

Reconciling Authenticity and Identity in Modern Folk Culture

by
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Introduction

My goal in this project is to create my own definition of “authenticity” within my own musical practice and subculture. I exist on the axis of many different identities which are often very hard to reconcile with one another, and I’m using this project as a tool to sort out what my goals, values, and motivations are with regard to participating in a larger music culture. I want to use examples both from my life and from history to figure out how all of these identities converge into one fully-formed human being.

I’ve been living on my own and paying rent in Queens for over a year, so I’ve been in a sort of transition period between childhood into true adulthood. The other day I was looking in the mirror trying to remember the last time I could confidently call myself a kid. I’ve been taking part-time classes for the past few semesters while trying to find a way to support myself, and this project is the last step I have to take before flinging myself into the void. I want to have a more comprehensive understanding of Why I Am The Way I Am, and I’m using this as an opportunity to set that stage for myself before I start the next step of being a person.

I made an EP with the help of two collaborators, SUNY Purchase graduates Nora Knox and Kya Naugle. I wrote all the songs myself over the course of the last few months, in response to some of the messed up stuff going on in my life and in the world, and used it as a way to process my emotions about it all. This is my second EP, and I’m using different techniques for recording, instruments, and songwriting for this one compared to the first one. My first EP was released in December of 2020, and it’s called “House of Certainty”. This EP was the first time I felt legitimized as a musician because of the outward support from friends and musicians that I knew, and I want to continue that feeling with this release.

This EP is titled “Grandfather Mountain”, named after the mountain that my family and I would go hiking at when we drove down to see my mom’s family in North Carolina during the summers. I wanted this EP to have a foundation for place and time, and to create an all-encompassing setting to create a semi-true, semi-fiction narrative about what happened at and around the mountain. I touch on many different topics of loss and grief, but also life and hope, using its creation as a coping mechanism itself. I legitimize my pain by making it tangible.

In this paper I’m going to talk about some concepts that really stood out to me when researching for this EP. It includes modes of performance and how American culture influences the goals of a performer, and how the intersections between identity impact artistic method. I also focus a lot on community, and my goals in creating meaningful community spaces based around art. I analyze my own songwriting and style, compared with the music of my personal influences. I hope to find a meaningful connection between the intersections of my own identity and how it affects what true “authenticity” looks like for me, as someone floating between multiple points in life and structure. I want to provide myself a strong place to start the rest of my life and art-making from.

Participatory vs Presentational Music

I've been thinking a lot about participatory and presentational music recently. I learned about these concepts from *Music as Social Life: Politics of Participation* by Thomas Turino. Participatory music is music where everyone is present and participating, whether through singing, dancing, playing an instrument, or clapping. In participatory music, there is no distinction between a performer and an audience member, because everyone equally occupies both of those roles. In presentational music, there is a more formal divide between the performer and the audience. Although audience members may participate in small ways like singing along or clapping, the main focus is on the performer.

I feel like presentational music is the kind of music that's been drilled into us for a long time, but not for our entire lives. When we're kids, we sit in a circle on the floor and learn songs about spiders and the sun together. We receive a lot of encouragement just for doing our best. There's no expectation to be good at singing or to be on rhythm, we are just expected to participate and engage and learn. After the age of elementary school, I feel like people start to develop their own musical taste, in the sense of being exposed to the music industry and its capitalistic influences. This is when we may develop our own "favorite artist". Most of my experience with listening to music growing up was in the back of my dad's car, listening to all the different music he loaded onto his iPod. I also learned a lot about music from my family's cultural context, and from my peers at school. I started developing my own musical taste through Disney Channel and kids' TV in general. The first albums I put on my first iPod at age 8 were the Hannah Montana, Demi Lovato, and Miranda Cosgrove albums. That's around the age that I think people started becoming aware of the concert scene. We could never afford it, but I remember people coming to school on Monday talking about the One Direction concert they saw over the weekend. A lot of my musical influence came from camp. I went to Camp Kinderland, a Jewish Socialist summer camp where my family has historical roots. We learned protest songs and folk songs and those months over the summer made a deep impact on me all 12 months of the year. Twice, they invited folk singer Dar Williams to perform at camp because her son was a camper, and everyone in my group was so excited to see her because we all played her songs around the bunk and sang them together. This was always the kind of concert experience that I wanted. I loved knowing everyone in a crowd and having a connection to the performer on stage. The lines were so blurred though, no one's voice was louder than anyone else's. This made me feel like a part of something bigger.

When I got older, late middle school into high school, the pop punk craze took over and I got all my friends into My Chemical Romance, and Paramore. My first proper "concert" was when my dad took me to see Panic! at the Disco the night before Halloween 2012 at the Paramount in Port Jefferson, NY. I found a guitar pick on the floor at the end of the show that I still have. In high school, my friends and I went to see Monumentour, which was Fall Out Boy and Paramore at Jones Beach. That was in a huge, overwhelming stadium and we were up in the nosebleeds. That show was fun, but it felt more like a baseball game than a music concert. I

hated being up in the rows of seats, I felt so confined and separated from the general admission section in the front. That, to me, seems like the peak presentational performance in music. We had no room to dance, and any singing along would be met with dirty looks from those around us who were having trouble hearing and feeling involved themselves. The huge arena concert is a byproduct of the commodification of music and music culture. The need for these huge arena concerts is caused by the celebrity pipeline, and how corporations or labels shape a performer's identity around polling demographics and what list of identities will resonate most with the target audience they want to sell to. The Jones Beach Amphitheater has a max capacity of 15,000, and tickets sold out rapidly. There is no reason for a music performance to be tied to the success of a million-dollar event. It's just really weird to me to imagine hundreds of thousands of people across the country paying for \$100+ tickets to different venues with multi-thousands seating capacities, all for just a couple of dudes. Music has the capacity to bring people together in vast and unimaginable ways, but it seems like those numbers wouldn't exist without the inflation of demand and imagined scarcity of a non-commodity due to capitalism. There is nothing Fall Out Boy has that the crust punk band playing at the dive bar doesn't have, besides a corporation financially invested in their success behind them.

