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Critics and scholars have noted the predominance of white male musicians in British-American indie rock, despite the gradual but noticeable ethnic diversity within the scene. In the 1990s, Asian American musicians such as James Iha of Smashing Pumpkins, Tony Kanal of No Doubt, Matt Wong of Reel Big Fish, Mike Park of Skankin’ Pickle, and Joey Santiago of the Pixies partook of the indie and alternative rock music’s side stage in the United States. Since the beginning of this decade, many musicians of Asian descent took the indie rock center stage leading iconic groups such as Yeah Yeah Yeahs, VHS or Beta, Blonde Redhead, Deerhoof, and Thao and the Get Down Stay Down.¹ This paper begins by asking: What is the current racial politics within the U.S.-based indie rock scene? How do American musicians of Asian descent today use the indie rock sound and ideology to navigate themselves as just-above-the-radar minorities?

In this paper, I argue that multiculturalism dominates the conceptions of race and ethnicity within the indie rock music discourse and scene. I use the word “multiculturalism” to refer to the liberal ideology that strives for racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in the post-Civil-Rights United States. I argue that the current multiculturalist environment provides an opportunity for individuals who fall outside of the black-and-white racial binary to experiment with their formerly silenced sound and identity. This paper examines two ethnographic case studies from my dissertation research on the Asian American experiences within the indie rock music scene. Before the analysis, I’ll first bring us up-to-date with a summary of the recent institutional and social changes that occurred within and around the U.S.-based indie rock scene.

In the 1980s, the term “indie” referred to financial independence from major record companies. Indie bands and labels produced records using newly affordable technology. They formed an underground network of record distribution and performance exchange. The term “indie” changed from being descriptive to prescriptive when musicians, journalists, and label owners began to use it as a way to ascribe value to their state of independence. The DIY, or do-it-yourself, ethos thus emerged as an ideological compass for some indie rockers. The indie rock discourse has since then fluctuated between its practical and ideological connotations.
In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the genre of “indie rock” split into a number of subgenres. Indie rock musicians, critics, and listeners employ subgenre identifiers to describe the sound as well as the associated image and subcultural identities. These subgenre identifiers include: dream pop, noise rock, indie pop, indie folk, Riot Grrrl, math rock, shoegaze, lo-fi, post-rock, post-punk, post-metal, post-hardcore, slowcore, new prog, dance-punk, twee, neo-garage, [\textit{\textsuperscript{1}}] gypsy-punk, etc. [\textit{\textsuperscript{2}}] The list expands infinitely as subgenres further split and recombine with present and past genre labels. [\textit{\textsuperscript{3}}] With hyphens and prefixes like “neo”, “new”, or “post”, musicians (and journalists), I argue, deploy DIY inventiveness to mix-and-match tags in order to construct unique band identities. This is not to say that earlier indie rock or other musical genres are more “pure”, or less complex and hybrid. What I am suggesting here is not just an aesthetic change, but a discursive shift in indie rock music of the late 1990s and 2000s.

The indie rock imperative for categorical multiplicity, I contend, inflects the logic of multiculturalism in the contemporary U.S. The splitting of the term “indie rock” into an array of subgenre terms parallels the conception of the United States as a multiracial, multi-ethnic nation-state. In this paradigm, whatever cultural difference exists under the umbrella term of “indie rock” or “the United States” should be treated with tolerance and respect.

In the next section, I will examine how two young indie rockers – Kathi Ko and Carol Bui – use the DIY ideology to express and contemplate their unique “indie” cultural identities. This analysis focuses on the strategies they deploy to de-essentialize “Asianness” while negotiating issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. The juxtaposition of these two minority examples will hopefully shed light on the limitations and contradictions of multiculturalism practiced in the United States.

Kathi Ko, otherwise known as “Kathi Killer”, is a guitarist and bassist who was playing in two bands when I first met her in 2007. I met Kathi at The Charleston, a dimly lit bar on Bedford Avenue in “hipster central” Williamsburg in Brooklyn of New York after her band Each Others’ Mother rocked their set in front of a 20-something-year-old, beer-drinking, and pizza-munching audience. Each Others’ Mothers, in Kathi’s words, is an “all-girl indie math-punk” band that she started with some close friends from college. Her other band BoySkout is a queer-identified, all-female indie pop group from Brooklyn.

