

## Playing Traditional Folk Music in Rural America

KIRA LECK

Department of Psychology  
University of Pittsburgh at Bradford | USA\*

---

### **ABSTRACT**

In the United States, folk musicians are commonly perceived as a liberal, progressive and politically active collective who perform music that was popular during the second wave folk revival of the 1960s. Most studies of folk musicians have focused on this culture, possibly because many aspects of the revival period remain prominent in modern coffeehouse and folk festival settings. Seldom examined is the traditional folk community, which possesses a distinctive set of norms and a small but devoted following. In the present study, musicians were asked to describe their motivations for playing traditional folk music. Interviewees reported that playing music served quasi-social, socializing and cultural functions, with emotional expression and social connection emerging as common reasons for becoming involved with the traditional folk music community.

\*300 University Drive, Bradford, PA, 16701, USA

## INTRODUCTION

I have a simple answer. It's what you do.

—Carmen, 73 year-old folk musician

Although it is a broad genre that includes music of multiple origins and styles, folk music in the United States is commonly perceived as centered on a coffeehouse culture that features songs about politics, protesting the status quo and introspective self-examination. This view of folk musicians has been described as the “Peter, Paul, and Mary Syndrome”<sup>1</sup> (Alarik, 2003, p.146) and became common in the 1960s when political activists used folk music to spread their messages to mainstream America, garnering widespread attention from the media. One outcome of this phenomenon was a perception that people associated with the genre were a homogeneous assemblage of politically liberal activists with ties to academia. Musicians were often caricatured as novice guitar strummers who attended coffeehouse ‘open mic’ events to sing about important social issues while like-minded audience members paid them in tips or espressos. As with most forms of musical performance, this broad stereotypical perception is not an entirely accurate characterization of folk musicians in general.

The music of the coffeehouse culture can be traced back to traditional American, Irish, Scottish and Quebecois songs that are hundreds of years old (Mitchell, 2007). Prior to the folk revival, these songs could be heard primarily among members of the working class who wrote about themes of their daily existence. Most songs were passed down through oral tradition, and few were authored by professional composers with formal musical training. The songs were often performed in the home as family activities or at local events like dances, which served to establish and maintain connections with other members of the community (Peterson and DiMaggio, 1975). Instrumentation commonly consisted of fiddle, guitar, banjo and double bass.

In describing the music, the popular American folk singer Pete Seeger explained that “I always point out it’s music that has more of the traditional element; whether it’s gospel music or Chinese or Jewish music or even Appalachian music with a Scotch-Irish background” (Alarik, 2003, p. 249). According to singer-songwriter Lui Collins, “folk music is primarily acoustic, as differentiated perhaps from pop or alternative music...it’s music that changes and grows, depending on who is playing it, and when it is being played” (Alarik, 2003, p. 252). Central to this understanding of traditional folk music is the perception that performers interpret songs depending on their own views of the world and belief systems. This emphasis on individuality can be contrasted with classical music, which may highlight performance in a manner consistent with how musicians believe the composer wanted a piece played.

---

<sup>1</sup>The “Peter, Paul, and Mary Syndrome” refers to a belief that all folk music conforms to the style and instrumentation of the popular American folk trio which rose to prominence during the second wave of the folk music revival in the 1950s and 1960s (Eyerman and Barretta, 1996).

Before the 1920s, traditional folk music was a mainstay of rural American life and tended to be performed at home or at church functions. Some musicians were able to supplement their incomes from playing on the streets, at barn dances or in contests and festivals, but none made a living from their music. In 1923, a recording made of Fiddlin' John Carson was released. High demand for the recording convinced members of the music industry that a market for "authentic" sounding rural music existed and they began to seek out and promote other traditional musicians. Folk music soon was divided into distinct genres of blues, jazz and country, which were then marketed toward different populations (Peterson, 1997).

Written and performed by professional musicians, music in these genres increasingly relied on electric instruments and was recorded in studios with modern equipment. As these forms became popularized through radio and later television, many Americans began to perceive folk music as provincial and unsophisticated, and as a result lost interest in the genre (Peterson, 1997; Peterson and DiMaggio, 1975). Beginning in the 1930s, artists such as Woody Guthrie resurrected folk songs that featured themes of social injustice and calls for change. Other musicians composed songs in a similar musical style but with lyrics that pertained to modern social issues (Eyerman and Barretta, 1996). Many of these songs became staples of the coffeehouse repertoire, but music performed by people who wish to preserve pre-folk revival instrumentation and lyrical themes became marginalized and continues to remain on the fringes of the folk genre in this country.

