accident I suppose we kind of got together and hit it off. I don't know what made us do it, but one day we were going through this old record store in town, a used record store, and they had a small punk section, and we each bought a record. To me it [this new music] was so much more real than what I had heard on the radio; at least that is what I felt at the time.

Through the event of introduction to a form of music previously unheard, the music listeners “found” a “new” relationship to the music. A fourth interviewee, Keith, specifically mentioned the newness of the music:

A buddy got me into AC/DC, Aerosmith, and a couple of what I call now the hard rock groups. Bon Jovi and stuff like that. But back then, that stuff was new and fresh to me as all this stuff is now.

However, it is more than just newness to these music listeners. After the event, the music listeners spoke about transformation in their relationship to music. Sam described the event as life-changing:

We had heard one of my friends [say], “You gotta check out this one band. They're really different, they're weird. And they will just blow your head off.” That album changed my life. It did. It totally changed the way I looked at the world, and really from that point on music played a critical role in my life.

Indeed, this transformational life-changing event could be experienced as a spiritual rebirth. The fifth interviewee, Tim, described it in those terms:

It was kind of like being born again, being baptized in Christian terms, you know, because when I was ten years old I went to a church camp, and every year they invited this group of African-American women Gospel singers. Whenever I heard these women sing, you know, that was kind of like an aesthetic rebirth. You know, that was a discovery of music that changed my whole life.... I think it was an energy. Something fundamental to the order of the world because it affected me that deeply, it was that kind of discovery.

The introductory event seemed to raise awareness of music in a way that allowed listeners to explore new genres. Though typically listeners dove headlong into this new form of music, in time they began to expand their repertoire into new genres through active choice, as described by Devin, “My favorite genre [now] is hard to say because it is becoming more diversified, as I come to the ripe old age of twenty six,” and Sam, “Especially I find as I’m as I’m getting a little bit older, not old but older, that my taste in music is broadening more.”

Sam described his openness to expand the musical repertoire in relational terms, aware that the experience from the initial transformative event could be continued:

So as he [his brother] has started to get into that [new form of music], he has introduced me to a little bit. So, as a result of forming these kind of close interpersonal relationships with other people, I really think that led to a broadening of my musical interests.

Identity

These transformative events also initiated the development of a self-identity among music listeners. Sam put it this way: “My entire personality had just completely changed all based on the music.” Music continues to serve that identity for music listeners. Tim added: “[Music is] kind of like a daily sustenance kind of thing. I mean, it is essential to my daily life and to the maintenance of my identity, you know, as much as food and sleep and oxygen and that type of thing.”

Like daily sustenance, music serves to ground values for music listeners. Keith stated: “To me music is very big. It is honesty.” It is those values that help serve the music listener’s self-identity. Devin expressed it this way: “I identified with that [music] movement. I think whatever [music] has integrity, I like.” John stated, “I mean it just fit in with what I was going through at the time.” Tim also expressed what he values this way: “I like alternative music because people are taking risks. People are being much more individual, you know, striving for that individuality.”

Music also helps the listener with grounding identity and self-understanding. According to John, “Music just seems to put me in touch with myself.... Sometimes I find that a song relates to me. Music sometimes gives me a lot of insights because a lot of the people who write music that I

listen to are going through the same or similar things that I have gone through or [are going] through at the time or whatever.” Devin described the process of identity grounding this way:

It kind of defines where I came from, especially since I have dabbled in the experience of playing music, and singing music.... If my sense of identity is being questioned, then I want to go back to that. It is like going back to my roots. And it helps to find who I am.... [I am] building my self-identity through music.

Identifying with music also influenced some music listeners’ choice in becoming performers. According to John, “I determined that that was the direction I wanted to go [play music], and I basically went by word of mouth with my friends of what was going on.” The influence of the transformative event on music listening tastes also had an affect on the type of music some chose to perform. In short, these music listeners seem to engage directly with the music of their experience.

This group of music listeners believed identification with the culture surrounding the genre of music of their preference was important. For some, it was the idea of challenging the status quo. For Sam, “Generally, I like to listen to music that is stuff that challenges the status quo, stuff that's along my kind of thinking.” However, for others identifying with the culture was a method for surviving the vicissitudes of teenage life. According to Keith:

I was always sort of an outcast at school. I really rebelled at school. I kept off to myself or with a couple of my buddies. Although we were snubbed by everybody else, we snubbed them right back. It was like, if they don't want us screw them, 'we're above you.' With the Johnny Rotten - Sex Pistols kind of attitude.

Tim was even more explicit:

I don't have much respect for the mainstream. I was always isolated by the people who, I guess, defined the mainstream or that the mainstream defined, you know, or both probably. I was always isolated by that. You are not accepted as a part of the mainstream culture, well you have got to find a community somewhere, you've got to find a culture to define who you are, you know. And, music helped me define my culture because music was that culture.

That sense of self-identity seems to have grown then stabilized after the transformative event. Sam reflected on a recent event in which music became part of a conversation with someone from his past who influenced his taste in music:

I [ran into an old friend] last weekend. We were talking about how important music was to us and the kind of lifestyle we had and the perspective, the worldview that we had adopted in college. And, that music that we listened to was the core of our worldview, and it influenced our perceptions of everything that we did.