I've learned a lot about different kinds of communal culture throughout my life and I feel like it comes in phases. The first is the childhood singalong songs, next is at Camp Kinderland and the theory of labor justice behind musical intent. Then is the arena concert scene, and the one that I'm residing in currently is the DIY city queers trying to share their songs. A lot of the people that I talk to now are friends that I made at Purchase. Most of my close friends from Purchase live either within walking distance or a train ride away. I sometimes feel lonely, but I know that I am never alone. It's easy to forget how many people there actually are that you know, that like you and are willing to help you for nothing in return. I really try to spend a lot of time helping people. I give people absolutely everything I am able to. One of my close friends has struggled with homelessness and the SRO system, which they recently reigned victorious over! But while they were in the worst of it, I gave every resource I was able to including food, money, drugs, a place to shower, basic things to keep people sane and human. When another friend just moved here and didn't have internet in her apartment for weeks, we let her work at our table every day and cooked for her, etc. My partner and I have very similar priorities and values in how we view community and the world, and how to actively engage in a system of mutual aid. We talk a lot about how to best show up for the people around us and it feels really fulfilling to be building a system of support that we can all rely on. My relationship to the music scene in NYC is just beginning in a lot of ways. I started writing my own songs in an active way during the start of the pandemic, when I had time and brainpower, as well as friends to motivate me from afar. I lived at my parents' house on Long Island from March 2020-August 2020, when I moved out to a sublet in Bushwick. There I worked more on writing songs until I had written an EP's worth, and with the help of friends I began to record, produce, and release my first EP, House of Certainty.

After that was released, I felt very motivated to keep going and I kept writing songs. I wrote a couple for my partner Rob, and kept writing more until I had enough for a 2nd EP. This EP means a lot to me because it was written in the midst of a lot of family trauma. A lot of it is a way for me to process and grieve, but also celebrate and uplift. I'm getting a lot of help on this EP from friends that went to Purchase. My friend Nora is doing so much to help me. She and our friend Kevin started a music label called Blixworld Records, and this EP is being released under their label. We're setting up a schedule for recording, mixing, mastering, releasing, and press things including a photoshoot and submitting the EP to magazines and websites. This brings a lot of validity to what I'm doing, and in a way it is playing into the whole corporatization thing on a small scale.

I also played my very first live show recently, and I feel like it gave me a whole new outlook on music and performing. I felt so amazing showing people my songs for the first time and I just felt so good afterwards. When I got off stage, one of the performers from the band, Whit Waltman, told me that I should be proud of myself and that made me feel really happy. A lot of my friends were there to see the show, both for me and another band on the bill made up of our friends. My parents also came to see the show, which I was really glad about. They asked a few weeks before if it was okay if they came and I didn't really tell them one way or the other, but after a little while I realized that I really wanted them to be at the show. It was really important to me for them to be there because they both influenced so much of how I view music and myself, and I feel like those two things are really intertwined. I knew that this would be a really important moment in my life, and I really wanted to share it with them. At least, I wanted to explicitly invite them and it would've been okay if they couldn't make it. At the show I felt like there was slightly more of a blurring of the lines between the presentational and the participatory nature of it. There was definitely a clear distinction between performer and audience member while on stage, but during my set other musicians were in the crowd participating as an audience member, and after my set I was an audience member for the other acts. In that way, I occupied the role of both performer and audience member during a single show.

Nora and I have started to talk about planning a release show for this EP, aiming for around the end of summer. It's just in a very conceptual stage now, but I really want to focus on blurring the lines between presentational and participatory music. I love the kind of DIY gig that my friends have planned and I've attended too many times to count. It works and it's fun. But when I was playing as the only solo or acoustic performer on a bill of full bands, I realized that while this venue was great and I was grateful to play, it was a form created for a specific style of music and that wasn't the style of music I had to offer. I feel like venues with stages and audience pits are conducive to full bands who need huge multi-channel amps and pedals and full sound-checks, but that's not what I'm doing. When I played my songs on stage, it was literally the same thing I did as when I was playing for myself in my room, or showing my friends a new song. It didn't feel authentic, whatever that even means. But it felt like that type of big production just wasn't made for my sound. And I'm not really sure what was "made for my

sound". I have a few reference points that I can look to for historical precedence, folk festivals like Woodstock or Clearwater or campfire jams like at my summer camp. Each of those are definitely contributing influences to my personal "genre". But there's also so much more. There definitely is the element of the crusty DIY that I inhabited for my recent show, but there's also a little bit of the arena concert and a little bit of the musical theater stage. It's a lot of sitting in my room playing the same 4 chords over and over again. But it's mostly just a letter sent out into the void hoping I get a buttle note back someday. It's really hard to think critically about a creation while you're in the midst of creating it. I wish this could be a neat little 2-step process, 1. Make album 2. Write paper. But those have to exist alongside each other just like the album has to exist alongside my life has to exist alongside school has to exist alongside the future. I'm kind of just smashing rocks together until something sparks. I want to be a revolutionary innovator and a genre-defying legend, but I also wanna be just some guy. And I also know music isn't the be-all, end-all for me. I get just as much of an endorphin release when I finish a craft project as when I finish a song as when I tell a good joke. But this is what makes me happy right now and I'm going to hit that serotonin button until it's depleted.

Thirteen unifying Themes

One of the tools I found most useful in analyzing my place within the folk music tradition was the collection of thirteen unifying themes in American music tradition, compiled by Kip Lornell and Anne K. Rasmussen in *The Music of Multicultural America: Performance, Identity, and Community in the United States*. The editors found thirteen themes that seemed to unify larger ideas about the way that identity, capitalism, and community impact music-making. I found many of these themes to be useful to me in placing myself within a larger context, and I elaborate below on which I found most meaningful.

1. The inherent, complex intersections among music, community, and identity

I face a lot of weird and sticky intersections with the identities I hold. I've been out as trans and bisexual for my entire young adult life, and it's a community that I feel very comfortable occupying because it's one of the givens in my life. I know that's somewhere I belong. I also feel similarly about my Jewish identity. I was raised as culturally Jewish and atheist, and that's also a community that I feel somewhat inherently connected to. Judaism is trickier because of the harsh divides going on with border conflicts and xenophobia, but I generally feel solidarity among young progressive Jews that support BDS. The camaraderie I've felt among Jewish communities is specifically about shared cultural contexts, and shared experiences with family and the world. Though this was how I was raised in my immediate family, I still have outward religious influences that I'm trying to understand. My mother was raised Baptist, and my grandparents on her side still practice. I'm still trying to understand how this history has shaped my fundamental worldview

There's more trickiness when it comes to understanding the intersections between different mental illnesses. I think that BPD, ADHD, autism, and OCD can exist on the same spectrum for many people, and I'm currently struggling with how these four things impact my ability to live and care for myself, as well as how they impact my art-making process. I've been realizing more lately about how many things that I take as a given, or treat as a rule, are completely ridiculous to other people and it's not something that they think about at all. This can be rules with music, social interactions, food, or anything else and I've been trying to find the clarity to be able to step back and see my behaviors in the larger picture.