I told Kathi that I first stumbled upon her band BoySkout
What Kathi distances herself from is not exactly the geographical Asia or the ethnic Asian America. By defiantly displacing or “killing” her Asian-or-Korean-sounding last name, I interpret, Kathi rejects a brand of Asianness constructed out of the capitalist impetus to consume Asian culture and people. Alluding to Sleater-Kinney, a band that emerged from the 1990s Riot Grrrl feminist punk movement, Kathi gestures toward her anti-capitalist stance regarding culture. I argue that her punk-derived, anti-commercial refusal of Asianness provides an implicit critique of the late-capitalist multiculturalism in U.S. bell hooks refers to this ideology as “eating the other”, the cultural process of commodifying and consuming ethnic otherness (1999). Born to working-class immigrant parents in Queens, Kathi admits that she feels like an outsider in the hipster indie scene in Brooklyn, despite her active involvement within it. Kathi’s ambivalence toward Asianness exposes the internationalist appetite for cultural otherness common among her (white) college-educated upper-middle class peers (Wilson, 2007). It also undercuts the seemingly progressive multiculturalist ideology in the indie rock discourse and scene in the U.S.

My second case study Carol Bui is a Washington, D.C.-based guitarist and singer-songwriter. In Adams Morgan in D.C, we sat down in a Middle Eastern kabob restaurant where Carol told me about her new musical
direction. Carol cites her current musical “obsession” as the Belgian singer Natacha Atlas. Through the filter of Atlas’s multiethnic biography and influences, Carol has been intensively studying Arabic pop music. Her new song “Mira You’re Free With me” is a product of her recent immersion in Arabic music and Middle Eastern belly dance.

Regarding her new song, she said, “it’s all about the rhythm.” In order to embrace the centrality of percussion, Carol has been practicing on the drum set fervently so that she could play all the drum parts herself. During our conversation, she drummed on the table while demonstrating a conventional Arabic rhythm called “baladi.” She described the baladi rhythm as being “heavy” and “earthy.” This “earthiness” is most evident in its indexical relationship to a hip-dipping or “sitting-on” movement in belly dance. The traditional baladi rhythm can be notated as followed.

In Arabic traditional and pop music, this rhythm is played...
Figure 2. Lyrics of “Mira”:
Verse Two + Chorus

if you’re so inclined to sweep me off my feet
leave your crinkled hundreds
out for me to keep
tell me about your wife
tell me about your babies
I don't give a fuck
but you don’t have to hear me say it

we're right on time (2x)
you're free with me (2x)

on a dumbek or a darabuka. On the drum set, Carol plays a rhythm similar to the baladi pattern [second line in Figure One]. She adds an extra 16th note right before “dum” on beat 3 [notated in blue in Figure One]. She also adds a 16th-note pickup before the last “tek” on beat 4 [notated in green in Figure One]. So, Carol’s version reads like this: “Dum Dum – tekka Dum – tekka –”, or “boom boom – chacha boom – boomcha –”, or “1 and – and a 3 – a 4 –". In this example, you will first hear handclapping on every beat of the measure, followed by Carol’s baladi-like rhythm on the drum set.

Carol’s “baladi-rock” rhythm lends itself to an ethnic ambiguity, highlighting elements from both Arabic music and British-American rock music. I use a familiar rock drum part exemplified in Queen’s song “We Will Rock You” [Figure One] to show how the drum part in “Mira” departs from the rhythmic conventions of British-American pop/rock. This “all-too-familiar” rhythm reads like this: “Boom Boom Cha – Boom – Cha –”. Compared to Queen’s song, Carol’s drum part lacks the articulation of the first upbeat, usually played on the snare drum. The second upbeat in Carol’s version is overshadowed by the struck hi-hat cymbal in the mix. [Notated in red in Figure One]. Also, adding to the mix are tracks of dumbek and handclapping, both are central to Middle Eastern belly dance music.

