NPR'S TINY DESK CONCERT SERIES: VOCALITIES OF OUTRAGE AND ACTS OF GAIETY

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NPR’S TINY DESK CONCERT SERIES:
VOCALITIES OF OUTRAGE AND ACTS OF GAIETY

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ABSTRACT

The Tiny Desk concert series features live video-recorded performances of artists at the desk of NPR Music’s Bob Boilen, the series’ main host. This thesis interrogates NPR Music’s values and the ways artists both manifest and queer those ideals in performance. I argue, in light of the 2016 election, performers challenge NPR Music’s taste system through two modes of subversion. The first mode considers vocalities of outrage specifically in the performances of Saul Williams and the Drive-By Truckers. These performers shift their social positions in expressions of outrage through vocality—as the embodied materiality of the voice and its constructed meanings (Freya Jarman-Ivens, 2011). The second mode considers acts of gaiety (Sara Warner, 2012), which sustain struggles for social change. These musical acts are shown in the performances of Common and Troker, who use moments of unexpected release to further engage their audience.
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INTRODUCTION

On November 9th, the day after the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, country singer-songwriter Margo Price cried in response to the election results before performing on National Public Radio’s Tiny Desk Concert series. This was in contrast to two days previous when the Canadian pop duo Tegan and Sara expressed excitement on the series to witness the making of history in the election. Surveying NPR’s Tiny Desk Concert series before and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election is rich terrain to examine musical agency in performance given the series’ physical location in the nation’s capital and its goals of diverse outreach. Yet the series has received little musicological attention. This thesis explores performers’ engagement with U.S. social and political life on the Tiny Desk series. The project interrogates what NPR Music values and how performers both manifest and subvert those values in analytical comparisons of specific performances. In the context of the 2016 election, I argue some performers, using the intimate venue of NPR Music’s Tiny Desk concerts, challenge and question specific cultural norms and musical values defined by NPR Music’s taste system. In what I consider a queering of the Tiny Desk space, I focus my examination on vocalities of outrage and acts of gaiety in musical performance.

This introductory section begins with a contextual placement of NPR in the 2016 election and explores Tiny Desk’s validating taste system through its venue, audience, and values. I briefly introduce the two modes of subversion considered in this study: vocalities of outrage and acts of gaiety. Although in my research I surveyed all of the Tiny Desk concerts in June 2016 through June 2017, I focus primarily on five performances, one that is
exemplary of NPR Music’s taste system and four that, in my viewing, were particularly evident as transgressing the values and norms of the space. I consider how the performance of Tiny Desk contest winners Tank and the Bangas reveal the NPR Music taste system. Then I compare the queering of this taste system in the performances of Saul Williams, the Drive-By Truckers, Common at the White House, and Troker.

The performances studied here occurred within the period orbiting around the Presidential election of Republican Donald Trump on November 8, 2016, against Democrat Hillary Clinton, the first female presidential candidate nominated by a major political party. The outcome of this presidential election deeply impacted artists and news media alike, shocking communities at national and international levels. As illustrated by a Southern Poverty Law Center’s survey, the aftermath of the election correlated with an upswing of hate speech, an emboldening of anti-immigration and anti-Muslim ideologies.¹ The 2016 election had direct impact on news organizations, like NPR, and the Tiny Desk is seen in the context of this divisive political environment.

In this election atmosphere, NPR Music is perceived as a branch of a “liberal” news producer, NPR, with specific goals. NPR has a left of center media perspective mostly perceived in its political reporting.² Reproach for NPR’s reporting is seen in other news organizations with critics from both conservative media groups and those further left of center such as Democracy Now. In the context of the 2016 election, NPR ombudsman and public editor Elizabeth Jensen claims both Democrat and Republican listeners sent increased

content complaints around the election.\textsuperscript{3} This increase in expressed political polarization during the 2016 election highlights the agency of a nationally respected news organization like NPR not only to produce influential media but also the perception that NPR content and its space are unavoidably political.

Furthermore, the range of listeners reached by NPR media has become an increasing priority of the organization. Under the website section “Our Mission and Vision,” NPR provides an electronic link to the outline of a strategic plan written in 2011 that focuses on four priorities including expanded diversity and engagement of audiences. The site states, “for NPR to remain vital and vibrant in the future, it must therefore maintain its core audience, expand its reach, diversify its audience and engage its users.”\textsuperscript{4} Tiny Desk has expanded its content, although still criticized by journalists and scholars for being too indie-centric.\textsuperscript{5} Possibly in support of diversifying NPR Music’s audience or simply responding to criticism, Tiny Desk has increased the diversity in genres like rap and hip hop since the 2014 performance of rapper singer-songwriter T-Pain. From its political placement and audience reach, NPR has the potential to attract new listeners through Tiny Desk’s diversifying musical content and it is granted a significant level of public trust by being perceived as noncommercial.

Hence, comparative examinations of the subversive concerts listed above explore Tiny Desk’s flexible space, where sonic tendrils interconnect performers, journalists, and a large listening audience. Although the physical and virtual audience is unknown to each other


in areas of politics, culture, and society, these participant strangers are linked together through an intimate concert experience. Considering Tiny Desk from this perspective, the curated concert series creates a sonic and physical space for both validation and subversion within a taste system that caters to a broad, but still specific, audience. This audience has shared socioeconomic factors and taste cultures, as tastes cultivated through experience and tradition.

Tiny Desk, as an intimate performance venue and negotiator of validating taste systems, was instituted in 2008 as a recurring series on NPR Music. It features live video-recorded acoustic performances of artists in the intimacy of NPR’s own Washington D.C. office specifically at the desk of Bob Boilen, Tiny Desk’s main host and co-creator of the podcast “All Songs Considered.” Journalists on the NPR Music team pitch guest artists for the series to Boilen including national, international, established, and up-and-coming artists from various genres. Then the team member, in conjunction with Boilen, coordinates the concert. The exception to this invitation-based series is the annual Tiny Desk contest, which accepts thousands of music video submissions and selects one winner to perform on the series every year. Overall, artists are invited to the venue not to reproduce their typical show, but to perform in an intimate venue without excessive instrumental or vocal amplification in the middle of the day.

The intimacy of the performances at Tiny Desk concerts are captured on documented video to be later published online. Often stripped to acoustic instruments, the concerts are recorded with high-quality audio and filmed with multiple cameras. Currently after each performance, the video recordings are attractively cut together by NPR Music videographer Morgan Smith to show various shots from full view to close-ups, and Josh Rogosin
meticulously mixes the recorded audio. A few weeks later, these videos are publicly published on the NPR Music website and YouTube. An online viewer does not experience the physical intimacy of the venue, but in another sense, the performance is personal, watched through the screen with millions of invisible others.

With this audience reach, the Tiny Desk series creates a mutually beneficial relationship between music journalists and artists based on constructing a validating taste system. According to communication scholar Christopher Cwynar, NPR, the news media organization of which NPR Music is only a part, has an audience base comprised of mostly white, educated, affluent, and left-leaning consumers. He also notes that NPR Music, partially through Tiny Desk’s YouTube audience, additionally attracts niche fan bases of specific performers and genres, reaching a broader and younger audience. NPR Music’s taste system negotiates and produces what is considered “good” and ignores the “bad,” as not fitting the NPR Music team’s tastes, for its audience in the content it produces. Journalists create new content that contributes to NPR Music’s taste system and their content selection constructs a human curated filter of musical cultural capital. Selected artists have the opportunity to be heard in a place of artistic power—NPR Music, which appeals to an affluent audience—and artists are broadcast from a place of political power—the U.S. capital, Washington D.C, specifically at the NPR headquarters.

Boilen establishes Tiny Desk as a tastemaker by presenting certain artists as culturally significant to NPR Music audiences. Before rapper Common’s performance at the White House Library, Boilen states that Tiny Desk represents artists who “have something to say in

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6 Ibid., 685.
7 The complex concept of taste will be further discussed in chapter 3.
our culture, who move our culture forward, and do amazing stuff.” With millions of viewers on YouTube, the vast popularity of Tiny Desk makes it economically feasible and necessary for NPR Music to forge its taste system through appealing to its core audience and new listeners. This is accomplished through connecting to more focused taste cultures.

Sociologist Richard Peterson notes how music is a surprisingly reliable proxy to indicate taste cultures to which individuals belong and identify, and, when it comes to social class, taste cultures vary in the breadth of cultural content desired. He outlines a social-class taste hierarchy that places classical music at the top followed by folk and jazz while rock, religious music, soul, country, and other genres are all near the bottom. This hierarchy suggests a pyramid with elite tastes at the top and a growing variety of tastes moving toward the bottom. When social class is correlated to taste, an inverted pyramid is formed depicting the range of musical aesthetics consumed. In the U.S., Peterson observes that while classical music remains aligned with prestigious tastes, the taste culture of the upwardly mobile and elite classes are beginning to be defined in terms of their range of cultural knowledge rather than exclusivity. On the other hand, the working classes, contrary to the designation of “mass taste” as preferring no category to another, can usually choose one, or just a few, genres of music to enjoy in particular. This is reflected by NPR Music’s taste system that values a broad set of musical genres that appeal to their more affluent audience, who see a range of cultural knowledge desirable.

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11 Ibid., 156.
12 Ibid. The concepts of NPR Music’s taste system as “good for you” is the topic of chapter 3.
Because of this broad appeal, Tiny Desk also presents subversive performances that, purposely or not, question and challenge the expectations established within the norms of the taste system and the space. I draw from musicologist Judith Peraino’s use of *queer* and *queering* as questioning and challenging ranges of norms and deviance, and her argument that music, as “double-tongued, participating in both the normalizing and the *abnormalizing* of the subject,” incites mobility to question normative societal pressures. In this project, subversion is a form of queering the taste system or challenging established assumptions to imagine alternatives. In this process, expressed and felt emotions construct the queer potential of Tiny Desk’s intimate venue where performers are heard in a physically and creatively closer space.

This project focuses on two modes of subversion on Tiny Desk. The first mode considers what I term vocalities of outrage specifically in the performances of Saul Williams and the Drive-By Truckers. These performers shift their social positions in expressions of outrage through vocality—defined as the embodied materiality of the voice and its constructed meanings drawing from musicologist Freya Jarman-Ivens. The second mode considers activism scholar Sara Warner’s acts of gaiety as performative acts that sustain struggles for social change. These musical acts are shown in the performances of Common and Troker, who use moments of unexpected release to further engage emotionally their audience.

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How do these modes challenge the validation inherent in the venue? As Tiny Desk values and validates specific musical aspects in all presented artists on the series, vocalities of outrage and acts of gaiety recognize and queer this validating process through performers’ shifting interpretations of Tiny Desk’s cultivated values. One of these cultivated musical values is innovation, understood as pushing expected musical and technical forms. Various interpretations of innovation are highly sought on the series and often manifest in exploring the peripheries of accepted genres, represented by the umbrella term *alternative* music.\(^\text{16}\)

Another value is the perception of authenticity in performing live, as each performance is shaped by the intimate venue and restrictions to perform without unneeded amplification and electronic effects. The reduced performance venue of Tiny Desk creates the acoustic and visceral perception of the *real* authentic artist, without the sonic and physical frills and barriers of a raised stage, studio production, and electronic effects.

All performances on Tiny Desk fulfill these values of authenticity and innovation in multiple ways and to various degrees. In particular, the annual Tiny Desk contest winner typifies what the producers of Tiny Desk value. In chapter 3, I consider how the 2017 contest winners, Tank and the Bangas, show authenticity and innovation in their unamplified vocal flexibility and instrumental backing to show a kind of *alternative* that appeals to Tiny Desk. The manifestation of these values is queered and repurposed by some performers using the modes described above.

Beginning with the taste system constructed by NPR exemplified by the performance of Tank and the Bangas, I then focus explicitly on four performances, Saul Williams, the Drive-By Truckers, Common, and Troker, that queer this system by engaging critically with

social and political issues in their interpretation of authenticity and innovation. Los Angeles-based poet and musician Saul Williams and the Athens-based country rock band the Drive-By Truckers form a critical stance on the power represented in the District of Columbia. In different ways both performances bring to the forefront the agency of NPR Music and present musical stories that contain raw expressions of outrage toward international and national events. Chicago rapper Common’s performance in the Obama White House Library and the Guadalajaran jazz band Troker’s performance place their work in solidarity with voices of difference through the music. These performances are the focus of this project showing one mode of subversion in the vocality of the performers and the other mode focusing on the musical/instrumental aspects not solely dependent on the vocal to sustain serious struggles for change. In revealing and exploring the values Tiny Desk cultivates, those same values unfold opportunities for critique and expressions of difference.

**NPR Music: History, Ideals, and Space**

Music scholarship has paid little attention to NPR Music’s role as an arbiter of musical taste and none to this point has considered the Tiny Desk series in any detail. For the purposes of the present study, the primary sources consulted are the Tiny Desk videos published on the NPR Music website, news media interviews, and media research studies readily available online. Additionally, the interviews I conducted with Tiny Desk creator and host Bob Boilen, NPR Music Senior Director Lauren Onkey, and Tiny Desk technicians Morgan Smith and Josh Rogosin are at the core of the primary sources consulted. Moreover, scholarship from disciplines as varied as musicology, music theory, media communication, and feminist and queer studies forms the theoretical basis for this project.
NPR’s history and development has mostly been considered in media and communication fields, where NPR is treated as an influential model for modern multimedia communication that hinges on the concept of noncommercial. NPR’s initial ideals of noncommercialism stem from the 1967 Carnegie Commission’s report on public television, where noncommercial media was being considered as a form of public access to education. However more recently, noncommercialism on NPR is a key part of its branding, just as the concept of the alternative is key to NPR Music’s branding. Public media author Michael McCauley focuses on the history of noncommercial news radio depicting NPR’s development of respected news, information, and cultural programming as the primary model in the U.S. Nevertheless, McCauley’s work portrays NPR as serving a niche audience for financial security. Building on his research, I include developments in NPR’s organizational goals to reach a broader audience.

In her doctoral dissertation, musicologist Louise E. Chernosky argues that NPR’s early embrace and influence on U.S. American experimentalism in the 1970s and 1980s showed the influence, audience, and early goals of NPR. According to Chernosky, NPR’s experimental programing hoped to define experimentalism not only as a sound but also as an aesthetic identifier of the U.S. nation. She emphasizes NPR’s attempt to educate listeners in musical experimentalism as an example of NPR’s social and political agency. Drawing from her research, I expand on her aims by focusing on the digital age, where “radio” is repurposed in interactive digital multimedia formats online. Additionally, NPR Music’s content has expanded to popular genres attracting consumers on a digitally interactive

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platform. Alternative, as a genre and concept, has become a defining factor on the series, entailing a catchall genre category that has an anti-mainstream stance. As a concept, alternative on the series has developed into a form of innovation that reintegrates “old-school” styles of music in a new context, resulting in a desire on the series for local flavor and still cosmopolitan exposure and referencing.\footnote{Fox, “Alternative to What?”, 164-191.}

Narrowing the study from NPR Music to Tiny Desk, a consideration of performers’ interaction with the space is crucial. The intimate venue and live component of Tiny Desk is vital, allowing opportunities for the artists to adjust, comment, and emotionally connect with their physical and virtual audiences. In a study of expression in music, Alf Gabrielsson and Erik Lindström conclude that powerful musical expression is dependent on both musical structure and small variations in live performance that connect to audiences emotionally.\footnote{Alf Gabrielsson and Erik Lindström, “The Role of Structure in the Musical Expression of Emotions,” in \textit{Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications}, ed. John Sloboda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 367-400.}

Therefore, the musical expression recorded on Tiny Desk is visually and aurally amplified through the live intimate venue. In another study by Patrik Juslin and Renee Timmers, the most moving aspects of performance were facial expression and body language.\footnote{Patrik N. Juslin and Renee Timmers, “Expression and Communication of Emotion in Music Performance,” in \textit{Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications}, ed. John Sloboda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 453-489.} These aspects are not visible in a large concert hall, but they are visible on the Tiny Desk video. Having explored musical expression and communication, Darla Crispin and Stefan Österijö describe the creative process of live musical performance as a collective activity.\footnote{Darla Crispin and Stefan Österijö, “Musical Expression from Conception to Reception,” in \textit{Musicians in the Making: Pathways to Creative Performance}, ed. John Rink, Helena Gaunt, Aaron Williamson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 288-305.}

In a Tiny Desk performance, the relationships between the artists, band members, journalists, technicians, and audiences are complex and accentuated in the intimate venue. Within the
perception of the physical and virtual audiences, the music does not disappear but continues in the minds individually and collectively as a shared experience across temporal, geographic, and identity boundaries.

**Musical Power: Emotion, Queering, and Difference**

This project utilizes the expectation theory of emotion in music to examine elements of musical and social structure. In his dissertation, music theorist David Bashwiner considers a comprehensive set of theories on musical emotion, including the expectation theory and theories built from its base. The expectation theory, the theory proposed by Leonard Meyer on how conscious or unconscious tendencies allow listeners to make predictions about musical events, allows for a connection between emotions, as domain general, to music, as domain specific. Expectation is an act that bridges the rift between the creative performance and the listener, in this sense literally connecting the audience to the music through emotion.

In my application of expectation theory, I focus on moments that depart from or accentuate cultural or structural patterns, and I mark these nonconformities as tools of resistance and advocacy, as with vocalities of outrage and acts of gaiety. Hinging upon the relation of music and social-political commentary on the Tiny Desk series, the expectation theory and other theories around music and emotion allow for an analysis of the connection between the vast concepts of music and emotion applied to a specific site.

The theory of emotion in music assists in analyzing the social and political potential in musical performance. As scholars have noted, the political is intimately meshed in emotional everyday life. Musicologist John Street, for example, argues that music and

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politics are entwined, functioning as constitutive of individual identity, binding of national identities, and affording pleasure and voice to marginalized people.\textsuperscript{25} Through this perspective, Tiny Desk can be understood as a mirror and driver of what is deemed authentic, innovative, meaningful, and powerful to NPR’s intended audience. Popular music scholar Roy Shuker considers the economic and cultural aspects of the music industry’s power supporting and producing the music.\textsuperscript{26} Applying Shuker’s perspective, the Tiny Desk, as a venue for mainly popular music, is inherently political although not always visibly. Tiny Desk can be conceived as an enforcer of cultural value with performers that sometimes subvert these values to empower expression of outrage and voices of difference. Shuker notes how past national organizations have attempted to educate listeners on idealized traditions, connecting to points described by Chernosky, yet such enforcement is often undermined in various ways. The arguments of both Shuker and Chernosky support the conception of Tiny Desk as a space of validated taste where performing groups can embrace emotional subversion and express queering undercurrents of opinion, from international injustice to local gun violence. Utilizing Peraino’s parameters of \textit{queer} and \textit{queering} these terms are not necessarily a reference to homosexuality, but a form of questioning sociocultural and musical norms applied to Tiny Desk’s taste system and space.

Queer theorist Judith Halberstam observes that public interest in queer subcultures or localized groups of taste cultures, cultures that Tiny Desk often tries to present to a broader audience, can lead to using queerness more as spectacle than rooted personal expression of


\textsuperscript{26} Roy Shuker, \textit{Understanding Popular Music Culture} (London: Routledge, 2008).
difference. In the documentation of various artists, NPR does absorb these localized musics into mass media to a great extent, yet Tiny Desk’s live component also allows for the solutions Halberstam proposes to such exploitation, protecting the groups from complete consumption in several ways. First, Tiny Desk creates a platform that is permeable between artist, producer, and audience through publishing an accessible video archive showing the real artist. This grants significant agency to the artist in contextualizing their performance to the time and venue. Secondly, NPR does account for a diversity of participants, striving not only for further public outreach, but also for the presentation of new and rising artists from multiple backgrounds. Thirdly, the documentation of a performance that is not only “unplugged” but also extremely intimate queers the domination of the produced circulated recordings, challenging the archive as well as typical band venues like bars, large concert halls, and stadiums. And last of all, Tiny Desk is not defined by youthful revolutionaries, often mistakenly credited as the sole driving force behind competing taste systems, but instead presents a range of artists: young and old, established legacy performances and new groups like the winners of the Tiny Desk contest, national and international, and a range of genres. This is not to say that Tiny Desk has a comprehensive presentation of music. Rather, NPR Music cultivates a taste system catering to its primarily middle-class identified audience that nevertheless grants significant queering potential to the performers.

One such avenue of queering potential is the voice as part of the larger theoretical framework of vocality. Freya Jarman-Ivens implicates the voice in queer liminal agency. She argues “the detachment of voice from body renders unstable the signifiers at play here in

such a way as to make the voice highly productive of the queer.”\textsuperscript{29} Referring to a “here” within the discourse of gender identity, the voice is not always attached to the culturally expected performativity of the physical body and in fact can challenge these expectations when, for example, a man has a high voice or a woman has a low basso. This queer potential in the voice is amplified with any kind of shift in expectation seen through the image and audio of a Tiny Desk video. This is integral in seeing and hearing both expressions of intense emotion and voices of difference. In a collaborative essay on vocal anthropology, Steven Feld, Aaron Fox, Thomas Porcello, and David Samuels similarly mark the power of the voice and language, where “voice is among the body’s first mechanisms of social difference.”\textsuperscript{30} Samuels and Fox both describe fieldwork that explores the performatve power of music to establish a social history and experience. These scholars recognize the potential of the voice to queer expectations and establish performative social identities, which I use to consider political agency in musical performance on Tiny Desk.

Vocality is built on culturally established visual and sonic signifiers of race, gender, class, and ethnicity that can be recognized and modeled on to fulfill or defy expectations. Jarman-Ivens theorizes vocality as the embodied voice and vocal timbre inclusive of language, music, gesture, and feeling, but also as a larger concept that exists apart from these individual components.\textsuperscript{31} Ethnomusicologist Katherine Meizel defines vocality as “encompassing the act of vocalization and the entirety of that which is being vocalized—it is a set of vocal sounds, practices, techniques, and meanings that factor in the making of culture

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{31} Jarman-Ivens, \textit{Queer Voices}, 4.
and the negotiation of identity.”

Although vocality is a powerful tool of communication and identity construction, musicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim discredits the assumed essentialism or expected “naturalness” of vocality to any identity correlation, especially race. Instead she illustrates how vocality is culturally constructed to form expectations of some identities to have a particular voice. Taking these theories of vocality into consideration, this project relies on Meizel, Jarman-Ivens, and Eidsheim’s work to illuminate the integrated social nature of vocality. These scholars mark music’s power in negotiating politics, identity and vocality noting methods and models for such emotions to be heard and even amplified within what I term vocalities of outrage on Tiny Desk.

Expressions of positive emotion also hold a specific kind of subversive potential. Sara Warner defines acts of gaiety as humorous approaches to initiate social and political change. While Warner used the concept to address aspects concerning gay rights and the LGBTQ movement, I expand the term to spectrums of normalcy and deviance as a form of questioning the “normal.” Musical acts of gaiety are tools to construct the affective potential of the venue confronting this resistance by humanizing performers and recognizing difference as a common strength. Considering musical acts of gaiety as key points of subversion, these moments humanize the performers in ways joyful and creative and facilitate the coexistence of difference. As cultural historian Josh Kun states, music is a valuable tool for constructing individual and collective identities within a site of transgressive performance.

Acts of gaiety can be read in various ways including sharing experiences of difference through passion and humor. In all of the Tiny Desk concerts discussed here, there is a sense of, despite somber commentary, relaxed enjoyment or what Audre Lorde calls the power of the erotic; the power stemming from sincerely sharing any passion with other people. Many of Tiny Desk’s performers express and share with the audience the pleasure felt in their art, communicating the power of the erotic in shaping the affective environment. Considering another form of sharing, musicologist Charles Garrett argues that musical humor, while often exiled to the periphery of academic study, constitutes a liminal space for performers to continually traverse the line between art and entertainment. Garrett notes how humor has been ignored and so has a power to transgress boundaries, as the Guadalajaran jazz band Troker does gleefully. Although specifically relating to jazz, Garrett uses the expectation theory to consider how jazz is humorous. In this study, humor is similarly expanded beyond jazz, especially when considering text-driven songs.

Merging the relationship of music with the social, Christopher Small explores the ways in which the act of music, which he terms musicking, is performative. Small says “all musicking is ultimately a political act,” formulating music as a tool to reveal the true values and contradictions within ourselves, our relationships, and where “those contradictions can be reconciled, and the integrity of the person affirmed, explored, and celebrated.” The power of musicking to articulate, reconcile and affirm differences is inherently linked to the social and political. Moreover, Small distills the agency in composing, performing, listening,

38 Christopher Small, Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 213.
39 Ibid., 221.
and collectively engaging in a world of sound and his ideas provide a foundation for my consideration of vocalities of outrage and acts of gaiety. Drawing connections between a wide variety of texts, academic, visual, and media-based, this study aims to expand on the relationships of performance, emotion, and music integral to the Tiny Desk.

Methodology

This thesis begins with journalistic and academic research to place the Tiny Desk in context of NPR Music and NPR as a whole. NPR’s history and development are considered through various lenses, such as media surveys, reports, stories, and media and social theory, asking how did Tiny Desk get where it is now, what values it reflects, and how the mission statement of NPR is mirrored more broadly. I conducted a content survey of the ninety-six Tiny Desk concerts that occurred in the time range of June 2016 through June 2017 accessible through the NPR Music Tiny Desk online archive. The information gathered through this content survey aids in the examination of the relationship of NPR music with social and political critique. While documenting the performers’ voices at the seat of power in Washington D.C., the content survey also recognizes the reporters’ agency to post the performance in a perspective several weeks later. Relevant information from this content survey is synthesized into the study to provide a temporal picture of NPR’s Tiny Desk in the time range considered, and assists in answering what NPR Tiny Desk values. It should not be assumed that the period of June 2016 through June 2017 is the only time when Tiny Desk values are subverted. However, this particular year, I argue, provides a rich perspective with which to examine some of the immediate effects of the 2016 U.S. presidential election on the series.
Utilizing comparative analysis, I contrast the social and musical values observed in the content survey, as a form of expectation, to the selected performances that queer these expectations. The concept of expectation is paralleled in the social contexts of the performance, as in Jarman-Ivens and Eidsheim’s consideration of vocality, and the syntax of musical material, as in Meyer’s expectation theory. The act of expectation, as a link between performer and listener, allows the exploration of affect without knowing the specific felt experience, which varies enormously. Such as consideration of expectation allows a two-part approach to performance analysis, considering the potentiality of emotional connection in both the social and musical space.

The first Tiny Desk performance explored in this study is Tank and the Bangas, as a celebrated and validated group winning the 2017 Tiny Desk contest. Their performance exemplifies aspects of NPR Music’s cultivated taste system. Next, I will compare the musical and textual expressions of Saul Williams and the Drive-By Truckers, both with politically driven text-based songs. Last, I will similarly compare the performances of Common and Troker, incorporating the impact of the presidential election and contrasting the two performances to Warner’s acts of gaiety. Through transcription and musical analysis, I will focus on the text’s cohesion with melody, texture, and rhythm considering how both performers create acts of gaiety through the entwinement of the music and lyric content. Mainly through transcription, music analysis, musical expectation, expression, and affect, I consider these specific performances methodically through comparative analysis.

An invaluable method for answering the questions this thesis proposes was my site visit to the office of NPR Music in Washington D.C., to observe the venue of a Tiny Desk concert and record staff reflections and interviews. On March 20 and 21, 2019, I visited the
NPR Music office and interviewed Creative Director Bob Boilen, Senior Director Lauren Onkey, videographer Morgan Noelle Smith, and recording technician Josh Rogosin. Through visiting the venue and speaking with the facilitators, I witnessed the way in which the arbitration of taste is constructed within the series. From these interviews, I gained a more accurate image of the venue, a detailed concept of the editing and documentation of the videos, and the goals behind the series relating to NPR Music’s team and their audience.

Chapter Overviews

In the first two chapters of the present study, I offer an overview of the history of the Tiny Desk concerts, asking how the series engages with current issues and what it values. In chapter 1, I argue that Tiny Desk functions as part of a larger whole that constructs a taste system to increase audience numbers and meet their base’s expectations. In chapter 2, I provide a timeline of politically critical performance around the election and discuss the series’ trends, most prevalent genres, and main journalists.

In the second part of the thesis, I analyze specific performances and their correlations using comparative analysis to examine these intersections. Chapter 3 examines where the values of Tiny Desk are manifested through cultural and performative intermingling hinging on the qualities of alternative music. Chapter 4 explores how a combination of lyrical and physical expression fitting Tiny Desk’s taste values allows these performers to preset subversive content driven by their vocalities of outrage. Chapter 5 argues that these performances contain acts of gaiety that emotionally engage listeners in hearing their voices of difference through creative stylistic crossover, harmonic accentuation, and focal mismatch that have different connotations in the context of the election. In conclusion, I draw together these performances as examples of ways Tiny Desk validates certain acts as culturally
significant while also allowing socially subversive expressions of emotion. This contradiction between being both the arbiter and critic of “taste” creates a space where difference exists together, which reflects both Kun’s concept of audiotopia, and Small’s concept of musicking.

Tiny Desk is a platform where both validation and subversion coexist, and where its taste values are shifted through angles of authenticity and innovation. Within this intimate venue, some performers use the musical agency granted on the series to queer the norms established by the taste system through expressions of outrage and acts of gaiety. The musical agency of the performers documents reactions to events within context of the series. For example, mentioned in the first paragraph of this introduction, Margo Price was unpredictably positioned to express her reaction to a polarizing election and in doing so reflected the shock many listeners felt. Tiny Desk places itself in Washington D.C.’s centrality of power, claims a staging of authentic and genre-bending artists, and presents a field of validation and subversion critical to an inquiry of NPR Music’s agency and impact. Performers on Tiny Desk potentiate the definition and empowerment of difference socially, politically, and culturally to varying degrees, and allows for imagining better alternatives where the act of voicing difference emotionally links the minds of strangers through sound.
Chapter 1  
NPR, NPR MUSIC, AND TINY DESK

I arrived in Washington D.C. in the late afternoon on March 19th. After taking the underground transit to my hotel, I walked in the coming twilight the few blocks to the NPR headquarters in the NoMa neighborhood, North of Massachusetts Avenue. Located in an industrial park under development, NPR is a polished office block that announces its presence with a monolithic sign in its colors of blue, red, and black. A scrolling news display inlayed on the top edge of the building announced in large yellow letters the newly released Tiny Desk concert and the live-streamed “Tiny Desk Family Hour” that happened just the week previous at Austin’s South by Southwest music festival. Standing in front of the prominent NPR Headquarters, the exterior face reflected, symbolically, the content listeners perceive NPR to produce as a public service. I wondered as I entered: What are the goals of this news business and who are its audience? How does it maintain a “clean-cut” perception of being noncommercial when representing many commercial interests? And what role does NPR Music and the Tiny Desk concerts play in the larger organizational whole?

The next day of my trip, I took the official guided tour of NPR’s relatively new building, acquired in 2008 and remodeled by 2013, and heard the endorsed rhetoric surrounding NPR’s public face, mainly about its public service and the “noncommercial” content it produces. The new building was funded by a generous bequest from Joan B. Kroc,

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2 The current location of NPR headquarters is 1111 North Capitol St. NE. NPR’s building before the move was located at 635 Massachusetts Ave. For more information, see Susan Stamberg, “In NPR’s New Building,
widow of Ray Kroc, founder of the McDonalds fast-food chain, of 221 million dollars.\(^3\) Like
the building’s façade, this new building fits the needs and perceptions of NPR, lauded as a
“green,” environmentally friendly construction. This building hosts the over 800 employees,
whom the tour guide enthusiastically described as working 24/7. With only a few employees
posted at member stations in Nashville, Chicago, New York, Boston and other cities, this
Washington D.C. office is the hub of NPR’s news production and branding (see figure 1.1).

\[\text{NPR STATIONS}\]

Figure 1.1. Map on display in the NPR building atrium showing the distribution of its over
1,000 NPR member stations across the United States.\(^4\)

The information on their “Overview and History” page describes NPR as a
multimedia news and radio resource employing around 340 news staff including reporters,

\(^3\) This exact dollar amount is taken directly from the NPR tour. For further information see John Ydstie and
Kevin Klose, “Philanthropist Joan Kroc Leaves NPR $200 Million Gift,” National Public Radio, November 6,

\(^4\) “NPR Stations and Public Media,” National Public Radio, accessed March 15, 2019,
correspondents, newscasters, editors, producers, hosts, and bloggers in the U.S. and abroad. However, there are also over a thousand member stations that distribute NPR content across the country. These member stations, funded locally, provide the majority of NPR’s income, while producing original content NPR draws from to potentially broadcast nationally. The nested organization of NPR, NPR Music, and Tiny Desk functions together as part of a larger whole that dictates the direction the series is developing in accordance with its funding, audience, and impact.