2. The role of core cultural institutions, including families, places of worship, and community celebrations that support musical activity

Family and community have been incredibly impactful on my own personal music journey. When I was 4 years old I started to take violin lessons with my mom, doing the Suzuki

method where a parent and child learn at the same time to help the child learn better since they can practice together. I did violin for 10 years, from 4-14. My dad sometimes took me to these fiddle workshops that were held in a contradancing barn, where fiddlers of all ages would get together and pass out sheet music to play together. There was never any practice or performance, people just tried their best to follow along to the music. I was definitely one of the youngest ones there, most people there were older. I think this is an excellent example of participatory music, because no one was the main performer. Chairs were set up in a circle so everyone could see and hear each other equally, and sheet music stands were set up sporadically so two or three fiddlers would be looking at the same sheet music.

In my family, music was always a huge part of our cultural traditions. Every Passover we would go to my Bubba's house for a Seder and read the Haggadah together before dinner. The traditional Haggadah is very religious and traditional, which my family of atheist Jews didn't connect to very much. My family wrote their own Haggadah, which focuses on the people's history and the history of oppression that moves from country to country. We all have a copy of the Haggadah and go around the table, reading the whole thing paragraph by paragraph going through the different sections. Throughout the pages there are many songs written in, and when we get to parts that have songs my Bubba stands up and walks over to her piano, sits down and starts playing. We all sing along to songs like Dayenu, Partizaner Lid, Go Down Moses, and Mir Zaynen Doh. For the last song, Mir Zaynen Doh, we all stand to sing it because it's the anthem of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. It's most respectful to stand during it if you're able, to show that we can all stand together as equals to fight oppression. The phrase "Mir zaynen doh" means "We are here", and at the last words of the song, we all put our fists in the air as a symbol of resistance, remembrance, and respect for everyone that we've lost in the battle against oppression to bring us where we are today. My family always gets emotional during the Seder, because they feel so connected to the history. Music is an integral part of the Seder, since the songs carry just as much history as the written portions do, but they also allow everyone to participate in sharing a story about our shared struggle. Everyone's voice supports the chorus, just like how everyone's individual effort supports the collective cause for justice.

3. The actions of individual musicians (both professional and amateur) who lead and participate in music-making activities

I've always felt an intense responsibility to make things happen for myself and the people around me. I want everyone to feel more of a responsibility to participate in the world around them, because I feel like it's easy to get sucked up into the narcissism and self-obsession that comes with trying to formulate a coherent musical identity. I have so much admiration for the people who actually plan and book shows, because they create something meaningful out of nothing. I think people are looking for excuses to get involved in the world when it lines up with their schedule or mood, but I want participation to be more intentional. I feel most inspired when

I'm in a group of people who are smarter or more talented than me, and I want to curate a community of mutual support to increase participation in music-making activities for marginalized people.

4. The trends related to musical preservation, innovation, renewal, or atrophy that occur at different times or simultaneously within a musical subculture

Musical trends shift alongside conversations in the United States. The art that we make reflects the hopes and fears of our society at large, which can be seen in pop culture trends. 9/11 led to the rise of superhero movies like *The Avengers*, because people felt like they needed a hero on top of a lot of complicated reasons around imperialism and the war. Frankenstein's monster was a response to people's fears of unknown and xenophobia. I think music acts in a similar way, echoing what people need to take power from at the moment. Songs have historically been repurposed to create an index, or a subconscious association the listener has with a particular sound or rhythm. This can be seen in protest songs, such as the song "Solidarity Forever" by Pete Seeger repurposing the tune of the song "John Brown's Body", a song about the death of an abolitionist. Through this renewal of melody, it imbues the song "Solidarity Forever" with more urgency and emotion, because people have that subconscious index associated with the melody's connotations.

This type of renewal is extremely important to the songwriting that I do, and was employed in my EP. In the song "Chorus for Father", I use the tune of the song "The Sun is Burning" by Simon & Garfunkel. This song is about the end of the world, where everyone sits calmly and continues to function in their daily life while above them, the sun is exploding and consuming the sky. To me, the song is about how people feel pressured to continue to uphold the norm so as to not upset the structure of the world, even though the worst imaginable thing is happening to them. This can relate to a lot of things, including the pandemic and how so many people insisted on acting like everything was normal when people were dying at unprecedented rates. It also relates to experiencing a personal tragedy, but still having to function as a normal person in the world. This song has a soft, soothing melody like a lullaby, which contrasts with the lyrics describing the end of the world.

My song "Chorus for Father" is a true story about a death in my family, and the feelings of those left behind. I wanted to use "The Sun is Burning" as a melody because it further contextualizes my song and the feelings I was already having before this grief began, and how it compounds to create something unshakable. I want to use the history of the folk music subculture to inform my future practice because this is the community that resonates with me on a spiritual level.

5. The ways in which music is transmitted among generations, sometimes skipping a generation or more

Some of the most meaningful songs I know, I learned from my Bubba, my dad's mother. She led the songs for the Passover seder every year, where I learned the importance of passing down music as an oral history from generation to generation. She was the music director at my summer camp and she taught everyone the songs for the musical each year, as well as the songs for commemoration events such as Holocaust Remembrance Day and Hiroshima and Nagasaki Remembrance Day. At Passover this year, a lot of people had to cancel at the last minute due to illness, including my parents and brother. This was the first time I was at Passover without my immediate family, and it felt so different than usual. I think it's really important to be able to pass down music through an oral tradition, because it removes the rigidity of a formalized song structure and allows the music to transform into more of a language itself, and a tool for communication.