The popularity of traditional music varies worldwide. In regions like the United Kingdom, the strong connection between traditional folk music and national identity has been explored by several researchers (cf. Cooke, 1986; Cope, 2005; Finnegan, 2007; Morton, 2005; Revil, 2005; Stock, 2004). Conversely, in the United States, scholarly explorations of folk communities have primarily focused on the music popularized during the 1960s folk revival movement (*e.g.*, Aldredge, 2006; Eyerman and Barretta, 1996). Nonetheless, across the U.S., small groups of people also regularly gather for the purpose of playing traditional songs in a group setting. They bring fiddles, guitars, banjos, mandolins, dulcimers, basses, accordions and other acoustic instruments into a friendly and welcoming setting for the purpose of playing thousands of traditional folk songs. Even though some participants may be members of outside bands that perform at paying events, these gatherings often have no audience and their main goal is the enjoyment that comes from connecting with other musicians. They meet through word-of-mouth and more recently have begun utilizing online social networking.

One characteristic common to coffeehouse and traditional folk musicians is limited opportunity for financial gain. The number of venues hiring folk musicians for pay and record labels offering recording contracts to folk musicians has always been low. Only a select few artists become superstars who sell millions of recordings and perform in large concert halls and arenas. In light of this reality, it may be assumed that folk musicians are driven to play for reasons other than gaining status and financial rewards. Understanding the motivations of these individuals may require the adoption of a framework that attempts to account for explaining recreational

activities that offer no direct rewards of monetary compensation or status elevation. This article will begin with the presentation of a theoretical perspective used to categorize musical motivations and a description of characteristics of traditional folk musicians. These sections will be followed by new data that include interviews with musicians and interpretations of their responses. This piece will conclude with a discussion of how musicians' reasons for playing traditional folk music fit into the framework for understanding musical motivations described here.

## STUDYING MUSICAL MOTIVATIONS

The study of music making has been examined from multiple perspectives by researchers in the humanities and social sciences. Foundational sociologists and philosophers of music (*e.g.*, Adorno, 1976) examined the connections among musical works and individual thoughts, social structure and behavior; in his work, historical and social relations are seen to be embedded in certain musical materials and genres. In 1982, Becker identified the adoption of the new "production of culture" paradigm, which was introduced by Peterson (1976). Production of culture researchers seek to identify the various mediators involved in music- and art-making and their contributions to the artworks produced. The 'arts in action' approach developed by DeNora (2000), among others, looks in more depth at the purposes playing or consuming music serves for individuals, and how those meanings are shaped by their experiences and interactions with other musicians. This present research aims to dialogue with this past work in sociology by focusing on the psychological aspects of musical motivations.

In 1998, Christenson and Roberts introduced a framework based on the production of culture approach. They examine reasons given by adolescents for listening to music, which I propose also may be useful for understanding the motivations of folk musicians. The authors suggest that listening to music serves three categories of social function: *quasi-social*, *socializing*, and *cultural* functions. I will now explain these three functions in the context of studies of amateur musicians, while examining how these functions also parallel with Willem Doise's (1986) well-known hypothesized levels of influence and explanation in social psychology (North and Hargreaves, 2007).

Doise proposes that intraindividual processes involve organizing and evaluating incoming information, and responding to it accordingly. Christenson and Roberts (1998) suggest that within the intraindividual level exists the first quasi-social function of using music to manage mood, express emotions and prepare for future interactions with other people. Hobby musicians in several samples have similarly reported that playing serves as an emotional and expressive outlet (Adderley, *et al.*, 2003; Campbell, *et al.*, 2007; Hylton, 1981), allows them to escape stressful situations (Clift and Hancox, 2001; Campbell, *et al.*, 2007; Finnegan, 2007; Pitts, 2004), improves mood and facilitated relaxation (Adderley, *et al.*, 2003; Beck, *et al.*, 2000; Clift and Hancox, 2001; Coffman and Adamek, 1999), induces self-confidence and self-esteem (Adderley, *et al.*, 2003; Beck, *et al.*, 2000; Clift and Hancox, 2001; Coffman and Adamek, 1999), and gives them an opportunity to

'have fun' (Adderley, *et al.*, 2003; Conway and Borst, 2001; Hess 2010; Kennedy, 2002; Parkes and Jones, 2011).