In this chapter, I offer a brief historical background of NPR and address how NPR Music and Tiny Desk function in terms of structure, finance, and viewership. The separation of NPR, as the organization at large, and NPR Music, a more specific subsection of NPR is key (see figure 1.2). Each has differing audiences, funding sources and uses. Through considering information published on NPR, reviews and interviews about NPR Music, and scholarly sources, I consider NPR’s big picture down to Tiny Desk as a specific program. Tiny Desk is not the priority of NPR content, which is generally more focused on news production. However, Tiny Desk is appealing to a diverse online audience and is described as a “gateway” for new viewers to find NPR news content. Tiny Desk curates content presented as a public service drawing from NPR’s initial noncommercial ideals. As just one program of many, Tiny Desk still reveals aspects of both NPR and NPR Music through its politics, advertising, audience, and music selection.

5 Lauren Onkey (Senior Director of NPR Music, NPR Headquarters in Washington D.C.), interview with author, March 20, 2019.
National Public Radio’s Background

Michael McCauley sees the history of NPR beginning before its incorporation in 1970 to the developments in radio programming in the 1920s. As radio technology advanced from the 1920s and into the 1940s, its popularity grew, particularly on college campuses that wanted to experiment with radio as a new medium to educate the public. In the early 1940s the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) allotted the lower end of the FM band exclusively to noncommercial educational stations and nonprofits. However, in the 1950s and throughout the 1960s, radio’s popularity declined with the advent of television.

In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Public Broadcasting Act, which led to the creation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). Congress created the CPB

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8 Ibid., 17.
to encourage the development of noncommercial television for educational programming that was seen, at the time, to possess a moral responsibility to the public. Members of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, appointed by Johnson to study the potential in noncommercial media, proposed that public broadcasting should be “a civilized voice in a civilized community”⁹ and, as E. B. White wrote to the Commission, like a literary essay it should “arouse our dreams, satisfy our hunger for beauty, take us on journeys, enable us to participate in events, present great drama and music, explore the sea and the sky and the woods and the hills.”¹⁰ The CPB, focused on television, eventually created a national radio service to similarly accomplish this goal.¹¹

National Public Radio was incorporated on February 26, 1970 to include approximately 90 charter stations. In April 1971, NPR hit the air with live coverage of the Senate hearing on the war in Vietnam. That same year, NPR debuted its first weekday newsmagazine, All Things Considered. In 1977, NPR assumed the responsibility of representing the interests of its growing number of approximately 190 member stations to Congress, the FCC, and other organizations. Morning Edition, another newsmagazine launched in 1979, expanded NPR’s news coverage to daily reports. In the 1980s, NPR continued to grow its reporting and audience. According to McCauley, the Gulf War initiated the 1991 talk program Talk of the Nation that set a standard for public radio talk-news formats.¹² NPR Worldwide launched in 1993 along with the domain name npr.org, which marked the beginning of NPR’s online platform. The next year the official website was

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¹⁰ Ibid., 13. E.B. White’s sentiments introduce the first chapter of the Commission’s report as an epigraph, showing the seriousness with which the commission took his vision for noncommercial television.

¹¹ McCauley, NPR, 23.

¹² Ibid., 22.
launched followed in 1996 with online audio streaming capabilities. This is the beginning of the online platform that would eventually host NPR Music in 2008, but before discussing NPR Music, I would like to address particular aspects about NPR’s funding, partisan perception, and audience.

**National Public Radio’s Funding**

The “Public Radio Finances” page presents NPR’s latest financial statements and annual reports as of 2018. The main source of revenue for NPR comes from its member stations. Individual listeners fund the largest percentage of member stations, in 2017 making up 38% of member stations revenues.¹³ For these member stations, corporation sponsorships make up the next highest percentage at 18%, described as support from local companies, businesses, and organizations. For member stations, federal funding is listed as the two lowest categories, including Federal appropriations via the CPB at 8% and Federal, State, and Local governments at 4%. NPR’s revenue is supported mainly through these member Stations’ dues and fees making-up 37% of revenue between 2014 and 2018.¹⁴ Member stations fees include the cost of NPR content, digital support services, and annual member dues. The dues are a flat fee to cover representation before Congress and regulators, and the legal rights to NPR programming, distribution, and other services. NPR notes that the amount of these costs has increased over time for member stations, growing with NPR’s popularity. The most significant charge is for carrying the premier NPR newsmagazines: *Morning Edition, All Things Considered, and Weekend Edition*. These costs are associated with

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¹⁴ Ibid. The breakdown of the NPR’s revenues includes: station dues and fees (37%), corporate sponsorship (29%), grants and contributions (13%), distribution and satellite interconnection (7%), other revenues (7%), distribution from the endowment to support operations (6%), investments (1%).
audience size. Non-newsmagazine content, like *Fresh Air* and other podcasts, make the next largest expense and charge is based on station size.

In spite of receiving most of its income from member stations, NPR’s finance page argues that federal and corporate funding is crucial to NPR’s continued existence. NPR receives less than 1% of its budget on average from federal funding from the CPB or other agencies or departments. Rather, member stations would suffer the most if federal funding were withdrawn, because, as the “Finances” page states, a decrease in federal funding would “undermine the stations’ ability to pay NPR for programming, thereby weakening the institution.”[15] Such funding cuts would particularly impact local and rural journalism in poor communities. Additionally, such a funding cut would impact NPR, as a loss to its main source of revenue, member stations. Although government funding for NPR is downplayed, such funds contribute significantly to the stability of the organization and contribute to making the space political. This is further complicated in terms of NPR sponsors and their branding as “noncommercial.”

After member stations, NPR’s next highest source of revenue is Corporate Sponsorships at 29%. In explanation, the page qualifies this percentage with the statement, “covering the news requires significant resources.” The page states that corporate sponsors cannot influence NPR’s coverage, and that NPR reporters are trained in ethics and practices of journalism, which “prevent outside groups from influencing their objectivity, story selection, and reporting.”[16] NPR states that they will report on their supporting corporations if the situation is news worthy. This justifies the potential conflict of interest and contradicts NPR’s “noncommercial” status. The terminology of sponsorship and commercialism both

[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
refer to a form of advertising and their differences and similarities are discussed further below. Investigating the choices in programming, and thus in some respect funding, in any media, especially one that is branded as a public service like NPR, is crucial to recognizing corporate media organizations’ vision and content as a production of their power and authority.

In an earlier version of the “Public Radio Finance” page, Programming and NPR Music received only 11% of NPR’s total operating expenses. The highest cost, because of the steep cost of international coverage, was News and Engineering at 41%. In the most recent break down of operating expenses, these costs are lumped together as 52% spent on Content. What is notable about the earlier breakdown is that, above all, NPR prioritizes through funding news production and technology over cultural content like NPR Music, if only for the simple reason that music and cultural coverage is not as expensive as national and international news coverage. Although NPR Music is now one of the four main categories listed on their site (including News, Arts and Life, and Shows and Podcasts), NPR focuses on News, which occasionally overlaps with other content, show in the selection of content for their newsmagazines. The lumping together of these expenses is indicative of NPR Music’s growth and potential of attracting a more diverse and younger audience to NPR news content, while also keeping costs low. This relates the finances of NPR as a national entity to NPR Music as a subsidiary of this larger body and Tiny Desk as only a portion of what NPR Music produces as content (see figure 1.2). As mentioned, a key component to funding is audience reached, which is different between NPR at large and NPR Music.

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National Public Radio’s Audience

Around a dozen visitors from across the U.S. attended the official tour I took of NPR’s ten-story office block. The group had fans of NPR’s programs such as comedy news show *Wait, Wait… Don’t Tell Me*, produced by member station WBEZ Chicago, and *Fresh Air*, a member station WHYY-FM Philadelphia talk show on contemporary arts and issues. However, most introduced themselves as listeners to the NPR newsmagazines and few in the group were there because of NPR Music. While I did not conduct a demographic survey of the group, it seemed to me that the predominant represented ages were between 30-40 years old. In the beginning of the tour some individuals introduced their places of residency: Texas, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Utah. In some ways, this tour group hints at some of the primary audiences NPR attracts, especially young professionals who are traveling to Washington D.C.

From this tour group and from conversations I had with other friends and acquaintances about this project, I gathered the collective NPR audience seems to trust its local and national programming, almost without question or criticism. This is further evidenced in the writings of Michael McCauley and journalism scholar Elizabeth Brixey, both of whom argue for the accomplishment of NPR as “nothing less than amazing”\(^\text{19}\) and “innovative.”\(^\text{20}\) However, Christopher Cwynar notes that although NPR seems to be expanding content and audiences through its digital platform, the audience reached specifically by NPR Music is skewed toward educated, 25-45 year-old, white, middle-class men.\(^\text{21}\)

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21 Christopher Cwynar, “NPR Music: Remediation, Curation, and National Public Radio in the Digital Convergence Era,” *Media, Culture, and Society* 39, no. 5 (2017): 680-696. It should be noted that the audience of NPR Music is not just one consistent group and that its audience is changing. Cwynar presents surveys and studies that recognizes educated, 25-45 year-old, white, middle-class men as more represented. However,
In spite of this, NPR and NPR Music advertise its audience as diverse and growing. The National Public Media, which platforms both NPR and PBS, claims, “NPR reaches the nation’s best and brightest.”^22^ Basically an advertisement for NPR, this site constitutes the “best and brightest” of its listenership, not as it exists in reality, but as it exists in an ideal and socially lauded form. Of the substantiated demographics of NPR’s audience, in October 2017 NPR celebrated reaching 99 million monthly listeners across its digital and radio platforms. They claimed newsmagazines like *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered* maintained “remarkable” growth seen during the 2016 election and that audiences did not drop after the election. NPR’s survey of the weekly audience contained 14.6 million listeners. The average listening age demographic with the greatest growth was among 25-44 year-old people, and within this range generational diversity was better including Generation X and Millennials.^23^

A 2012 *People Press* survey revealed NPR’s audience to be “relatively well educated” with 54% college graduates, compared to the 29% college graduates in the U.S. at large and only 24% college graduates that watch Fox News as a more conservative news outlet. This survey also found that family incomes of $75,000 or more correlated with a fourth of the readership of magazines like *The Economist* and NPR.^24^ Social psychologist Antony Manstead presents evidence that such material circumstances and education levels results in a difference between the ways social classes behave, making it harder for working-class

Cwynar is the only scholar who claims this 61% male to 39% female gender split for NPR Music as building on the established audience of NPR news and broader content. Although it is unclear what the source is for those percentages, Cwynar implies he got the data from NPR’s website.


individuals to benefit from “the kinds of educational and employment opportunities that would increase social mobility and thereby improve these material circumstances.”

Manstead’s assessment of social mobility suggests there is a social class association with a college education, and thus also potentially with NPR listeners.

While the radio programs appeal to a mainly white audience, media policy journalist Tracie Powell considers how NPR revealed 33% of its podcast audience was comprised of people of color. This is a higher percentage than broadcast radio, where NPR had previously not attracted minority audiences, especially African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinx communities. Because of NPR’s cross platform content, their goals of higher diversity outreach are to some extent being realized through media like podcasts, which are popular with tech savvy audiences inherently more diverse and younger than listening audiences of antiquated broadcast radio. Popular podcasts by NPR include: *Serial, This American Life, Radiolab, Freakonomics Radio, Invisibilia, Codeswitch, The Hidden Brain,* and *Wait Wait… Don’t Tell Me.* These podcasts are accessible online and are sometimes included in broadcast content by member stations or in the NPR newsmagazines. Although this shows an increase in nonwhite podcast audiences, the majority of podcast audiences are white at 67% and that increases to 87% for NPR’s radiobroadcast audience.

The current public feeling surrounding NPR is often considered a partisan issue in relation to the funding NPR receives from the national government. Republican President

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27 “Quick Facts,” United States Census Bureau, accessed September 16, 2019, [https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045218](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045218). According to this 2018 census, the largest racial groups within the U.S. population are: 76.5% white, 18.3% Hispanic or Latino, 13.4% Black or African American, and 5.9% Asian.
28 Powell, “Are Podcasts the New Path to Diversifying Public Radio?”
Donald Trump frequently discusses cutting funding specifically to PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) and NPR through “zeroing out” funding for the CPB. In 1995, House Speaker Newt Gingrich used similar language about funding for public broadcasting because of the perceived liberal bias of public television. In 2005, a Harris telephone survey commissioned by the Public Relations Society of America found that while no participants trusted a news source completely, NPR was the most generally trusted by 61% of the public.

More than a decade later, in 2017, a Gallup/Knight Foundation mail survey of 19,000 U.S. adults showed that audiences recognized a lack of objective reporting in all news platforms. The survey found that more than eight in ten U.S. adults believed news media is critical to democracy, yet Americans have a negative view (43%) of news media. There is a strong correlation between political values and media distrust with 18% of the Democrats polled commonly having an unfavorable view of the media, much lower than the Republicans polled, 68% of which had unfavorable outlook on media. Of the 44% of

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32 Gallup/Knight Foundation, “American Views: Trust, Media and Democracy,” Knight Foundation, January 15, 2018, 51, [https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-trust-media-and-democracy](https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-trust-media-and-democracy). The main goal of the survey, listed on this overview page is to assess how Americans perceived and evaluate media with so much (mis)information readily available. The survey was sent by mail to 109,962 randomly selected U.S. households with an oversampling of households with difficult to reach groups like blacks, Hispanics, and young adults. There was a $1 cash incentive to return the survey and the response rate for valid surveys was 20% at 19,196 U.S. respondents 18 years and older. Nonresponse adjustments were made by national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, region, and population density.

33 Ibid., 2.

34 Ibid., 5. 54% of Democrats polled had a favorable view of the media, and only 15% of Republicans had a favorable view. This survey was self-administered and likely these party affiliations are self-identified.
participants that named a news source as objective, 24% named Fox News, 13% named CNN, and only 10% named NPR (see figure 1.3).

### News Sources Believed to Be Objective, by Age, Race and Party Identification*

*Figures are the percentages mentioning each source*

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<th>All</th>
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<th>30-49 years old</th>
<th>50-64 years old</th>
<th>65+ years old</th>
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<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Republican</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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*Based on those who say they can name an objective news source (n=9,814 national adults)

Figure 1.3. The Gallup/Knight percentage tally of news sources believed to be objective.  

The majority of conservative and very conservative identifying adults listed Fox News as objective and NPR and CNN tie as the most objective news outlets for liberal identified respondents. NPR is the top listed news source for those identifying as “very liberal” at 26%. The study also considered education level with 19% of postgraduates listing NPR as the most objective. Other educational groups listed Fox News yet those with

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36 Ibid., 13.
four-year college degrees mentioned Fox less often (19%) than participants with some
college education (27%) or high school education (32%).³⁷ Where there seems to be shifting
perspectives, according to this survey, Cwynar, and Powell, NPR continues to appeal to an
arguably middle class, educated, liberal, white audience with growing audience outreach
through online content.

**NPR Music: “Noncommercial” Digital Content**

In its creation mainly online, NPR Music capitalized on the rise in digital media. In
2000, *All Songs Considered*, hosted by Bob Boilen and Robin Hilton, premiered as NPR’s
first web-based program.³⁸ The program’s success was the beginning of NPR’s embrace of
digital media, which increased NPR podcasts and mobile forms of accessible web content.
This program was also a precursor to NPR Music as a program devoted to current new music
releases covering “all” genres, although the breadth of coverage has been criticized as *too*
*indie-centric* and *hipster* by journalists that Cwynar discusses.³⁹ NPR Music was created in
late 2007, known as NPR’s “digital arm”⁴⁰ and as Senior Director Lauren Onkey calls it one
of the first parts of NPR that was really “digital first”⁴¹ as an outgrowth of *All Songs
Considered*. NPR’s “Overview and History” page forefronts NPR’s move to digital online
media as a return to the initial values of public radio, referring to it as “another era of
innovation, not unlike the earliest days of radio.” Additionally this page states that, “NPR
and its stations are actively embracing the power and potential of digital media to serve our

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³⁷ Ibid. Education was a point reported on by April Simpson, “Report: Most Americans Don’t Cite NPR, PBS as
³⁹ Ibid., 688.
mission,” implying that new digital technology was and is a priority and key part of NPR’s accessibility as noncommercial.42 In 2008, shortly after NPR Music was formed, the first Tiny Desk concert featuring singer-songwriter Laura Gibson was released on both npr.org and NPR Music’s YouTube channel. Although featuring a more interactive interface than radio, NPR Music preserves the brand of NPR’s noncommercialism and promotes its content to a wider audience online.

The audience reached by the digital content of NPR Music is different than that reached by NPR broadcast news. Onkey states, “From the beginning NPR Music had the potential to crack into a different audience than the radio shows. NPR’s audience overall is well educated, [and] that audience for the radio shows are older. Audiences for podcasts skew younger and that’s sort of revolutionizing our world here, the explosion of podcasts.”43 Because NPR Music attracts such an audience, Onkey describes NPR Music as a “potential kind of gateway for a younger audience to discover NPR.” Like NPR’s audience at large, NPR Music’s audience is also educated, but skews younger and is arguably more popular with men. Cwynar claims there is a 61% male to 39% female gender split to the more even split for NPR’s online audience more broadly.44 To some extent this addresses the two audiences of NPR and NPR Music, however for both groups the idea of noncommercial public media is a key principle of the organization.

During the time before NPR Music, NPR’s coverage on music maintained ties to the Carnegie Commission’s proposed goals of noncommercial ideals as a civilizing force.45

44 Cwynar, “NPR Music,” 693. Cwynar is not clear where this data is drawn from although he implies it comes from NPR.
45 Killian Jr. et al., Public Television, 18. The report focuses on noncommercial public television, not radio, although the concepts are still applicable.
Louise Chernosky depicts radio as a frontier for new and more accessible “spaces and places,” separate from the concert hall, that embraced new music and shaped experimentalism in the U.S. However, focusing on NPR’s experimental music programs in the 1970s and 1980s, she writes, “NPR’s eventual specialization in news production and its position as an increasingly mainstream institution meant that it never became a committed patron of new music in America.” New music, to Chernosky, refers specifically to the experimental within “concert” music even within those “other places and spaces.” NPR initially cultivated coverage of new music in experimental, classical, and jazz genres and limited their content to fit the Carnegie Commission’s “ideals of excellence,” as seen as educational to the public.

Now, Lauren Onkey says, “NPR Music’s bones are based in indie rock and not mainstream music. That has shifted over the years as NPR Music has grown.” Taking the Carnegie Commission’s ideals of noncommercialism, NPR’s trajectory in music coverage transfers this concept to the present by offering new music in popular genres and this effort hinges on perceptions of NPR’s traditional ideals of “noncommercial” content for public benefit. Onkey notes a shifting in genres performed on Tiny Desk, particularly in hip hop, yet this broadening content range remains under the anti-mainstream, or alternative, brand of NPR Music discussed in chapter 3.

From its start in 2008, NPR Music hinges on the perception of “noncommercial.” While in a somewhat contradicting fashion, NPR Music still promotes its sponsors, but

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distances itself from commercialism by using sponsorship. The difference between sponsorship and commercialism is in the method of promoting the sponsor or advertiser, although both have the ultimate goal of advertising. Sponsorship is considered a payment of some kind to a sports, arts, or entertainment organization in return for access to its usable commercial prospects. In method, sponsorship is less direct than commercial advertising. Sponsoring a public service improves the advertiser’s image and brand as supporting a community while also advertising its presence. However, NPR’s noncommercial branding is an important trust factor for audiences when compared with commercial radio that plays longer commercials with shorter news segments lasting under a minute. To NPR at large, McCauley poses commercialism as “compromising its public service mission by tolerating forms of underwriting that are too blatant in their attempts to sell.” This may have historically been the case, but as Chernosky notes, this avoidance of the mainstream only lingers in perception today as a significant portion of NPR funding comes from promoted content and sponsors which have advertising as the end result. NPR Music online content and videos often feature advertising from their sponsors including the Lagunitas Brewing Company and Blue Microphones.

What happened to the ideals of noncommercialism imagined by the Carnegie Commission? Sociologist William Hoynes argues that as public media faces ongoing market pressure to compete and promote a brand identity there is an erosion of such ideals. The very idea of public service is commodified and targeted to consumers in a market. Hoynes states, “the brand becomes the primary asset of the system, marking the shift to a conceptual

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framework that renders public service a kind of value-generating activity and makes the idea of noncommercial broadcasting increasingly dubious.”

Cwynar depicts NPR Music as navigating a necessary slide back into commercialism using NPR’s culturally significant branding and digital human-curated content. As Cwynar states, “the shift toward curation provided NPR with an opportunity to capitalize upon its reputation for the filtration and presentation of cultural material.” NPR Music fosters this cultural influence through maintaining is growingly popular “smash hit” of Tiny Desk and using both human-curated content alongside user analytics and algorithms made possible through the digital platform. In this sense the digitalization of NPR Music and NPR’s brand of “noncommercialism” work in tandem to cultivate NPR’s opposition to the mainstream, appeal to a specific online audience, and promotes both the content of NPR Music and NPR generally.

**Tiny Desk: Audience and Impact**

Lauren Onkey has been the NPR Music Senior Director since January of 2018, and in her first year-and-a-half, she sees the breadth of NPR Music as continually expanding. The week before my visit, NPR Music hosted the “Tiny Desk Family Hour,” which featured several Tiny Desk alumni presented and recorded at the Austin SXSW festival. NPR Music announced the event for the festival without naming specific artists featured and still had a large audience turn out. Onkey states:

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It was kind of an experiment of taking the Tiny Desk on the road and we had 1,500 people show up. We did not announce a single artist. That means [our audience is] trusting the brand of Tiny Desk. That we will deliver something that they will find compelling. That is the really exciting thing. It is sort of a delicate balance. And the artists trust us, because they can come here and do unique things and know it will put them in front of a big audience. And in front of an audience that loves and trusts the Tiny Desk.57

This audience’s trust of the NPR Music brand correlates with a similar ideological belief in NPR as a broader organization. The “Tiny Desk Family” hour is just one example of how the listenership of NPR Music trusts the musical promotion of the site. Onkey finds it “stunning the amount of love and loyalty people have to the Tiny Desk” that stems from social media like Twitter.58

When dealing with which platforms to publish the Tiny Desk videos two audiences must be considered: the audience that accesses the videos through npr.org and the audience that accesses the videos on YouTube. The audience for Tiny Desk concerts on YouTube is, using Onkey’s term, “enormous” with over 20 million views a month for Tiny Desk concerts. Drawing from YouTube’s user analytics data, Onkey asserts that the YouTube audience is significantly younger, an aspect of NPR Music viewers generally, and more diverse compared to NPR’s broader audience. With such a large number reached through this platform and a different audience than would usually see NPR content, Onkey describes the balance of catering to each audience, “You’ve got Anderson .Paak with millions of views and yet a classical performance is never going to scale to that, but that is putting a classical performer or ensemble out in front of one of the biggest audiences they will ever have. Because of the algorithm on YouTube that means an audience can be fed things that it might

58 Ibid.
not otherwise see.” Relating back to the Carnegie Commission’s idealized view of what radio would become, Onkey notes that if the Tiny Desk wanted to feature only the most popular artist, they could. Yet they have chosen to feature a mixture of performers to “feed” their audience what is different, but also what can be seen as culturally “good” for their arguably younger and more diverse audience.

Reviews of the Tiny Desk by Vox’s Zachary Crockett and Washington Post journalist Marcus Moore and Chris Richards usually focus around the main curator, Bob Boilen, and the impact on the audience at the performances, physical and virtual. Bob Boilen is the Creative Director of Tiny Desk and makes the final decisions about who performs. In a direct interview with Boilen, Vox journalist Zachary Crockett recounts Boilen’s path toward becoming a “tastemaker,” beginning by working in a record store where his job was to cater to individual customers. Boilen is an active electronic musician and composer and performs contradance music, which he also hosts a podcast about with his son. As further discussed in chapter 2, Boilen is both curator and gatekeeper for the Tiny Desk series. The name of Tiny Desk itself comes from the name of Boilen’s psychedelic dance band Tiny Desk Unit, active during the 1970s and 1980s.


Post article, Chris Richards marks the growing influence of NPR Music, stemming from the shrinking number of people who buy music, preferring online services like YouTube, Pandora, and Spotify. With music’s visibility on these sites, labels are forced to pander to NPR Music. The Tiny Desk venue is sought out, because “for lesser-known indie acts, NPR Music’s stamp of approval can feel downright momentous.” Tiny Desk is a pursued venue but also battles a perception of being too indie-centric, too folk, and too white, a reputation attributed since the 2000 launch of All Songs Considered.

Marcus Moore focuses on an interview with NPR Music journalist Frannie Kelly, a co-host of NPR’s Microphone Check, a now discontinued NPR series on hip hop culture. Kelly describes how Boilen encouraged her to suggest appropriate hip hop artists. She suggested inviting rapper T-Pain in 2014, who is now one of the most viewed of the Tiny Desk concerts on YouTube, and initiated the series’ “hip hop explosion.” However ultimately, in addition to wanting to focus on the cultural aspects of hip hop music, Kelly felt there was no place for hip hop on a concert series which Boilen primarily curated and approved. Richards claimed that to counter the indie-focus of Tiny Desk “NPR Music has started to push in new directions,” yet success is still debatable.

Crockett’s article, on the other hand, further focuses on the physical space and authenticity of the Tiny Desk performances. He writes about his personal experience attending the Blue Man Group’s performance in 2016, saying, “there is an awkward intimacy in our closeness to the act, and to each other; everyone senses it. And that’s what makes NPR’s Tiny Desk concert series so special.” He also argues for the unique documentation of

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64 Onkey, interview with author, March 20, 2019.
65 Richards, “NPR the Music Powerhouse?”
perceived authenticity in the series with the live performance, non-produced audio, and stripped-down amplification. Crockett concludes that Tiny Desk presents a side of performance usually obscured, citing a 2013 study, “In today’s world 56% of millennials claim to feel some level of disconnect from the physical. On social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, ‘reality’ is Botoxed; things are twisted, manipulated, and advertised to appear far better than they actually are.”

In contrast, Crockett sees Tiny Desk as still a “product of technology” yet minimally produced and maintaining its flaws, “We hear Alt-J mess up a guitar lick. We see the veins in Hozier’s neck as he strains to hit a high note without an amplifier. We feel the awkwardness of the silence between takes in an Adele set.” The unconventional venue of Tiny Desk awards small live audiences, more musical nuisance, and reminds physical and online viewers of the human fallibility of the participants. Crockett ends stating, “the show reminds us of our own nakedness, our own vulnerabilities. And, in its own way, it tells us we’re okay as we are.”

In an interview with Elizabeth Brixey, NPR Music journalist Stephen Thompson recounts the story of how Tiny Desk got its start in 2008. Boilen and Thompson were at a bar at Austin’s SXSW festival to see singer-songwriter Laura Gibson, who Thompson describes as tending to “project inward” and “sing into her own lungs a little bit.” The bar was an inappropriate venue for Gibson, and the two journalists invited her to play at the NPR office space in their old building before relocating. As it coincided, Gibson was planning on being in Washington D.C. in three weeks and Boilen arranged for her to have a short concert.

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67 Ibid.
Thompson says the captured video was not great but that the sound was “better than being there.”\textsuperscript{69} This initial concert established several stipulations of Tiny Desk: it is for hearing what is missed in a noisy bar, capturing a more intimate performance, booking performers that are going to already be in D.C., and choosing them based on the advocacy of the members of the NPR Music team. These rules, the logistics, and the political context of the shows considered in this project are discussed in the following chapter.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 41.
At noon, a band arrives at the NPR Headquarters loading dock to perform a Tiny Desk. Already in communication with their sponsoring journalist about scheduling and set-up, they are met at the loading area by Tiny Desk Creative Director Bob Boilen and assemble their performers, instruments, amplifiers, and cases into the elevators up to the NPR Music office space. Once off the elevators, they navigate the corners and turns to enter a large office space. They pass the first few cubical offices including Tom Huizenga and Bobby Carter’s desks to arrive at a small open space and the Tiny Desk, or Boilen’s desk. There are clusters of cubicles and concrete columns down the full length of the office segmenting the large room into hallways between the working reporters. The Tiny Desk venue is in a small carved-out corner and the band is about to perform an unusual gig.

I saw the Tiny Desk venue for the first time on the NPR Headquarters’ official public tour. Initially, the venue was unrecognizable. For a place where I had seen over a hundred concerts on video, the venue was innocuous and understated. An open area formed the cleared space for the audience, usually used for coffee and socializing in the office. A taped line in front of Bob Boilen’s “tiny desk” indicated the first row of the physical audience. Boilen’s desk is next to the current intern’s desk, which are both in front of a colorful and jumbled bookshelf filled with books on popular music icons, pictures of bands, and cluttered with objects, some left behind by performers.¹ This venue shapes the acoustic nature of the

¹ One of the notable items left behind by an artist on Tiny Desk is Adele’s plastic water bottle.
performances, restricting the sound and creating an awkwardly small and intimate venue for the performers. As Boilen states,

I am rarely interested in a band coming here to perform a fifteen-minute set exactly the way I would have seen them the night before in a night club. And I think the philosophy behind Tiny Desk is [that] the coolest thing about artists is challenging them, and often challenging them in restricting them. The best artists like to rise to a challenge. So if you restrict someone, they are now challenged and they will then do something that is not only different, but for them they invest more. It will be more memorable for them and that translates to the audience.  

These restrictions of the Tiny Desk venue challenge artists in a musically and socially expressive space for a unique performance. This cultivates qualities on Tiny Desk that are geared toward audience perceptions of the genuine or “real” artist as authentic and innovative. These perceptions of authenticity and innovation limit the content presented on NPR Music and manifest in the people, instruments, and styles of music selected by the NPR Music team to fill this live performance venue.

This chapter is divided in three main sections. First, I explore the logistics of the series as introduced to me through my interviews with Tiny Desk technicians Morgan Smith and Josh Rogosin, Senior Director Lauren Onkey, and Creative Director Bob Boilen. Some of the initial questions that drove my conversations with them were logistical: How are the concerts scheduled? Are the performers paid? How long and what is accomplished in the editing process? Second, taking into consideration their responses, I suggest that there are three core, interacting, and guiding principles that define the series: 1) Originality, 2) Curation, and 3) Intimacy. Through a content survey of 96 Tiny Desk concerts between June 2016 through June 2017, I compiled these three principles. They shape the restriction of the venue and gather the values of NPR Music. Third, I discuss trends I observed in this content

3 These values are further explored in chapter 3 in a discussion of NPR Music’s taste system.
survey with regards to genre representation, journalist participation, gender split, geographical bases of groups, YouTube views, and overt social-political commentary. The goal of this content survey was to contextualize the performances and place the comments of Onkey, Smith, Rogosin, and Boilen in correlation to a specific time frame.

**Making a Tiny Desk**

The goals and intent of the Tiny Desk series are broad, claiming to showcase new skilled artists to wide audience access. Lauren Onkey states, “We are trying to provide a platform as a public media organization for music that we have identified as significant, beautiful, unique, and will work really well in this setting based on the various expertise we have on the team.” For Onkey, NPR Music’s content is about audience having access to music stylistically viewed as significant, beautiful, and unique, recalling early public radio’s idealized goals to educate the public by being a civilized voice bringing “excellence and diversity” to the American public.