6. The means by which musical performances articulate, challenge, and teach gender or age roles and other social constructs

Gender and identity roles in music are very hard to deconstruct because they exist at the core of how capitalism is framed to label and section people in order to succeed. Since "the music industry" exists at the core of most conversations about musical performance, it takes a lot of work to separate the implicit biases we have (due to our existence under late capitalism) from the art we want to make. I try really hard to create a reality for myself that exists outside of gender roles or other implications. I am nonbinary, and honestly 9/10 people that I know are trans. Everyone that I would consider a close-to-intermediate friend is trans, and trans people are the only people I interact with nearly exclusively on a daily basis. This is my own personal reality and one that I've formed somewhat intentionally. I consider myself lucky to have known I was trans at a much younger age than a lot of people I know. Most people I know have come out within the past 1-5 years, which is a large span of time of course and there are material differences between being out for 1 year vs. being out for 5 years. But I've been out to myself and family/close friends since I was around 13 years old, which makes 10 years of being out. I feel different from people that came out recently, in some ways. It's really hard to put my finger on it though. I feel like I've gone through a lot of different feelings towards myself in regards to transness, and have had a lot of time to understand myself in this way and how this body responds to the world around it. I think that once someone comes out as trans, it takes a lot of time to rethink what it actually means to exist in the world in this way. So much of the complexities of coming out and navigating the world as a trans person exist because of transphobia and how it's instilled into late-stage capitalism. I see a lot of the people around me

going through struggles that are universal for trans people, and because I've gone through them already or seen a lot of people struggle with it, I sometimes downplay or minimize it. I just want people to understand that they are not the problem. The self consciousness and struggles with the medicalization of our bodies is not natural or authentic, it exists because industries profit from its perpetuation. The transmedical industrial complex is a multi-million dollar machine that exists to profit off of trans people's reactions to transphobia from cis people. I think that largely, dysphoria wouldn't exist in a void and only exists in relation to transphobic gender structures that dictate our behaviors and expectations. The transmedical industrial complex conspires with insurance companies, and even lawmakers, to take advantage of trans people's fear. I want to have more conversations with transmasculine people about how they're treated by the people around them with regards to their gender. I've heard people talking about how cis women started to feel uncomfortable around them when they started to transition and framed it as their "gaining male privilege", but actually cis women are just inherently transphobic towards trans men. Privilege politics are very complex when you have to account for so many factors such as people's biases like transphobia, and the systems that we have to manipulate in order to survive.

All of these systems inherently affect my art-making process and the final result. I don't write songs that are straight up "about being trans", but that context is intrinsic to all of my songwriting. An example of this in my EP is the song "Verse for Son". The first verse in the song is,

"I long for the son I'll never have,
I beg for my father's gentle hand
I don't want to be a dad,
But I don't want to be forgotten.

My body is wearing out,
From wandering house to house
I don't want to be a man,
But I wanna be loved like one"

This is the song that I have that pertains most directly to gender and my thoughts about my own gender, as well as the role that masculinity plays in the family structure and impacts how my family treats each other, as well as how I view myself. This song is about a lot of complicated feelings I've had about the father/son relationship and how it affects myself and my family. When my cousin Walt committed suicide, my uncle lost his son but remained a father. My relationship with my dad has gotten a lot stronger the past few years, since we stopped living in the same house. It used to be really difficult for us to be in the same house, because both of us were stubborn and looking for reasons to get upset with the other. I never really gave him the benefit of the doubt and assumed that he was coming at me with anger, and he did the same which resulted in real anger. We've both learned how to communicate with each other a lot

better, and have connected over talking about music. His music taste was one of the biggest influences on my own personal developing taste, and his recommendations have led me to some of my favorite bands. This song is about our strained relationship and how even though things were rough sometimes and we didn't always have full trust in one another, I still always longed to be connected and I'm really glad that we're able to build a better relationship. The song is also about my fluctuating thoughts about whether or not I want to be a parent, and what parenthood would look like for me. I know this isn't a decision I have to make for a long time, but it's been on my mind recently. When I was really little I said I wanted kids because that's just what I thought was normal, and I never thought about the fact that there might be an alternative. When people grew up, they had kids and became parents because that's just what people do. As soon as I became old enough to think critically about it, I realized that the idea of being entirely responsible for another human being was too overwhelming to consider. Since age 12 or 13, I struggled with a lot of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, which made the prospect of even existing as an adult unfathomable. Through the next few years, I just didn't have the kind of long-term sight to consider it a possibility so I always told people that I never wanted kids. Another part of it was the intense discomfort with the idea of being pregnant, for multiple reasons. One was the dysphoria of being clearly identified as "female", another part was the fear of not having control over my body. I just knew that wasn't in the cards for me. That was an unwavering thought for many years, and still isn't completely gone. I still can't really picture myself to be in a stable enough position to be able to raise kids. But I've learned a lot about partnership and mutual support since I started living with my partner Rob in June of 2021. We talk about getting a kitten and raising it up its whole life to be a part of our family, and I know we would be amazing cat parents. But I also think that we would make great human parents eventually, once we've grown up more and have both more life experience and stability. I want raising a child to be a community's group effort. I would only want to have a child if I had friends and community members who were committed to supporting us and committed to raising children in a way that nurtures in a holistic way. I really don't know the core principles of parenting. But I want to be able to have a true kind of community support for trans parents. I don't want to be "dad" per se, but I want to be a part of something larger to make the world a better place. I'm so disheartened by so many trans people saying that they never want kids. If trans people don't have kids, that means that all the kids being born have cis parents that don't understand gender. Trans people need to create support structures for parents because so many of us exist in poverty and childcare is so inaccessible. If we could count on having people we trust looking after our kids when we have to work, and can count on having food and diapers and medical care and emotional support, then people would feel more comfortable having children that will have access and opportunities to anything they want or need.

7. The evaluation of a group's access to and use of mass and electronic media in the construction of community within and across geographical and political boundaries

The pandemic completely altered the way that people participate in art and culture, especially music and other types of live performance. One thing that I've noticed about the shift in how people engage with recording music is that it is reflected in how we interact with the technology around us. Some of these ideas were inspired by the article "The Mobile Device: A New Folk Instrument". In the 1970's, the 4-track tape player was invented and became the most accessible way to quickly record ideas or songs. It operated with 4 separate tracks so 4 instruments could be recorded and mixed separately with the dials and knobs on the body of the machine. It allowed up to four people, a full band, to record mixtapes and demos at the press of a button, with mixing either live or after the fact. These recorders gave a lot of freedom to artists that didn't have access to recording studios or professional software. Even though they were big and bulky, it was considered a standard part of a musician's toolkit. It recorded straight onto physical cassettes, and these cassettes could then be copied for larger releases. The 4-track tape recorder that I have the most experience with using is the TASCAM 414, which came out in 1979. The release of the TASCAM Portastudio led to many "bedroom producers" having the tools to make music. An example of a musician that used the 4-track tape player in an interesting way was Daniel Johnston. He didn't know how to copy tapes, so he just recorded his songs over and over again onto dozens or hundreds of tapes, and then handed them out to whoever would take them.

