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Playing the Way to Equality

Music culture is where a group of people share a common involvement, or interest, in music. This culture spans across time and area as music evolves. Whether it be rap or country, classical or punk, people have found their niches in the world of music. People relate to music, and it makes them feel good. Music comes with an emotional attachment in this way. This bond is seen between listeners and performers, as well as the listeners themselves. This common love of music is seen very blatantly, as it's played on every kind of social media, and is seen in schools across the country. In some cases, music helps with more than just mood and friendships. Music helps people feel included and equal in their societies. When it comes to the fight for equality, music is a fundamental supporter. Whether it be the Civil Rights movement, the wave of feminism in the 20th century, or the current LGBTQ movement, music is "much of the shape of the future" (Cateforis, 96)

The group of individuals that have been, visibly, fighting for equality for the longest amount of time is the African-American community. This community was enslaved, seen as nothing more than a piece of property, and arrested without cause for decades. Even today, in some parts of the nation it can be seen that African-Americans are lacking the true equality that American citizenship guarantees. As they have fought for rights and equality, music has followed blacks through time.

Originally, music was the opposite of a helpful resource to the African-Americans. When slaves were still being taken to America, the slavers used music to “preserve and promote a healthy cargo” (Thompson, 51) and prevent large numbers of deaths of slaves due to sickness and lack of space. Music was a form of abuse that was “interlaced with violence, rape, and subjugation” (Thompson, 44). It didn’t take long for the slaves to take advantage of these acts for their own purposes, though. Specifically seen with the slaves from Western Africa, when the white slave owners would force the blacks to sing and dance, slaves would use this music “to stand between their cultural heritage and an expectation to fulfill myths created by another culture.” (Thompson, 50). Many whites believed that blacks were supernatural and savage, and so the slaves would act exactly as the whites expected. This would create fear, as well as keep their ways of life alive.

The bond created due to these events created a tightly knit community. On Sundays, the slaves would gather at the expense of their white masters to communicate. Eventually, they would come to adore “the times they were able to come together for these music and dance gatherings” (Thompson, 99). Music turned the tables of fear between whites and slaves. It turned from a form of torture to a way of scaring their white masters with music gatherings where they would “play music, sing, and dance on Sundays throughout North America from the colonial era until the Civil War” (Thompson, 102). Without music, this community would not be as tight-knit as it is, and the Civil Rights movement would not have been as powerful.

With the strong foundations set by the slaves in America, music was still a large part of the black community through the introduction of Jim Crow laws and the Civil Rights Acts in the 1960s. During the 20th century, the black community was now struggling to get their music on the airwaves. While many of the artists struggled to get recognized, much of their music was

“stolen from under [their] noses” (Cateforis, 12) by white artists who “duplicated [their music] note for note” (Cateforis, 11). Soon, a new type of sound arrived on the scene and gave the black community a time to shine in the music industry. First seen “during the first wave of the Great Migration when a major demographic shift was taking place in black America” (Douglas, 33), Blues was ready to change history come the 20th century. It told stories of hope and heartbreak with a “passionate authenticity that no other musical form possessed” (Douglas, 4). This difference was not necessarily accepted by all listeners. In fact, the black community itself was unsure of Blues. Many of the religious people of this community saw the Blues as the Devil’s music and believe that “a pact has been made between accomplished blues guitarists and the devil” (Douglas, 62). Many of the listeners didn’t agree with this idea and saw the blues as “[reflecting] the signifyin’ nature of god” (Douglas, 180) rather than rejecting Him. Music supported these people’s religious views, regardless of some of their peers seeing it as the Devil.

From Blues came the music of Motown. Made up of a community of its own and seen as “a place and a form” (Cateforis, 68), it gave Blues some much needed help in attracting an audience without troubling the Church. It brought to the music world a “highly regimented, stiff, impersonal” (Cateforis, 69) sound laced with repetitive motifs and heavy drum that was not yet seen before. The sound was “totally lacking in spontaneity” (Cateforis, 69). Whether or not the community wanted it or not, Motown gave the black community a new voice. This voice gave them the ability to have their lives be visible and respected by the society that listened to it.