Onkey describes NPR Music’s focus on “music discovery and curation,” as reaching audiences with new content and filtering cultural products as curation. This focus inhabits segments of NPR Music differently. Where Tiny Desk, in specific, does not provide contextual background of the groups, other areas of NPR Music focus on that social and cultural background exclusively. Tiny Desk is separated from this more contextualized content as Onkey describes Boilen’s approach as “aesthetically first, and that is something that Bob will always lead with, that is not necessarily how everyone on the music team

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7 Onkey provided the example of a social background focus at NPR Music as the Turning the Tables project where journalists consider U.S popular music history centered on women.
thinks.” She continues, “He is thinking of that music kind of floating free from history and culture; he would not even say it that way. But, you know, for him he is approaching the music as much as he can almost by itself. And you can tell that from how he shares it with the world and how he talks about it." This is to say, Onkey, speaking for Boilen and NPR Music, desires to present the Tiny Desk as free as possible from social and political agendas and with a focus on the perceivable “objective” values held in the style of the music “by itself.” I interpret her concept of “aesthetically first” as referring to curated music that easily falls within the constructed values of innovation and authenticity to the NPR Music team. The idea that this “floats free” from other factors is impossible, but the perception is there to naturalize new content as impartially discovered and filtered for its audience.

Perhaps this is one reason Tiny Desk has been criticized as myopic and elitist by other journalists and academics, not as a platform where one finds “all songs considered,” but rather one that places emphasis on alternative genres. Onkey recognizes certain weaknesses and omissions of Tiny Desk as her main focus to correct, and she sees the content of Tiny Desk as already expanded because of the current NPR Music team. In her own words, “The balance of tastes and areas of expertise on the team has sort of holistically filtered into the Tiny Desk. I am certainly aware of where we are tipping this way or another way. But since everyone is thinking about those questions in all of the work that they do, they raise those questions at the Tiny Desk.” In short, the team is a mix of musical tastes and opinions that

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10 Onkey noted the Tuning the Tables program on women in popular music as an example of her efforts.
curate, and hopefully balance, NPR Music content. The team is also the source of *pitches*, or suggestions, for future Tiny Desk artists and the concert series that according to audio engineer Josh Rogosin, is “very much of a group effort.”

The pitch is the very first point in the making of a Tiny Desk concert. For an artist to be invited, a member of the NPR Music team advocates for that artist to Bob Boilen, who approves the idea mainly if the journalist has seen the group live, is passionate about the artist’s work, and the group would fit the restrictions of the venue. Pitching is somewhat limited to journalists who can produce the shows in the Washington D.C. headquarters, and Boilen often assists. For example, NPR Music’s country music expert, Ann Powers, is based in Nashville and is not able to directly produce artists on the series. Once Boilen accepts the pitch, the journalist, who is now the producer, contacts the band to book the concert usually at a time when the group is already touring and playing a show in the Washington D.C. area. In the end, every concert is funneled through, approved, and supported by Boilen’s consideration of the Tiny Desk concert series. After the initial pitch is accepted, the process moves to logistics, putting the pieces of the concert together.

Current video coordinator, Morgan Smith notes, “how quickly and efficiently [the event] moves” once the artists arrive (see table 2.1). The invited artist arrives at noon and performs at 1:00 p.m. At half past noon “sharpish” the whole planned set list is performed for sound check and the comfort of the artists. Most bands have four to five performers, and the basic setup depends on the instrumentation and their potential placements. The artist will send Rogosin and Smith a sketch of their planned setup, but that can change in the small

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14 Morgan Smith was the videographer when I visited in March 2019. The videographer during the time range surveyed here was Niki Walker.
venue under the specific limitations placed on the artist. Smith and Rogosin prefer instruments on the back bookshelf wall, where the desk does not obscure the performers hands or bodies (see figure 2.1).

Table 2.1. The typical timetable for a Tiny Desk concert

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<th>Time</th>
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<tr>
<td>12:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Band arrives and sets up instruments, equipment. Microphones and cameras placed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12:30 p.m.</td>
<td>Sound check and rehearsal run.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Tiny Desk Concert. All at NPR headquarters are invited to come, including the daily tour participants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:30 p.m.</td>
<td>Pack up and tear down.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Up to a month later</td>
<td>During this time the videographer and audio engineer edit the video with other NPR Music content. Then the concert is published.</td>
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For the video shot, Smith adds that the performers have limited range of motion and should not “move because then you will stand in front of like three people and you can’t see anybody.”\(^\text{15}\) Drums might go along the back wall too or in the corner with improvised muting, sometimes with a stuffed animal, on the snare and bass drum as feasible. The vocalist is centered with the guitars and bass players placed to the singer’s left along the bookshelf, sometimes with occasional back-up singers. The setup needs to allow for the best microphone placement\(^\text{16}\) and video image possible in the small venue.

\(^\text{15}\) Smith and Rogosin, interview with author, March 20, 2019.
Rogosin expands on these issues: “How do we get the horn section away from the vocals so there is not too much bleed.” By *bleed* Rogosin means detected audio signal not from the intended sound source recorded by each microphone. Too much bleed makes the recorded tracks less independent and harder for Rogosin to balance and mix. Rogosin needs to capture a recording of each band member’s instrument as independently from the others as possible.

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possible for future mixing. Rogosin compares Tiny Desk to a typical gig: “Everyone is really close together where, on a normal stage, things are spread apart, everyone has monitors, there is a PA system.” On Tiny Desk, the recording signal is not projected into the space to act as a PA until Rogosin recently added some speakers mounted on the ceiling to subtly strengthen the vocals. Mostly the microphones are only for the video recording mix to be published online. This lack of vocal amplification is the most limiting factor of the venue.

Consequently, there is a vast difference between the sound in the room and the sound of the audio on the videos. The sound in the room is restricted by the instruments balancing to the vocalist having little to no amplification, yet Rogosin meticulously mixes the video audio. The vocal limitation can be subtly navigated now with the four speakers Rogosin installed to project only the vocal microphone’s signal. He states it is for the people in the room, “When there is a loud band and a very quiet vocalist, I have a little something I can add.” This is new in the last six months and in the past if the vocals were too soft it was a last-minute solution. Rogosin says now “it is very subtle, you don’t hear it as reinforced.” On the ceiling, there is an audience microphone to pick up live sounds, catching applause and laughter of the audience, who can number to over two hundred. After the concert, Rogosin does a quick mix for his memory and then, “I enhance the hell out of everything. I am listening to each little detail and boosting little like, oh, they did a cool little guitar lick there.”18 Now, more than before, the artists ask to hear the mix of their performance before its approved publish date, and Rogosin takes notes about what they want adjusted.

Morgan Smith is the “dedicated video director person,” placing the cameras and editing the final videos to look like they were taken in one shot.19 She uses a minimum of

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
three cameras for the normal group of five or fewer musicians and up to five cameras for over seven performers. She directs the wide camera shot (camera A), which gets the whole group in “the classic tiny desk shot.” The intern operates the B camera for an alternative shot getting more of the sidewall. Smith describes her approach to the videos: “I think personally that when you are singing it is nice to be straight on, because it feels more intimate. You are looking at their eyes. That is really important for me.” The light can be “blown out” from the afternoon sun streaming in the windows. Smith says as an exception some performances occur later in the day and bring their own light rack into the venue. However most of the time, “we are lit by the sun.” To keep the venue from feeling too much like a studio, Boilen avoided using a lighting rack.

Currently, NPR Music tapes three concerts a week and publishes two a week. In the past NPR Music was publishing three a week and they might do so again with the increasing backlog of performances. Rogosin notes that there are more than a hundred concerts a year. Although there is up to a month between taping and publishing the concerts, Smith says they edit something new every day. Smith’s editing intent is to be believable as a one-take shot: “A lot of times people don’t even feel like they are edited because we try to edit them in a smooth way.” Both Rogosin and Smith say collecting all of the documentation, getting it placed together, and editing is time-consuming. Rogosin listens to the preliminary mix and sits with it in different contexts: “I’ll live with it for a while. I’ll listen to it at home. I have a crappy mono speaker in my phone. I’ll listen to it while I’m showering, biking to work, in all these different contexts, cooking dinner and make mental notes and tweak the mix.” After he gets a finished mix, he will make only one or two changes before publishing unless he gets

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
“obsessed.” Then he will make four to five changes. There is usually a one-month shelf for editing of the videos, and the artists approve NPR’s suggested day to publish.

This process of Tiny Desk has developed over its existence. The number of concerts recorded and published per month has increased with the popularity of the series. Sound quality and visuals are continually improving the documented experience, now including the live sound of the audience. Old videos, before 2014, documented the bands performing alongside staff diligently working during their lunch break. The new building is set-up as an informal stage to accommodate the audience and cameras. Audience members stand in the cleared space and hallways to watch concerts. Signs are posted to not stand on chairs or wall outcroppings. At this time, performing on Tiny Desk was by invitation only, now Boilen receives requests to perform via email, claiming the whole team receives offers from 60-80 groups to play per week. With the long run of the series and its huge reach in audience online, Boilen says, “every single publicist on the planet wants their band at the Tiny Desk.”21 However even as the number of solicitations for booking on the series grows, Boilen says his first question is still if the group would work on Tiny Desk and as the deciding factor: “Am I interested in them coming? Do I like them?” These questions and requirements of the venue show a mix of logistical considerations and personal preference in the selection of groups, something explored further in terms of curation.

The videos produced by the NPR Music team are curated at large- and small-scale levels from the selection of artist to how the vocalist is recorded. The only viewers who see the physical concert are those who actually attend the performance. In small-scale curation, Rogosin and Smith both refer to ways they have “sneakily” enhanced the sound in the venue

and the appearance of the “one-take” video. In fact, the published video of the event is highly mediated with careful mixing and editing dictating the viewers’ experience. The result is a reflection of Boilen and the NPR Music team’s curation of the series to best appeal to their audience.

The lack of monitors and vocal amplification, the venue lit by the sun, and attentive audience members, might make this gig uncomfortable for some performers, also influencing the content with awkward silences and stage patter. For example, in Tegan and Sara’s performance, Tegan notes, “I can’t tell, like my instinct is that I want to banter, but I don’t know” followed by laughter from the audience. She continues, “it’s really warm, and I just also want to say that if I had known that this many people were going to come, I would have applied a little more attention and focus to the application of makeup and clothing this morning. Just want to say that. It was really bubbling up in my throat that last song.”

Lucy Dacus, in her set in 2016 asks the audience, “Is anybody else’s biggest fear having a runny nose on Tiny Desk?” These are by no means the only examples of instances where performers express feeling awkwardness and discomfort on the Tiny Desk venue. In Adele’s performance in 2011 she asks the audience if they can hear her. Sometimes to break the silence between songs, Boilen requests a joke from the musicians like he did in Boygenius’ set in 2018. At the end of this same set, Boilen queries if it was any easier the second or third time and he gets a firm response back, “No, it’s not!” Smith notes, “Most of the time [the performers] are happy, but others, they hate it,” and Rogosin refers to the Tiny Desk as “all

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about getting out of your comfort zone” for the artists.\textsuperscript{25} Mercifully efficient, the whole process of recording a Tiny Desk live concert only takes one hour and fifteen minutes. The band gets there at noon and is gone by half-past 1 p.m.

**The “Unofficial” Rules of Tiny Desk**

In my discussion with Lauren Onkey she brought up the idea of rules in regard to artists working in electronic sound media: “You know one of the rules of Tiny Desk is that you have to have a band and you have to play instruments.”\textsuperscript{26} Although this statement seems obvious, this comment made me wonder about other rules Tiny Desk. In my observations, there seems to be three core principles in operation at Tiny Desk, which, following Onkey’s wording, I will refer to as “rules.”\textsuperscript{27} This first requirement is for original music. This is followed by curation, a filtered expression of what Onkey calls “significant” and “beautiful,” where artists reflect the NPR Music team’s composite values.\textsuperscript{28} Last, the venue’s vulnerable intimacy dictates presentation, like having instruments. These rules interact and combine in ways that make the concerts function fluidly while cultivating the documentation of a live, although touched-up, intimate concert that is the polar opposite to heavily-mediated session recordings and commercial releases.

**Rule #1: Originality**

To avoid copyright infringement, Tiny Desk requires artists to perform original work. This is a “rule” Onkey explicitly states, “because of music rights and the cost of clearing music rights, we can’t have artists do cover versions. They have to do their own songs, which

\textsuperscript{25} Smith and Rogosin, interview with author, March 20, 2019.
\textsuperscript{26} Onkey, interview with author, March 20, 2019.
\textsuperscript{27} These rules are my own and are not directly repeated in official NPR rhetoric. They are echoed in the Tiny Desk Contest 2019 rules discussed more in chapter 3. See “2019 NPR Music Tiny Desk Contest—Official Rules,” Tiny Desk Contest, accessed September 14, 2019, https://tinydeskcontest.npr.org/rules/.
\textsuperscript{28} Onkey, interview with author, March 20, 2019.
can also limit who you have [perform].” The rules for the 2019 Tiny Desk Contest define “original” by copyright law and the applicant must own all composition and publishing rights to the music in their submitted video. This can be challenging for genres like jazz. A jazz singer known for their interpretations of specific standards needs to write and perform their own songs to be considered for the series. Such was the case for René Marie, a singer-songwriter jazz vocalist known for her interpretations of standards like “The Very Thought of You” and “A Sleepin’ Bee.” However on Tiny Desk, Marie performed all original songs in August 2016. Onkey notes this rule limits considered groups and is a reason the series presents many singer-songwriters in various genres.

NPR Music’s concept of originality is also tied to the perception of innovation, as pushing an established sound, to allow the producing journalist to advocate for what has not yet, by them at least, been “discovered.” Boilen states, “the ideal Tiny Desk for me is to bring an artist to the desk that few people know, who are super, super talented, that more people will get to know.” This concept of innovation can be perceived as a group “rising” out of obscurity, although most groups featured on Tiny Desk are already well established. NPR Music’s search to discover artists creating distinctive original material is one aspect that brands their content and attracts their audience. Consequently, this rule of originality is closely associated with the curation of content as a broader facet of NPR Music’s branding.

29 Ibid.
Rule #2: Curation

Taking many forms, curation is the filtering, selection, and representation of cultural material for a specific audience drawing this definition from filmmaker and entrepreneur Steven Rosenbaum. The process has a strong association with Pierre Bourdieu’s term “highbrow” or elite culture and expensive artifacts, like curating an art museum. Within the realm of mass media, Rosenbaum describes curation as “the coin of the realm.” He sees curation as human-added value through qualitative judgment to a select gathering and organizing of material or products from a mass amount of information. Applying this to NPR Music, as Lauren Onkey states, the curation process is guided by what is considered culturally valuable, i.e. significant, beautiful, and unique, by the NPR Music team and “really belongs at the Tiny Desk.” Thus, curation is tied to broader ideas of cultural capital, taste, and social class realized through the choices NPR Music makes in its programming.

These judgments in the content presented on Tiny Desk reflect the journalists who comprise the NPR Music team. For an artist to be seen by the journalist, the chosen band must be established enough to have performed live on tour or at festivals. These limitations on original content, exposure, and experience contribute to the team curation of the series. Boilen states:

All I want to know is [if] the producer [is] passionate about this band. And if [the producer is] passionate about this band, although I may not know them, I am on board. That keeps [the NPR Music staff] from doing bands that will be huge, for the sake of huge, and it will also keep us from doing stuff because someone happens to be available and we happen to have an open date. It keeps us as a staff being tight curators of the series and so hopefully it reflects the people in this building, or certainly NPR staff.  

34 Onkey, interview with author, March 20, 2019.
The journalist pitches groups they have a passion for and believe offer something to the series. Bobby Carter, Rodney Carmichael, Frannie Kelley, and Suraya Mohamed’s advocacy for hip hop, jazz and R&B groups balance the alternative and indie rock tastes of Boilen, Robin Hilton, and Stephen Thompson. Lars Gotrich sometimes selects country and heavy metal artists, one of the only advocates on the team for these genres. Felix Contreras is described by Rogosin as the “master of all the Latin artists” and brings a huge variety of genres to the Desk. The growth and development of the NPR team has expanded the scope of the series since its start in 2008 along with the sheer numbers of concerts produced. Yet, the venue is still selective in the team’s curation and the limitation of the venue. Boilen states that no money is exchanged between NPR and the performing band; however, an invitation to perform on the series can have a huge impact on an artist. With such a desirable venue, NPR Music’s choices in content are easy to simplify as “aesthetically first” yet reveal directly social and cultural aspects of the NPR Music team and cultivated taste system. This curation is also evident in the content and the production and editing process.

Occasionally, video content is removed in the editing process. Repeat takes of songs are deleted unless Boilen sees them adding to the intimacy of the venue, and inappropriate conduct by performers, like smoking marijuana which violates NPR’s code of ethics, is also edited out. Otherwise, the stage is set for the performer to say anything. Boilen notes, “I am not pushing a social agenda. I am giving voice and space for people, a platform maybe is the best word, for people to say what they have to say, provided it is respectful.” For example Margo Price wore a T-shirt with the words “Icky Trump” in reference to the White Stripes’ song “Icky Thump,” critical of U.S. immigration policies in 2007, in her performance on

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November 9, 2016, the day after the presidential election. Referring to this concert, Boilen remarks, “so that was like a perfect Tiny Desk moment of culture colliding and being amplified by a musician and I love the way it marked time.” In his brief write-up about the concert Boilen notes how devastated Price was about the results of the election. This may or may not have resulted in two out of the three songs she performed that day potentially addressing the election, including “Four Years of Chances” and “About to Find Out” dedicated to Donald Trump.39 Through selective curation of musical content, NPR Music looks to produce a series that will both be new and acceptable to their audience while also presenting musical expressions as they organically happen.

While the series provides a respectable and attentive platform for artists who meet the selection criteria to express their creative voices, the venue challenges the performers to represent themselves in unusual ways.40 Not only does the NPR Music team select artists that fit their curation values, they also demand the artists to be presented in a small venue with no vocal amplification for a short midday concert. This is also part of the curation process, as the restricted venue challenges artists to create a unique performance and step out of their comfort zone, as they must adjust to a smaller and more instrumental context. This constraint impacts specific genres, as Lauren Onkey states, “How is a genre that is so rooted in electronics and sampling and turn-tabling, how can that work here effectively?”41 A group that uses electronic backing tracks and beats will need instrumental performers to play in real time on Tiny Desk, changing their sound to fit the curation of the venue.

40 Boilen, interview with author, March 21, 2019. Boilen says, “I don’t want [the artist] leaving here, walking out of this building and being comfortable with what [they] have done. We don’t want to represent [them] in any way [they] will not be proud of.”
41 Onkey, interview with author, March 20, 2019.
Rule #3: Intimacy

Before NPR Music, Boilen would record artists for brief music segments between news clips on All Things Considered and found that the artists mainly reproduced the sound perfected on their albums. He was disinterested in the highly mediated sound that obscured the fragility and fallibility of the creative process. For Boilen, the idea of intimacy is key for what he wants in Tiny Desk: “playing in a room with energy and feeding off the energy in the room is vital to the creation of music.”

What Tiny Desk offers is the opposite of a studio session in two ways. First, the intimacy cultivated in the Tiny Desk venue challenges artists to make their sound reproducible live without vocal amplification. Second, this intimacy attempts to reproduce the live quality of a concert in a new context: a personal serenade captured on video. Boilen sees this restriction as the opportunity for the artist to create a more memorable event for the audience.

In my content survey only 10 out of the 96 concerts were instrumental performances. For a series mainly presenting groups that feature a vocalist, by far the most limiting factor of this intimacy in the venue is the reduced vocal amplification. The voice is often the main focus in these concerts, joining language to melody and acting as the intermediary between the performers and the audience. In a studio session, the voice can be highly mediated, constructing layers of filters, effects, correcting pitch, and mixing between the flawed human sound and the smooth pristine quality recording. Most radio live-recording sessions capture this mediated sound as the way the artists want to be heard. Through these challenges for the artists, Tiny Desk is different than a live studio session at a local radio station or MTV’s

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43 A future avenue of research is to compare the Tiny Desk concert to bands’ live recording session at public radio stations, such as FUV, KEXP, KUTX, as well as MTV’s “Unplugged.” This research direction is out of the purview of this project.
Unplugged series. As Boilen states, “It does not have to be unplugged, and I don’t want to use that word ‘unplugged.’ Intimate is really what it is. You can have all four electric guitars.” The studio sound is meant to be a representation of the band’s brand and their professionalism, yet to cultivate intimacy such a mediated sound is the antithesis of Boilen’s goal for the venue:

> You have singers singing with big fat p-poppers in front of them so you can’t see facial expressions, you can’t see, none of the band members are able to emote that way to their other band members. I hate that. Having been in a band, having been in situations like that, I know the difference between playing live, and playing together, and playing in a studio.\(^{44}\)

In contrast, Tiny Desk attempts to capture the live performance with little obvious mediation like “p-poppers.” This forces groups to balance their volume to the vocalist, a restrictive challenge that it makes the performance uniquely memorable and emotionally connective.

An example of both the curation and intimacy of the venue, the United Kingdom-based duo Alt-J has played two Tiny Desk concerts showing two sides of the group. Boilen states, “I don’t often repeat bands, but if I do I really challenge them to do something very different than the first time so you take a band like Alt-J.”\(^{45}\) Alt-J’s first performance exhibits the group as a close acoustic rendering of their recorded sound.\(^{46}\) The group plays with lyrics sometimes functioning as percussive sound more than coherent narrative. This obscured meaning veils the content as an example of NPR’s values of original and innovative with stimulating ambiguous material. This also directs the focus of attention to the voice.

However, the second time Alt-J performed Boilen challenged them to write for a string trio.

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\(^{44}\) Boilen, interview with author, March 21, 2019. A p-popper is a protective guard for a microphone to reduce the impact of plosive breath sounds from consonants like “p” and “b” that can create unwanted sounds on the recording. To get a quality sound, the singer is close to the microphone and the p-popper covers the majority of their face.

\(^{45}\) Ibid.

The group did and sent Boilen the parts for the string players. The day of the concert, Alt-J arrived an hour early to rehearse with the string players before the concert.47 This concert has a different feeling with the focus on the integration of the voice with a foreign medium. Both concerts showed original curated content while additionally requiring changes to cultivate a sense of artistic intimacy.

These three rules interact and combine in ways that make the Tiny Desk concerts a flexible venue, while at the same time getting artists out of the comfort zone. The rules are not always absolute, for example a fixed electronic track played during Saul Williams’s performance and Mariachi Flor De Toloache performed a cover of “Blue Skies.”48 However, the majority of the performances fulfill these rules to some extent. The creators of Tiny Desk claim to apply these aspects of curation and limitation without social-political considerations, but the studied concerts within the range of June 2016 through June 2017 presented musical statements in connection to the social, cultural, and political. The next section will note trends and events in the content survey period to provide some overarching context to the concerts.

**Thirteen Months of Tiny Desk in Political Transition**

When I started my research, I wanted to consider intimate performance spaces and performer agency within such spaces. The Tiny Desk concerts were a starting point in exploring intimacy and musical expression, yet I was uncertain how to get a firm understanding of the content without doing an analysis of the almost 1,000 Tiny Desk concerts to date. Because I was looking at intimacy, musical expression, and how those

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aspects overlap with social-political context, I selected a year of Tiny Desk concerts to survey for content surrounding the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. The rationale behind the selection of this time period was to consider if and what the election impacted on the series. I was not specifically looking for commentary about particular presidential candidates and rather wanted to observe what performers chose to comment on in the heightened political climate. This would allow me to sample a year of Tiny Desk to immerse myself in the breadth of content and reveal trends.

Following is a content survey of some quantitative—including counts of members in the band, gender presentation, and YouTube views—and qualitative—including genre categorization and social-political commentary—aspects of the 96 Tiny Desk concerts that occurred in the time range of June 2016 through June 2017 accessible through the NPR Music Tiny Desk online archive. This is not a survey of demographics for each member of the performing groups. Here, survey is meant as a consideration of the content of Tiny Desks in the time period, not a survey of all participants’ demographics. A much more in-depth study, out of the scope of this project, would need to be conducted to assess performers self-identification of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and other identity parameters. Because of the qualitative nature of this content survey, it is a subjective reading of the source material and inherently based on my interpretations.49

This content survey focuses on the first transition of presidential power in which Tiny Desk was fully established.50 The content survey covers the Tiny Desk series in a year of divisive political activity surrounding the presidential election, noting basic qualities of the

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49 A more definitive and in-depth demographic and content survey of the series may be a future avenue of research.
50 Tiny Desk was newly established in 2008 the same year of the election of President Barak Obama, who was re-elected in 2012. The 2016 election was the first transition of presidential power in the time frame of Tiny Desk’s existence.
performance including: publication date, performer, journalists (producers), duration, and views on YouTube to measure popularity. Also included are aspects of the performing group like gender split, geographical base, and if the group engages in social-political commentary in the content of their performances. I considered social-political commentary as overt targeting of current issues relating to class, sexuality, gender, race, and a catchall category for miscellaneous social feedback. This latter category includes commentary that combined or did not fit directly in the other categories but is still relevant to the criteria. In the process of considering social-political commentary, direct remarks about the election and activities pertaining to the government are included, but form only a small portion of the group. The majority of the performances containing relevant commentary made generalized comments that did not directly refer to the election or specific governmental policies.

The information gathered contextualizes the relationship of performers on Tiny Desk in social and political commentary. Not all of the performances exhibited my criteria of social commentary as relating to current issues. In fact, the majority of performers did not make overt political statements. I still viewed these performances and considered them as contextual to the series in displaying one interpretation of the “unofficial” rules of Tiny Desk. This content survey synthesizes a temporal picture of NPR’s Tiny Desk in the time range providing a basis to observe and assess the rules above.\footnote{It is not assumed that this is a unique time as a complete content survey of the ten running years of the series is out of the scope of this project.} In this section, I review trends in the series with respect to which journalists pitched genres the most, YouTube popularity in relation to genre, national bases of the groups, gender split, and social-political commentary.
Journalists and Genres

Louise Cherno notes that initially NPR featured experimental music shows, yet that tendency was tempered with audience appeal and reception as the organization developed.\textsuperscript{52} According to Christopher Cwynar, NPR Music maintains a focus on the “cultured” music of jazz and classical genres yet has shifted to a more popular focus to attract its younger and expanding online audience. This shift has created an alternative focus in the series, morphed from its experimental, classical, and jazz legacy to become anti-mainstream popular music. Genre is a valuable industry tool to target audience groups and the distribution of genres presented on NPR Music using the iTunes genres shows a definite bias toward alternative as a genre. This implies that the audience that NPR Music is catering to is not interested in music fitting a “pure” genre, but more interested in the exploration and fusion of various styles that defy an easily definable category. This defiance of genre is a value NPR Music curates through its values of originality, innovation, and intimacy.

In delineating genre on the series, I used two genre types: 1) general genre, as a range of genre descriptions easily associated with the performing group in a preliminary web search, and 2) the iTunes genre, as the marketed genre for the album the group is touring with or most recently released. The general genre was more descriptive as more detailed information was included as to how the band or fans advertised online. The iTunes genre (see table 2.2), taken from the iTunes link the journalist often provided in their write-up, was a simplified category implying the producers as promoting and selling the album to an associated target audience.

Table 2.2. The iTunes genres represented in the content survey, June 2016-June 2017.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>iTunes Genres</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jazz</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hip Hop/Rap</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R&amp;B/Soul</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classical</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Música tropical</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americana</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folk</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singer-Songwriter</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choro</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indie Rock</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Country</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As discussed above, Tiny Desk reflects the journalists who curate its content. Over the time period studied, there were a total of 19 journalists producing Tiny Desk concerts. Out of the 96 published concerts, Bob Boilen, the main curator of the series, produced 38 concerts followed by Felix Contreras at 12 concerts. As I compiled the list of general

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53 See Appendix table A.1 for full list of concerts from June 2016 to June 2017 to show the extent of the performances surveyed in chronological order. Also, see Appendix table A.2 for tally of journalists, how many concerts they produced, and which genres they pitched. This was the source for the word cloud lists.
genres, I noticed specific repeated words like “Indie Rock,” “Alternative,” or “Folk.” From these recurrences, I created “word clouds” to represent the genre preferences for some of the contributing members of the NPR Music team that produced a Tiny Desk. Word clouds are a visual representation of the amount of repetition in a list. Words that are repeated are larger and bold, while words that just occur once are in smaller fonts. Figure 2.2 presents word clouds showing repeated genres of NPR team members with five or more performances in the time frame. This shows each member’s focus and expertise on the series.

Bob Boilen
Figure 2.2. A word cloud visual that factors in the repetition of general genre descriptors for the journalists with five or more produced performances, color is randomized, created by author.
Boilen has the largest and most diverse grouping of general genre descriptors, and even with such variety note the repetition of “Alternative/Indie,” “Folk,” and “Indie Rock.” Felix Contreras shows a breadth in his produced concerts including the differentiated categories of “Jazz,” “Funk,” “Rock,” and “Electronic.” Bobby Carter has produced some of the most popular Tiny Desk concerts and specializes in “Hip Hop” and “R&B” music along with Suraya Mohamed, and Rodney Carmichael. Lars Gotrich and Stephen Thompson both tend towards types of rock while Tom Huizenga is the only “Classical” music expert on the team. Genres are a fraught aspect of music classification, in reality compartmentalizing complex interlocking networks of musical styles into simpler one or two word descriptors.\textsuperscript{54}

During the surveyed period there was an average of seven concerts published per month. Taking Tegan and Sara’s concert and Margo Price’s performances as the splitting point, the election can be factored into the genre distribution comparing the frequency of a genre before and after the election (see figure 2.3). With a total of 96 concerts surveyed, the split in the performance is clear from the commentary of Tegan and Sara, who performed the day before the election, and Margo Price, who performed the day after the election. This split makes 45 concerts before the election and 51 concerts after the election in the time period. After the election, there was a spike in Alternative and Hip Hop/Rap identified performances with a smaller increase in R&B/Soul and Country. There was a decrease in Jazz and there were no Classical performances after the election. The significance of these results is questionable. These differences could be due to multiple factors that have no correlation to the events of the elections. However, I posit that the increase in Alternative and Hip Hop

performances supports NPR’s overall branding as anti-mainstream, where mainstream is considered predictable, superficial, and diluted to appeal to the largest possible audience.\textsuperscript{55}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figures/figure2.3.png}
\caption{The before and after tallies between the top six genres normalized by percentage, June 2016-June 2017.}
\end{figure}

\textbf{YouTube Views}

Lauren Onkey describes the audience reached through YouTube as “enormous” and “stunning,”\textsuperscript{56} reaching 2 million monthly listeners. Views in YouTube are influenced by the genres presented as correlating with specific audience groups that consume that specific music or that specific artist’s music (see figure 2.4). A view on YouTube is counted as an

\textsuperscript{56} Onkey, interview with author, March 20, 2019.
intentional play from different computers when discussing such large numbers as above. Although the views represent not exactly the number of unique individual people who have seen the video, it does show that the videos are reaching an “enormous” audience, as Onkey describes.

Figure 2.4. A log scale plot of the top six performance in the six most represented iTunes genres in this time range, June 2016-June 2017.

In the time range surveyed, the video with the largest number of views is that of Anderson .Paak with over 34 million views. This is a considerable outlier numbering almost five times the next highest views of Tiny Desk, contest winners Tank and the Bangas. Classical music genres comprise the lowest views with the smallest being Classical pianist Alessio Bax’s performance promoting his compellation of piano lullabies for his 22-month-

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old daughter. This performance features Bax playing for his young daughter and includes a
duet with his wife, pianist Lucille Chung. This performance shows family intimacy in ways
no other performance in the period achieves, and yet is the least seen in the time range. All of
the classical performances in the series are below a hundred thousand views, with classical
violinist superstar Joshua Bell just under that cut off at ninety-six thousand. These are still
large audience numbers for any performer.