I think that with the rapid progression in technology, there have been a lot of improvements on the most accessible or easy way to record for musicians who don't have access to a full recording studio with microphones. The form that has replaced the 4-track tape recorder in 2022 is the iPhone voice memo. iPhones, and smartphones in general, used to be seen as a status symbol or signifier of wealth, but recently they have become necessary to the daily functioning of most people, especially people who need to engage in the digitalscape in new ways because of the pandemic. Most people have some sort of smartphone with a microphone and recording app, and I'll mostly use the example of iPhone voice memos. Most people have a high-fidelity recording microphone in their pockets at all times, on a device that can store hundreds of hours of recordings with the instant ability to either save to the cloud or share with friends or collaborators. This has now become the most accessible recording method for artists who want to quickly record a track or idea. I'm thinking about the accessibility and barriers of iPhones in general. It seems like most people have them, including homeless people, kids, and the elderly. There doesn't seem to be much of a barrier for entry in terms of the physical accessibility of being able to use the product because of the iPhone's accessibility features. In terms of price, I feel like since there are so many generations of iPhone, even though new Apple products are ridiculously overpriced, there are older generations that people get for very cheap or

free. And even an iPhone 4 is still a more advanced piece of technology than NASA had during the first moon landing. Voice memos are one of the most useful and functional tools that I use as a musician. I constantly record myself while I'm practicing to listen back to hear how I'm sounding. When I practice with other people, we always have a voice memo going for posterity, because it's really important to be able to listen back in a group setting since it's impossible to hear and absorb everyone's instruments at once, if we're going for perfection.

One drawback of the voice memo, compared to the 4-track tape recorder, is that there's only one channel since it's a single built-in microphone. With the 4 channels of the TASCAM, there are 4 1/4inch aux inputs where you can connect any instrument including a microphone, electric guitar or bass, or anything with an aux input. With a voice memo, only the microphone is available so when recording instruments, you only pick up the sound of the instrument coming through the amp, instead of the actual tone of the instrument that would come through if it were connected directly to the recording device. Also since, with a voice memo, everyone has to share one microphone as opposed to each having their own connection, that means that the phone must be placed in the perfect position to equally pick up all sounds. It takes some sound engineering and trial and error to figure out where in a room the phone should be placed to pick up all sounds in the right levels. One similarity between voice memos and 4-track tape recorders is the fidelity of the recording itself. When listening back to a recording done on tape, it has this crackly lo-fi quality that gives the recording a lot of body, heart, and texture in my opinion. This is because of the physical materials involved in the recording. I value this texture a lot more than the smoothness of hifi and studio recordings. Voice memos also have a similar quality to them, since the microphone isn't studio level and also oftentimes during recording, people rest their phone on a bed or desk which contributes to a grainy quality in the recording. This can be really desirable to me in a recording, because I think that the place and times of recording are equally important to the piece as context, as the words or music that's being performed. Often times, voice memos are seen as demos, unofficial, or unprofessional but I want to break that down

An example in my own work of voice memos being used to add setting and context to a song is in the last song of my first EP, "Panopticon". This song was recorded with 2 iPhone voice memos going at the same time for a stereo sound. My collaborator and I were playing this song standing on top of a playground structure in a dark park near my old apartment at midnight. We rested both of our phones on the bars and recorded the song. The song is in stereo, unlike the typical voice memo, because we were using 2 voice memos at the same time on opposite sides of the structure. The recording picked up the sounds of the city park in the nighttime, including cars going past to provide an ambient fog. There was also someone else in the park with us, a guy who was on the phone with someone. Before we started we asked him if it was okay if we played there, and I'm not sure if he thought we meant playing music or playing on the playground. But we played through a couple songs up there, but after that take of Panopticon we knew that it was "The One" and felt really good about it, and when we finished the song the guy started clapping and we said thank you, which you can hear in the last seconds of the EP. This is one of my favorite recordings I've ever been a part of and I think it speaks to the multiple qualities and

all-encompassing-ness of the time and place that can be captured by portable recording devices such as the TASCAM 414 or the iPhone voice memo.

8. The phenomenon of music as a commodity in the commercial marketplace, on local, regional, national, or even international levels

Music has become commodified as emphasis is placed on performance over participation. I sometimes feel pressure to “legitimize” my practice through promoting myself the way that other musicians do, like releasing teasers on Instagram and consistently posting about their art practice online. Most of the things that really make me happy, I don’t post about and maybe it should stay that way in some regards, like it’s not good to post every thought or feeling on social media, but I want to be able to share myself and what I’m actually like online. The social media presence just feels so artificial. I’ve been trying and struggling to figure out what my “brand” is. I feel like it’s really important for some reason. A lot of my friends have strong aesthetic identities and things that they’re “known” for, and I’m sure people do think some of those things about me, but it’s really impossible for me to see it. I’ve been doing a lot of apartment DIY stuff recently, and that’s a kind of art that makes me really happy. I’m really into interior design and making living spaces both more beautiful and functional, and that’s one type of art that I also feel pressured to commodify. I’m working with the label “Blixworld”, which is run by two of my friends. The work that we are doing together also contributes to the “legitimization” of my music, because they’re the ones that booked my show and will help me plan the EP release show, helping with releasing cassette tapes, getting promo photos, etc, which are all things that “real bands” do. I feel like I should find a strict definition of a “real band” as seen in the eyes of the music industry vs. just people that play songs for other people, and I think there’s a big difference in the way that those musicians are treated and the way that people respond to their music. Like “You’re a Musician”, vs. “Oh, you play guitar? That’s cool...”

I made a chart to capture how people vary their perceptions of a musician based on external factors outside of their control.