Another major equal rights movement is the feminist movement. Regardless of reactions and opinions on feminists, these women and men strive to create an equal environment between binary, and nonbinary, genders to create an equal playing field in America. This can be seen in music while “the role of women in society changes, some of this is reflected by the female

composers” (Cateforis, 126). Women in the music industry took off in the 70s, as female singer-songwriters began to “talk about what they [were] feeling, not what society might still think they should feel.” (Cateforis, 126). This gave women a leverage that they did not have when they were writing what a male-influenced industry told them to. They could give their grievances or sing about what made them feel good. They were beginning to see that “women’s equal prominence is accepted as a natural thing, not a fad” (Cateforis, 126). One of the biggest females in this movement is Madonna, who is still producing music today. Many listeners believe that Madonna “reinvented her glamorous image while wading into socially taboo waters” (Cateforis, 249) by teaching girls “how to be attractive, sensual, energetic, ambitious, aggressive, and funny—all at the same time” (Cateforis, 250). Women began to feel empowered due to the music that was being produced at this time. They looked at the past wants of women to look at how far, or how little, they have come in their fight for equality.

I think about another person who wanted to be the girl with the most cake—Sylvia Plath’s Esther, in *The Bell Jar*. There’s that passage where she sees all of her options—wife and mother, famous writer, magazine editor—as figs on a tree. But she can choose only one, and she can’t make up her mind, and the figs all wither and die. Women, of course, have it better than they did when Plath wrote that book in 1963, but how much has really changed? (Cateforis, 292)

Women took the music of the mid-to-late 70s as their own. They wanted it all, like Plath’s Esther. They wanted to be heard on the radio, or seen on stage. With this quickly becoming a reality, it gave hope for women who felt less than equal. Music showed this want to women across the nation, confirming that they wanted to be all of these things. Music allowed women to

sing about what they wanted, and to be seen as successful beings. Without the music of the 70s, women would not feel as empowered during this wave of feminism as they did.

The movement getting the most current recognition is the LGBTQ movement. Only blowing up the medias in the past few decades, the fight for equality for sexual orientations has only been reaching the airwaves musically for a short amount of time. Artists such as Mary Lambert and Lady Gaga are struggling to give this community the recognition that it is lacking. While “rock music has been extolled for its liberating and empowering qualities” (Cateforis, 181) it has “rarely embraced an openly homosexual, public identity” (Cateforis, 181) like it has for other areas. It is well known that for decades homosexuality was seen as taboo. Even today “The fear and resentment of gays and gay impulses run deep” (Cateforis, 182) in the country, for whatever reasons people hold. As gender roles during the World War began to change as women entered the workforce, it seemed that the country had “a major step in economic and social independence.” (Cateforis, 155) after the wars. The fight for marriage equality and transgender visibility is still going on, gaining some traction in the past decade. But, the LGBTQ community wasn’t seen as accepted, though it became less and less invisible.

Enter Lady Gaga. She begins to switch the norm in her music and music videos. While typically “the mainstream media tends to represent heterosexuality as the normative standard and queer sexuality as a pathological deviation.” (Iddon,112), she is beginning to change that. In many of her videos, straight relationships are infact seen as toxic and unhealthy while queer relationships are being celebrated. Gaga tends “to represent queer sexualities as linked to emancipation and self-determination while representing heteronormative sexualities as linked to confinement, disability, and death.” (Iddon, 123). Many would say that Gaga is a bit over-the-top when it comes to showing homosexual relationships as good, and straight as bad. But, at this

point in time nonheteronormative lifestyles need this kind of visibility to have even the slightest chance against their conservative neighbors. Gaga does this as her “art pioneers awareness and liberation at such a massive cultural scale” (Cateforis, 364) that it would be foolish to not look to her when it comes to music that breaks the norm. Though the community still has a long way to go before it achieves complete equality, Lady Gaga stands by its side to help it be stretched into the mainstream media sources.

As Lady Gaga tries to begin a homonormative culture, she is succeeding in making teens, and adults, feel more comfortable in their skin. Singers such as Mary Lambert and Sam Smith have come out and dedicated some of their music to their homosexuality, creating more of a playing field for LGBTQ performers. This also paves the way to other performers, such as Macklemore and Ingrid Michaelson, to show their support of the movement through their songs and music videos. Obviously, the LGBTQ movement still has a long way to go. But, music is playing a major role in its visibility. This community can feel connected to their society and feel accepted and loved by their singing role models. Without these artists, the LGBTQ community would not be as visible in social media as they are today-and are continuing to grow stronger.

These three movements have been fighting for decades for the equality, visibility, and rights that their peers have been born with. By being different, they craved something to feel connected to. Music has been this connection. Music has given the black community their own forms of music to rock out to and be able to be themselves. It has given women a way to show that they can be musicians, too, and good ones. It has said that it's okay to be gay, and that you are loved. Music is a major supporter of the road to equality, and a fundamental one. Without music, these communities may not have been as successful as they were, and would still be seen as lesser Americans.

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