By far the most consistently popular Desk concerts are Hip Hop/Rap, appealing to a
regular fan base for those specific artists and styles. Anderson .Paak and Tank and the
Bangas make up the two highest R&B defined albums and the Australian singer-songwriter,
Tash Sultana, makes the single Alternative spike above Hip Hop and Rap. Jazz performances
mark the upper mid-range of views with Country and Classical the two least popular genres
yet with a still a significant audience.\footnote{58}

National Base

The majority of invited groups on the series, 70 out of the 96 groups, are
geographically based in the U.S. Some groups form in their hometown but more often
members collect from various parts of the country. There was an increase in international
performances after the election, but this may not necessarily be correlated to the political
environment, having more to do with touring schedules and logistical planning (see figure
2.5). Figure 2.6 displays another word cloud comparison showing the range and frequency of
international bases. Internationally, countries that have a large English-speaking population
such as England, Australia, Canada, and Ireland are featured more frequently than musicians
from non-English speaking countries. Figure 2.7 shows the range and frequency of

\footnote{58 See Appendix for tables A.3 and A.4 with the performances with over a million YouTube views and under
ten thousand views.}
performers within the U.S. The majority of these bands are from various cities and do not claim a specific location as a point of origin for the group. I defined this as “various,” which is not exclusive of any state but means that no base was claimed. Other groups claim a base of operations, like New York or California. This does not mean everyone in the group was born and raised in the same city, only that the group operates from that home base. For example, the Tank and the Bangas claim New Orleans as their base although not everyone in the groups is from New Orleans.

Figure 2.5. The split between U.S. and international groups performing on the series in the time frame and the percentage comparison between before and after the election, June 2016-June 2017.
Figure 2.6. A word cloud showing the locations of the international artists, June 2016-June 2017.

Figure 2.7. A word cloud showing the locations of the artist based in the U.S., June 2016-June 2017.

**Gender Representation**

Performance scholars have established the gender binary system to be a complex social construction.59 I did not conduct a survey of the performing members in each group to know where they self-identify on the gender spectrum. A much more in depth survey would need to be conducted to assess performers self-identification of gender, race, ethnicity, class,

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sexuality, and other identity parameters. Additionally, age and ability are important factors that often go overlooked and play an integral part of perceived professionalism and skill.

Although the gender binary is a cultural construct, those societal norms are performed in everyday life and, as Judith Butler notes, if not followed may initiate “a set of punishments both obvious and indirect.” On Tiny Desk, this gender binary is visibly performed, and, in my observations of this time period, more masculine-presenting people performed on Tiny Desk than feminine-presenting people. Because of this trend in the concerts, I am using gender binaries, as who sings or plays an instrument is naturalized along such gendered lines. Men dominate the performances as more than three out of four performers are men (see figure 2.8). A common structure of the groups is a woman vocalist backed by three men on the drums, bass, and guitar. Figure 2.8 breaks the roles of the performers down further. Of the men in the group, 95% are instrumentalists. This percentage includes the 20% of men who perform the dual function of vocalist and instrumentalist, however the majority of men participating in these bands are only instrumentalist. Of the women performers, 67% are both vocalists and instrumentalist. When a woman performs she is more likely to be a vocalist and additionally playing an instrument. Because the majority of the group’s leaders are the vocalists, this shows a trend of women being in leading roles when they are represented at all. Figure 2.8 only compares the roles specific genders assume in bands and overall the majority are men as seen in the total gender split of 311 men to 97 women.

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Figure 2.8. The percentages of gender for the specific roles in the band, this is a comparison within gender groups, June 2016-June 2017.

Social Commentary

Social commentary on the series is not unusual and is highly interpreted. For this project commentary was noted as reference to current issues around race, class, sexuality, gender, and a catchall category for artists’ commentary over current events across a variety of themes. One could argue that every single concert on the series is political in some form. In order to analyze the overt current social-political commentary, I chose these categories as I went through the videos to classify the commentary that I perceived. The commentary about these subjects needed to be overt, either in the lyrics, in the song introductions, or in the stage patter. The commentary also needed to be about current issues, as I am considering if the
election had a direct impact. It is very possible the election influenced the songs in ways that were not obvious or connected to current events, however I am only analyzing the overt statements that were available in the edited videos.

Racial commentary often centered on police brutality and killings as in rapper Noname’s song “Casket Pretty.” Social class was often described through stories of poverty or helping the homeless as in Gregory Porter’s song “Take Me to the Alley.” Commentary around sexuality was focused on homosexual expression because the majority of the songs would assume heteronormative attraction. Only clearly transgressive songs to this heterosexual assumption were counted in this category of commentary, including the Lebanon base group Mashrou’ Leila’s response to a shooting at a gay club and Tegan and Sara’s “Boyfriend.” Gender commentary was frequent, including Bax’s performance of lullabies with his wife and small child and country artist Brandy Clark’s song “Daughter.” The catchall categories included religious overtones and comments about overarching human experiences and relations. Blue Man Group, defined generally as performance art, playfully mocked the contradiction of the popularity of Eastern mindfulness philosophies in a competitive Western cultural context such as the U.S., holding up a sign reading “I am the best at being relaxed!” Although there appears to be some shift in the commentary content before and after the election, again the significance in reaction to the election is dubious (see figure 2.9).

Overall artist commentary does show some changes relative to the election. There is slightly more commentary before the election than after, especially in class and gender categories. There is an increase in the catchall category after the election. The presidential election is an intense period of political rhetoric and the decrease in commentary afterward
can indicate artists’ disillusion with the election. The increase in the more general commentary shows perhaps processing of political and social events. However, it is difficult to draw conclusions because the differences between the before and after counts are small.

![Social Political Commentary](image)

Figure 2.9. The total tally of marked social-political commentary broken down by the categories of race, class, sexuality, gender, and miscellaneous before and after the election, June 2016-June 2017.

In this chapter, I delved into the process of creating the Tiny Desk series. The overarching trends observed in the content survey contextualize the performances, marking the most prevalent journalists, genres, and performers. Now I would like to turn to NPR Music’s taste system asking: what does “alternative” mean at Tiny Desk? How are the ideals of authenticity and innovation entailed in the space? What do these values reveal about NPR Music’s curated taste system? Taste, like genre, is a fraught concept and must be considered within social networks and performative assemblages of identities. In the next chapter, NPR Music’s taste system is considered, in particular on the Tiny Desk contest, an annual call for groups across the country to demonstrate authenticity and innovation at their own tiny desks.
Ohh, man you know I would have been the fish, I would have been the meat
I would have been the eggs and, ah, I would have been the grease
I would have been the milk and I would have been the fruit
I would have been the vegetables and I would have been the soup.

    ah uh
You know I would’ve been            I could’ve been
ah uh ah uh       ah uh ah uh
You know I would’ve been,           I could’ve been,
Yeah         yeah       ah uh ah uh       yeah, yeah
You know, you know I would’ve been,   I could’ve been, girl

    ah uh
You know I would’ve been            I did, I could’ve been
You know, I know I would’ve been,    you know I could’ve been
    ah uh       ah uh ah uh
Yeah, yeah                   yeah
You know, you know I could’ve been   You know, I would’ve been
Girl                        ah uh
You know I would have been

I would have been good for you.

- Tank and the Bangas Tiny Desk, winners of the 2017 NPR Tiny Desk Competition¹

In the late 1960s, the Carnegie Commission envisioned noncommercial public media presenting “civilized” cultural content to educate the masses. According to Louise Chernosky, who focuses on experimental broadcast programs in the 1970s and 1980s, this resulted in NPR producing music with a foundation in legitimate-perceived forms of jazz, classical, and experimental music. This chapter discusses how these ideals of educational cultural products as a “civilizing” mission have shifted on NPR Music to focus more on popular genres to maintain and grow their current audiences, which, according to Christopher Cwynar, is majority educated, white, affluent, and male. In spite of this shift from the ideals of noncommercialism in legitimate jazz, classical, and experimental music to a range of approved popular genres, the Carnegie Commission’s vision is reconfigured on Tiny Desk through the predominance of musical content perceived as “alternative.” More than a third of the 96 Tiny Desk concerts in the time range were categorized by iTunes as alternative in genre and many other concerts are presented by NPR Music as fringe to their marketed

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genres in the context of the series.\textsuperscript{4} This implies that that “alternative” on Tiny Desk is more than a genre category and also a broader concept. In this chapter, I attempt to provide answers to the following questions: How does the concept of “alternative” function on NPR and what does it involve? How does this term connect to the values and taste system NPR Music produces? And in what ways does it manifest? I argue that Tiny Desk’s cultivation of perceived authenticity and innovation in its concerts construct a taste system rooted in the concept of alternative, as a quality that will, in perception, “better” their audience intellectually and culturally through increasing and solidifying their social status. As Tank and the Bangas note in the epigraph above, NPR Music curates cultural capital that is branded as “good for you.”

The perceived values of authenticity and innovation are key to the NPR Music brand and represent an aspect of contemporary musical culture.\textsuperscript{5} Musicologist Nicholas Cook states there is a current system of values in Western culture that “places innovation above tradition, creation above reproduction, personal expression above the market-place. In a word, music must be authentic, for otherwise it is hardly music at all.”\textsuperscript{6} Such a system is reflected in NPR Music and stems from the ideals of musical modernism. Although these values in music are constructed, they function as what Cook calls “aesthetic capital,” or products that consumers can accumulate, that mark a social alertness and cultural wellbeing.\textsuperscript{7} Because NPR Music is a well-established national media organization, they can effectively define these values for their audience. As the winners of the 2017 Tiny Desk contest, Tank and the Bangas

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{4} For a tally of the iTunes genre over the time range see table 2.2.
\textsuperscript{5} Although not the only values presented on the series, authenticity and innovation contribute significantly to the perception of NPR Music and Tiny Desk as alternative and are the focus of this chapter as a full range discussion of all the values of NPR Music are out of the purview of this project.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 16.
\end{flushleft}
exemplify a form of authenticity and innovation that constructs this taste system NPR Music uses to cater to its base audience and attract new viewers.

Although a team effort, the NPR Music taste system is strongly filtered through the curation of Bob Boilen. Political scientist John Mueller considers taste a collaborative social judgment of cultural values between both the producers and the audience stating, “In a collective world, only collective tastes can qualify for survival, because the overhead in time, effort, and financial investment necessary for the implementation of a ‘taste system’ is so great that only collective effort will sustain it.” As applied here, the collaboration of taste reveals the influence of both NPR’s and its listeners. Taste, beyond a surface opinion of “good” or “bad,” is a social and psychological outcome for an individual at any moment in time, according to Mueller, and forms in complex cultural groups. A taste system is more specifically derived and stabilized through financial investments in places, training, education, and of course, institution of public (and private) access like radio. NPR is a large institution with enough economic clout to create its own taste system appealing to its core audience and beyond.

This chapter explores the values of authenticity and innovation on Tiny Desk in how they appeal to NPR’s audience as a taste system. Because of the nature of the Tiny Desk contest, its winners exemplify these values. However through genre, timbre, harmonic movement, and lyric experimentation, all Tiny Desk performances entail the values of authenticity and innovation in various ways. These various interpretations form the alternative “good for you” perception as a product arranged through the subtle manipulation

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and curation of the media by its creators. I conclude the chapter by exploring these values in the performance of Tank and the Bangas.

**Alternative on Tiny Desk**

Through this constructed taste system, NPR Music is perceived as a wholesome cultural arbitrator that gifts listeners with approved music that is alternative in its wide range, rootedness in place, and still reforming or pushing boundaries. Initially, I consider alternative on Tiny Desk as a music genre categorization, and trace the overgeneralized model of genre through its social beginning connected to taste, then to markets, and back to social construction of genre. I then explore alternative as a broader concept cultivated on Tiny Desk through its values of authenticity and innovation. This alternative, unconstrained by genre, is seen as anti-mainstream, neo-traditional, and self-consciously reinventive.

Music genre, on a basic level, is a category produced by the music industry to promote and sell music to a specific audience, based on cultural distinctions in taste relating to production, meaning, and place. Sometimes highly generalized and problematic, genre can be a useful form of popular music categorization, criticism, and understanding. Music scholar Fabian Holt recognizes the over-generalization genres support yet also the discerning lines of cultural and historic spheres that bond people together. Genre is not a useless concept and rather offers a lens to examine music and musical markets through collective social expectations. As Holt states, “Conventions and expectations are established through acts of repetition performed by a group of people, and the process of genre formation is in turn often accompanied by the formation of new social collectivities.”

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10 Ibid., 3.
Genre is linked to taste, which is performative of collective and individual identities. Morton Michelsen specifically refers to genre’s influence in comparing and marketing musical content through radio, newspapers, and magazines. He explains how genre descriptive categories like “‘hot’ versus ‘sweet,’ then ‘mouldy figs’ versus ‘sour grapes’” were often changed, cemented, and reevaluated through conflicted arguments over categories’ distinctiveness. This genre comparison and conflict allows music to be classified by potential markets but also places fans, musicians, and music critics in taste cultures. Michelsen notes how music criticism started in print where genre categories were indispensable in relating and comparing music. However, now with music literally at the fingertips of listeners with access to online streaming, genre remains a constantly changing cultural and economic force in contemporary methods of music marketing. Holt argues that genre tries to direct consumer interest, sometimes aesthetically and sometimes through market segments like “race records” and “world music” where the industry uses racial and geographical identities to sell the music. Although genre is indirectly presented on NPR Tiny Desk, a similar audience targeting is seen through the predominate presentation of the alternative, both as a genre and as an aspect in the performance of various music styles. With NPR’s history of promoting “legitimate” art works and associated duty to educate the masses, alternative becomes those aesthetic values shifted to a more popular music audience.

Overall, popular music genres are messy to delineate as they are interconnected and rooted in vernacular trends that quickly change in social, cultural, and political currents. This makes genres easy to argue over, promoting a social function that depends on what the music means to a community and how it helps to articulate identity. Holt notes, “the music industry

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daily invents and redesigns labels to market musical products as new and/or authentic.”¹³
This idea of genre, as a vernacular tradition the industry chases with the intent to circulate
music sales, is created through local social spaces that may be inaccessible to the public gaze.
Holt sees musical shifts come from “the street” and “other social spaces where many
residents value their relative independence from or even resistance to social authorities,
educational institutions, and the music business.”¹⁴ Sociomusicologist Simon Frith describes
the use of genre as the idealized way the music industry would like people to consume music,
a fantasy business world, although it rarely functions that way.¹⁵ With NPR Music’s
prominence as “digital first”¹⁶ and strong influence on the music market through its audience,
genre’s function is shifting. Where genre is still defined through artists and communities of
various social spaces, Tiny Desk values the expansion of these boundaries in their emphasis
on alternative defined performances.

To understand the music industry’s concept of alternative there is often the perception
of the polarized forces of the mainstream or popular as opposed to the “authentic.” Cook
traces the idea of authenticity in music back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s comparison of
French and Italian music, where he argued Italian music was freer and more natural in
emotional feeling than French music. In popular music in the 20th-century, authenticity
became associated with innovation, and the opposite was seen as the “mainstream” or
hegemonic. For example, the appropriation of black rhythm and blues by white musicians
and groups modeled on successful bands like the Beatles were seen as mainstream

¹³ Ibid., 14.
¹⁴ Ibid., 15.
¹⁵ Simon Frith, Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,
1996), 15.
¹⁶ Lauren Onkey (Senior Director of NPR Music, NPR Headquarters in Washington D.C.), interview with
reproductions of what was authentic and innovative. Cook states, these mainstream replicas on success “were seen as a synthetic band, an artificial construction, and thus a transgression against the very principle of authenticity.” Holt describes mainstream as associated with conformity, predictability, and superficiality. In contrast, alternative is initially representative of the new, the edgy, the mixed-up, and the more genuine “real” artists. In his defining of alternative, Aaron Fox notes this opposition to the corporate mainstream as only masking an alternative market’s own form of commoditizing and consumption with a middle and upper social class focus. This façade parallels NPR’s noncommercialism where the alternative, as supposedly outside the bounds of “mindless” consumerism, appeals to a bourgeoisie taste. Additionally, Fox sees “alternative” or “alt” as emplaced within either local rootedness or cosmopolitan exposure, both adding to an artist’s branding as authentic expressive individuality.

Beyond genre, the term alternative provides a broad concept that is less suspect as institutionalized and constraining, with the intention of allowing more expressive individuality. As Fox states, the alternative has “been characteristically eclectic and synthetic, embracing the absence of category as the basis of a new category: ‘Whatever that is.’” This concept allows the reflexive shift between genres’ core style, classifying aspects to central or peripheral to that style. Fox discusses neo-traditionalism as a characteristic of the alternative in his exploration of alternative:

17 Cook, Music, 9.
18 Aaron Fox, “Alternative to What? O Brother, September 11, and the Politics of Country Music,” in Country Music Goes to War, ed. James E. Akenson and Charles Wolfe (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 164-191. In his consideration of alternative, Fox refers mainly the genre of alternative country, yet I see a similarly applicable to other genres because of the interrelated quality of these categories. Especially in terms of a reconfiguring of the past in the alternative, country music seems a good reference point for the alternative in various genres.
19 Ibid., 166.
A slyly invented tradition already evocative of an authentic vernacular folk object is here reinvested with the status of a postmodern myth, marked by consciousness of its inventedness yet signifying a new kind of authenticity by virtue of its very self-consciousness. A delicate balance, to be sure, is thereby achieved. And this delicate balance is emblematic of the conjuncture I am describing as “alternative.”

Fox notes that alternative is significantly marked by a return to outdated vocal styles, recording techniques, and technology as proof of awareness of the past, yet a simultaneous reconfiguring of that past to fit current contexts. Such recontextualization is perceived as a “self-conscious” representation, leading to stylistic expressions outside of the genre’s core style.

NPR Music’s focus on the values of authenticity and innovation to form a taste system reveals the reflexivity of the alternative. All of the artists on Tiny Desk fulfill these values of authenticity and innovation in multiple ways and to various degrees, but they do so in multiple and varying forms. In particular, the annual Tiny Desk contest winner typifies what the producers of Tiny Desk consider valuable as seen in the 2017 winners, Tank and the Bangas’ unamplified vocal flexibility, virtuosity, freedom, and quirkiness.

**NPR Values and Taste System**

The selection of Tiny Desk contest winner is rooted in NPR Music’s values that cultivate its taste system. The first Tiny Desk contest was in 2015 and received nearly 7,000 video submissions with a flood arriving just hours before the cut-off deadline. The first winner was Fantastic Negrito, a musical project based in Oakland, California. Since then the winners have been Gaelynn Lea (2016), Tank and the Bangas (2017), Naia Izumi (2018), and most recently Quinn Christopherson (2019). The contest calls for an under-ten minute video

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20 Fox, “Alternative to What?,” 187. Also see footnote 18.
21 Ibid., 170.
22 For more information on the first Tiny Desk Concert see Tyler Falk, “‘Soul is Just Right There’ for the Winner of NPR’s Tiny Desk Contest,” Current, February 17, 2015, accessed May 14, 2019, [https://current.org/2015/02/soul-is-just-right-there-for-the-winner-of-nprs-tiny-desk-contest/](https://current.org/2015/02/soul-is-just-right-there-for-the-winner-of-nprs-tiny-desk-contest/).
of an original song from any individual or group over the age of 18 in the United States and the Virgin Islands, excluding any group with a current recording contract.\textsuperscript{23} The winning group receives paid travel and board to the NPR Washington D.C. Headquarters to perform a Tiny Desk concert, and is then featured on a national tour of events scheduled in major cities, often in Los Angeles, New York, Austin, and Seattle. The value of this grand prize is estimated at $5,000 for one performer and grows with the membership of the group. To this point, Tank and the Bangas is the largest group to be awarded the prize.

The video must be made specifically for the “sole purpose” of entering the contest and feature a short performance of one original song (not a cover song) at any desk, small or otherwise.\textsuperscript{24} The video is uploaded to YouTube and submitted to the contest. After the deadline, the NPR Music team judges the videos to choose a preliminary top hundred from the thousands of applicants. The grading criteria is:

\begin{itemize}
  \item 40\% Musical Quality and Appeal
  \item 40\% Originality
  \item 20\% Stage Presence and Charisma
\end{itemize}

Once one hundred groups are chosen, a panel of seven judges, including Boilen and “industry experts selected by [NPR] in their sole discretion,” judge the finalists.\textsuperscript{25} This panel selects the Grand Prize Winner on the same criteria as above.

This judgment of the Tiny Desk contest makes the winners’ performance unique from any other concert in the series yet also distinctively representative of what Tiny Desk values most in its rules of originality, curation, and intimacy. These winning performances are from

\textsuperscript{23} Puerto Rico and all other jurisdictions other than the U.S. and the U.S. Virgin Islands are excluded. The rationale for this is not made clear in the document.


\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
“undiscovered” local groups that perform an original video standing out from thousands. This fulfills the Tiny Desk rules by presenting a locally rooted band that, without winning the contest, may never have had such wide exposure as NPR Music’s audience. Unlike any other Tiny Desk group, the winners are paid to come to Tiny Desk and then substantially compensated and advertised on an NPR Music-sponsored national tour. Bob Boilen states that being invited and performing a Tiny Desk alone creates a massive impact on the artists’ careers: “It changes their lives, it changes their career, it changes the amount of people who attend their show. It changes everything.”26 For a relatively new group or even an established group without a current recording contract, winning the contest is like a Tiny Desk concert on steroids, with free online advertising and sponsored touring.

NPR Music’s sponsorship for the contest winner validates and increases the cultural value, or as Cook refers to as the “aesthetic value,” of the group to its intended audience.27 Simon Frith marks the perceived value of popular culture as linked between aesthetic qualities, or qualities internal to the object, and social function and meaning, or the qualities surrounding the object. Social and historical contexts construct the distinctions between social group tastes that frame the cultural object, but the content of taste resides in the relation of those social values to material conditions.28 In this way, the values of NPR Tiny Desk relate the audiences and creators of the series to the cultural content it produces and promotes on the series as wholesome for socially and culturally aware consumers. From this perspective, content like Tank and the Bangas are the meat in the soup of NPR Music’s taste system.

27 Cook, Music, 16. The Lagunitas Brewing Company made NPR’s sponsorship of Tank and the Bangas Tiny Desk and tour possible.
28 Frith, Performing Rites, 8-9.
Stemming from NPR’s past focus on jazz, classical, and experimental music, the cultural value that NPR Music produces aligns with what would be perceived as “high” culture therefore potentially elevating the social status of its listener base. NPR aligns with these “high” attitudes through presenting its material as journalistically “objective” and as culturally significant and beautiful.\textsuperscript{29} However, Frith marks no difference between the processes of judging the value of “high” or “low” culture as both have “the same hierarchical effect.”\textsuperscript{30} Both extremes of the “high/low” dualism draw from the creation of cultural value for different social groups although formed around different cultural objects and concepts. As Frith states:

\begin{quote}
Low culture, this is to say, generates its own capital—most obviously, perhaps, in those forms (such as dance club cultures) which are organized around exclusiveness, but equally significantly for the fans (precisely those people who have invested time and money in the accumulation of knowledge) of even the most inclusive forms—sports or soap operas, say.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

Frith focuses on the similarity in the process of deciding cultural value within any social group by the social work and knowledge the cultural object achieves in both exclusive and inclusive cultural forms. The false perception of the popular or “low” culture only appealing to the “mindless” working masses and the bourgeoisie, posh, or “high” cultural tastes as based on so-called sublime beauty or strictly intellectual contemplation are inaccurate. Rather, these misperceptions reveal the cultural authority behind the construction of musical meaning. The process of taste distinction is a relation between aesthetic criteria (musical qualities), the functional goals that link the cultural object (Tiny Desk performances), and the people who have developed a taste for that object (NPR Music’s audience). NPR constructs

\textsuperscript{29} Onkey, interview with author, March 20, 2019.
\textsuperscript{30} Frith, \textit{Performing Rites}, 9.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
authenticity and innovation as objective traits, yet these qualities function to create a taste system that promotes a social positioning of its listeners, and NPR’s content at large.

These two prominent constructed values, authenticity and innovation, contribute to NPR Music’s taste system on Tiny Desk. The value of authenticity is shaped by a perceived intimacy produced by a restrictive space and lack of amplification and electronic effects. As explained in chapter 2, performing on Tiny Desk is unlike typical concert settings, for it is a daytime show for an audience primarily of NPR employees that is a few feet away. The requirements placed on each invited artist are to create a memorable performance never before seen by fans. In effect, the intimate space forces a reduced sound and stage that creates an acoustic and visceral perception of the “authentic” artist, without obvious sonic and physical frills, the barrier of a raised stage, studio production, and electronic effects. Tank and the Bangas exemplify authenticity in their obvious comfort in such an intimate space as well as their novel musical style.

The value of innovation, on the other hand, is here defined as pushing, challenging, or developing expected musical and technical aspects, such as genre, in seemingly new “original” ways. Various interpretations of innovation often manifest in exploring the peripheries of accepted musical styles, represented by the alternative. Because of this, a rehashing of a traditional or established style in a way deemed new by the NPR Music team can be seen as “original” or perceived as innovation. The innovative can be synonymous with the alternative if contrasted with the center, as mainstream. The periphery, therefore, is connected to artists challenging established styles of the cultural moment. Although advertised as R&B/Soul, Tank and the Bangas push the boundaries of that broad genre in a way that Tiny Desk can construe as alternative, as the vegetable variety in their taste system.
Through NPR Music’s curation of a taste system with the values of authenticity and innovation, Cwynar sees NPR’s embrace of digital media as further allowing NPR Music to maintain its perceived brand of noncommercial cultural filtration to its base audience and member stations.32 Such branding has allowed NPR Music to arbitrate a taste system with its audience that points to perceived cultural genuineness, intelligence, discernment through human curated content (although in truth in tandem with algorithmic). This hybridized human curation influences the music market in powerful economic ways through catering to an audience that still buys music. Cwynar places NPR Music at a digital point of agency, noting the influence of taste and audience on content programming. Boilen himself describes the role of Tiny Desk as a tastemaker by presenting certain artists as culturally significant to NPR Music audience.33

The vast popularity of Tiny Desk makes it economically feasible, as Cwynar notes, for NPR Music to forge its taste system through both appealing to its core audience through connecting to more focused taste cultures, as tastes cultivated through experience and tradition. Through this series, NPR Music constructs a validating taste system, negotiates and produces what is considered “good” and ignoring the “bad” in the context of NPR Music and its audience. Musicologist Morton Michelsen argues that taste is a key element in understanding the individual and collective relation to music. He traces the concept of taste back to the 1700s with the rise of the bourgeoisie and has noted the flexing of mass media in promoting and controlling popular tastes. He specifically refers to radio and journalism as

tools of influence where journalists must justify their choice of musical content through words.

While NPR Music journalists benefit from the production of fresh popular music, its chosen content is part of a collaborative loop influenced by their arguably urban-identified middle-class core audience. This allows both journalists and their main audience to collectively define the aesthetic and cultural values that create NPR’s taste system. Because of this collaboration, the taste system will vary over time with the market and audience. NPR Music can quantify the success of a Tiny Desk concert and simulate content that would in theory expand their audience further. If reaching the largest possible audience were the only goal, NPR Music would present vastly more popular artists. Yet, NPR Music must balance their presentation of artists because of their cultivated taste system.

Additionally, NPR Music’s taste system appeals to taste cultures, or social groups formed around similar tastes, perceived as more culturally refined. Pierre Bourdieu relates taste, particularly in music, to social class and other forms of social hierarchy that label some taste as legitimate, middle-brow, or popular.34 Through education, experience, and tradition as cultural intermediaries, Bourdieu proposes taste as a way to socially communicate. In his own words, “a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded.”35 Musical taste can define cultural distinctions between social groups through recognizing similar knowledges, values, experiences, and histories that create social boundaries. As Cwynar aligns the social groups of NPR Music audiences with certain demographics, Bourdieu supports this coordination

35 Ibid., 2.
noting specific traits of distinction as closely related to education and family upbringing.

Bourdieu continues:

In fact, through the economic and social conditions which they presuppose, the different ways of relating to realities and fictions, of believing in fictions and the realities they simulate, with more or less distance and detachment, are very closely linked to the different possible positions in social space and consequently, bound up with the systems of disposition (habitus) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions. Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.  

Bourdieu bestows taste with performative meaning that communicates and self reveals.

Additionally, considering taste as a cultural commodity predisposes validating one social class over another, that of the upper echelons of society. Bourdieu pre-dates Frith in equalizing the social value processes of “high” and “low” cultural taste noting the functionality of social status and the falsity of a “pure” gaze. However in his sociological data analysis, the recognition of classical music composers was the clearest marker of social class distinction. Bourdieu argues that the most classifying of cultural objects are those perceived as legitimate, like classical music composers, and show an exclusive point of taste from which everything else can be separated including genres, periods, styles, and other characteristics. From Bourdieu’s theories, it is unsurprising that NPR initially had roots in the legitimate forms of jazz, classical, and experimentalism as a form of perceived class betterment.  

Contributing to Bourdieu’s work, sociologist Richard Peterson adds the linkage of social class to musical taste by considering groups that prefer one type of music, “univores,”

36 Ibid., 6.
37 Jazz was not always “legitimate.” In the 1920s, jazz was seen as an immoral music played in brothels with drinking and dancing. By the time of the Carnegie Commission and ideals of public media in the late 1960s, jazz was becoming seen as America’s music. Although, classical genres were initially adopted on NPR, jazz was soon included as an expressive art that should be accessible. Cwynar, “NPR Music,” 686.
to groups that consume a range of musical styles, “omnivores.”38 Peterson relates these terms of social class values with working classes, parallel to Bourdieu’s “popular,” generally favoring one type of music and middle (middle-brow) and upper class (legitimate) social groups consuming a wider musical range. In the U.S., Peterson observes that while classical music is perceived to symbolize prestige, “the aesthetics of elite status are being redefined as the appreciation of all distinctive leisure activities and creative forms” in addition to classical.39 On the other hand, working classes are harder to define, and Peterson finds results contrary to the designation of “mass taste” as preferring no category to another. Rather there is a reversal of the perceived singular elite taste (“snob”) versus mass consumption (“slob”) taste paradigm that Peterson considers obsolete in his findings. The working classes can usually choose one type of music, hence “univores,” although a variety of genres are selected. He suggests that this group engages deeply in just one, or at most a few, aesthetic music genres. Reflecting its more affluent audience, NPR Music’s taste system values a broad set of musical genres, especially performances that push such categories as alternative, to appeal to this “omnivorous” audience defined by its range not its focus.40

Thus, cosmopolitanism in musical taste can link to social mobility and validated cultural attentiveness, as Tiny Desk’s alternative-focus links to NPR Music audience. While a singularity in musical taste, refined to one select music genre, links to working-class identified communities, a community not focused on by NPR. Tank and the Bangas present a musical style that is a mixture of different genres and captivating in its sonic contrasts. This

39 Ibid., 156.
40 Ibid.
mixture appeals to NPR Music’s middle and upper-class audience who desire a broad spectrum of cultural knowledge, as in Peterson’s linkage of class and musical tastes.

This suturing of music, taste, and social group is a lens to understand the range of material presented on Tiny Desk. Considering Frith, Michelsen, and Mueller, taste is a collective collaboration between various actors with various types of economic and cultural agency. Bourdieu and Peterson relate the social to the aesthetic in the range of content presented and placed, showing in general terms how NPR Music is branded as a cultural tastemaker for its audience. These values are equally present in individual performative identity and make musical taste a vulnerable self-revealing quality as well as a powerful tool for self-creation.

French Sociologist Antione Hennion argues for the conception of taste as an action, which makes it even more complex on an individual level. Taste is pleasure for the listener, a deliberate action that is constructed through sociability. Frith similarly argues for the value of popular culture as seen not in the sole intrinsic object but through the social meaning developed around interaction and distinction over an object, through the social meaning and function of the work. Action links value and taste, as Hennion states, “In terms of music fans, there is less emphasis on labels and more on states, less on self-proclamations and more on people’s activity; regarding the objects that motivate taste, their right to rely and their ability to coproduce what is happening, what arises from the contact, remains open.”41 Hennion further defines tastes as a reflexive and mediated action that is deliberate, as Frith would say focused “not about likes and dislikes as such, but about ways of listening, about ways of

hearing, about ways of being.”