Social Perceptions/Stereotypes towards “real musicians” vs. “hobby musicians”

“Real Musicians”	Similarities (closer to reality)	“Hobby Musicians”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -signed to a label -sells tickets -has “fans” -professional recording set up -performs at concert venues -makes a living from music -has dedicated social media accounts for music -only known for music -prioritizes fame over the musical experience -writes their own songs -plays one genre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -creates songs -could live in a community of musicians -are thought of by friends as “a musician” -could be a multi-disciplinary artist -struggles with pressures of “legitimization” from the music industry and fellow artists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -not signed to label -doesn’t have a following -doesn’t play shows -makes no money from music -records on voice memos -posts music on their regular account -not known for music -multi-disciplinary artist (DIY cover art, photos, etc) -prioritizes the musical experience over fame -plays other people’s songs -plays multiple genres

9. The role of regional and national sources of music patronage, for example, colleges and universities, museums and concert halls, festivals and fairs, and tourism management

The sources of music patronage that affect me the most are, with regard to location, DIY venues in bars and backyards, the college music scene, and the homes of my friends. With regard to people, it is my friends and community, my family, and my partner. Most musicians I know don’t really get paid for their work. My music community mostly comprises of talented musicians who work together and use their own insular talents to put out entire records. The entire machine of putting out a record is very self-contained. That’s something that I admire because it means that we are able to continue to nourish a scene that doesn’t depend on large-scale music patronage. The DIY community has been thriving for a long time, and I’m grateful to be able to witness it in action. I see musicians and producers and promoters that are friends with each other that can create an entire album or event just with the skills that they possess amongst themselves. There is very little if any money exchanged in these situations, because most people involved are pretty broke and instead we rely on the barter system. I’ve drawn posters and lifted and carried and given feedback on tracks countless times and in

exchange, I have a team of highly talented musicians and friends working to make my album the best it can be, because they care about the project and they care about me.

10. The importance of the fieldwork experience in shaping our view of the music, the way we represent musicians and communities through our writing and other productions, and in opening doors to collaborative research and production

I guess in my case, “fieldwork” would just be the act of going out to shows and events and meeting people, learning as much as I can, and trying to make my own art from that. Every album I’ve ever listened to has shaped my view of music, and I want to represent that through my songs. I admire artists that have a clear source of inspiration, because it turns that piece of music into a part of the larger musical story. Everyone is constantly influencing each other through sharing music, teaching each other, and planning shows that it’s impossible to create art in a void, but I think that’s a good thing. I want to be able to follow the thread of music starting at the beginning of time, seeing who influenced each other through the years to create new and groundbreaking art until we get to today and I can place the thumbtack connecting my red string to the history of music as a whole.

11. The porous, often flexible boundaries and eclectic constitution of American micro-musics that feature and depend on the participation of both “insiders” and “outsiders”

I think about this a lot in relation to the DIY scene, and the way that shows are promoted and run in rock and electronic spaces. Someone has to put the QR code sticker in the alleyway, and someone has to be curious enough to scan it for the show information. There’s a lot of smoke and mirrors in the gig scene, where people have to see you as cool and untouchable enough to want to pay for a ticket, but still accessible enough for the other musicians to want to work with you again. It depends on the dynamics between the audience either seeking out or stumbling upon the show, as well as the dynamics artists have between each other in looking to make connections and collaborate. Most of the time in my life I’ve been on the “outsider” part of subcommunities looking in, but I think that’s true for most people. It takes a long time to truly be immersed in a subculture enough to consider oneself a part of it, so it’s difficult to hop back and forth between communities because it takes so much knowledge and experience in the same scene to finally be considered an “insider” into these pre-established communities.

The terms “insider” and “outsider” are mechanisms of exclusion, because I find that it affirms the existence of the institution that succeeds by categorizing musicians together based on

the existence of a marginalized identity, and ignores what their actual genre or instrument is. An example of this is Daniel Johnston, a singer songwriter who was considered one of the most famous outsider musicians. Daniel Johnston's music was considered "pure" and "childlike" because of his simple guitar sections and abstract lyrics. He lost a lot of autonomy because of his diagnoses of schizophrenia and bipolar, and people inherently started categorizing him as an outsider artist, when he also made innovations in folk and lofi music. Outsiders and insiders are social constructs to make people spend more money and I want to reject those labels moving forward.

12. The impact of political, economic, and cultural events as well as of natural disasters on a community's music making

During the start of the pandemic, there was a flood of instagram live shows where the host account could get on and speak to introduce, then share the live with each performer who played their set in their room, then left the live show so the next performer could take over. It let people tune in no matter where they were in the world, as long as they had an internet connection and an instagram account. This happened pretty consistently for a couple months, but slowly trickled out because I think people realized the kind of inherent despair and gloominess of the whole thing. It felt like when my friends and I replayed the same Jackbox party games over Discord for the fifth week in a row because we were all so contact-starved and desperate for a hit of serotonin. Discord itself was a huge thing. It was like our own little clubhouse where, for the first few months, you could pop in and see anywhere from 1-10 friends hanging out and chatting in a voice chat channel. It felt safe and warm and comfy, but in a bunker or bomb shelter kind of way. We were all huddled together in the dark waiting for the tornado to pass overhead.

The pandemic never ended, but the ways that we communicated with each other shifted. People started having live shows again, for one. My first live show since the pandemic started was "Blixworld", a show put on by some friends that had live music, comedy, and artist vendor tables. It was weird and slightly uncomfortable, because everyone was trying to loosen up after months of being inside, but we were just grateful to be "allowed" to see each other again. Electronic media is really important for show promotion and communication with audiences. I've made some posters for friends' shows that have been shared on Instagram to promote all of the show details. People also use their social media accounts as archives of their work, to have on-call to send to employers or show to other artists when out and about.

13. The multi-sited aspect of many of America's musical subcultures and the flow of music and musicians within diasporic communities that span the globe

I just googled “Am I a part of the Jewish diaspora” and most of the articles that came up seemed to be either Zionist or antisemitic, and that kinda sums up my experience of the world. I find solidarity among young progressive Jews, but this can be a very narrow channel to navigate, and I want to figure out how to navigate the world with conflicting identities.

