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## Commentary: The remix culture; How the folk process works in the 21st century

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### Abstract

*The internet and our digital convergence are rapidly transforming long-held views regarding the traditional relationship between performer and audience (“creator” / “consumer”). This change is giving a new voice to the audience, literally bringing them into the mix. With unprecedented access to the creative process, and with an audience for their creations, consumers of music are also its producers, and are reshaping concepts of creativity, individuality, and intellectual property. This paper examines fundamental shifts in the way the “Folk Process” works within this context. Remix culture, once a bastion of beat-driven dance mashups, is expanding to include all styles of music, film, theatre and art. I will argue that its long-term significance lies in the notion that it blurs lines between the traditionally separate roles of creator and consumer, and challenges long-held concepts of intellectual property and copyright. Over the protests of many traditional folk musicians and devotees, folk music is entering this new digital arena, where the Folk Process is changing from gradual to immediate, from slow to rapid, adapting to fit the new digital paradigm.*

We are already living in a remix culture, whether we know it or not. Remixers—those people who borrow the works of others and rearrange them to suit themselves—are still thought of as a fringe group, more often than not labelled as pirates and thieves, who are thought to take others’ work and call it their own. To the public at large, and to the music industry in particular, they’re generally viewed as nothing more than plagiarists, but

the fact is we’re all remixers to some extent, and always have been.

Think about how we’re taught in school. A student is not assessed upon what she reads—instead, she is graded upon the things she writes. She doesn’t earn a grade for reading a book; rather, she receives her mark for writing a report about it. The things we write almost always reflect in some way the media we have absorbed, be it reading, viewing, listening, or conversing. In nearly all cases we borrow ideas—and quote them—from other sources. This is seen as a good thing; ample quotes and references will generally earn a better grade. Even this paper I’m now writing will contain quotes and references. If it didn’t it would generally be considered an unworthy candidate for publication.

We reuse works all the time in our conversations, in papers we write for school, in the music we sing and play. It is a natural, historical, ongoing dynamic process that extracts value from previous works while at the same time adding new value to them by placing them within new settings. We constantly create derivative works from the media that surrounds us. This is how the folk process for folk songs and folktales has worked over the centuries. It is the method by which we have told stories and how we continue to relate our day-to-day experiences to each other. It is also the method by which we constantly reinvent and renew our own culture, to keep it from atrophying and dying.

Remixing as we know it today might turn out to be a passing fad, a phenomenon uniquely placed at this period in our history. I believe, however, that it has a larger significance than

merely a capacity to polarise us on two sides of any copyright argument. Remix signals a fundamental shift in our way of thinking about our culture. It is a signpost pointing away from our historical mindset, one that focuses upon music (and any other intellectual creation) as a commodity, and toward an emerging one that sees a creation more as a means to an end. To us, an artist creates a *product*. Remixers see the creation of a *process*.

I consider remixing, and the remix culture, to be the 21st Century's new folk process. I see it as a return to a communal way of experiencing our art and our intellectual creations, a change of tack taking us away from considering the individual to be the keystone of it all. We have already begun to adopt opinions, perceptions and habits that reinforce the idea of 'mass ownership' of our intellectual creations, though we do not yet acknowledge this.

YouTube™ might be the single biggest player in this game, with millions of videos and songs available to anyone with the ability to log on. Within months, YouTube™ seems to have changed our attitudes and assumptions about what should be available to view (just about *anything*), and the schedule to which we should have to adhere in order to view something (my own schedule; that is, *anytime I want to*).

The folk process has been described by Katherine MacDonald (2005) as: "the process by which cultural artifacts are changed, whether minutely or in significant amounts, to form new cultural products" (p. 4). Musicologist Charles Seeger (the father of American folk singer Pete Seeger), used the term to describe not only how these artifacts are changed, but also how *cultures* are continually renewed and reborn. Our approaching digital culture will be an aural culture, a communal one. It will be a non-linear, 'bottom-up' society that augments the folk process, and is in turn stimulated by it. If you don't think *digital* equals *communal*, spend a week on Facebook.

We come into this new digital arena from a print culture, one that has held sway over our

social mores, our cultural habits, and our thinking processes for several hundred years, now. It is a decidedly *linear* medium. It has steered us away from being a primarily *aural* animal into being a primarily *visual* one, and from being a communal creature toward one in which the individual is both elevated and separated.

What happens to music—and to a songwriter or composer—when this culture we're used to, this *print* culture that has driven us to become visual, linear, and Newtonian using top-down, individual and specialised methods, finally gives way to a digital, non-linear, bottom-up, communal, *automated* culture?

Digital media demands that the individual give way to the community. The surrender of the rights of the individual runs against everything we've been taught about sanctity and inviolability of those rights. It implies that people who reuse the artistic works of others are *not* pirates. In the music world we are moving away from a very long industrial era where an intellectual creation has been labelled 'property', and has been considered a commodity, toward the idea that when recording a new album we are not creating a *product*, we are creating a *process*. It can be a difficult concept to visualise.