Thus, taste is a complex social web defined collectively, individually, and guided by institutions of authority, like NPR. Here taste is considered by examining aspects of NPR Music that serve their audience in specific ways, not by generalizing the taste of the millions of listeners and viewers of Tiny Desk. Such a claim would be impossible to establish. Taste, therefore, is rather considered in the relationship between the materials presented and the listeners. NPR Music’s taste system is partially revealed in the performance of Tank in the Bangas as the “good for you” alternative.

**Tank and the Bangas**

Tank and the Bangas were announced as the 2017 winners on February 28, 2017 (see figure 3.1). The decision was unanimous across the final judging panel including Phish guitarist and singer Trey Anastasio, R&B singer Miguel, glam-punk rocker from PWRBTTM Ben Hopkins, gospel and R&B singer Anthony Hamilton, and electropop singer BANKS. The judges from NPR affiliates included Seattle’s KEXP hip hop DJ Stas THEE Boss, New York’s WFUV program director Rita Houston, Talia Schlanger from Philadelphia’s WXPN, Robin Hilton and Bob Boilen from NPR Headquarters. The winning video by Tank and the Banga featured “Quick,” a narrative song covering a variety of grooves. The music, although clearly structured, sounds improvised and free with Tarriona “Tank” Ball and Anjelika “Jelly” Joseph hocketing vocal lines and timbres fluidly.

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In their performance on Tiny Desk, Tank and the Bangas manifest the values of authenticity and innovation that form the taste system of NPR Music by presenting a local, passionate, virtuosic, original, and creative performance that in the context of NPR Music is alternative. After a brief background on the group, I begin with a discussion of two types of authenticity they display in specific ways, as they present a performance contrasting to their released recordings and engage the audience in unique ways on the Tiny Desk. Authenticity is also seen in the presentation of the “real” artist’s expression in the venue and so ties into perceptions of innovation. Then I discuss their presentation of innovation in connection to the

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alternative and how a group marketed as R&B is appealing to NPR Music’s alternative-focused taste system. This section concludes with the impact of Tank and the Bangas’ performance as completely integrated with the music and the storytelling, creating a unified experience for the audience.

Tank and the Bangas started in New Orleans, Louisiana, led by slam poet Tarriona “Tank” Ball. The other band members include Anjelika “Jelly” Joseph on vocals, Albert Allenback on saxophone and flute, Merell Burkett Jr. on synthesizers, Norman Spence II also on keys, Joshua Johnson on the drums, and Jonathan Johnson on the bass guitar. Ball has written poetry since she was a child and participated in many slam poetry events. She came to music as a parallel venture to her writing and recorded her first album *RandoMe* in 2010 and later *ThinkTank* before being selected for the Tiny Desk. *RandoMe* includes singing, scatting, and poetry and, according to Ball herself, “transcends from any genre.”

The integration of slam poetry in a musical background defies straightforward genre classification, referencing jazz, funk, soul, hip hop, rock, and spoken word. In this mixing of genres, Tank and the Bangas exemplify the values that form NPR Music’s taste system. Although the group’s work is sold as R&B/Soul on iTunes, aspects of the group’s work push that genre, and relate to Tiny Desk’s values of authenticity and innovation as alternative. Authenticity, considered in two forms here, is seen first in the individual way Tank and the Bangas take on the challenges of performing at Tiny Desk’s restricted venue in their music and in their interaction with the audience. I then relate their performance to the alternative through their innovative sound.

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The first kind of authenticity is seen in the specific ways Tank and the Bangas meet the challenge of the intimate venue, which shows them as less reserved than in recorded release and engage the audience in ways impossible through a recording. In a comparison between the recorded release of “Boxes and Squares” on Think Tank in 2013 and Tank and the Banga’s Tiny Desk in 2017, the recording begins slower, more internally thoughtful, with floating bell-like accompanying arpeggios that shift between two chords. The verse introduces the whole band, defined by brass, saxophones, funky electric bass, and piano interjections. The performance on Tiny Desk more actively reproduces this verse texture where in comparison the recording sounds restrained. However, the beginning is texturally contrasting to the recording with an up-tempo pentatonic riff in the flute, leading the harmonic sway and sharp rhythmic backbeat. In both the recorded and live versions of “Boxes and Squares,” the focus is Ball’s voice and variation in vocal timbre; the quick shifting she exhibits goes from high to deep in one phrase. Ball’s timbral shifting is compared to rapper Nicki Minaj by some music journalists and radio broadcasters, yet Ball exhibits transitions in vocal color to a further degree with wide range shifts, blurring of singing and spoken word, and more variation in the text deriving from her slam poetry background.48

Ball’s vocal color at the beginning of the Tiny Desk performance is significantly different than in the recorded version. In the recording, Ball’s voice is breathy, producing a thoughtful recitation over the dreamlike floating music. In the Tiny Desk performance, Ball’s

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full expressive capabilities are exhibited in the altered introduction and the interaction with vocalist Anjelika “Jelly” Joseph. Each of Ball’s recited statements has a downward trajectory that becomes further emphatic with repetition. The last statement “I would have been the vegetables and I would have been the soup,” shows this melodic and timbral shift to its greatest extent with “vegetables” being in a high, nasalized, childlike joy and rolling smoothly down to “soup” as deep, round, and intensely resonant in meaning and tone.

In the next phrase, this point of depth is contrasted with the higher eager tone of “you know I would’ve been” with Joseph interjecting agreements and comments as in a conversation. This conversational hocketed rhythmic, timbral, and melodic counterpoint again arrive at a point of deep resonant meaning with “I would have been good for you.” In the transition between these downward trajectories the electric bass has active interjections with the piano and drums that weave together around the vocal lines effortlessly. This cadential moment of arrival is instrumentally sparse with a stop in the drums and only a lingering hangover of the bass and keys. Next is the verse section more familiar from the recording, yet in performance seems less reserved, less produced, and less mediated. Overall, Tank and the Banga’s performance is raw and visceral in ways the recording smoothed over. This is the difference that Tiny Desk documentation looks for in the live rawness of performance and strives to present as authentic in its venue.

Additionally, Tank and the Bangas interaction and connection with the audience is also seen as authentic and “capturing” the live quality of a performance. Boilen begins the video by announcing, “Tank and the Bangas everybody!” as the flute starts playing its repeated pattern. Tank opens with: “I like that Albert. It’s missing something. It’s missing
you [the audience]! Can I get a snap?” Several performers on Tiny Desk use audience participation, which contributes to a unique concert experience drawing from the intimacy of the venue, but Tank and the Bangas engage the audience in specific and even unique ways in this time frame. After singing “Boxes and Squares” Ball says over the drum groove and flute: “We are Tank and the Bangas from New Orleans, and [applause] we invite you . . . on the crazy rollercoaster that is Tank and the Bangas of sounds, and rhythm, and love and light, and expression, and things that make you feel whole.” What is notable about this musically backed introduction is Ball’s framing of the group as an experience, not as a Jimi Hendrix experience, but as a holistic experience, emotional, spiritual, and healthy.

Ball continues in what appears to be an improvised song, “And one day I woke up last week and I said to myself [sung] ‘Man I just won Tiny Desk.’” This leads into a celebratory improvisation about winning Tiny Desk. Referring directly to the situation with the audience, this improvisation connects to the audience as marking the unique event. In the time frame no other group recognized the venue so directly in song. Artists in the time range make verbal references to NPR journalists working on their lunch break or to the city as the seat of the nation’s capital. However, Tank and the Bangas’ celebration of winning “with big hair and a Tiny Desk” and their focus on the contiguous audience experience of their work is unique.

Tank and the Bangas continue to engage the audience through theatrical movement, the use of found objects in the office, and continually weaving a groove-based improvised set
even in introducing the band. After the celebratory improvised “I just won Tiny Desk,” the snare segues directly into the song that won the Tiny Desk contest, “Quick.” Over a repeated introductory minor chord progression, Ball and Joseph both dramatically look in different directions at the chord restatements and use objects from the NPR Music office as percussion instruments, including a small gong, wooden eating utensils, and two small red rattles. Following “Quick,” Ball introduces all of the band members through song. This introduction happens in other performances only in between a song, almost as an afterthought and sometimes not at all. Ball’s introduction is musically sustained and gives each member a chance to play a solo or nod in recognition. This constant flow of musical control shifts the audience attention. It shows Tank and the Bangas as saturated in their music, marking it as integral to the group, something they love, and have worked hard to achieve.

The second type of authenticity here is rawness in performance, meant to reveal the genuine, true, “real” artistic expression. This second kind of authenticity is related to innovation and the alternative as a broad concept, bringing familiar melodies, and stories into unexpected and different contexts. In his defining of alternative, Aaron Fox discusses neo-traditionalism as a reinvention of past musical styles and traditions that are both evocative of the “authentic vernacular folk object” while creating something “self-consciously” different.52 Tank and the Bangas have several such reworkings of references in their song “Quick.” The beginning lyrics, “Down by the river, where the green grass grow and the sun be burning hot,” is a reference to the children’s rhyme “Down by the river called Hanky-Panky, where the bullfrogs jump from bank to bank.”53 There is additionally a sonic

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52 Fox, “Alternative to What?,” 187. Also see footnote 18.
reference with a minor arpeggiated texture reminiscent of “Gangsta’s Paradise” by rapper Coolio. These external references mark the past while also making the styles their own “authentic” expressive voices.

NPR Music presents this reconfiguration as a key part of their taste system, in some ways harkening back to their experimental past. In presenting content that is perceived as alternative in artistic “realness” and a genre-defying, NPR Music is continuing its past of presenting the “legitimate” culturally formed products. Such products could be perceived as bolstering the social status of its listeners through informing and exposing them to “higher” forms of musical culture. The alternative for NPR Music is meant to appeal to its audiences as cultural wealth and health, as Balls sings, quoted the epigraph, “I would have been good for you.” In this context, Tank and the Bangas is not a conventional R&B ensemble but creative in expression and style shown in their presentation as innovative.

The alternative similarly shows aspects of NPR Music’s value of innovation as pushing a genre style. On iTunes, Tank and the Bangas are presented as R&B/Soul, which marks their musical market classification. However, the alternative representation on Tiny Desk offers an expanded audience. If Tank and the Bangas fit the core style of R&B they would never have stood out from the nearly 7,000 contest submissions and been selected as the winners of Tiny Desk. Therefore, the perception of innovation fosters making music that the NPR Music team can deem stimulating and new to its audience. This judgment marks Tank and the Bangas as innovative in their genre, and to understand how, their defined iTunes genre needs to be examined.

Music scholar Richard Ripani notes the difficulty of defining a genre’s “core style” and focuses on R&B as a musical transformation out of the 1940’s “race records,” defined as
music created by and targeted to African Americans including country, blues, jazz, and gospel. R&B, Ripani states, “inherits much of its identity from earlier African-American folk and popular music, such as work songs, string band and jug band music, fife and drum music, minstrelsy, black vaudeville, black religious music, blues, and boogie-woogie.”

R&B includes a huge variety of styles historically and the delineation from other genres or subgenres is subtle, like jazz can merely be stated as harmonically more complex, according to Ripani. R&B, like alternative, can be seen as a catchall category that is aimed at a particular audience.

Attempting to define R&B as a genre, Holt discusses the shift in R&B from the 1950s country and soul centric to a type of groove that includes aspects of various styles like soul, funk, and jazz. If it is this groove that marks R&B, the various grooves Tank and the Bangas seamlessly shift between can be seen as alterative R&B, expanding their style and audience.

Steven Feld defines groove as “an ordered sense of something . . . that is sustained in a distinctive, regular, and attractive way.” Holt goes further to define groove as a gestalt of this mix of patterns. The performance by Tank and the Bangas is built around switching smoothly between different textures and grooves, few of which could be described as “sustained” as they are always morphing to the next. As Holt states, “The groove is a flexible framework for mixing different things because its simple structural and harmonic framework gives individual layers a certain freedom and allows for various kinds of variation.”

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55 Steven Feld, “Aesthetics as Iconicity of Style (Uptown Title); Or (Downtown Title) ‘Lift-Up-Over Sounding’: Getting into the Kaluli Groove,” in Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues, ed. Steven Feld and Charles Keil (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 112.
56 Holt, Genre in Popular Music, 139.
excellent preparation and rehearsal to navigate the quick changes that make their groove both a throwback and something merited as new and as alternative in an R&B framework.

Over this intentional, improvised, and fluid groove musical backing, Tank and the Bangas perform a constant interweaving of music, singing, and spoken word that is unique, and perceived as innovative, to any other performance in the considered range on Tiny Desk. Often groups will perform some stage patter between songs along with awkward silences while tuning or switching instruments. From the moment Boilen introduces Tank and the Bangas to the end of their last song, the group is in constant communication navigating between songs without stopping the sound. Although it feels extemporaneously expressive and creative, the transitions are smoothly executed showing significant rehearsal and comfort playing together.

This constant interweaving of tunes and introductions makes the whole set a unified experience for the audience. This is perceived as innovative and new to the Tiny Desk NPR Music team, showing musical virtuosity, control, and a groove that shifts effortlessly. A unified experience over the whole concert, this shift in groove is realized at a smaller level within individual songs, similarly cohesive with structural contrast within. For example, “Quick” shifts rapidly between various musical textures and grooves telling a story that “mixes liquor and revenge,” as Boilen notes in the write-up for the video.57 The starkest example of this shift is when the whole band drops out when Ball’s narrative character asks “whose gonna save me, whose gonna save me now?” The resulting cutting silence with the beat maintained only in the snare backbeat is one of the sparest moments of the entire performance as Ball and Joseph ask the audience: “Whose gonna save me? You? You?”

hocketed rhythm. The question goes unanswered, as the texture shifts back to the familiar musical intro, “gotta make my money real quick, real quick.” This section’s transition between grooves parallels Tank’s shifting vocal timbre in “Boxes and Squares,” forming a deeply resonant musical moment that underlines the meaning.

Although told with “idiosyncratic flair and humor”\(^{58}\) and compared to a modern-day fairytale according to Boilen, in an interview with Boston’s WBUR Amelia Mason, Ball says the song is about:

> Women that works the streets, a woman that was taken advantage of and went to try to go and reclaim her power again. It's a story. I can be a storyteller. You know, I grew up watching a lot of movies and I also grew up in America. It's not this white picket fence — there are all type[s] of women. And they all have a lot of story. And each one should be told.\(^{59}\)

Therefore, although somewhat underplayed by Boilen’s write-up, “Quick” shows a musical fluidity of a creative group and reflects powerful stories that relate to the lives of the performers and their communities in real ways, whether or not they are fantasy or fairytale. Because of that creative expression Tank and the Bangas fulfill the values of Tiny Desk as both authentic and innovative. Where R&B is defined by a variety of grooves, Tank and the Bangas create an alternative take on vocal timbre, phrase, groove, and genre through expressing poetic ideas reinforced through sound.

The taste system NPR Music cultivates focuses on values that reflect Tiny Desk’s three rules of originality, curation, and intimacy, and this taste system is manifest in the prevalence on the series of alternative music groups. Originality shows through the value of innovation in the groups as they push the boundaries of style and virtuosity and work toward the perception of genuine individual expression. Curation is NPR Music’s maintenance of its

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\(^{58}\) Ibid.

\(^{59}\) Mason, “Tank and the Bangas’ Playful, Expert Recipe.”
taste system and shifts over time, seen in the popularity of hip hop on the series after rapper T-Pain’s performance in 2014. NPR Music’s curation takes the perceived values of authenticity and innovation as elements of music cultural capital that is significant, beautiful, and “good” for its listeners, as the epigraph describes, the vegetables and the meat in the soup. The intimacy of the venue further implements this perception as “good” for listeners by capturing live performance in a unique presentation of the artist’s music, tying together both ideas of authenticity in a space and innovation derived from those challenges. At the heart of Tiny Desk performance is the vulnerable intimacy of a short set with a close audience without frequencies equalization, amplified the vocals, or having a click track. It is this intimacy that makes Tiny Desk itself alternative, a perceived return and reformation of music before it was so highly mediated and produced on recordings.

NPR Music’s taste system makes Tiny Desk representative of these promoted values through a cultural and performative intermingling hinging on the novel approaches encapsulated in the term alternative. Taste is a complex web formed by NPR content producers and listeners and flows from a suturing of both aesthetic characteristics and social function. Where in the music industry an audience that will consistently buy the musical “core style” is the fantasy, for NPR Music it is the mess-ups, failure, and alternative readings on these styles that grow their own cultural capital, their branding and taste system.

On the other hand, the artists have significant agency in this venue. Artists have the opportunity to be heard in a place of artistic power—NPR Music that appeals to an affluent audience that buys music and hence further collaborates in a cultural sense of taste through financial spending—and artists are broadcast from a place and space of political power—the U.S. capital. Even as Tiny Desk values and validates specific musical aspects in all presented
artists on the series, that very process is queered, or questioned in counterexample, through
the shifting interpretations of such values by the individual artists. In the symbiotic
relationship between music journalists and artists, there is additional power in the failure and
questioning of these musical norms established by the taste system. Artists possess an agency
that allows them to transgress the taste system socially, culturally, and politically through the
very individual expressions so treasured on the series. In particular, transgressive expressions
explored in this project focus on vocalities of outrage, discussed in the next chapter, and acts
of gaiety, discussed in chapter 5.
President of Archaeological Indifference
Vice-President of Truth
Secretary of Statistics
Minister of Celebrity Injustice
Chief of Staff and Serpent
Blessed Page Turner of the Great Book of Misdeeds and Overestimations
Bishop of the Great Climate War
Minister of the Deteriorating Sky
Baron of Epic Boredom and Self-Indulgence
All gathered notables,
Good afternoon.

- Saul Williams “FCK the Beliefs,” from the beginning of his Tiny Desk performance.¹

In the previous chapter I considered how NPR Music constructs a taste system through its presentation of the alternative. Based on the Tiny Desk contest branding and judging criteria, I argued that NPR Music’s curation validates specific artists as more culturally valuable for its listeners. Values like innovation, as pushing current expected musical and technical forms, and authenticity, as capturing a performance of the supposed genuine artist, present the screened content as sophisticated and knowledgeable to improve the social status of its listeners. In this way, NPR Music validates its content, presenting selected artists as unique, innovative, and socially valuable. This validation creates a centricity of values, which generates audience expectations for programs like Tiny Desk.

¹ “Saul Williams,” National Public Radio, September 16, 2016, accessed July 1, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2016/09/15/494108672/saul-williams-tiny-desk-concert. All subsequent quotes by Saul Williams were taken from the Tiny Desk performances, unless otherwise noted.
In spite of NPR Music’s validation system, there are artists who transgress these very values through musical expressions while using that platform. In this chapter, I consider the ways in which, through vocality, performers express outrage as a form of transgression. Drawing from Freya Jarman-Ivens, vocality is a theorization about the embodied voice and vocal timbre inclusive of language, music, and feeling as a gestalt apart from any individual characteristic.\(^2\) Ethnomusicologist Katherine Meisel considers vocality “everything that is being vocalized.”\(^3\) Aspects of vocality are closely linked with identity and the way people are perceived and expected to behave socially, culturally, and politically. On Tiny Desk, divergent vocalities to the political expectations of the performers question the established norms of NPR Music as “aesthetically first” or “floating free from history and culture.”\(^4\) In particular, the performances of Saul Williams and the Drive-By Truckers on NPR’s Tiny Desk question and challenge this constructed taste system through their individual expressions of outrage over national to transnational events. While the artists recognize the validation of the venue, they narrate musically simple yet powerful stories and perform a vocality that shifts their expected social positioning in contrary directions.

Saul Williams is an African-American actor, poet, alternative hip hop artist and writer born in New York. He has appeared in several films including the lead role in the 1998 film Slam that he also co-wrote. In this film, he played a conflicted young African-American poet named Ray Joshua, a role that influenced the title of his first album Amethyst Rock Star.


\(^4\) Lauren Onkey (Senior Director of NPR Music, NPR Headquarters in Washington D.C.), interview with author, March 20, 2019. In this quote, Onkey is speaking for Bob Boilen about how he curates the Tiny Desk series. I believe the idea of “aesthetically first” refers to the programmed artists as easily falling within the constructed values of innovative and authentic in style to the NPR Music team. The idea that this “floats free” from other factors is impossible, but the perception is there to further elevate the content as valid and “good” for the social status of its audience.
Lynnée Denise describes Williams as coming from a “migratory, diasporic people” as “Brooklyn Haitian Creole, Black Southern American” with his mother’s side coming from Haiti.⁵ His diasporic heritage and his travels around the world are evident in his poetic language, using multiple languages and citing events transnationally from the poisoned water in Flint, MI to Sudanese refugee boats landing on the coast of Italy.

Saul Williams’s performance on Tiny Desk, with brothers Aku and Akwetey Orraca-Tetteh, members of the Afropunk band Dragons of Zynth (see figure 4.1), was the same year as the release of his album MartyrLoserKing in January 29, 2016.⁶ According to his website, the album was written and recorded between Senegal, Reunion Island, Paris, Haiti, and New Orleans. The album as a whole is a story about a hacker based in Burundi, the southern neighbor of Rwanda in Central Africa. This hacker is brilliant and clever, piecing together computers from scrap that can outwit NSA, CIA, and NASA intelligence. Williams depicts a radical tech savvy culture in Burundi that challenges the Western assumption of the “digital dialogue between the 1st and 3rd Worlds.”⁷ Like his character in MartyrLoserKing, Williams pieces together words and references from a bank of influences from black pop stars, to black music, and black culture, including pop music superstars like Whitney Houston and Beyoncé, field recordings of mbiras, and political speeches and essays. His slam poetry background, like Tank and the Bangas, and his integration of a myriad of musical, political, and popular influences marks Williams’s works as alternative on Tiny Desk, fitting the taste system.

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⁶ Reginald Duvivier, “MUSIC: Saul Williams Live at NPR’s Tiny Desk Concert Series,” The Couch Sessions, accessed July 1, 2019, https://www.thecouchsessions.com/articles/music/music-saul-williams-live-at-npr-s-tiny-desk-concert-series. This crediting is not clear from the published NPR page although Williams recognizes the brothers by first name at the end of his set. Usually the members of the band are credited along with the video and audio team at the bottom of the producing journalist’s write-up.

However filled with outraged speech, Saul Williams’s performance on Tiny Desk is described by Biolen, as “the most potent in our eight-year history,” comparing it to the performance of London hip hop artist Kate Tempest from July 2015.  

Figure 4.1. Saul Williams and brothers Aku (left) and Akwetey (right) Orraca-Tetteh at Tiny Desk, September 2016.

The Drive-By Truckers (the Truckers) are an alternative country and Southern rock band based in Athens, GA although two of its founding members, Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley, both grew up in northern Alabama (see figure 4.2). Patterson Hood was born into the music industry as the son of Muscle Shoals rhythm section bassist, David Hood. Both Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley write their own songs, singing and playing lead or rhythm

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guitar with Brad Morgan on drums, Jay Gonzalez on the keys, and Matt Patton on bass. Their performance on Tiny Desk was closely preceded by the release of their overtly political 11th album, American Band, on September 30, 2016. The producing journalist of their performance, Lars Gotrich, writes about a shift in their songwriting saying, “there is an anger behind these songs never heard before.” Their music is tied to the rural poor and working-class experience of the South, referencing the trap of unemployment and access to health insurance deciding who lives and dies. The Truckers shift these themes for the Tiny Desk performance by focusing on gun violence and media censorship in what I consider recognition of the venue.

Figure 4.2. The Drive-By Truckers at Tiny Desk, October 2016, (left to right) Jay Gonzalez, Matt Patton, Brad Morgan, Patterson Hood, and Mike Cooley.  

Saul Williams and the Truckers accomplish a similar queering of the NPR Music’s taste system with their expressions of outrage. Both performances have a striking focus on words, spoken and sung, and current events supported with simple musical accompaniment. Where the Truckers have a dense lyrics monologue over the harmonic accompaniment of mostly tonic, sub-dominant, and dominant, Saul Williams uses variations over short repeated progressions. Both use songwriting relying on storytelling, where Williams exists as a character in his story, the Truckers witness scenes and stories they narrate.

In the context of NPR Music, both performances represent genres that are still at the periphery of the focus of alternative genres that form the majority of the concerts in the time range (see chapter 2). Saul Williams balances between the representation of hip hop on Tiny Desk, by artists like Anderson .Paak & the Free Nationals, Gucci Mane, D.R.A.M, Run The Jewels, Little Simz, Noname, and Nick Grant, and makes it alternative through his slam poetry delivery. The Truckers are in contrast to other country artists featured on Tiny Desk like Brandy Clark, Margo Price, Brent Cobb, Maren Morris, and Holly Macve, through their poetic and dense lyrics and political emphasis. Both genres featured in these performances, country and hip hop, are already at the periphery of NPR Music’s focus. However, their use of language and delivery in their vocalities of outrage pushes them further outside, rather than drawing them toward, NPR Music’s alternative center. These performances fulfill the value of alternative in the taste system while simultaneously subverting its centricity.

In discussing vocality as linked to identity, I explore the ways in which Saul Williams’s performance focuses on race and the Truckers’ performance focuses on social class. Their vocalities of outrage are expressed through the ways both groups utilize their embodied vocal identities to strengthen their connection with the audience. Through these
vocalities, their performances fulfill and challenge NPR Music’s taste system. I consider the validation and subversion of the venue and space containing the NPR Music taste system. I then explore how these artists’ storytelling expresses a vocality of outrage enmeshed with the social-political identities of each group to maneuver their social positioning in unexpected ways.

**Voice, Vocality, and Outrage**

The voice situates an individual in a physical and social placement perceived by a listener. As ethnomusicologists Steven Feld, Aaron Fox, Thomas Porcello, and David Samuels note, the voice is “a key representational trope for identity, power, conflict, social position and agency.” From this perspective, the vocality of the voice encompasses “a social practice that is everywhere locally understood as an implicit index of authority, evidence, and experiential truth.”\(^{12}\) Musicologist Tia DeNora argues for considering music as a resource that documents reflexively produced social agency, as the life, feeling, moving, and doing of the everyday. Music, with the voice as a particularly poignant instrument, is a potent form of human agency that is co-constitutive of identity. The voice performatively grants expressions of self for the performer and contextuality to the listeners.\(^{13}\)

French literary theorist Roland Barthes proposes the “grain” of a voice as “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue”\(^{14}\) and “the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs.”\(^{15}\) In her exploration of the agency of the queer voice, Jarman-Ivens describes Barthes’ use of pheno-song and geno-song as one relying on

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\(^{15}\) Ibid., 188.
culturally established signifiers (pheno-song) and the other, that defines the “grain,” as playfully lacking any established cultural signification (geno-song). She explains further on geno-song:

It can be thought of, then, as those aspects of the voice where the physiology of vocal production is audible; in concrete terms, although Barthes himself is unclear about the specifics of what this means, we might identify the grain in, for instance, the air in a whisper, or the movement of the lips, tongue, and teeth against each other as the language is given sound.

Considering the “grain” of the voice as set forth by Barthes and further refined by Jarman-Ivens, the different vocalities of Williams and the Truckers are indicative of their own identities, although the connection between identity and voice can manifest in unexpected and unclear ways. Thus, vocality is a powerful medium for not only words and melodies but also performers’ embodied identities. These expected embodiments, as musicologist and vocal scholar Nina Sun Eidsheim notes, mark the producer as “in tune” or “out of tune” with collective productions of meaning associated with aspects of vocality.

In the process of hearing vocalities, social identity is recognized and confronted. Meizel further defines vocality as “encompassing the act of vocalization and the entirety of that which is being vocalized—it is a set of vocal sounds, practices, techniques, and meanings that factor in the making of culture and the negotiation of identity. Vocality, then, is part and parcel of how we interact with the world around us, of who we think we are.”

She notes that construed aspects of vocality become essentialist or equated as “natural,” especially those in relation to nation and race, like the idea of the “black voice.”

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17 Ibid.
20 Ibid. For nation, Meizel refers to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s discussion of the difference between French and Italian singing. Rousseau also theorization the “harsh” English language to the “smooth” Italian language as
Eidsheim challenges the “assumption that voice is unique and innate.”\textsuperscript{21} She confronts these essentialist assumptions by proposing the voice to be seen as culturally constructed, collectively enculturated, and ultimately understood in the mind of the listeners, not the vocalist. It is the listener who makes assumptions about, or as Eidsheim describes as “measures,” the voice from the singer’s body, tone, and emotional expression according to culturally established meanings. When these expectations are unmet, it is the listener who shifts their perspective to create “coherence (according to a given society’s measuring tools) between singer’s timbre and visual appearance, ethnic or racial identity, genre assignment, and affiliations with vocal communities.”\textsuperscript{22}

For Eidsheim, the essentialism connected to the voice is constructed through “entrainment” and challenged through style and technique associated with other stereotyped vocalities. She explains, “Entrainment may take place within a constrained existence, such as the conditions of slavery or gender inequality, where the entrainment of the body is total. Entrainment can also take place within the choice to undertake a particular vocal practice . . . within which the vocalizer may potentially redefine the very definition of that vocal practice.”\textsuperscript{23} In a sense, these “vocal practices” have been naturalized in relation to race, gender, nation, and other identity markers, and a vocalist can use the style and technique from a different practice to self-define their vocality.

Such manipulation of the naturalized medium of vocality has powerful potential to challenge established social and cultural expectations. The collective designation of meaning

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Nina Sun Eidsheim, \textit{The Race of Sound}, 19.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid., 32.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
in vocality creates norms in the entrainment in society that form expectations, allowing fulfillment or queer defiance of such norms. The potential held in challenging norms in performance creates a musical agency inherent in the queer vocality that challenges the expected placement of an individual in a social background. Judith Peraino articulates how music functions as “a technique for conceiving, configuring, and representing queer subjectivity.”  

In other words, Peraino presents the agency of music to queer—as the act of questioning and challenging accepted norms, like those of NPR Music’s taste system—and facilitate imagining of other possibilities.

Jarman-Ivens describes the potential of the voice as virally bridging between performer and listener:

To be sounded at all, [the voice] must leave the body and be projected, disconnected itself from the body that produced it, like a child breaking free from its mother. On leaving the body, the voice acquires the power to roam at will and launch itself into another body, forcing itself into the passive, waiting ears, and thus becomes invader, intruder…contagion.

An action, reaction, and challenge to taste, sounded vocality of strong emotions like outrage potentiates a “contagion” in response, while creating a spectacle that draws fascinated attention, evoking a range of reactions. It is through this musical agency that Saul Williams and the Truckers’ vocalities of outrage queer the values of Tiny Desk. This can be heard in Williams’s emotional voice that pulls the sound back in the throat as he begins to cry. The Truckers, specifically Patterson Hood, have a voice evocative of country “twang” and a graveled delivery that emphasizes his political message.

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24 Judith A. Peraino, “Listening to the Sirens: Music as Queer Ethical Practice,” *GLQ* 9, no. 4 (2003): 433. Peraino is not using queer in specific reference to queer sexuality, rather defining queer as questioning and challenging norms on a spectrum of norms and deviance. This is the definition of queer I draw from throughout this project.

Vocalities of outrage integrate the vocality of the performer with the emotional expression of outrage. Within the stories the performers tell, they focus on specific aspects in their expressions of outrage. Although aspects of race, gender, and social class are touched on in both performances, each group pays particular attention to certain issues. Both performances are by all masculine-presenting members, and critical aspects of gender construction are not a focus of either group. Saul Williams focuses his expression of outrage on the exploitation and violence faced by Africans and African-Americans, using a vocality sonically connected to black icons like Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin. The Truckers present a facet of their work on Tiny Desk that centers on the manipulation of the working-class and the masses by the government in gun control and media censorship. The Truckers utilize a vocality culturally connected to the South and country music.