This ethnically “in-between” rhythm, I argue, is foundational to illustrating the emotional depth of the character Mira in the song’s lyrics. Mira is a club dancer. With “crinkled dollars” and “crinkled hundreds,” her clients
pay for her anonymous intimacy and companionship. Beneath Mira’s work life is a psychological interior exuding angst and ambivalence. With a coarse, throaty, tone-defying, and PJ-Harvey-like vocal timbre, Carol sings lines such as: “I don’t give a fuck / but you don’t have to hear me say that.” Her jagged post-punk drumming and aggressive vocals provide a running commentary critiquing Mira’s story as a dancer. [Figure Two] I will play a segment of the song that starts with the second verse as it transitions into the chorus. Notice that the drum part during the verse section is a stripped-down version of Carol’s “baladi-rock” rhythm as I just described.

Marked by a loud, compressed, and aggressive sound, Carol Bui’s performance enlivens the character of Mira. Why does Carol, who is of Vietnamese descent, link an Arabic-inspired rhythm with the fictional character of Mira, who is an English-and-Arabic-speaking female club dancer? I argue that this is an instance of strategic anti-essentialism, a term that George Lipsitz coins to refer the process that an individual “seeks a particular disguise on the basis of its ability to highlight, underscore, and augment an aspect of one’s identity that one can not express directly” (1994, p. 62). By creating a representation of an Arabic-speaking female dancer in her music, Carol reclaims the Asian female body while circumventing the risk of being objectified.

Carol is careful to identify her interpretation of Arabic music as subjective. To explain her attraction to Natacha Atlas’ music, she said, “it’s poppy and accessible enough to me, but it’s also [pause] exotic in that the melodies and the modal scales…are still a little [pause] just exotic – to me.” Self-conscious of her musical “obsession” and the implications of such an obsession, she repeats the phrase “to me” twice in the sentence. On the surface, Carol’s cross-ethnic identification with Arabic music would seem problematic as it flashes an Orientalist fantasy (Said, 1979). It’s important to note that Carol, of Vietnamese descent, also embodies the object of Orientalism.

On a D.C.-based news blog, Carol’s show was recently promoted as a “Hot Asian Alert!”[5] The Asianness of her body is highlighted over her music, on a billboard of ethnic and gender differences – in a tagline that says “Hot Twins, Hot Asians, New York Jews.” This multicultural-inflected tagline not only objectifies women, Asians, and Jews, it also exemplifies the capitalist appetite for cultural otherness. The term “Hot Asians” specifically resonates with the trafficking of the Asian female body in the sex-based transpacific industry of pornography and mail-order brides. Carol’s characterization of “Mira” is not an Orientalist trope. Inventing her own baladi-rock rhythm, she exploits an imaginary character constructed out of her strategic anti-essentialist identification with a
closely related “Asian” otherness. Performing it with a biting post-punk musicality, Carol takes charge of her own body while making an indirect critique on the global sexual economy that objectifies and circulates Asian female sexuality.

To conclude, I return to the issue of multiculturalism. Cultural otherness has become a form of “multicultural capital” (Bryson, 1996) that present-day hipster indie rockers consume and invest in. This is in part a reflection of the demographics of the scene participants: the majority is white, college-educated, upper-middle class men and some women. My case studies of Kathi Ko and Carol Bui have hopefully presented the complex ways in which race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class intersect in the social and musical lives of Asian American indie rock musicians. Their experiences challenge the “illusion of autonomy” articulated by the Do-It-Yourself ethos in the indie rock music discourse (Hibbett, 2005). In short, not everyone can perform his or her “autonomous” DIY agency on an equal playing field. In the case of the musicians in my study – it is a particular kind of agency that is strengthened by an aesthetic of ambivalence.

Endnotes

1. The popularity of Japanese groups such as Mono, Boris, Boredoms, and British-Asian M.I.A. has further accentuated the representation of Asianness in the increasingly globalized indie music scene.


4. Kathi’s sister is getting a Masters degree in education at Columbia University whereas Kathi went to SUNY Purchase that, according to her, is “where all the punk kids go.”

Selected Bibliography


Selected Discography