As an example we can take a look at Wikipedia (n.d.). If we look up 'musicologist' we see no author's name on the main page. It's true, you can find out who wrote and edited the article, but the main page is not about preserving intellectual property. It is not about venerating the author, nor even giving credit. It is about intellectual and artistic creations within a communal culture. The 'audience' (the reader) has access to the material and may edit it as he or she sees fit. This is a bottom-up approach to writing a dictionary. It is far different from print culture's historical top-down approach to creating the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

We have followed a linear, top-down, industrial/mechanical model that began back in Newton's time and has served us well for several centuries. But that model is now operating within a new era, one that I might label 'post Einsteinian', inside a dynamic

system in which Newton's clockwork universe is no longer viable or even relevant.

Our western culture has become a visual one. It is a culture that has been exploding outward for several thousand years. During this time we have, by virtue of the various media we have created, extended our own bodies in space. By mechanical means we have augmented and enhanced our bodies. Marshall McLuhan (1962) pointed out that all media are simply extensions of our bodies and minds. This explosion by mechanical means has given us both specialisation and alienation—each of us having a unique and special point of view, or as McLuhan (1964) put it, “the vehement assertion of private outlook (as) the natural mode of expression” (pp. 4-5).

When a new medium comes along to replace a previous one, those who hang on to the old media will always suffer the greatest hurt. When the automobile replaced the carriage all horse-related industries suffered, including manufacturers of buggies, whips, saddlery and harness, and stables. Today we talk of digital downloading and of the remixer's effects upon the music industry, upon artists' rights and publishing, and upon how we view the public domain. We discuss ways of either minimising or maximising the impact upon these things. We see impending losses of income and intellectual control from unauthorised use of recorded, digitised creations. Some of us wonder how we can stop this while others consider ways to expand it. And as we consider our options, we continue to focus entirely upon the medium's *content*, and not upon the nature of the digital medium itself.

We can take a look at the demise of the horse industry at the turn of the 20th century. We focused upon the effects of the automobile, but not 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.

Automobiles did not simply replace the horse and buggy, didn't simply allow us to travel faster, lifting the burdens of animal husbandry from our shoulders. They

fundamentally changed who we are, and the world we live in. While we quickly saw cars as symbols of status, we were late to realise that they were really all about power—the ability to take us through time and space. They created highways, resorts, suburbs, all over the land that were not only alike, but also equally available to all. They levelled the social structure and drove home (literally) the concept of standardisation. The automobile broke up our family life, separated work and domicile. It threw our cities out into suburbs, and extended many of our forms of urban life out along new highways and into rural areas. It saw to the end of the countryside as we used to know it, and destroyed the city as a casual environment in which to rear a family. When cities became places with streets that catered first to cars, neighbours became strangers who came and went at will. The car created shopping malls and drive-in movies, and has generally reshaped all the places that have both united and separated people. It rendered big city life unbearable to many who would not otherwise have felt that way.

I very much doubt that anyone would have considered much of this back in 1910. Being enamoured of this new and exciting medium, people were naturally blinded by it as well. Focusing upon the things the automobile *did*, they were blind to what it *was*.

I use the automobile as an analogy to the computer today. It is only natural that we find ourselves enamoured with the stuff of the digital world. However, while we focus upon the computer's *content* we fail to understand its very *nature*. We are blinded, enthralled by the sheer mass and variety of content that this medium provides, and we fail to recognise the nature of the computer itself. And I submit that its very nature is this: it is a communal, bottom-up medium that is fundamentally changing the way we view music, art, and any other creative media, and it will profoundly alter our views on intellectual property and its creation and control.

The folk process has been, historically, a decidedly bottom-up thing. During the 20th century the music industry has employed a top-down system of control that has become

untenable in the face of the new digital technologies. What are seen by some as extreme copyright protective measures, including the extension of copyright duration and implementation of severe penalties for its abuse, are giving way to what has been called the 'new anarchism' (Adorno, 2001). What some see as anarchy others view as freedom. 'Control and order' for some means 'restriction and limitation' for others.

The folk process as we have known it will remain. It is not in jeopardy of being replaced, but will certainly be augmented by virtue of the digital domain. What the folk process in the 21st century will look like, and how it will affect songs and stories of our culture, is anyone's guess. But it is certain to remain a primary method by which our cultures evolve.

Music is our fundamental language. It is something we all share on some level, and it affects all of us. Musicians are not the only people who play and listen to music. On some level, everyone is a musician. Music is as vital to us as water. Our 'electric media', as McLuhan referred to them, enrich our musical world, and our music by the same token enriches our new technology and the lives of those who use it.

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