An adaptable emotion, outrage is generally assumed to mean the expression of anger, resentment, shock, and indignation towards an event. Although destructive in many cases, I am considering outrage here as a constructive emotional expression that roots out injustices that in eventuality impacts everyone to various degrees.\(^\text{26}\) In reaction, outrage is also used to label that event as an act that draws out anger, injury, or insult.\(^\text{27}\) From another angle, outrage(ous) can be associated with the silly, unusual, farcical, and lacking in taste.\(^\text{28}\) In their vocalities of outrage, Williams and the Truckers toe this line between condemnation and satire, containing both grim insinuations alongside the fantastically ridiculous.

These artists’ commentaries can be interpreted as moral outrage, as explored in the research of neuroscientist M. J. Crockett, exposing “a vast array of misdeeds.” Cockett examines moral outrage as a commanding emotion that motivates the discrediting and retribution of wrongdoers, making moral outrage a call-to-action. While providing questionable benefit to the public on impersonal social media platforms, performers’ vocalities of outrage accomplish “signaling their moral quality to others” and the notoriety of the expression attracts a wider audience. On the more personal venue of Tiny Desk, vocalities of outrage transgress the validation in the venue and taste system through using it for consciousness-raising and provocation. This reaches the audience on a potentially “contagious” level and contradicts Onkey’s description of the series as “floating free from history and culture.”

Therefore, it is this vocality of outrage in the performances of Williams’s hip hop performance and the Truckers’ country rock performance that shifts their social class and racial agency, contrary to assumed social positions. Hip hop and country music both have associated and re-established racial and working-class social positionings expected by the listener and portrayed by the media. As Afro-American studies scholar James Smethurst notes, “Country and rap are notable because their framings of class identity and class conflict are so often linked to race in the mass media, presidential candidate-nominating conventions and so on—with country and western framed, in the United States, as the music of the white

30 Ibid., 769.
31 Ibid., 770.
32 Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices*, 3; and see footnote 4.
working-class and rap as that of a black urban ‘underclass.’” These categories are far from absolute yet mark a normalized stereotype that Williams and the Truckers fulfill only to reconfigure through their vocalities of outrage.

Williams draws on a rich history of black music and protest to emphasize his expression of outrage. Writing about outrage in the blues, critic and DJ, Frank Matheis expresses: “Protest songs testify about suffering and hope, the tenacity of survival and the gritty determination to overcome injustice and a yearning for freedom.” Matheis traces outrage in the African-American blues scene from slavery to the current Black Lives Matter movement on social media. He links this outrage to Jim Crow era segregation and oppression as the blues developed out of spirituals and work songs during slavery. This suffering and inequality brought out voices for change, as he states, “the cruel inhumanity and suffering that made life hell for African Americans in the South brought out voices in song, one of the few ways that musicians could confront harsh injustice was through the blues.” Songs like Cow Cow Davenport’s “Jim Crow Blues” from 1927 to Billie Holiday’s 1939 recording of “Strange Fruit,” a song describing the lynching of black Americans in the South, expressed kinds of outrage at atrocities African Americans faced while also calling for social change.

These styles lay the foundation for hip hop and rap and such outrage at severe conditions and voices for change perpetuate in current times. Matheis notes a new form of slavery took place after emancipation as “black people were arrested in great numbers, often on minor or trumped up charges, and then used as unpaid convict laborers.”

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35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 12.
actions are acknowledged in Ava DuVernay’s documentary the 13th and Michelle Alexander’s The New Jim Crow, which explores causes of the mass incarceration of African Americans in the U.S. The movement Black Lives Matter called for the recognition of the disproportionate police killings of African Americans—an issue raised by the Truckers in their expressions of outrage. According to criminologist Biko Agozino, the Black Lives Matter movement started on social media “to mobilize the spontaneous outrage against the impunity that followed the killing of unarmed black people by police officers.” This mobilization has impacted artists like Williams, the Truckers, Common, and blues musicians Hubby Jenkins and Rhiannon Giddens that Matheis names.

Williams’s vocality of outrage takes a powerful stance of awareness and judgment, sonically linked directly to the African and African-American racial struggle in his use of quotation and content. His vocality additionally references urban and technological undergrounds in what Williams sees as the exploited and misconstrued “third world,” as the manipulation of developing countries, especially African. The grain of Williams’s voice is distinct from other kinds of rap in his resonant vowels and rousing preacher quality, reminiscent of Martin Luther King Jr. that socially correlates to the perception of refined and educated. This vocal style is juxtaposed by a style more in tandem with mainstream gangsta rap, with intermingled derogatory language and colloquial interjections like “bitches,” “yo’s,” and “fucks” in the vocal lines, for example in the second verse and chorus of “Burundi.” In the gesticulations with his hands he marks word repetitions to added emphasis, and smudges the line between speaking and singing. Williams’s voice has a tightening of the

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soft pallet that pulls the sound back in the throat as he becomes more emotive and ends the concert in tears.

Despite the negative portrayal of any emotionally heightened speech by a black person as indicating aggression, illogical over-reaction, and hostility without provocation, Williams’s vocality of outrage is nuanced, layered, and poignant. His performance, ending in tears, provides a broader understanding of African-American vocal expression that is outraged and angry, and also emotive and vulnerable. He makes a call to create the best possible future through exposing harmful injustices that impact all and in consequence obtains an outpouring of support by YouTube viewers who praise his display of vulnerability.

In a similar but different vein, the Truckers’ vocality of outrage focuses on issues of social class and to a less obvious degree race. Whiteness and masculinity are often overlooked and perceived as invisible, or unmarked, and, in both performances, masculinity is an unstated and mainly uncriticized norm. In terms of race, the Truckers do not directly confront their whiteness. Yet, like Williams draws from a musical style saturated in cultural association with race, the Truckers utilize Southern rock that relates to country music as heavily connected to the “working-class,” with whiteness often assumed. Sociologist Geoff Mann argues that country music’s supposed whiteness is not innate at all, but rather actively reproduced in and through performances of country music. Country is also associated with nationalism and xenophobia. Josh Kun argues that produced national narratives, like Paul Whiteman’s starring in the film King of Jazz, are whitewashing of musical history. As Kun

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notes, this forms a conception that the music of a place or nation is of one voice, “univocality.” Rather both country and hip hop are filled with different influences and cultures that form multiple vocalities that through the power held in the voice can define and redefine social positions.

Tacitly presenting whiteness, the Truckers state their social positioning as “working-class” in their country music songwriting. Gender scholar and musicologist Nadine Hubbs notes that, “country music is a music of working people” and over the second half of the 20th-century the genre has acquired a negative stereotype connecting the white working-class to “rednecks.” In describing this stereotype, Hubbs states: “White working folk in the American hinterland are rednecks. And rednecks are bigots and homophobes.” Aaron Fox expands that the term “redneck” is “bound up with a defensive articulation of whiteness.” A social class that is “backwardly” ignorant, stoically traditional, patriarchal, violent, racist, and hyper-nationalist marks this whiteness. In spite of this pejorative, many of the working-class musicians Fox interviewed happily describe themselves as “rednecks” out of a pride and loyalty to where they identified as belonging. This identification also implies an arena of exclusive knowledge and feeling that those who dismissed “rednecks” would not understand anyway.

This feeling of belonging is part of Fox’s concept of “real country” as musical and social ways the voice of country and the working-class experience is expressed and heard. Fox’s interlocutors identify with “country” as music that resonates with them politically and culturally. The qualifier “real” claims a feeling, a communal understanding of the

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43 Ibid., 1.
authenticity in working-class expression in the community. The combination of “real” and “country” hinges on vocality as, “the medium in which this linkage is materialized—and literally embodied—is the medium of the sounding human voice.” This vocality registers through vocal techniques like cry breaks, pharyngealization, nasalization, yodeling, vibrato, recitation, pitch bends, and vocal color.

The Truckers, in performing a working-class identity, express “real country” in their vocality. This is recognized mainly through lead vocalist Patterson Hood’s “twang,” as elongated diphthongs and hard ‘r’s. Hood’s vocal twang also features a tight muscular articulation in his delivery, growl and vocal roughness, and his higher register’s tremulous yet cutting quality. Mann defines this “twang” as a key aspect that defines Southern and country music, saying it “refers paradigmatically to the short sustain and dynamic resonance of instruments like the banjo, mandolin, or dobro, the sounds of which are distinguished by an abrupt, relatively sharp initiation when plucked, which is followed by a quick, usually slightly ascending, muting.” Although this definition is largely instrumental, Mann also discusses the Southern voice as carrying a similar distinctive timbre that is often performatively related to an “exaggerated regional and racial accent,” such as a “Texas Twang.” Through their working-class focus, the Truckers challenge the stereotype of “redneck” in expressions of outrage over national issues like media censorship and gun control. Their vocalities of outrage also comment on the killing and targeting of African-Americans by the police. They denounce a practice rooted in racism through indirectly using their own display of a stigmatized whiteness.

Referring to the Black Lives Matter movement, a key point criminologist Biko Agozino makes is that such injustices negatively impacts all and he uses Martin Luther King Jr.’s theory that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. What he calls “moral indignation” over injustices is a call for change that will improve society for everyone not just African Americas. For Agozino the matter of a safer police force is not only beneficial for black communities, but would make everyone safer. From this perspective, Williams and the Truckers’ vocalities of outrage is a call to create the best possible society by announcing acts of racism. Their critique of the present state of society exposes harmful injustices that affect us all. As Frank Matheis concludes, “Music has a way of reaching out and ‘speaking’ to people in a way that often words alone cannot. Hopefully people will listen.”

Vocalities of outrage are an intermediary expressed and heard between different identities, evoking a variety of responses, yet potentiates a queering of established norms.

**Validation and Subversion**

The validation of NPR Music’s taste system forms expectations that listeners can hear as culturally valuable, i.e., characteristics like perceived innovation, authenticity, and intimacy. The listener becomes familiar and accustomed to these values and these expectations form the norms of the taste system. These expectations are central to the branding of Tiny Desk, NPR Music, and even NPR, constructing aspects of the organization’s brand at large. These norms limit the content validated on Tiny Desk, manifesting where alternative performances are three times that of any other genre. The alternative becomes, ironically, representative of the centric values NPR Music cultivates. Genres like hip hop and country are peripheral to this norm. Peraino and DeNora, discussed

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above, depict music as possessing the intangible potential to defy any legibility. Music is a powerful agent of potential change in internal relations to self and external social relations. So as NPR Music uses its presented culturally valuable content to construct and brand itself, artists are granted a similar agency to that of NPR Music in performing on the venue.

Although these norms are not always challenged, performers’ differing interpretations of NPR Music’s cultivated values may have subversive qualities seen as failures to the centric version of the values promoted on the venue. In her book The Queer Art of Failure, Judith Halberstam argues the perception of success is conforming to normative forms of being, while failure is more sustainable in offering overlooked and undervalued options. On Tiny Desk, these options, presented by artists in substitute for the norm, fail some characteristics, like the normal interpretation of values and principles that define Tiny Desk. As discussed in the previous chapter, these characteristics cultivate the concept of alternative on NPR Music. The alternative is a perception of the anti-mainstream that appeals to more affluent consumers seeking the rehashing and reference to past musical models as “better” for their social standing. In contrast, Halberstam’s concept of failure privileges “theoretical knowledge that works at many levels at once, as . . . the detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion, and that seeks not to explain but involve.” Subversion on Tiny Desk happens when artists embrace the musical agency they have in the venue to queer the norms established by NPR Music’s taste system. They do so by expressing and exploring failures to the norm, which involves the audience, emotionally, politically, and culturally. Performers’ agency is expressed in selectively failing aspects of NPR Music’s alternative taste system, drawing attention to queer possibilities that reach audiences.

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50 Ibid., 15.
When performers fail to conform to or represent NPR Music’s taste system, they queer NPR as a news producing organization more broadly. NPR constructs itself as an “objective and neutral” news source, yet is perceived as slightly left-of-center politically. Boilen asserts that artists themselves are innately more liberal and distances NPR Music from the perception of curating more left-leaning content. Artists do not necessarily have liberal political views, although this tendency is constituted as natural through NPR Music’s arbitrated taste system. Additionally, within a predominantly “hard” news organization, such cultural content as music is possibly seen as benign, serving only as a “gateway” to more important news-oriented programs like All Things Considered or Morning Edition.

From a broad perspective, nothing presented on Tiny Desk is so extreme to merit alarm or be convincingly described as exceptionally subversive in the context of all online content. However, within the context of this perception of benign beneficial content the queering of NPR Music’s taste system is powerfully apparent. Subversive expressions to the taste system need not be extreme to have significant impact. Instances of subversion to the norm do not impact NPR Music in a negative way. On the contrary, they make NPR Music’s content more notable and desirable to a taste system where breadth is a form of cultural capital in itself.

Two opposing forces drive the content on NPR Music; one is the desire to present enjoyable music that will attract a broadening audience and the second is to present content that still fulfills NPR Music’s ideals of the alternative. These two opposing actions construct and reconfigure a taste system that is composed of artistic expressions as both valid and

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51 Onkey, interview with author, March 20, 2019. I explore the political bias placement of NPR in chapter 1.
52 Bob Boilen (Creative Director of Tiny Desk, NPR Headquarters in Washington D.C.), interview with author, March 21, 2019.
53 Onkey, interview with author, March 20, 2019. Here Onkey is referring specifically to attracting younger audiences to NPR’s news content.
subversive. The ideal content NPR Music creates fits within the center of its taste system. Although subversion to this established center is not embraced, it is important to recognize that performers’ use of the venue is accountable to the authority of the publishing journalists, and what NPR Music eventually publishes (or not) is always within their control. DeNora states, “Music is a resource—it provides affordances—for world building.”54 A conceptual world is co-constructed by NPR, NPR audiences, and the artists it features. That world is queered when the artists take advantage of their opportunity to speak, as Saul Williams states, at the nation’s “seat of power,” about issues important to them and their communities.55

With its location in the nation’s capital with a view of the capitol building just outside the window and at a dominant news producing organization, the space holds political power just in its placement. Then there is the count of two million YouTube viewers, a large reach for rising performers and additionally an audience that still buys music. With these implications built into the venue and goals to capture a “live” feeling, the artist has a significant amount of agency and how they take advantage of that opportunity is telling. In the cases of Williams and the Truckers, the venue is recognized and subverted in vastly differing ways.

Transcribed in the epigraph of this chapter, Saul Williams begins with a satirical welcome that calls out power in its most corrupt forms, as indifferent, unjust, mythologized, ineffectual, war mongering, and overindulgent. The song “Burundi” covers a metaphor for the opposing forces to this corruption of power, a candle (see figure 4.3). Williams explains in detail:

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54 DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 44.
55 This is a comment Williams makes to conclude his first song, a mash up of “FCK the Beliefs” and “Burundi.”
What that means is regardless of the policies that often times come from this city, regardless of the domestic or foreign policies that may go into disenfranchised communities and poison water, play their part in distributing . . . whatever it is they are distributing, that may play their part in overthrowing companies or countries that don’t cooperate with how we perceive better business, for our comfort, for our privilege, for our beautiful shining buildings, and our tiny desks. We understand that the voice and vision that counters power cannot be wiped out. And they can try as much as they want, they can push as much policy as they want, they can militarize the police, it can be as systemic as it wants to be, but we are candles and you can chop our necks a million times we will still burn bright and stand. And we will burn this bullshit down.  

In this long explanation, Williams recognizes “this city” and “our tiny desks” as a manifestation of the power he is condemning and he ends this first song pointing to his own chair, saying, “sitting in the seat of power, ‘Live from the Nation’s Capital!’” mimicking the common introduction to NPR’s news broadcasts. In this seven-minute opening song, Williams openly recognizes the power of the venue that he is given through the performance at NPR offices in Washington D.C.  

In his last song, “Down for Some Ignorance” Williams departs from the recording’s script saying, “And the media might act like they are not complicit, as if the power that they yield is not the power that they yield,” and “this performance is brought to you by the Clinton foundation in the NPR offices live in Trump Tower.” Under this overt and highly critical view of NPR and NPR Music as media and political rhetoric, Williams plays an electronic track. This track has a short build before “dropping” the beat, a moment Williams prepares the listener for by saying “let’s do it.” The drop is met with a physical response from Williams’s fellow guitar accompanists. This moment breaks Tiny Desk’s principles of intimacy and expectation of live performance. Although the brothers instrumentally enter the electronic produced sound of the track eventually, there is a moment that the only sound in the room is electronic, not live at all.  

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56 Ellipsis represents pause.
As Williams places NPR as complicit in the confusion surrounding not just the
election but also the atrocities around the world, he also recognizes and defies the limits of
the space as “live” and “real” captured on video. NPR is placed in the crossfire of Williams’s
commentary, a commentary meant to comfort the afflicted, i.e., the disenfranchised in Flint
MI, refugees from Sudan, and rule-defying transsexuals, and afflict the comfortable, the
media, NPR, and those who wield power.

In contrast, the Truckers do not mention the venue directly. The last song of their set,
“Once they Banned Imagine,” is written and sung by Cooley who introduces the tune as “a
song about things staying the same, and not necessarily in a good way.” In an interview with
Paste Magazine’s Geoffrey Himes, Cooley explains:

After the 9/11 attacks, Clear Channel put out that list of songs that their stations
shouldn’t play. I couldn’t get my head around the notion that John Lennon’s
“Imagine” was on that list, that it was something we didn’t need to hear at a time
when it was exactly what we needed to hear. The Red Scare, the War on Crime, the
War on Terrorism, they’re just excuses for cracking down on anything the
establishment finds objectionable.  

Cooley’s recognition of the media’s stranglehold on information parallels Williams’s
accusation of media complicity.

Cultural scholar Jeffrey Roessner, in his article about music in the time after the
attacks, notes the upswing in protest music that was not heard on the radio. In the 1990s, less
than twenty corporations controlled the majority of the radio stations in the country. By the
turn of the century the corporation Clear Channel held over 1,200 stations in the U.S. and

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57 Geoffrey Himes, “Drive-By Truckers Walk the Bloody Streets,” Paste Magazine, September 27, 2016,
accessed July 1, 2019, https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2016/09/drive-by-truckers-walk-the-bloody-
streets.html.
reached around 75% of the adult population. Clear Channel’s radio monopoly distributed a list of over 150 songs to its stations that were considered lyrically questionable and were recommended for limited airplay. This list included a range of songs, some expected like Metallica’s “Seek and Destroy,” Steve Miller’s “Jet Airliner,” and the Dave Matthews Band’s “Crash Into Me.” Others were surprising choices like Carole King’s “I Feel the Earth Move,” Cat Stevens’ “Peace Train,” and of course John Lennon’s “Imagine.” In ways it seemed like the list was aimed at controlling exposure to its listeners of religious beliefs, antiwar sentiments, and political persuasions of the artists. On the contrary, Cooley saw Lennon’s song as exactly what needed to be played by the media and heard by the people.

Hood’s songs grapple with the implication of police brutality and murder that impacts African-American communities in the supposed post-racial and high-tech climate after the election of President Barack Obama. The two songs about gun violence that Patterson Hood sings both refer to events in the news, Umpqua Community College shooting and the shootings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, Trayvon Martin in Sanford, FL, and in Athens, GA where Edward Wright, a mentally disabled black man, was shot by police on Ruth Street in 1995. At the time, Hood lived across the street from Edward Wright’s mother and the shooting received no media attention. This irony is particularly apparent in the context of the 2016 presidential election, with both Saul Williams and the Truckers’ performance in the last few months of the Obama administration, which historically marked the first black presidency.

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For the political tone of the entire album, *American Band*, these songs are not the most dramatic the group could have presented on Tiny Desk, in some ways they temper their stronger political messages. Rather the songs are tightly organized around the venue, as a stage where the Truckers could present the issues most important and impactful to them at the time and place: gun violence, war, and censorship. These themes center on the government and the impact of the election, already mentioned as an irritant sparking the album. Where Williams aggressively notes and criticizes the venue that serves, for a time, as his “seat of power,” the Truckers more passively use the musical agency allotted to them through the venue.

In recognizing NPR Music’s venue and queering their tastes system, Williams and the Truckers assert a criticism on the treasured ideals of the alternative on Tiny Desk. Nadine Hubbs describes the stereotyped denigration of the “white working-class” and country music as a “triumph of Good, progressive, middle-class whites over Bad, bigoted, working-class whites.”60 The alternative is branded as “good for you” on NPR Music’s taste system and aligns with what Hubbs so called Good, progressive, innovative, and authentic perceptions. Hubbs continues that the oversimplified mainstream representation of “redneck,” performs the “work of erasing privileged whites and institutions from prevailing images of racial and sexual bigotry past and present.”61 In this sense “redneck” stereotypes are the scapegoat for past indiscretions of a social group with more cultural power. In parallel, the alternative can be viewed as a cleansing value on Tiny Desk that forgives all sins and marks the venue as culturally healthy and wholesome. These performances recognize the power of the venue and the media as complicit in the attempted disavowal of responsibility and power. Both

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60 Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country*, 2.
61 Ibid., 5.
performers’ detection of the venue is queering to NPR Music constructs, but the way they do so is also indicative of their own expressions of outrage: Williams clear, upfront, and the Truckers indirect, telling another’s story. By recognizing the venue in their various ways, Williams and the Truckers’ vocalities of outrage represent the “helpless” third world refugee and working-class “redneck” as contrary to their expected social stereotyping. Thus, these performances expose the branding of NPR Music as representative of cultural and musical norms that are seen as “higher” in cultural value by presenting stigmatized identities as more nuanced than previously recognized on NPR Music.

**Vocalities of Outrage**

In the stories they tell, the pictures they create, and the conclusions they draw, Saul Williams and the Truckers use narrative techniques to communicate their outrage. Their vocality of outrage shifts the way each group is perceived. Whether or not the group is actively political outside of their music is not the focus here, rather I focus on their expression of outrage over events and issues relevant to them on a national stage in their presented songs. Their performance is indicative of their musical agency and social placement. Here are two excerpts from the performances, Williams first and the Truckers second, showing their respective uses of outrage, issues they pinpoint, and scope of their commentary:

- The name of this song is Burundi.
- The name of this song is Syria.
- The name of this song is America.
- The name of this song is England, Brexit.
- The name of this song is Turkey.
- The name of this song is Sudan, Eratria.
- The name of this song is Egypt.
- The name of this song is Tunisia.
- The name of this song is Ukraine.
- The name of this song is Burundi.
Runnin’ down a dark street, app that got a flashlight.
Nike swoosh on bare feet, Whitney Houston’s crack pipe.
The “greatest love of all,” watch me rise to watch me fall
Contemplating, rent is late in houses that I can’t afford.
Show my papes at heaven’s gates, they ask me for my visa.
Lived a life without no hate so tell me what you need, sir?
Question your authority, genocide and poverty.
Treaties don’t negate the fact you’re dealing stolen property.

Hacker, I’m a hacker, I’m a hacker in your hard drive.
Hundred thousand dollar Tesla ripping through your hard drive.
Oh, Jesus, pull the cord, seat belt, what you standing for?
Buckle up, let’s knuckle up and tell Mohammed bring his sword.

Swoosh,
I’m a candle. I’m a candle.
Chop my neck a million times,
I still burn bright and stand, yo.

-Saul Williams

He was running down the street
When they shot him in his tracks.
About the only thin agreed upon
Is he ain’t coming back.

There won’t be any trial
So the air it won’t be cleared.
There’s just two sides calling names
Out of anger out of fear.

If you say it wasn’t racial
When they shot him in his tracks
Well I guess that means that you ain’t black
It means that you ain’t black.

I mean Barack Obama won
And you can choose where to eat,
But you don’t see to many white kids lying
Bleeding in the street.

In some town in Missouri
But it could be anywhere.
It could be right here on Ruth Street
In fact it’s happened here.

And it happened where you’re sitting,
Wherever that might be,
And it happened last weekend
And it will happen again next week.

And when they turned him over
They were surprised there was no gun.
I mean he must have done something
Or else why would he have run.

And they’ll spin it for the anchors
On the television screen
So they can shake their fingers
Without asking what it means.
What it means?

-Patterson Hood

Before addressing aspects of storytelling, first I will consider the musical foundation of these songs. In both groups, the simplicity of the musical accompaniment queers the value of innovation on a series that searches to push boundaries, especially musically seen as “aesthetically first.”62 As an affront to the Tiny Desk rules, Saul Williams uses an electronic track in his last song, setting up the most musically complex portion of his performance. The other songs are sparsely accompanied with two guitars strumming repetitive harmonic patterns. The Truckers use simple chord progressions that fit their established genre and sound.

Beginning with Saul Williams musical foundation, the longest pattern is “Burundi” an eight-bar F minor harmonic pattern that rises to the mediant (A-flat), the diatonic submediant (D-flat), and cadences using a diminished supertonic (G) to tonic F minor again (see example 4.1). This harmonic movement is outside of the syntactic rules of harmony and rather serves

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as a harmonic and rhythmic ostinato that emphasizes a fall by a tritone, D-flat to G, as it cadences. This harmonic instability supports the shadowy setting Williams establishes lyrically, “Runnin’ down a dark street” and his commentary to other nations, Burundi, Syria, the U.S., England, etc.

Example 4.1. Simplified guitar accompaniment to Saul Williams’s “Burundi.”

The backing for “Think like They Book Say” is far simpler, riffing variations from a two-bar repetition of a falling half step, D to D-flat/C-sharp, with a syncopated second bar (see example 4.2). This obsessive repetition of the strongest harmonic interval, the movement of the leading-tone to the tonic, could be read as a musical example of Williams’s conclusion, “They cannot imagine if they do not see it in a book / Even when they see it it’s their book that tell them how to look.” The simple harmonic movement creates an obsessive establishment and constant re-establishment of the norms of musical harmony as he calls out these very norms in society.

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63 All transcriptions from Tiny Desk video documentation done by author.
Example 4.2. Guitar 2 shows ostinato accompaniment with occasional melody in Guitar 1 in Saul Williams’s “Think Like They Book Say.”

“Down for Some Ignorance” uses a similar oscillation between two chords over four-bars, A minor and A minor add 9 (see example 4.3). Although the root of the chord never changes, the “progression” maintains the movement from stable to instable through a coloring of the chords. Again, the harmonic stasis here reflects the repetition of “down for some ignorance” as the backbone of the song.

Example 4.3. Basic guitar accompaniment to Saul Williams’s “Down for Some Ignorance.”

The Truckers rely less on short repeated ostinatos like Williams and more on traditional four-bar chord progressions that house the form and the lyrics. However these progressions similarly challenge the dominant to tonic movement of traditional harmony, as the Truckers continually resolve to the subdominant, not unusual in country music. “Guns of Umpqua” and “What it Means” both tune the guitar down a whole step moving down from the EADGBE tuning to DGCFAD tuning. “Guns of Umpqua” cycles a descending fourth progression, E-flat major 7 to B-flat to F, adding in a G minor relative to B-flat, but never
having a direct motion from the dominant, F, to the tonic, B-flat. The dominant is always resolved to a deceptive cadence, the subdominant, E-flat, or the relative minor submediant, G minor. Again in “What it means” there is similarly no dominant to tonic motion. The majority of the song shifts between D, the tonic, and G, the subdominant, with only an instrumental bridge containing A, the dominant, which deceptively resolves to B minor, the relative minor. In “Once they Banned Imagine” the reflection of John Lennon’s “Imagine” is in the key of C major, however the similarly from there is only loosely contained in the lyric references. The harmonic progression is similar to that of “What it Means” as resolving to subdominant and submediant chords. There is a stark modal chord in the bridge that introduces the flat seven, B-flat. To my hearing, this harmonically emphasizes the reference to the Beatles, who often used such modal harmonies, like in “Norwegian Wood,” “I am the Walrus,” and predictably “Imagine” although not specifically using the flat seven. The Drive-By Trucker’s show an avoidance of the perhaps trite sounding direct cadence as Williams emphasizes strong cadence elements, the half-step and tritone, in unusually obsessive ways.

These patterns in musical support are common for the artists, as not out of the norm for the music they typically create and this in not to imply that the artists are subversive to the rules of Western harmony. Rather it is to note the simplicity of the musical basis of support and the strategic emphasis or frustration of tension and release to which Western ears are generally accustomed. This defying of straightforward dominant-tonic relationships is common in country and hip hop music, however the simplicity of the patterns and progressions are stark in the context of the series. Even with slight variation, the repeated basic patterns serve to mainly support the text, making the focus the voice. The complexity is
not in the music alone but in the vocality, the embodiment of everything in the voice and the medium for the words and message.

To begin examining vocality, I will discuss styles of storytelling in use of perspective and use of references. Perspective is the main difference between Williams and the Truckers form of storytelling. Williams narrates actors and characters in his own story. As a poet or preacher, he rains down thoughts, questions, and ideas like Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin. In “Burundi,” Williams refers to a collective “I” including himself (see figure 4.3). He is part of the voice and vision that counters power, “cannot be wiped out,” and “will burn this bullshit down.” In “Think Like They Book Say,” Williams plays with the audience’s sense of who he is by placing himself in the story unexpectedly:

Met this girl on Friday night  
Rocky Horror Picture night  
Cuban stogie, Karaoke  
Purple satin bra and tights

Initially the “purple satin bra and tights” is assumed to be on the girl he met, a participant in the Rocky Horror Picture night, but Williams surprises the listener by qualifying it with “That’s what I was wearing,” clarifying that it was not the girl but Williams who was cross dressing.

Figure 4.3. Excerpt from Saul Williams handwritten lyrics in “Burundi”

In his positioning as narrator and political activist, Williams performs a speech-like cadence in his vocality. In “FCK the Beliefs” he states questions:

My question to you today is what is your mind’s immigration policy? Do you detain foreign thoughts that may have entered your mind illegally against the wishes of your parents, pastors, teachers, leaders, or perhaps simply against the security of your own comfort?

He asks leading questions to have listeners query their own beliefs as he places himself in a challenging and enlightened position. Similarly he makes moral claims as he criticizes forms of teaching and knowledge:

Truth is not a theory that can be imprisoned in any book
Words are sometimes prisons, sometimes prisms from the way you look.

Overall in his performance on Tiny Desk, Williams is an active part of the story. He is a narrator from the point of view of a character and a countercultural theorist.

In contrast, the Truckers’ perspective is through another’s eyes, or as a narrator to events they have little control over. In “Guns of Umpqua,” Hood takes on the perspective of a student at the school during the shooting:

I see a bird soar through the clouds outside my window
Smell the fresh paint of the comfort shade on this new fall day
Feel the coffee surge through morning veins from half an hour ago
Hear the sound of shots and screams out in the hallway.

Although written in the first person, we come to understand that Hood was not in the school at the time of the shooting and is rather putting himself in the shoes of a student, imagining the setting, the scenes, and the lifestyle of his character. The song places scenes of serenity into scenes of terror as he further describes his character:

And now we’re moving chairs in some panic mode to barricade the doors.
As my heart rate surges on adrenaline and nerves, I feel I’ve been here before.
I made it back from hell’s attack in some distant, bloody war

Only to stare down hell back home.

Perhaps this was a war in another time or world, but the character is implied to be a returned veteran, making the harsh implication that the war fought on distant shores did not, in fact, reach to protect his own home. Where Williams stops to explain and detail his meaning, the Truckers describe in their lyrics long scenes arriving at a gut-wrenching conclusion that is not explicit but ripe for interpretation. The stories they tell are narrative-based, describing detailed events as Hood does in “What it Means:”

And that guy who killed that kid  
Down in Florida standing ground  
Is free to beat up on his girlfriend  
And wave his brand new gun around  
While some kid is dead and buried  
And laying in the ground  
With a pocket full of skittles.

The outrage contained in these lyrics is evident in the portrayal of condemnation, shame, injustice, and murder that go from the big picture to the small. Even in “Once they Banned Imagine” the “we” referred to by Cooley is collective with a historical reference to the people, “We [the people] had our heart strings dangling ripe for the yanking” after 9/11. As Cooley spins long ideas through the music, that collective “we” is a shocked mass in contrast to Williams’s ever-surviving and resisting opposition.