Catharsis

Music serves as a transformative, identity management device for this group of listeners. Music grounds their daily activities. Music as a daily grounding activity assists listeners with mood. For Keith, “To me music is basically a representation of whatever kind of mood I am in.” Although some admitted that music could change their mood, more often the music listeners used music to represent or enhance their mood. Keith continued, “I listen to music to emphasize my mood.” Tim was more descriptive:

Whenever I am in a melancholy mood I listen to melancholy music. I want to hear music that expresses how I feel in that moment. I know it is therapeutic. I know that my melancholy would be a lot worse, a lot more hollow during those times if I didn't have that companionship of music, of people who are singing my songs at that time.

These music listeners intentionally select music for mood enhancement. According to Sam, “I definitely pick the music that I want to listen to based on the particular mood that I am in or the mood that I want to get in.” Tim expressed feelings associated with music choice: “[When I listen to music] I feel essential.... Music is like the inspiration. If I am extremely low in energy, I can listen to certain music especially and be more invigorated.”

Music listening has specific cathartic effects for these listeners. Keith stated: “[After listening to music], I feel better.” According to Sam, “[Music has] a calming effect.” Devin expressed, “I would say that [after listening to music] I feel happy and content, and a warm glow through my body, if that makes any sense, which I suppose is some sort of slight adrenaline rush.” John added: “It [music] usually lifts my spirits. It makes me more energetic, usually. It's more stimulus than anything else.” John described music listening as transportive: “It was almost like being somewhere else.”

Sam was more descriptive about the effects of music listening:

Music is almost like a drug for me. I've actually had a tingling sensation, you know, it's just like, wow, like an altered state of being. It was just like I shivered inside. I said, 'Wow.' I was moved greatly. I'm not exactly sure how this happens but the structure of the music, the way the music flows, the rhythms in the music, the vocal qualities of the singer or whatever, were soothing to me. That's something about that music would just - it's a form of music that would stimulate my thought.

Finally, for Tim, listening to music provided an opportunity for self-expression in a safe environment: “No one can hear you [sing when driving] on a country road. So I mean that gives me that opportunity to participate when other contexts were too frightening for me.”

INTERPRETATION

According to Kvale (1983), the qualitative interview rests on subjective understanding of the researcher and interviewees. All of the participants, this author included, experienced some

type of transformation in which a new awareness of music came to the fore: music had affect. The transformation brought with it the development of an individualized sense of self-identity. However, that self-identity associated with a subculture of music genre. Although the experience of music listening transformed identity and meaning following some introductory event, once the awareness came, identity stabilized: awareness was a life-changing event. Plato had come out of the cave and could never truly return (1941).

In contrast to the “eyes out of your head,” or out of body televisual experience, as noted by Nelson (1989), the auditory experience from music listening was more like an immersion of the inner-self with the immediate surroundings. As Kandinsky (1994) noted (cited in Welten, 2009, p. 275):

The street may be observed through the window pane, causing its noises to become diminished, its movements ghostly, and the street itself, seen through the transparent but hard and firm pane, to appear as a separate organism, pulsating “out there”. Or one can open the door: one can emerge from one’s isolation, immerse oneself in this organism, actively involve oneself in it and experience its pulsating life with all one’s senses. Sound, with its constantly changing frequencies and rhythms, weaves itself around the individual, spiraling to a crescendo and suddenly falling away as if lamed.

The interviewees also acknowledged that once they became aware of the affect of music, through introduction to a “new” form, they utilized music for cathartic purposes. Music enhanced their moods, or allowed them to work through feelings or stress, and was utilized for that purpose on a daily basis. Music made them feel “better,” whether that feeling was stimulation or calming.

The transformative and cathartic nature of music can have health implications for those who listen. Clynes (1991) posited that healing powers of music relate to the cathartic effect of releasing repressed negative emotions, which de-stresses through a non-threatening activity. Clynes (1991) also argued that some aspects of the immune system are directly affected by emotion, therefore music listening may induce immunity. According to Campbell, “Music can be the medicine, the healing agent...” (1993, p. 5).

It has long been posited that health and music go hand-in-hand. McLellan, McLachlan, Perkins and Dornan (2013) interviewed musicians with interests in health, both professionally and from a lay perspective. Through phenomenological analysis, McLellan and colleagues discovered that music affected people’s emotions and sense of self and identity. More specifically, music listening and performance promoted health and well-being, even among seriously diseased individuals. Similarly, Nicol (2010) found that music listening offered comfort to those with chronic illnesses. While Moss, Donnellan and O’Neill (2012) argue that such qualitative approaches (such as conducted by this author, as well as McLellan, et al. (2013), and Nicol (2010)) are scarce and do not provide sufficient evidence for claiming efficacy for therapies. Moss and colleagues recognize the importance of such studies for furthering our understanding of the relationship between music and health.

Phenomenology is an approach that intends to uncover commonalities of lived experience. For these participants, the author included, listening to music was transformative. For each, some chance event in life brought music from the background to the forefront of the development of their identity. The relationship music played, the connection it created, was cathartic. All three themes (transformation, identity, and catharsis) played a role in the overall development and maintenance of self-identity. The first element involved a transformation to awareness of self-identity in music. The second element served to enhance and solidify that self-identity. The third element maintained that identity. In this sense of connection to self, listening to music is health.

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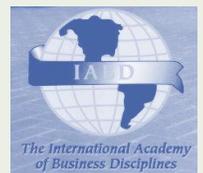
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QUARTERLY REVIEW OF BUSINESS DISCIPLINES

November 2014

Volume 1
Number 3



A JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY OF BUSINESS DISCIPLINES
ISSN 2334-0169 (print)
ISSN 2329-5163 (online)