Songwriting

When I write a song, I think much more about the words than I do the music. The tune is often an afterthought, only rarely do I actually think of the melody as I'm writing a song. I think of songs like poems, and a lot of the time they are about more than one thing, and sometimes I realize after finishing the song that it's actually about something totally different than I thought it was when I was writing it. I wrote this EP after a lot of grief in my family, as the culmination of the conflicting feelings I have over family and where I come from. This EP is based heavily in the geography of the Appalachian Mountains, and specifically Grandfather Mountain, where my family and I went during the summer when I was little.

Here are all the songs I wrote for this EP, with lyrics and an analysis at the end.

1. Calloway

Lyrics:

In Calloway,
how I wish you were here,
the stars shine dark in Calloway
like the quiet fear
that makes me want to run away
from the creeping ears
that leeches the hallway Saturday.
Make it easy to hear
the weeping of the magistrate,
pulled up the truck to the rear
and watched it as he drove away.
Put your mouth to my ear
and tell me what you mean to say,
we all know why we're here,
we'll meet again in Calloway,
Calloway.

We'll meet again in Calloway

I don't want to change my story,
I'm frightened not to kill my worries.
And I'm not trying to spend my whole life
wondering what it's meant to feel like up in Calloway

I wrote this song because I wasn't able to go to my cousin's funeral. The night that it happened my mom and brother drove down to North Carolina that night, but my dad and I had to stay behind because I had to drive him to have heart surgery that weekend. It's weird not having a picture in my head of an event that mattered so much. The Facebook live feed that my dad and I watched was cutting in and out, and buffering and it was difficult to watch. This song is about the picture I have in my head of what it was like, and how I might've felt. I reference Calloway Peak, a mountain peak on Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina, where my family and I would go when I was little. I use Calloway as a Valhalla-type afterlife where we could one day see each other again. I don't believe in Heaven, so this is the compromise my brain could reach with talking about Christian afterlife beliefs vs reconciling my own secular Jewish upbringing. I reference funerals in a vague way, instead trying to create the feeling of paranoia and discomfort, but also some blind hope. This is one of my favorite songs I've written and it means a lot to me. It mostly uses one tune repeated, which is a technique used in a lot of traditional folk music.

2. Bargaining Chips are Better Than Cash

Lyrics:

Empathy is harder
when the end is out of sight,
my racing mind
leaves my body far behind. The only
shadow in the circle that we
opened up that night,
the spirits rise-
twin thunderheads climb high.

They deal in time.
Put your money down and say
what's on your mind, or fold to
entropy and feel the bite.

Promises from lips like these are

twenty for a buck,
don't need no devil's advocate
when they're dealing all our cards face-up.
I can't look in the evil eye
but it's harder to ignore it.
All the lies I tell myself are living
right above my forehead,
too distorted.

I wrote this song to be about people that try to bargain their way out of bad situations, whether they rely on religion or the people around them for stability. I was thinking about addiction when writing this, how it's easy to get trapped in a cycle that you try to bargain your way out of, but there's no one around to listen to your pleas. One of the people that I lost last year was my friend Maddie, to an overdose. It's easy to get in a very dark place quickly, and make last-ditch efforts out of desperation. When singing this song, I picture two people going into a graveyard to summon and make a sacrifice to two spirits, and they have to play a card game against them to win what they want. Southern Baptist feelings towards death have been something I've thought a lot about recently and want to learn more about. My mom's parents are Southern Baptist, but my mom's brother's family is Moravian, whose traditions seem much gentler than Baptist traditions. I want to learn and do more readings about death ceremonies and rites in these traditions. This is a sort of folksy song with darker instrumentation. This song seems a bit more youthful/modern than the other ones, and it was inspired by songwriting from the band Lvl Up. This is the most classically "spooky" of them all.

3. Chorus for Father

Lyrics:

He traded in his guns for a guitar,
that he learned to play in order to remember
why the people who live fastest
often leave us without asking first.
But he learned to play guitar.

Traded his guns for a guitar
he brings every time he gets out of the house now,
cus the plucking of the strings
makes him think of babies and diamond rings
so he carries that guitar.

Gave up his guns for a guitar
cus the silence in the hallway leaves the echo raw
in the ears that heard the gunshot
from the cradle where his son took higher ground,
back to the brightest southern star.
So he plays it loud and far,
hoping they can hear guitar.

This song is about my Uncle Tim, my mom's brother. After my cousin committed suicide, my uncle sold all his guns because he didn't want them in the house anymore. He used that money to buy a guitar and has been learning to play it. When I visited them over the summer, he let me play his guitar and it felt very special. It made me really emotional when my mom told me he was learning, because I feel like we connect by healing through music. This song is about using music to heal from trauma. This song is to the tune of "The Sun is Burning" by Simon & Garfunkel. In folk music it is a tradition to use a popular folk melody and change the words to tell a story. Storytelling through song is one of the fundamental methods of communication for community, resistance, and remembrance and I think it's important to reference that form in this album.

4. Verse for Son

Lyrics:

I long for the son I'll never have,
Beg for my father's gentle hand
I don't want to be a dad
but I don't wanna be forgotten

My body is wearing out
from wandering house to house,
I don't want to be a man
but I want to be loved like one

My son, my dear,
whether you're far or near
I'll keep you at the tip of my tongue
I will stand up for your name, though I'll never be the same
I'll keep my heart and hands and wits about me

My apartment's for the taking,

and my heart it's made for breaking
all these prophecies
they end with me.

Please tell me what you could've been
if I didn't always have to win
oh father dear,
please promise me,

oh tempest heart
please lead me through the dark
through anger and the jealous path of men
and this home we've made
will never be the same
I never thought I could live or die without you

Verse for Son is kind of inspired by the family bonds that I've noticed and take part in within my own family. It's about the connection between father and son, referencing the relationship between myself and my own father, my cousin and his father, as well as myself and the son that I'll never have. It's something I've been thinking about a lot in relation to my family and my own gender and future. It's difficult to think about it in such a direct and specific way, but I feel like it was healing to work on this. I want to create a gentler form of masculinity.

5. Maizy is Missing

Lyrics:

Maizy is missing, her family posted her picture
to bulletin boards in the chapel and all down the street.
They faded in the sun.
They found her car empty on Saturday, after the sun sank.

Toby went looking, long after the sun had left the sky.
Last time he saw Maizy, she told him she didn't know why
the world was moving so quickly, she thinks she just might drown.
Toby felt sick, when he gagged he tasted salt water

But is it better to know,
Is it better to know if she's dead or alive?
Is it better to know,

Is it better to know where her body took flight?