References are another difference in these artists’ storytelling. Williams’s references come from an extensive international background and a perspective of transnational events and issues with a focus on the misconstrued third world. The concept of the grand story behind MartyrLoserKing is set in Burundi, with a tech savvy protagonist that hacks into institutions of knowledge and power for fun. He references Rumi, a Sufi mystic poet, and “forbidden fruit” referring to both the biblical Garden of Eden and Macintosh computers. He
dedicates “Think Like They Book Say” to Chelsea Manning and uses French and Portuguese in the verses. Williams spans events across the globe that particularly impact African and African-American people. The Truckers have a rural working-class focus within the nation, referencing Oregon scenery, the 9/11 attacks, and the House Un-American Actives Committee in their performance on Tiny Desk. And yet, in their work at large, they focus more on working-class experiences in the American South.

These references of both groups connect to the range of their message and importance of content to the performers. Saul Williams riffs to the end of “Down for Some Ignorance” over the recorded track with:

Through the Britta filters in Flint,
Jesus walking across the Aegean, fined for helping out.
“But oh, our hands are clean. We have nothing to do with it.
All of those immigrants, we have nothing, nothing to do with it.
It’s way over there.
Milwaukee’s over there.
Ferguson’s over there.
Aleppo’s over there.
We have nothing, nothing to do with it.”

Down for that ignorance.

“Oh, but my hands are clean, my hands are clean”
Tiptoeing across the Aegean.
Ran from Sudan,
Held at gunpoint in Libya,
Held in captivity,
’Till they made it to the shore,
Four hundred or more in a boat.
Too many to float.
Italian fisherman are fined (fined!) for helping out.
You don’t see it, you don’t see it.
“Send them to Germany, don’t send them here. Don’t send them here,
We have nothing, nothing to do with it. Nothing to do with it.
No, Nothing to do with it.”

Down for that Ignorance.
And we just want to, we sing along, franchise another superhero.
Saving everything but reality, everything but reality.
Browse that timeline, save delete save delete,
You were never erased from the question.
Encrypted and vulnerable, and that is what I like about you
Encrypted and vulnerable.
Don’t say it too loud,
Don’t say it too loud.

In the fervor and emotion, Williams brings himself to tears, tears for the refugees dying and struggling to escape horrible conditions in conflicted and denigrated areas of the world.
Throughout, Williams mimes the voice of power that does not recognize the complicity of the media, “the first world,” those who live in comfort, who have “nothing to do with it.”
Williams characterization is powerful in the room, holding to account NPR reporters, editors, listeners who hear Williams’s accusation of complicity. Through his stream of consciousness and active storytelling he shows the issues and events he feels moral outrage over and shames those who are complicit with his expressed vocality of outrage.

The Truckers express a similar outrage in “What it means,” noting that even in a time of technological advancement, prejudice and hatred remain:

Astrophysics at our fingertips
And we’re standing at the summit
And some man with a joystick
Lands a rocket on a comet.

We’re living in an age
Where limitations are forgotten [takes hat off]
The outer edges move and dazzle us
But the core is something rotten.

And we’re standing on the precipice
Of prejudice and fear
We trust science just as long
As it tells us what we want to hear.

We want out truths all fair and balanced
As long as our notions lie within it
There’s no sunlight in our asses [returns his hat to head]
And our heads are stuck up in it.

Again, the “we” is an impersonal collection not refusing blame or ownership to these problems, but recognizing the surrounding insanity. As the song’s narrator but not the protagonist, Hood situates himself in a lower position without denying his own complicity in the irony of a world that is so advanced and yet so “down for some ignorance.” Through his physical actions, attention is drawn to this particular verse, creating a sense of solemnity when he takes his hat off. In the contrasting extremes Hood presents in this section, he narrates the Truckers’ frustration and outrage that initiated the album. Hood continues:

And our heroes may be rapists
Who watch us while we dream
But don’t look to me for answers
Cuz I don’t know what it means.
What it means?

While Williams is bent on revealing the flaw in modern social issues, the Truckers express their own confusion at a flaw they cannot understand. They know and show the conflicts, like heroes as rapists, but offer no solution to the outrageous circumstances.

In the story of Sudanese refugees and the contradictions of U.S. culture, Williams and the Truckers express a moral outrage response. Yet where Williams takes a position of the aware activist, the Truckers take a position of powerless disgust and confusion. Where Williams sounds like Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin with his deep voice and wide-ranging references, the Truckers sound strained and gravelly. Both performances feature the use of point of view in their narratives to place them in different relationships to their characters and reference to current events in their storytelling. These components forefront issues each group finds most relevant to the time and place and out of necessity manifests in their vocality of outrage.
Williams’s smooth vocal transition between speaking, or recitation, and melodic singing is one defining element of his vocality of outrage. His quick vocal transitions separate verse from chorus and additionally marks his voice from that of other characters in his narrative, like the voice of power speaking, “But oh, our hands our clean.” Williams’s vocal representation of this character is spoken, yet often in a higher range, faster, and melodically phrased together. This vocal representation is distinct from Williams’s voice as narrator, “Through the Britta Filters in Flint,” in a lower range, with more articulation. In the end, Williams mixes these separately defined aspects of his vocality. Including downward melodic and phrased lines like “And we just want to, we sing along, franchise another superhero,” that begin in the voice of another and moves down to the voice of the narrator, with sardonic vocal fry. The opposite motion is in “Encrypted and vulnerable and that is what I like about you” ending in a higher register that is high strung with tense emotion. The fluidity of his vocal expressive range and articulation separates and reintegrates creating a voice that swiftly moves between multiple perspectives: Williams himself, the complicated “other,” and every shade in between.

Williams’s vocality is fluid and capable of using and re-mixing multiple references. This flexible vocality is the primary aspect that grants him such agency in his performance. Media scholar Russell Potter notes that mixture or remix is one key mode where hip hop maintains social resistance in new media technologies and times. To Potter, remixes are the essence of hip hop’s continued resistance as it “discovers its future in the fragments of its own past, cannibalizing its own parts in the ancient backyard tradition of vernacular
recycling.” Hip hop is always grappling with what it has become and synthesizes its past and present to make its future that, as Potter argues, is reflected and produced in the microcosm of the mixtape. As with “old school” mixes, Williams’s mix of reference, place, and social position vocally grants him musical power through his expression of outrage. James Smethurst sees this remixing at a large social level and raises the possibility that “hip hop allows the figuring of class- and class-consciousness through a model of class identification that is multiracial or cross-racial.” In the separation, distillation, and reintegration of the different qualities Williams poses in his vocality, he enacts the resurrecting power of the mixtape while also offering class- and race-based understanding and identification across borders of identity, just as he blurs the lines between speaking and singing.

In shifting their social positioning, the Truckers’ stance parallels what country music scholar and literary critic Barbara Ching calls the abject burlesque, putting their flaws and the flaws of their community on display. Ching relates this self-deprecation to “hard” country artists as “self-consciously low, and self-consciously hard, a deliberate display of burlesque abjection.” Ching describes this “low” stance as not writing for “uptown people,” or those in a higher social class, and as an emotional self-conscious inability to be seen as acceptable in society at large. Her focus is the display of unhappy emotions, lack of perfect delivery, and a consciousness of being a “redneck” heard in the “twang” in a way that reveals and queers

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smooth mainstream country’s connection to whiteness and nation. Mainstream country is a blissfully ignorant and heart-warming nostalgic “elsewhere” in the American patriotic nation, paralleling the Nashville sound. Mainstream country features an unremarkable accent, standard American English, and a smooth style. Ching contrasts this mainstream country as the false idealism of the South to the self-denigration of “hard” country. The Truckers present an ugly world, with Patterson singing with a nasalized voice, long lyrics of questionable grammar, and a strong Southern accent. Hence Ching’s depiction of hard country’s abject stance can lend to a queer analysis of the Truckers’ performance as oppositional to the “status quo” and reflects Halberstam’s envisioning of failure.

The vocality of outrage presented by the Truckers is that of the rural-identified working-class, as compared to the cosmopolitan power of the city assumed in Williams’s transnational storytelling. The Truckers present, in their variety of abject burlesque, a show of “redneck” ignorance and queer failure. Hood states, “I don’t know what it means” and all of their songs mark a slide into chaos in a changing world that is a failure: a failure of war to protect the homeland, a failure of science to counter ignorance, a failure of democracy to counter corporate control, and in some ways a failure to resolve dominant to tonic. This failure portrays what Ching would call a “slippery slope of shame” where the performer “forfeits the prerogatives of his race and gender.” The vocalities of outrage for these two groups grant a powerful awareness to Williams’s transnational proclamations, and allow a disconnected disempowerment of the Trucker’s Southern rock social positioning.

The Truckers express outrage over gun violence and censorship at a national level as witnesses from a stigmatized working-class whiteness. Conversely, Saul Williams presents a

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70 Ibid., 5.
71 Ibid., 20.
display of outrage at inequality and injustice transnationally, moving his positioning as an African-American alternative hip hop rapper and poet into a powerful self-conscious performance where he is both narrator and participant. This shifting of social positioning and agency reflects the difference of the urban, cosmopolitan, transnational background of Williams and the country, rural, national and local placement of the Truckers. Both show an awareness of the power and validation of Tiny Desk and forefront it in contrasting ways. Williams maneuvers into a culturally powerful position through his hyper-fulfillment of the alternative, including many references. Yet he defies these same alternative values by using simple harmonic ostinatos and an electronic track. In his dense lyrics, he pronounces judgment on the so-called “progressive” first world from a lofty position as a culturally aware hacker and poet from the perceived “maladroit” third world. The Truckers use a similarly dense word play as Williams, yet queer the expected country Southern rocker’s white working-class persona by narrating local troubles from a stance of powerlessness and abjection. The Truckers observe the moral flaws of the nation, yet portray themselves as powerless to enact change. Both performances by Saul Williams and the Drive-By Truckers, maneuver expectations on their musical style to reposition themselves contrary to expected social placements, bringing vocalities of outrage to their own center.
Chapter 5

MUSICAL ACTS OF GAIETY: COMMON AT THE WHITE HOUSE AND TROKER

In May 1970, the Lavender Menace, holding signs reading, “Women’s liberation is a lesbian plot,” interrupted the second annual National Organization for Women (NOW) meeting in Manhattan. The disapproving audience denounced the demonstrators for commandeering the meeting to promote their lesbian agenda. At the time, NOW was trying desperately to distance themselves from the lesbian movement believing any kind of recognized lesbian presence would further alienate feminists publicly. In a call for support, a plant in the audience, Karla Jay, rose and screamed, “Yes, yes, sisters! I’m tired of being in the closet because of the women’s movement.” With this, Jay began unbuttoning her blouse, to the horror of the homophobic audience, revealing a Lavender Menace T-shirt underneath. Then members of the Lavender Menace also began a similar striptease, stripped off their own shirts they too revealed another just like it underneath. Eliciting laughs from the crowd, the audience, initially hostile, was now firmly on the protestors’ side.¹

This recounting, according to feminist performance scholar Sara Warner in her book, Acts of Gaiety, is an example of just one such act. Acts of gaiety refer to “playful methods of social activism and mirthful modes of political performance that inspire and sustain deadly serious struggles for revolutionary change.”² Warner derives the term specifically in relation to the late 20th-century LGBT movement, yet uses queer theory broadly, not focused on

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² Ibid., xi.
sexuality alone but extending to spectrums of normalcy and deviance. The emotion of gaiety
is defined broadly as happiness, playfulness, and humor as associated with difference.
Warner defines gaiety further as not deluded sweetness or obliviousness, but a purposeful
form of endurance and resistance. In the words of cabaret artist Carmelita Tropicana as
“crying in one eye and laughing in the other.”

This nexus of expectation and surprise facilitated through acts of gaiety are political
in nature. As radical feminist Carol Hanisch stated in 1969, “the personal is political,” and
when there is no personal solution, the consciousness and collective action around an issue
becomes political out of necessity. In Karla Jay’s performative act of stripping away one
identity as the loyal NOW member for another in the Lavender Menace, her act of gaiety
challenges the homophobic expectation of over-sexualized lesbians. As the other members of
the Lavender Menace strip away their “façades” to reveal the same, the act illuminates the
commonality that members of the Lavender Menace want the same political recognition and
advocacy as NOW: the potential to be seen beyond stereotyped roles.

But how does an act of gaiety translate to music? Here I investigate the musical
translation of acts of gaiety in two performances on the NPR Tiny Desk Concert series.
Through musical analysis, I argue two performances on Tiny Desk, Chicago rapper Common
and Guadalajaran jazz band Troker, illustrate acts of gaiety that emotionally engage listeners
in hearing the performers’ voices of difference through creative stylistic crossover, harmonic
accentuation, and focal mismatch. Performing at the White House Library in Obama’s last
month in office, Common addresses mass incarceration through jazz idioms and unexpected

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3 Ibid., xiv.
4 Carol Hanish, “The Personal Is Political: The Women’s Liberation Movement Classic with a New Explanatory
In the introduction, Hanish admits that she was not the one who titled the essay rather it was the editors of the
journal Notes from the Second Year, Shulie Firestone and Anne Koedt.
harmony. After the 2016 election, Troker renders the band’s Mexican identity as humorously creative in a politically hostile atmosphere by playing with meter, form, harmony, and instrumentation. Troker integrates typical jazz instrumentation with a turntable placing them in a liminal space that connects Mexican music traditions with jazz, Latin idioms, and hip hop. Rapper Common is vocally focused and Troker is instrumentally focused. However, both use a swapping of that very emphasis to establish placement within that liminal space allowing for unexpected emotional connection.

Music is performative, allowing individuals to construct aspects of identity around styles and sounds. Music is also a powerful tool for imagining and potentiating better worlds where the act of critiquing the present emotionally links the minds of strangers through sound. Music can be seen as inherently transgressive. In the words of Josh Kun, “all musical listening is a form of confrontation, of encounter, of the meeting of worlds and meaning, when identity is made self-aware and is, therefore, menaced through its own interrogation.”

Here Kun connects music not only to individual identity but also to that of strangers hearing, feeling, and processing the same vibrations. Illustrating the idea of audiotopia, as a kind of achievable form of sonic utopia, Kun ties popular music to U.S.’s own identity as a form of refuge for different groups. He connects music to individual identity but also to that of strangers, where music has the potential to manifest an invisible world where difference meets, difference recuperates, difference imagines, and difference fights for a better otherwise.

In chapter 4, I focused on vocalities. Here I focus on musical connection through pitches, instruments, harmony, and other aspects of the music that do not rely solely on the voice yet still subverts NPR Music’s taste system. To consider these elements, I utilize the

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expectation theory of emotion in music initially proposed by musicologist Leonard Meyer in his 1956 book, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. Meyer states, “affect or emotion-felt is aroused when an expectation—a tendency to respond—activated by the musical stimulus situation, is temporarily inhibited.” In Meyer’s theorization, he describes the process of emotional stimulation using “tendency,” “instinct,” “pattern reaction,” and “habit” all conflated to imply expectation.

However, music theorist David Bashwiner synthesizes and refines Meyer’s theory by outlining three distinct conceptual steps that function in musical expectation between the artists and the listener: 1) Tendency, 2) Pattern Reaction, and 3) Expectation. For the first step, Bashwiner draws from Meyer’s definition of tendency as an automatic reaction or instinct. To describe Tendency, Meyer uses a cigarette smoker as an example. If a cigarette is easily found, the emotional state is consistent and the Tendency is fulfilled as normal. However, if there are no cigarettes in the house and the shops are closed for a holiday this Tendency is frustrated and emotions arise. To connect this emotion to music a second step is necessary. Bashwiner proposes a refinement of Pattern Reactions to encompass a series of Tendencies, which can specifically be related to music, while Tendencies are more generally applied as affecting emotion. Together, Tendency and Pattern Reactions allow for a connection of the broad concept of emotion to the more specific category of music, as emotions stirred through sound. Last of all, Bashwiner proposes Expectation as an act that allows the listener to perform conscious or unconscious predictions about musical patterns drawing from cultural experience and musical structure. For example, cultural jazz idioms

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like linked ii-V-I progressions create a musical expectation drawing on repeated sequences and resolving half steps established in the musical structure. In my application of expectation theory, I focus on moments that depart or accentuate cultural or structural patterns and relate these nonconformities as tools of resistance and advocacy. I identify and relate such tools used in Common’s performance of “Letter to the Free” to advocate for social change and then Troker’s performance of “Príncipe Charro,” as representing a lively and humorous sound in Mexican music. I conclude with how both performances switch focuses as a destabilizing alternative.

**Common’s “Letter to the Free”**

Hip hop studies scholar Reiland Rabaka inherently links hip hop and rap to pre-Civil Rights Movement black music and politics, but notes that connection is often ignored in current hip hop. However in his performance at the White House Library in Barack Obama’s last month in office, Common not only recognizes but forefronts hip hop’s political strength to advocate for change in “Letter to the Free,” written for Ava DuVernay’s documentary *13th*, which centers on mass incarceration and the 13th amendment’s justification for enslavement of criminals. Common performed at South by South Lawn, a gathering of “creators, innovators, and organizers who work to improve the lives of their fellow Americans and people around the world.” The Tiny Desk chose to broadcast Common’s performance at this event specifically (see figure 5.1).

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8 Such an expectation is created in the introduction of Troker’s “Príncipe Charro,” as shown in example 5.4.
Alias for Lonnie Corant Jaman Shuka Rashid Lynn, Common performed with award-winning Robert Glasper on keys, producer Karriem Riggins on drums, Keyon Harrold on trumpet, Elena Ayodele on flute, Derrick Hodge on electric bass, and guest vocalist Bilal Oliver. While providing commentary on race politics in the U.S., “Letter to the Free,” as performed on Tiny Desk, cultivates a nurturing environment in which musical acts of gaiety emerge as moments of release in a tense struggle for social-political change. The content of Common’s rap is an example of what Rabaka calls a “musical mouthpiece-and-socio-political movement relationship,”12 in his work for Ava DuVernay’s documentary on mass


incarceration as the “New Jim Crow”\textsuperscript{13} and in his outspoken support for the social and political movement Black Lives Matter.

On an album that is directly political, \textit{Black America Again}, Common integrates idioms utilized in African-American spirituals and hip hop. Within the main genre of hip hop, the pentatonic hook, sung by all the performers, alludes to spirituals over a four-bar harmonic cycle (example 5.1). The spiritual-like hook connects further to Rabaka’s historical placement of hip-hip and bolsters the social impacts of the song. Citing W.E.B. DuBois, Kun takes the idea of spirituals as “sorrow songs” as a utopian imagining that may, “transfer into the realm of social change.”\textsuperscript{14} In the integration of spiritual components, Common infuses “Letter to the Free” with social purpose and resistance essential to an act of gaiety.


In his book \textit{America’s Black Musical Heritage}, Tilford Brooks contextualizes what he calls “American Black musical idioms” by delineating origination between Western Europe and Western Africa. In “Letter to the Free” Common integrates these idioms utilized in the distinct genres: spiritual, jazz, hip-hop and rap. Brooks describes spirituals as “constructed in a simple, short-phrase, call-and-response form.”\textsuperscript{15} This hip hop song’s hook features a simple

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Michelle Alexander, \textit{The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness} (New York: The New Press, 2010).
\item \textsuperscript{14} Kun, \textit{Audiotopia}, 24.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Tilford Brooks, \textit{America’s Black Musical Heritage} (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984), 35.
\end{itemize}
pentatonic melody, sung by everyone, alluding to spirituals, over a harmonic cycle, common in hip hop, of four bars (see example 5.1). Additionally, the soloist or leader, Bilal, improvises between the melodic pauses further strengthening the connection to spirituals where, as Brooks states, “the leader has license to improvise on the melody in his call, while the response usually repeats its basic melodic line without change.”

Spirituals often contained Christian related themes like salvation, and offer an expression of hope that allows for moments of lightheartedness in a song of struggle.

Because of the attached “sorrowful” aspect to spirituals, surprisingly the majority is in a major tonality, yet according to Brooks “the most striking” are established in minor. In “Letter to the Free,” C minor pentatonic is strongly established in the melody. Brooks addresses this scale as a variation on the “blues scale” featuring a microtonal lowered third and seventh, arguably predominant in West African music traditions. This allows a duality of major and minor simultaneously, what Brooks calls “bimodal” with the partially flatted third and seventh being indecisive between major or minor, Brooks states, “the aberration of these tones, being microtonal, results in their not coinciding with any diatonic scale or mode.” Additionally the chromatic shifts are obscured by syncopation, even the resolution to the tonic at the end of the phrase. The only emphasized tonality is that of C minor, although sometimes without the third.

The harmony obscures a shift between the major and minor subdominant, dorian to minor, and the minor dominant visited briefly before cycling through again. This harmonic shifting is developed through chromatic motion between the major and minor thirds in the subdominant, A-natural and A-flat, and additionally adding coloring ninths and elevenths in

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16 Ibid., 20.
17 Ibid., 37.
18 Ibid., 16.
low voicings. Because of the “bimodal” property of the utilized scales, the piano compensates for its equal temperament by utilizing “blue” tone clusters. This translates to quick ornamentation as well as dyadic harmonic movement. Although varied slightly throughout, the cycle in the lower voices maintain a clustered quality that descends chromatically from the raised sixth to the fifth. The harmonic motion is further blurred through syncopated chord changes.

The solo section on the Tiny Desk concert, not originally on the released commercial recording, bridges additionally between the genres of hip hop and jazz while destabilizing the focus on Common’s rap. The piano marks the section by changing register and integrates a B-natural to B-flat suspension. This introduces a half step dissonance on a downbeat, contrasting to expected syncopation in a striking higher register. This also marks a change in cyclical phrase length. Rather than a four-bar phrase, the solos occur over a cyclical eight bars. Brooks notes that the voice is in such a prominent position in African-American folk music that instruments inflect vocal timbre and pitch nuance in solos. A similar vocal imitation is included in this solo section. Both the trumpet and flute solos refer to the pentatonic, “bimodal” quality of the hook (example 5.1) and the patter rhythm of the rap (example 5.2). However, in the inclusion of a solo section in this Tiny Desk, Common bridges the gap between hip hop—a vocally driven genre—and jazz—a more instrumentally-focused genre—and the result, while outlining a harmonic change discussed below, places the instrumentals into the realm of the vocals.

On jazz improvisation, Brooks states:

A false impression exists among the listening public that the jazz soloist who improvises is creating new material spontaneously. In fact however, when a jazz musician improvises, he calls on a reservoir of material gained through years of
listening, absorbing, analyzing, and imitating the work of performers before him, his contemporaries, and his own work.¹⁹

It is through this recycling of material in the solo section that the instrumentalists integrate the spiritual, jazz, hip hop and rap. Thus, it is in this solo section that genres are integrated, claiming the historical connection Rabaka notes, and the instruments are given the opportunity to be vocalistic in a place of prominence.

Example 5.2. “Letter to the Free,” a simplified transcription of Common’s rap, pitches approximate.

Harmonically more changes, in the now longer solo section, the sixth bar marks in example 5.3 the moment of lightheartedness in the otherwise minor saturation. The culminating moment for the act of gaiety is when C major for two beats challenges the domineering C minor tonality. The trumpet and flutist both emphasize this briefly uplifting change in a song mired in syncopation, low dyadic voicing, and minor tonality. The pianist plays only a melodic flourish counterpoint in the new register, leaving out the typically dyadic bass. Elena Ayodele, the flute player, accentuates this modal mixture in her solo by approaching the E-natural from above by half step and arpeggiating upward, only to fall by a chromatic step back into C minor, creating a brief, but powerful, moment of relief or refuge.

¹⁹ Ibid., 21
from the dark reality the song sets (example 5.3). Here, the C major harmonic alteration in
the solo section breaks away from the vocal sections of the song and the established C minor
pattern, briefly countering it with an unexpected shift in harmony, accompaniment voicing,
texture, and focus. This C major alteration achieves an act of gaiety concentrated in the solo
section, marking the other aspect of genre integration and shifting focus in a point of
harmonic surprise.

Example 5.3. “Letter to the Free,” flute solo and piano accompaniment.
Such acts of gaiety are usually supported in the visual performance and Ayodele, as she accentuates the C major change, also performs the act of gaiety in her emotive expression. In their study, Gabrielsson and Lindström conclude that “perceived expression is thus dependent both on factors in the composed structure and factors in the performance.”

It is fundamental, therefore, to consider all visual factors pertaining to the performance as documented on the recorded video. In the flute solo, and throughout Common’s performance in general, there is an affective sense of relaxed enjoyment, comfort, ease, and joy. I interpret this affective atmosphere as what Audre Lorde would call the power of the erotic, defined as a deep source of social power. Yet, Lorde sees this power distorted by hegemonic controls as equivalent to the pornographic. Rather its polar opposite, Lorde reclaims the erotic as, “the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person.”

Within an act of gaiety, the power of the erotic intertwines the social, the political, and appropriately, the spiritual, collectively sharing, encountering, and humanizing social difference. The flutist, Elena Ayodele, for example, is filmed turned slightly away from the camera, playing the flute as an extension of her voice and her own self. The camera shot, after Ayodele plays the C major change, captures the response of the audience, mirroring the contagious pleasure and satisfaction embodied in the performance. The connection between hip hop, spirituals, and jazz, the “vocal” quality of the instruments in the solo section, the unexpected harmonic twist, and the power of the erotic augment this fleeting, yet powerfully elegant act of gaiety.

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22 Ibid., 56. One aspect of the power of the erotic is the simple enjoyment of doing and sharing something loved and enjoyed.
Troker’s “Príncipe Charro”

In another form of musical acts of gaiety, humor is a revealing expression to explore music’s power to challenge social expectations. It is through humor that Troker, a jazz band based in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, performs an act of gaiety confronting stereotyped tropes of Mexican music genres. The members include Frankie Mares on drums, Christian Jiménez on keys, Diego Franco on saxophone, Samo González on electric bass, Chay Flores on trumpet, and DJ Sonicko on turntable (see figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2. Troker on Tiny Desk, May 2017, (left to right) Frankie Mares, Diego Franco, Christian Jiménez, Chay Flores, Samo González, and DJ Sonicko.23

“Príncipe Charro,” the title of the first song performed, ties Troker to a Guadalajaran identity and more broadly to a Mexican identity. “Príncipe Charro” refers to a masculine

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archetype akin to a cowboy in a Mexican rodeo, a Charreada, predominant in Jalisco. The trumpet’s sonic quality alludes to musical idioms performed at these rodeos. Anthropologist Olga Nájera-Ramírez argues that the charro prototype has developed into a symbol of lo mexicano, or “Mexicanness,” on both sides of the border. The charro has become a symbol of “the true Mexican hero, always at the service of his country, fighting on horseback in every battle, every war. . . . By inscribing Charros into history in this manner, all conflict and opposition becomes oriented towards non-Mexicans, thereby promoting a less conflictive image of Mexican culture and society.” By claiming this identity in their first song, Troker establishes a political context in their performance. In contrast to Common’s support from the Obama White House, Troker could claim no such support from Trump, who has been politically hostile toward the so-called “bad hombres” from Mexico. Challenging this negative sentiment from the leader of the nation, Troker performs with flare and humor that embraces their Guadalajaran identities.

Considering multiple theories of humor, music theorist David Huron addresses the intricacies of musical anticipation by noting, “Humor requires surprise; surprise requires an expected outcome; and an expected outcome requires an internalized norm.” In acts of gaiety, humor potentiates social connection through accentuating and breaking such internalized norms. Thus humor in music is filled with potential for acts of gaiety, constituting a liminal space for performers to continually traverse the line between the

25 Ibid., 11. Nájera-Ramírez notes that this symbolism of the charro obscures issues of gender, class, and ethnicity. Similarly, Troker’s presentation of their sound as Mexican through the symbolism of the charro assumes gender, race, class, and ethnicity implications. This is a future direction of study, however out of the scope of the current project.
expected and unexpected. In particular, humor can be described as a coping mechanism for the resilient expressions that act of gaiety permeate.

In examining the process of anticipation Huron organized the concept into four categories. He describes the four types of expectation or anticipation as 1) Veridical, recalled verbatim memory, 2) Schematic, internalized style codes, 3) Dynamic, based on context, and 4) Conscious as declared predictions. Bashwiner refines these points with four expectancy spaces including 1) Rousseauian space, based on general parameters of the melody, 2) Intervallic space, based on frequency of nonfunctional intervals, 3) Schematic space, based on extra-opus scalar patterns, and 4) Rameauian space, based on harmonic functional context. Through interactions of these expectancy types and spaces musical expectation can be theorized and humor can be seen as a disruption of these internalized norms in musical expectation. Musicologist Charles Garrett summarizes that “musical surprises can be fashioned using many techniques that break rules and upend conventions, including intentionally ‘wrong notes,’ unexpected sounds or noises, and sudden changes in timbre, tempo, style, harmony, dynamics, and more.”

The introductory material of “Príncipe Charro” is an example of these humorous incongruities that challenge the internalized norms of being a jazz group from Mexico. The song begins with a standard jazz progression in F major in just the drums, bass, and keys (example 5.4). However, a bar before reaching a complete sixteen bar form, this expectation is countered by an off-kilter duple ostinato metered in five, not the typical four beat

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27 Ibid., 224-238.
symmetrical pattern (example 5.5). This sudden change creates an expectation in the rest of the piece that the form will feature similarly stark changes.

Example 5.4. “Príncipe Charro,” introductory bass line.\(^{30}\)

![Sequenced pattern]

Example 5.5. “Príncipe Charro,” counterpoint of the ostinato played by piano and bass guitar.

This introduction material to “Príncipe Charro” sets up a Schematic expectation from the linking of ii-V-I progressions (example 5.4), familiar from jazz standards like “Autumn Leaves.” This expectation is interrupted when the meter is suddenly and asymmetrically changed. With this change the bass ceases and the rhythm is syncopated, although the electronic timbre of the piano and the F tonality remain. Occurring so early in the song, this sudden change creates a Dynamic type of expectation for the rest of the piece, which is to anticipate sudden change. The form of “Príncipe Charro” is essential to its humor in fulfilling this expectation. The rest of the form is similarly jagged with sudden changes:

Intro ➔ Ostinato on piano 5/8 ➔ Head (AAB) ➔ transition/free solos ➔ Saxophone solo ➔

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30 All transcriptions from Tiny Desk video documentation done by author.
pause (shout) → Head (AB) → Ostinato added sax → Trumpet solo in 6/8 → trading fours

trumpet and turntable 4/4 → rhythmically augmented variation on Head 5/8 → Shout → Head (AB) → Ostinato (Coda).

The melody functioning as the Head is an F tonality that shifts between major, minor, and phrygian and always has lowered sixth and seventh scale degrees (example 5.6). The major and minor tonality, in contrast to “Letter to the Free,” is indecisive, between the second and third bar in example 5.6 the saxophone slowly slides from a minor third to a major third creating a tritone interval with the trumpet. This third bar’s A and E-flat tritone interval imply an F dominant function although with the ostinato acting similar to a drone, F is expected to be the tonic not the dominant. The phrygian flatted scale degree introduces the tritone again, emphasized melodically in the florid triplet figures concluding in a leaping from C to F-sharp/G-flat, distinguishing the Phrygian mode in bars five and seven. In the second ending another change of a half step is in the last bar of example 5.6, the trumpet rises from G to G-sharp/A-flat, the minor third, acting to cadence in F minor, however that cadence is undercut with the rise in the saxophone from the B-flat to B natural, again the tritone to F, propelling the phrase forward. I see this shifting of half steps as adding to the energy and humor. While the ostinato would seem to stagnate, the melodic emphasis pulls attention forward, where the nonfunctional tritone is defining. This kind of resolution with a twist mirrors Warner’s definition of gaiety, an oppositional pull that partly fulfills and partly denies expectation.
Example 5.6. “Príncipe Charro,” Head (AAB) trumpet and saxophone counterpoint.