Maizy was missing, her body just found in the ocean,
her family's last taste of hope was washed out to the sea.
They thought she was driftwood.
They thought she was seaweed.
They thought she was alive.

My mom's cousin is listed as a missing person, but everyone in our family knows that she was murdered by her husband. It was hard to hear about this grief as a child, because I didn't know what to do with all those feelings, both mine and others'. This song is about a girl who went missing and was found dead by her family. It's about how her family and community react, looking for her and their response when her body is found. It is inspired in tune by the song "America" by Simon & Garfunkel. I think this song represents an important context for my family's history and the way that griefs can conglomerate on top of each other in weird ways, and affect a family.

6. Mile High Swinging Bridge

Lyrics:

We're shoulders for this mountaintop,
shift in sleep on pangea shelf green.
Battles fought and lost below us, skeleton armies
carry rocks and keep the pace but they can't keep their sleeves clean.

Windy city just a memory,
now the only wind we're threatened by is pushing at the
galvanized steel that cracks and turns corroded, barely
keeping us together but it's keeping this shit real.

Golden promise held by a silver stitch,
ancient ears have heard of the swinging bridge.

I rise to meet your highland hair.
We don't need to live like millionaires.

Ash to ash and dust is rising
off your shoulders as you turn your back to me.

The only breath of hesitation that I hear is in
the creak of bones below us, in a march of buried cavalry.

Where we choose to lay our bodies
only matters to the rhododendron underneath our knees.
But our ropes will start to fray and sway to Calloway,
I don't know how much longer I can
stand up to the breeze

Appalachia to Anchorage,
we are bound by the swinging bridge.

Falling Rock will be here any day,
she waits with me while you're away.

Push the branches of your hair back,
look for my silhouetted face in green.

This song is referencing the Mile High Swinging Bridge in Grandfather Mountain. These are two peaks that jut out tall from the mountain, with a long rickety bridge that connects the two of them. I'm comparing these two peaks to two people in a relationship that may have a strain put on them, like a bridge that's being pushed by the wind whipping around the mountains. This is a projection/imagination of how I picture my aunt and uncle struggling under this pressure. This makes me think about disclosure in songs about personal information, and I don't want anyone to feel bad from the music that I put out. A lot of what I write about is fiction, inspired by reality. I can never know how people really feel, but I can use my own experiences to shape the art that I put into the world. I also reference a folk tale that was told to me by my mom, about Falling Rock. I incorporated this tale into the lyrics to reference the history in this region of indigenous people, which it is very important that I learn more about. There are a lot of geographical references in this song, in the style of The Mountain Goats. I want it to seem well-traveled and understanding of the world, which is difficult because I am not really either of those things (working on it, though)!

Conclusion

When I write “folk songs” I don’t feel like it’s an authentic, true “folk song”. I think that any attempt to fit strictly into a genre is disingenuous, because once there’s a name for a genre that means that it’s been around long enough for someone to establish something totally different but directly inspired by it. I don’t want to attempt to create an accurate depiction of folk revival music, I want to use it as a tool to create something new. Folk as a tool has been important for me to learn about because I understand how different aspects of music such as melody, structure, and repetition, are used to communicate. I’ve thought a lot about the index of my music, what associations people would convey onto it because of a previous familiarity with melody or subject matter. Folk has been used to pass down stories verbally, in many cases unrecorded, and this lifeline can be traced back to the birth of music. I’ve been able to more accurately place myself within history, because I can recognize where my influences lay and what type of culture I want to contribute to.

I’ve been deeply guided by the art that I consume my entire life, and I want to pay homage to them in my work. I was inspired strongly by the works of Simon & Garfunkel, Joni Mitchell, Karen Dalton, and more. Using the melody of a Simon & Garfunkel song in my song was a moment where I was able to clearly draw a line between the musical culture I was raised in and my direct musical output. When working on my first EP, I made a playlist of songs that either directly or indirectly inspired my songs, because there were a lot of specific connections I was able to draw. For this EP, I didn’t make the same kind of specific playlist with those types of direct musical comparisons. The playlist that I did make was more of a “general vibe/where I’m at in my life right now”, a combination of folk punk, hyperpop, and J-Rock and I think it stands up, not as a direct comparison, but as a representation of where my head is at creatively. I try to be aware of the media I consume, because I know that I am a sponge and will let it influence a lot of what I make. That is what is authentic to me though, and I try to approach it with intentionality rather than avoidance.

I’ve tried so hard to think about how these songs represent me, and how they come together to tell an all-encompassing story, but I don’t think it’s true. At least, not to an entire extent. I’m not trying to create a biography that represents all the facets of my selfhood. Most of these songs were written in the wake of trauma. This is my coping mechanism that you are witnessing. These were truly just the “songs in my heart” that I am going through the motions of “legitimizing” because of my access to the resources of my peers. However, I believe that everything is everything. The songs about death are equally about poverty, and fear, and hope, and life. The songs about myself are also about everyone I’ve ever known, and the ones that are true are just as much fiction as the fictional ones are true. It’s really hard to explain. I’ve come to realize over the past few months that all the awfulness does have one root cause, that I’m still trying to directly identify. A lot of it ties into capitalism and our American structure of life, but even that feels too insular and specific. I understand more easily how Christians can believe in the Devil, because there is something tying us all together in ways that we don’t realize, and

there is a singular force of evil in the world that can manifest in countless ways. I think it exists in all of us, but some people are forced to fall victim to it more easily because of pre-existing power structures. I see it when my friends are denied healthcare, or get evicted, or put up unnecessary divides in our community. I feel it dissipate when we cook together, and share our songs, and say that we love each other when we go home. This is what authenticity is to me! I want to share the fruits of our labor in abundance with everyone I love and everyone I hate too. Once we achieve that, there's no point in hate anymore.

One of my goals with this project was to provide myself a strong foundation for my artmaking when emerging into the world after graduation. Do I feel ready? Absolutely not. But I definitely feel a lot stronger and smarter than I was when I started writing these songs. I know a lot more about how the world works, and what people expect from each other. I know more about the way people treat musicians they view as "legitimate" and how they treat people they don't. I've had more exposure to the formal music industry, as both a participant and observer. I don't know how to track my music journey as a separate chart from my life journey, but in general I think both lines are trending up. :)

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