The physical performance of Troker is again an essential aspect of the act of gaiety constituted through “Príncipe Charro,” particularly in the build to the coda material. With the Dynamic expectation of unconventional form and tritone Intervalic space, a vocal shout marks the beginning of the last Head before the coda. The group pauses long enough for the crowd to applaud, believing the song is over, yet the unexpected shout draws out laughs from the audience, who did not expect the continuation. Then with a rubato melodic beginning, the group dives back into the florid and asymmetrical Head. The coda, consisting of the repeated ostinato, returns with the whole group when the expected texture is interrupted. The ostinato becomes burdened with dyadic clusters contrasting to the established tritone Intervalic space. This dyadic dissonance acts as a dominant before the resolving tag, a similar resolution as the
tritone, however this cluster is unexpected enough in the presented Intervalic space that the section is sonically uncomfortable. In spite of this, the bassist, Samo González, can be seen nodding to the meter, enjoying the rhythmic asymmetry and the harmonic dissonance, manifesting the act of gaiety in the visual performance.

Mismatched Focus as Instrumental Vocalism

Both performances by Common and Troker create musical acts of gaiety through unexpected shifts in the focus of their performances. The resulted shifting connects with and involves the audience in new perspectives. In “Letter to the Free,” where the vocals and rap are central in the recorded release, the performance moves the instruments to take the main stage for a time, forming the articulate rhythm from the rap into further expressive ranges. The alteration to C major creates an unexpected harmonic shift that draws audience attention to the point of instrumental focus and sonic release. Troker uses sudden contrasting sections to similarly pull the attention of the audience forward. A mainly instrumental group, Troker also links to the vocal by integrating the post-human voice of the turntable.

As Tilford Brooks notes, it is common in jazz for the instruments to imitate vocal techniques, and these performances parallel each other in the instrumental connection to the vocal. Yet the turntable in Troker’s performance relates further to the voice with more complex rhythms (example 5.7) and less definable shape in pitch and volume. When the trumpet and turntable trade four bar solos, the turntable produces complex rhythmic and pitched material that the trumpet imitates, paralleling the normative flow of imitation as if the turntable was a vocalist. Where the flow of imitation is usually instrument to vocal, the turntable occupies a hybrid position of both instrument and vocal, sampling the instrumentals and creating a complex pitch and rhythmic line the instruments imitate.
Jarman-Ivens argues that “In rap music, the vocal interest very often emerges not simply from the linguistic content, but from the rhythmic work achieved by the vocal line. At the same time, the content itself is frequently obscured by the intensity of rhyme and alliteration, and the rhythmic pace.”\textsuperscript{31} Although featuring no human vocalizing in “Príncipe Charro,” Troker confuses the normal flow of imitation by mimicking the post-human voice of the turntable where meaning is completely obscured by rhythmic pacing. In a way, the instruments are imitating themselves in an electronically manipulated format, confusing and questioning the normal flow of imitation. Troker produces a feedback loop between instrument and turntable in contrast to Common’s elevation of the instrumental to the prominence of the vocal. This reverse flow of imitation connects both performances in a similar act of gaiety, a mismatch of focus that increases the expressive potential beyond human vocals. This shifting of focus creates a potentiation of liminal agency, a kind of bait and switch, which interrupts expectations and forms an emotional connection between audiences and voices of difference through both grace and humor.

Example 5.7. “Príncipe Charro,” rhythmic excerpt of turntable’s complexity.

Troker’s use of the turntable also connects to the political possibilities of hip hop. Reiland Rabaka notes that the hip hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa observed four “fundamental elements” of hip hop culture: 1) MCing or rapping, 2) Disc Jockeying or DJing, 3) breakdancing, and 4) graffiti-writing. Troker, a band sometimes portrayed as psychedelic, references hip hop through its use of the turntable, a DJ’s tool. Musicologist Mark Katz writes about “performative DJs,” who select records and manipulate them in real time. This describes DJ Sonicko, who distorts fragments of the band’s recordings by scratching, or quickly pushing a record back and forth underneath the needle of a record player to create, what Katz describes as, “that wicki-wicki or zigga-zigga.” This kind of scratching technique, according to Katz, “violates its own medium. . . . In a sense, scratching is, like its hip hop cousin graffiti, an art of vandalism. It is a celebration of noise.” In creating this transgressive connection to sound, Troker taps into what sociologist Pancho McFarland calls a polyculturalism that “challenges essentialist notions of ethno-racial identity.” McFarland recognizes a similar background of colonialism, slavery, and disenfranchisement in the cultures of African-American hip hop and Chicano hip hop. In Troker’s use of the turntable, the band challenges stereotypes of Mexican music as well as the flow vocal of imitation. Through these elements of performative DJing, polyculturalism, and focal mismatch fuse together musical ideas drawing from different styles, creating an act of gaiety throughout Troker’s performance of “Príncipe Charro.”

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34 Ibid., 66.
The performances of Common and Troker utilizes a musical act of gaiety as a powerful tool to mitigate interracial and geopolitical difference across musical genres just as the Lavender Menace’s action in the NOW meeting raised consciousness about the pushing out of a lesbian presence in the movement. These acts of gaiety all use alternative tools to create commonality between performer and listener. Common used tools of genre integration, harmonic release, and instrumental focus to advocate for social movements like the comprehension of “the New Jim Crow.” Troker use a turntable, humor, and an unapologetic sound in a political atmosphere hostile to Mexicans through dissonant intervals and formal incongruities as tool to further involve the audience.

Echoing concepts in the act of gaiety performed by the Lavender Menace recounted at the beginning of this chapter, poet Audre Lorde critically notes that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” in her address to the Second Sex conference in 1979, saying, “difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.”36 Vocalities of outrage and Warner’s acts of gaiety are such alternative tools, assisting in the exposure of oppressive normatives through modes of resistance that potentially ignite perception of personal biases and cultivate creative engagement. There is a power in the simple performative tools of taking off one shirt, symbolizing one cultural identity, to reveal another, or queering expected norms set up in NPR Music’s taste system. The vocalities of outrage, like that of Saul Williams and the Drive-By Truckers, and acts of gaiety, like those presented by Common and Troker, provide such alternative tools. Through imagining better worlds in their performances, these groups forge links of commonality through ethos and fight for a better otherwise.

CONCLUSION

As I sat in an Albuquerque, New Mexico coffee shop one day in late March, I heard the sound of applause over the café’s sound system. With lilting electronic jazz organ and the smooth and rhythmically connected “nah nah” vocalization, I recognized the beginning of Noname’s Tiny Desk Concert (see figure 6.1). I had just arrived back from my fieldwork trip to the NPR offices in Washington D.C., and, in this moment, it felt uncanny and strange to encounter the subject of my research in such an everyday place, far away from the headquarters producing the concerts. I then learned that the employee, Elise, who had just spun Noname’s concert over the sound system, was a fan of Tiny Desk. She was not only a fan of the rap artist but also of Tiny Desk as an enjoyable and appropriate musical experience to project throughout the café. When Elise told me that she thought they had the concerts in their office, I got the sense that the performances were enjoyable to her because listening to them while working made her feel like she was there in the office, listening to Noname rap, sing, and banter with the audience. The sound, more than the video, was taking her to a place of musical escape with a personal-feeling serenade, and she was sharing that with the people in the café.

NPR Music and Tiny Desk are cultural products known and beloved by some and unknown or disliked by others. A military scientist working at Sandia National Laboratories I met said he listened to the series nonstop while he worked and that it calmed him down. He said he had probably heard all of the concerts they had ever published, because he listened to the series so much. On the other hand, a vocal master’s student at the University of New
Mexico had never heard of the series and was not that interested in its presentation of mainly popular music.

![Figure 6.1. Noname’s Tiny Desk performance, April 2017 (left to right) Connor Baker, Noname, Akenya Seymour, Phoelix, Brian Sanborn (not pictured).](image)

While on my trip to Washington D.C., the weather was rainy and cold, and I bought an NPR knitted hat at the gift shop to try to keep warm. At the airport, a couple started a conversation with me because of my NPR hat, saying their family listened to NPR’s *All Things Considered* every day. The couple had never heard of the Tiny Desk concerts and also seemed uninterested. This was similarly reflected in the NPR tour participants who showed a strong admiration for NPR as a trusted news source, but were not overly interested in NPR Music’s content. In a different vein, my conservative family in Texas believes any content produced by NPR is a source for communist propaganda, especially any arts and culture

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coverage. One of my uncles calls NPR “National Pravda Radio” in reference to the former official newspaper of the Russian Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

From these experiences, I observe NPR as a polarizing organization with its own political stance, however unarticulated that may be. People are devoted to it as their only reliable news source and others perceive it as extremely liberal propaganda. Within the context of the election, the Tiny Desk space and venue is far from politically neutral, especially in such a polarizing time, however it is not perceived to be a point of agency by its creators whose focus is seen as Onkey states “aesthetically first.” My experiences with people who love it, hate it, or have never heard of it show the tenuous nature of any cultural product, engaging with what people in different points of life and places believe valuable. NPR Music’s Tiny Desk is not any single of these opinions. It is not wholly benign, subversive, or inconsequential, yet it is a mixture with the defined taste system here only meant to identify trends and norms. This contradiction between being a mixture of absolutes at once, as both the arbiter and critic of “taste,” creates a space where difference exists together, connecting to Josh Kun’s concept audiotopia, where music on Tiny Desk, while not all-inclusive, potentiates the definition and empowerment of difference socially, politically, and culturally to varying degrees. This conclusion draws together possibly perspectives on Tiny Desk as it validates certain acts as culturally significant while allowing socially subversive expressions advocating for social difference. In doing this, I suggest future points of research for this rich topic.

Having presented NPR, NPR Music and Tiny Desk as nested aspects of a larger whole that cater to a specific audience, NPR Music produces a taste system that features the alternatives through emphasis on perceived authenticity and innovation. This taste system
allows the production of norms as well as the queering of those norms. Two specific methods of queering were presented in this project as vocalities of outrage and acts of gaiety. Both of these modes rely on emotional connection between the performers and the audience through sound. However, that meeting of emotion is crucially oppositional, just as the validated and the subversive is oppositional. This state of contradiction is not meant to criticize NPR or NPR Music for what it produces, but only describe and speak to its work within a context. An apt summation of that context can be understood in the space Tiny Desk inhabits, both as a physical venue and as the political and cultural space with all implied standards and taste system of NPR Music as a whole.

Christopher Small describes the spaces where music is made as following a social function indicated through the place’s location and structure. The modern concert hall’s location is situated in a position of geographic and economic power. Inside, the hall is structured as a physical divide of the everyday from art space, and the stage separates the concert consumer and the musical laborer. From Small’s examination, the place music is made is a critical aspect to the kind of music produced and who participates. Variations in this place are a component of “musicking,” where ritual, cultural value, and social positioning allow members of a social group to define themselves as distinctive and such dividing lines can be “explored, affirmed, and celebrated.”

Josh Kun argues that music is a spatial practice “organizing places along spatial trajectories” referring to Michel de Certeau’s ideas of “travel story,” as “narrated adventure,” and “geographies of action.” Kun describes music’s ability to similarly define national and individual identities as a function of musical space that shifts and redefines through the

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collective actions creating it: “Through music, space is constructed and de-constructed, shaped and shattered, filled up and hollowed out. Music creates spaces in which cultures get both contested and consolidated and both sounded and silence.” Kun’s concept reflects the similar validation and subversion NPR Music’s taste system allows, yet it is the performers who are granted the agency to shift these spaces through emotional connections like vocalities of outrage and acts of gaiety.

Through musical space, Kun potentiates his audiotopia as “the space within and produced by a musical element that offers the listener and/or the musician new maps for re-imagining the present social world.” Although, Tiny Desk asserts rules on the performers, the space of Tiny Desk allows a collective agency inclusive of NPR Music reporters and audience as well as the performers and their own fan bases. The contradictions of Tiny Desk allow an audiotopia of difference, a place where alternative options are explored, and, as Kun states, “where contradictions and conflicts do not cancel each other out but coexist and live through each other.” There are norms in this, yet the variety of content presented on Tiny Desk appeals both to the broad range of tastes in NPR Music’s audience and to a wide affective foundation.

José Muñoz proposes utopia as a potential of hope, the imagining of alternatives, “the emotional modality that permits us to access futurity.” Utopia is always at a liminal point of agency, the point between before and after. Muñoz states that this utopian performative in queer culture (specifically referring to LGBTQ culture) needs “a critical modality of hope

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4 Ibid., 22.
5 Ibid., 23.
6 Ibid.
Muñoz marks the need for multiple affective expressions to create a utopian performatice and generate the liminal space where, as with acts of gaiety, crying in one eye laughing in the other are heard and understood. Subversion to the norm on Tiny Desk through these acts of gaiety, vocalities of outrage, and other affective expressions parallels the potentiated of Muñoz’s conception of utopia as “always in process, always becoming, emerging in difference.” The place, venue, or stage of Tiny Desk is limiting, enforcing rules on its guest, and dominated by a primarily news producing organization in the nation’s capital. However, the space of Tiny Desk offers the potential for utopian performatives, allowing the inclusivity and hope encompassed in a dialectic of difference like an audiotopia. Tiny Desk, far from all-inclusive, still potentiates utopia through the collective liminal agency of imagining better futures. These performances are documented and published where the affective expression, as Muñoz describes, “lingers and serves as a conduit for knowing and feeling other people.” The emotional connection through music, especially in an intimate venue, makes the space of Tiny Desk socially flexible.

Tiny Desk is a rich archive of performance and performativity and this project hardly touches the surface. The creative possibilities of further research span Tiny Desk’s history for performative analysis. This project’s aim was to begin a discussion of Tiny Desk’s venue and values and to show the complexity of musical performance, its internal actors and popular consumption. Each chapter of this thesis reveals more about my own identity and thought process, as each touches on the broad topic of musical performance and agency encapsulated on Tiny Desk. The performances and careers of Tank and the Bangas, Saul Williams, the

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8 Ibid., 111.
9 Ibid., 112.
10 Ibid., 113.
Drive-By Truckers, Common, and Troker were only perceived through a narrow and rosy lens that Tiny Desk creates and publishes and that I consumed. Yet the contradictions Tiny Desk exposes remain fascinating: the centricity of the alternative, the perception of the benign in a contextually subversive expression, and the wealth of human artistry and emotion. Does Tiny Desk’s content validate or queer? At least for now, the answer is yes.
APPENDIX

Here I include the information collected in the content survey for all of the Tiny Desk concerts in the time frame, June 2016 through June 2017. I break this information down by date, performer, producing journalist, general genre, performance duration, and views on YouTube as of May 15, 2019. Table A.1 additionally marks performances I considered as including social-political commentary. Table A.2 shows the lists I used to create the word clouds connecting journalists and genre in chapter 2 and includes all of the 19 producing journalists in the period. The last two tables show YouTube views broken down to videos with over one million views (table A.3) and videos with less than ten thousand views (table A.4).

The names of the groups are often the name of the front person sometimes with their band, for example Margo Price and the Price Tags or John Congleton and the Nighty Nite. Performances that were considered to contain a form of social-political commentary are marked with a cross, this is not to imply that the unmarked performers take no stance on social issues. Rather, these performances did not fit my criteria for social-political commentary described in chapter 2. The journalist is the NPR team member that pitched and arranged for the band to play at Tiny Desk and additionally wrote up a brief article about the performance including some background, activities of the group, and usually an iTunes link to their newly released album. The general genre listed is the groups’ categorization easily found in a preliminary web search. The iTunes genre is dictated from the iTunes link designation for the new album and is usually less descriptive. The duration of the concerts can last under ten minutes to over twenty and has to do with the number of songs the band
chooses to perform, between three and four. The last column of table A.1 lists the YouTube views as of May 2019. Although the views do not represent the exact number of individuals who watched the video, it does show that the videos are reaching a large audience.

Table A.1. All the Tiny Desk concerts published between June 2016 and June 2017 surveyed in this project.

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Performer</th>
<th>Journalist</th>
<th>General Genre</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Views*</th>
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<td>Tom Huizenga</td>
<td>Classical</td>
<td>12:57</td>
<td>50,438</td>
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<td>6/6/16</td>
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<td>Stephen Thompson</td>
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<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Indie Rock, Indie Pop</td>
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<td>Suraya Mohamed</td>
<td>Jazz</td>
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<td>6/20/16</td>
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<td>Country, Singer-songwriter</td>
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<td>6/24/16</td>
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<td>Anastasia Tsioulcas</td>
<td>Indie Rock</td>
<td>11:12</td>
<td>414,649</td>
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<td>6/30/16</td>
<td>Adia Victoria †</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Country, Rock</td>
<td>11:00</td>
<td>135,087</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Los Hacheros</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
<td>Latin Music</td>
<td>23:40</td>
<td>1,021,829</td>
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<td>Valley Queen</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Americana</td>
<td>14:54</td>
<td>136,900</td>
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<td>7/12/16</td>
<td>Jan Bunnett †</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
<td>Jazz</td>
<td>22:12</td>
<td>58,300</td>
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<td>7/15/16</td>
<td>Chris Forsyth &amp; The Solar Motel Band</td>
<td>Lars Gotrich</td>
<td>Alternative/Indie</td>
<td>17:43</td>
<td>68,165</td>
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<td>7/18/16</td>
<td>Gregory Porter †</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Jazz, Blues, Soul, Gospel</td>
<td>17:25</td>
<td>1,130,331</td>
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<td>7/22/16</td>
<td>John Congleton And The Nighty Nite †</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Alternative/Indie</td>
<td>14:26</td>
<td>49,510</td>
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<td>7/15/16</td>
<td>Xenia Rubinos †</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
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<td>14:09</td>
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<td>286,629</td>
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<td>Indie Rock, Folk Rock</td>
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<td>René Marie ‡</td>
<td>Patrick Jarenwattananon</td>
<td>Jazz</td>
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<td>144,405</td>
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<td>Bobby Carter</td>
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<td>15:37</td>
<td>34,436,559</td>
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<td>Suraya Mohamed</td>
<td>Latin Jazz, Salsa</td>
<td>15:10</td>
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<td>8/22/16</td>
<td>Margaret Glaspy</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Singer-songwriter, Indie Folk, Folk Pop</td>
<td>13:04</td>
<td>960,647</td>
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<td>Nina Diaz</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
<td>Alternative/Indie</td>
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<td>8/29/16</td>
<td>Big Thief</td>
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<td>Indie Rock, Folk Rock</td>
<td>9:23</td>
<td>1,247,645</td>
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<td>9/7/16</td>
<td>William Bell ‡</td>
<td>Rachel Horn</td>
<td>R&amp;B/Soul</td>
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<td>The Secret Sisters</td>
<td>Nick Michael</td>
<td>Americana, Folk, Country</td>
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<td>Saul Williams ‡</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Hip Hop, Alternative Hip Hop, Experimental Hip Hop, Spoken Word, Poetry</td>
<td>20:47</td>
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<td>Corinne Bailey Rae</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
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<td>1,450,743</td>
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<td>Performance Art</td>
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<td>4,851,479</td>
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<td>Tom Huizenga</td>
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<td>96,339</td>
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<td>Common at The White House library ‡</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Hip Hop/Rap</td>
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<td>2,387,404</td>
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<td>Haley Bonar ‡</td>
<td>Stephen Thompson</td>
<td>Folk, Slowcore, Indie Rock</td>
<td>10:41</td>
<td>537,523</td>
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<td>RDGLDGRN ‡</td>
<td>Suraya Mohamed</td>
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<td>Stephen Thompson</td>
<td>Indie Folk, Indie Pop</td>
<td>17:24</td>
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<td>Bob Boilen</td>
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<td>Artist</td>
<td>Host</td>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>Time</td>
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<td>11/2/16</td>
<td>The Westerlies</td>
<td>Tom Huizenga</td>
<td>Jazz, Brass Quartet</td>
<td>10:54</td>
<td>63,785</td>
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<tr>
<td>11/7/16</td>
<td>Ta-ku &amp; Wafia</td>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>Electronica, R&amp;B</td>
<td>11:23</td>
<td>172,671</td>
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<td>Adam Torres</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Folk</td>
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<td>John Paul White †</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Folk, Country</td>
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<td>Attacca Quartet †</td>
<td>Tom Huizenga</td>
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<td>Tegan And Sara †</td>
<td>Josh Rogosin</td>
<td>Indie Pop, Indie Folk, Synth-pop, Indie Rock, Pop</td>
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<td>641,089</td>
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<td>Pinegrove</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Indie Rock, Indie Folk, Alternative Country, Americana, Emo</td>
<td>12:44</td>
<td>738,334</td>
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<tr>
<td>12/15/16</td>
<td>Ro James † †</td>
<td>Bobby Carter</td>
<td>Alternative R&amp;B</td>
<td>12:25</td>
<td>256,814</td>
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<td>12/9/16</td>
<td>Alsarah &amp; The Nubatones</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
<td>Dance, Electronic</td>
<td>11:22</td>
<td>167,615</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Gucci Mane</td>
<td>Frannie Kelley</td>
<td>Hip Hop, Trap, Southern Hip Hop</td>
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<td>Derek Gripper</td>
<td>Tom Cole</td>
<td>Classical Guitar, Kora</td>
<td>14:48</td>
<td>117,720</td>
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<td>The Oh Hellos</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Folk Rock, Indie Folk</td>
<td>14:32</td>
<td>153,005</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Declan McKenna †</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Indie Rock</td>
<td>11:37</td>
<td>740,829</td>
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<td>Donny McCaslin</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Jazz</td>
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<td>220,708</td>
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<td>1/13/17</td>
<td>Lila Downs †</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
<td>Latin, Latin Rock</td>
<td>21:49</td>
<td>319,359</td>
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<td>Brent Cobb †</td>
<td>Lars Gotrich</td>
<td>Country, Americana, Outlaw Country, Southern Rock</td>
<td>17:52</td>
<td>165,481</td>
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<tr>
<td>1/23/17</td>
<td>BADBADNOTG OOD</td>
<td>Bobby Carter</td>
<td>Post-bop, Hip Hop production, Jazz-funk, Free Improvisation, Electronic, Jazz Fusion</td>
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<td>1,456,888</td>
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<td>Miramar</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
<td>Bolero Music, Sylvia Rexach composer</td>
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<td>118,886</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Gallant</td>
<td>Suraya Mohamed</td>
<td>Contemporary R&amp;B, Dance/Electronic</td>
<td>12:15</td>
<td>901,524</td>
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<td>2/1/17</td>
<td>D.R.A.M. † †</td>
<td>Bobby Carter</td>
<td>Hip Hop, Contemporary R&amp;B, Soul music, Trap</td>
<td>20:44</td>
<td>2,409,198</td>
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<tr>
<td>2/6/17</td>
<td>Run The Jewels †</td>
<td>Mina Tavakoli</td>
<td>Hip Hop, Alternative Hip Hop, Conscious Hip Hop, Hardcore Hip</td>
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<td>1,813,052</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Artist(s)</td>
<td>Host</td>
<td>Genre(s)</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Plays</td>
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<td>Esmé Patterson †</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Folk</td>
<td>11:38</td>
<td>538,674</td>
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<td>2/15/17</td>
<td>Agnes Obel</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Folk, Soul</td>
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<td>205,913</td>
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<td>Little Simz</td>
<td>Cameron Robert</td>
<td>Hip Hop/Rap</td>
<td>11:58</td>
<td>406,645</td>
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<td>Tank and The Bangas †</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Funk, Soul, Hip Hop, Rock, Spoken Word</td>
<td>23:48</td>
<td>7,870,663</td>
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<td>Red Baraat's Holi Celebration</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Mix of Indian Bhangra and New Orleans Big Band</td>
<td>17:13</td>
<td>716,904</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Sampha</td>
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<td>Electronic, Soul, R&amp;B</td>
<td>15:37</td>
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<td>Alternative/Indie</td>
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<td>Electropop</td>
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<td>Noname †</td>
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<td>4/10/17</td>
<td>Sinkane †</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Rock, Soft House, Reggae Fusion, African</td>
<td>14:36</td>
<td>141,635</td>
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<td>4/14/17</td>
<td>Ljova And The Kontraband †</td>
<td>Anastasia Tsioulcas</td>
<td>Fusion of Classical, Jazz, Tango, Eastern European and Balkan Folk Music</td>
<td>23:43</td>
<td>69,146</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Chicano Batman †</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
<td>Soul, Tropical Music, Psychedelic Music</td>
<td>12:24</td>
<td>608,161</td>
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<td>4/28/17</td>
<td>Antonio Lizana</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
<td>Flamenco Jazz</td>
<td>17:55</td>
<td>87,179</td>
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<td>Avery*Sunshine</td>
<td>Rodney Carmichael</td>
<td>R&amp;B, Soul</td>
<td>17:08</td>
<td>387,166</td>
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<td>Peter Silberman †</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Singer-songwriter</td>
<td>23:50</td>
<td>51,756</td>
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<td>Aimee Mann †</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Rock, Pop Rock, Folk</td>
<td>15:17</td>
<td>336,201</td>
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<td>5/12/17</td>
<td>Danilo Brito</td>
<td>Tom Cole</td>
<td>Choro</td>
<td>17:31</td>
<td>135,592</td>
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<td>Tim Darcy</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Alternative/Indie</td>
<td>13:17</td>
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<td>Jazz, Psychedelic</td>
<td>21:35</td>
<td>83,317</td>
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<td>5/22/17</td>
<td>Julia Jacklin †</td>
<td>Stephen Thompson</td>
<td>Art Pop, Indie Folk, Alternative Country</td>
<td>15:19</td>
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<tr>
<td>5/26/17</td>
<td>Gabriel Garzón-Montano</td>
<td>Bobby Carter</td>
<td>Alternative R&amp;B, Soul, Funk</td>
<td>11:13</td>
<td>110,585</td>
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<tr>
<td>5/30/17</td>
<td>Royal Thunder †</td>
<td>Lars Gotrich</td>
<td>Hard Rock, Psychedelic Rock, Stoner Rock, Occult Rock</td>
<td>14:28</td>
<td>79,915</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/2/17</td>
<td>Nick Grant</td>
<td>Rodney Carmichael</td>
<td>Hip Hop/Rap</td>
<td>12:23</td>
<td>129,462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/5/17</td>
<td>Violents &amp; Monica Martin</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Alternative/Indie</td>
<td>14:53</td>
<td>438,998</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/12/17</td>
<td>Perfume Genius</td>
<td>Robin Hilton</td>
<td>Indie Pop, Chamber Pop, Contemporary Folk, Indie Rock, Art Pop</td>
<td>9:28</td>
<td>313,533</td>
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<td>6/16/17</td>
<td>Penguin Café</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>Chamber Jazz, Folk</td>
<td>15:54</td>
<td>213,535</td>
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<td>6/19/17</td>
<td>Tigers Jaw</td>
<td>Lars Gotrich</td>
<td>Indie Rock, Emo, Pop Punk</td>
<td>11:01</td>
<td>271,427</td>
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<td>6/26/17</td>
<td>Ravi Coltrane Quartet</td>
<td>Suraya Mohamed</td>
<td>Jazz, Post-bop</td>
<td>26:05</td>
<td>147,364</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/30/17</td>
<td>Helado Negro †</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
<td>Latin, Folk, Experimental, Electronic</td>
<td>14:53</td>
<td>179,380</td>
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†Indicates performance was considered to have social commentary
^ YouTube as of May 15, 2019
Table A.2. A tally of the journalists who pitched and produced these concerts over this time period with a listing of the general genres of the artists they have proposed.

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<thead>
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<th>Journalists</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>General Genre</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Jazz, Latin, Funk Rock, Contemporary R&amp;B, Jazz-Funk, Alternative/Indie, Dance, Electronic, Latin Rock, Bolero the music of Sylvia Rexach, Soul, Tropical, Psychedelic, Flamenco Jazz, Experimental</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bobby Carter</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Hip-hop, R&amp;B, Funk, Soul, Alternative R&amp;B, Jazz Rap Neo-Soul, Post-bop, Hip hop production, Jazz-funk, Free improvisation, Electronica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Huizenga</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Classical, Alternative Country, Country Rock, Alternative Rock, Jazz, Brass Quartet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodney Carmichael</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>R&amp;B, Soul, Hip-Hop/Rap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Cole</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Classical Guitar, Kora, Choro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anastasia Tsioulcas</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Indie Rock, Fusion of Classical, Jazz, Tango, Eastern European and Balkan Folk Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel Horn</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>R&amp;B/Soul, Country, Pop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron Robert</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Electronica, R&amp;B, Hip Hop/Rap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin Hilton</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Indie Pop, Chamber Pop, Contemporary Folk, Indie Rock, Art Pop</td>
</tr>
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Table A.3. The 17 performances out of the content survey 96 concerts that have over a million views.

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<th>Performers</th>
<th>Journalist</th>
<th>Views</th>
<th>Genre (iTunes)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Anderson .Paak &amp; The Free Nationals</td>
<td>Bobby Carter</td>
<td>34,436,559</td>
<td>R&amp;B/Soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tank and The Bangas</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>7,870,663</td>
<td>R&amp;B/Soul</td>
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<td>Tash Sultana</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>7,861,172</td>
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<td>Blue Man Group</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>4,851,479</td>
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<td>Noname</td>
<td>Bobby Carter</td>
<td>3,143,366</td>
<td>Hip-hop/Rap</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alt-J</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>2,509,988</td>
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<td>D.R.A.M.</td>
<td>Bobby Carter</td>
<td>2,409,198</td>
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<tr>
<td>Common at the White House Library</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>2,387,404</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sampha</td>
<td>Bobby Carter</td>
<td>1,919,361</td>
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<tr>
<td>Run The Jewels</td>
<td>Mina Tavakoli</td>
<td>1,813,052</td>
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<td>BADBADNOTGOOD</td>
<td>Bobby Carter</td>
<td>1,456,888</td>
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<td>Corinne Bailey Rae</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
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<td>Big Thief</td>
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<td>1,247,645</td>
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<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>1,218,477</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gucci Mane</td>
<td>Frannie Kelley</td>
<td>1,184,353</td>
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<td>Gregory Porter</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>1,130,331</td>
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<tr>
<td>Los Hacheros</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
<td>1,021,829</td>
<td>Música tropical</td>
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</table>
Table A.4. The 20 performances with less than ten thousand views, includes all of the classical performances represented in this time period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performers</th>
<th>Journalist</th>
<th>Views</th>
<th>Genre (iTunes)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joshua Bell &amp; Jeremy Denk</td>
<td>Tom Huizenga</td>
<td>96,339</td>
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<td>Billy Bragg &amp; Joe Henry</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>88,828</td>
<td>Americana</td>
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<td>Eddie Palmieri</td>
<td>Suraya Mohamed</td>
<td>87,182</td>
<td>Música tropical</td>
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<td>Antonio Lizana</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
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<td>Pop</td>
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<td>Troker</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
<td>83,317</td>
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<td>Royal Thunder</td>
<td>Lars Gotrich</td>
<td>79,915</td>
<td>Metal</td>
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<td>Brandy Clark</td>
<td>Jacob Ganz</td>
<td>77,578</td>
<td>Country</td>
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<td>Charles Lloyd &amp; Jason Moran</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
<td>72,455</td>
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<td>Rachel Baron Pine</td>
<td>Tom Huizenga</td>
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<td>Ljova And The Kontraband</td>
<td>Anastasia Tsioulcas</td>
<td>69,146</td>
<td>World</td>
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<td>Chris Forsyth &amp; The Solar Motel Band</td>
<td>Lars Gotrich</td>
<td>68,165</td>
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<td>The Westerlies</td>
<td>Tom Huizenga</td>
<td>63,785</td>
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<td>Attacca Quartet</td>
<td>Tom Huizenga</td>
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<td>Adam Torres</td>
<td>Bob Boilen</td>
<td>60,248</td>
<td>Folk</td>
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<td>Jan Bunnett</td>
<td>Felix Contreras</td>
<td>58,300</td>
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<td>Tim Darcy</td>
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<td>56,951</td>
<td>Indie Rock</td>
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<td>Peter Silberman</td>
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<td>51,756</td>
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<td>Bary Douglas</td>
<td>Tom Huizenga</td>
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<td>John Congleton And The Nighty Nite</td>
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<td>Alessio Bax</td>
<td>Tom Huizenga</td>
<td>38,830</td>
<td>Classical</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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