At Doise's (1986) interindividual level where interpersonal interactions require responding to others, music fulfils what Christenson and Roberts (1998) would identify as a second socializing function of setting moods, filling silences or enhancing communication. This socializing function can also be identified in a wealth of psychology literature on music-making. A central theme observed in folk music communities is the focus on social connection, which Becker (2008) and Stebbins (1992) have cited as a defining characteristic of folk art. Becker (2008) described folk art as being "done by people who do what they do because it is one of the things members of their community, or at least most members of a particular age and sex, ordinarily do" (pp. 246-247). While folk artists recognize that practitioners of their art vary in skill, they are more concerned that all members be allowed to participate in presenting their work; the primary purpose of folk art is to bring together members of the community as opposed to competing to determine who is the most skilled at practicing the art.

Research examining the interindividual and socializing levels of music-making include musicians in samples examined by Adderley, *et al.* (2003), Campbell, *et al.* (2007), Clift and Hancox (2001), Coffman and Adamek (1999), Conway and Borst (2001), Cope (2005), Finnegan (2007), Gardner (2004), Hess (2010), and Leonard (2005) report that playing music allows them to make personal and business connections. Additionally, Gardner found that bluegrass festival attendees enjoyed the opportunity for repeated interaction that comes from many people travelling the festival circuit across a region. The formation of a 'portable community' allows members to create special bonds unlike those created in their hometowns and workplaces. Singers who performed in a Gilbert and Sullivan tribute festival report feeling a strong sense of loyalty to their performing society and enjoying being part of something that they perceive as bigger than themselves (Pitts, 2004). They perceive that even after a festival concludes, their performing identities and connection with the rest of the group are maintained.

Moreover, many folk musicians have praised the encouraging atmosphere, acceptance and sense of community they experience when playing with other people. Pete Seeger suggests that "We're less human beings when we don't participate, and this nation is being turned into a nation of spectators" (Alarik, 2003, pp. 20-21). Old-time musicians Jay Ungar and his wife Molly Mason, who have composed scores for several PBS series, refer to themselves as "community musicians" despite being in-demand stars in the folk world. Ungar states that "I think if we only did big concerts, we would rapidly lose our ability to create that in our music. The skills that we have come from our remaining as community musicians, playing at dances, parties, and just around the kitchen table" (Alarik, 2003, p. 360). These performers' stated beliefs about the role that music performance plays in bringing people together are consistent with those made by lesser-known musicians in several psychological studies cited above.

To cite a few additional examples of the socializing functions of music, singers in Pitts's (2004) sample of a Gilbert and Sullivan tribute performance group perceive their organization as being welcoming to all types, including people who had difficulty fitting into other social situations. They believe they view all members as individuals, yet at the same time report feeling a sense of connection due to their shared interest. Similarly, college choral singers interviewed by Clift and Hancox (2001) report that musical participation allows them to feel like part of a group in a friendly atmosphere.

At Doise's (1986) final social-positional and ideological levels where beliefs and expectations influence behavioral expressions in given situations, Christenson and Roberts (1998) argue that music serves a third cultural function of giving people an avenue to publicize their membership in a group or adherence to a belief system. Adopting the identity of a musician serves as a badge for individuals to publicly convey certain values and beliefs. Similarly, high school students in one sample (Conway and Borst, 2001) report that playing music allows them to identify with their school's music program. Beck, *et al.*'s (2000) interviewees believe that singing allows them to adopt the identity of 'artist'. Respondents in Leonard's (2005) sample of Irish musicians and dancers describe traditional Irish music as "connected with their very beings" (p. 519) and indicate that participating in dance and music enhanced their connection with their Irish customs and traditions. Finally, one participant in Stock's (2004) sample reports joining sessions for the purpose of "preserving the national tradition" (p. 65). Overall, it appears that playing music, particularly at the amateur level, serves similar functions to those that Christenson and Roberts (1998) propose as motivations for listening to music. Next, the characteristics of traditional folk music and the manner in which they enter into folk communities will be discussed.

## FOLK MUSICIANS

Researchers who have investigated traditional folk communities have observed several commonalities among members. Most are between 40-70, literate, white and well-educated white-collar workers (Finnegan, 2007; Gardner, 2004). The majority consider themselves to be hobbyists, and their descriptions of their musical activities are consistent with Stebbins's (1992) definition of a hobby as "a specialized pursuit beyond one's occupation, a pursuit that one finds particularly interesting and enjoyable because of its durable benefits" (p. 44). Furthermore, these individuals tend to fit into Stebbins' subcategory of "activity participants" who engage in a physical act (playing an instrument), learn required rules and perceive a non-competitive challenge in their hobby. Finally, many begin playing music later in life (Cope, 2005), which is common among baby-boomers who grew up wanting to play an instrument but instead marry, have children and immerse themselves in their careers. Only after they reach their 40s and 50s do they find time to pursue their dream of playing music.

The process of learning traditional folk music is consistent with Green's (2002) description of informal musical training that occurs among rock musicians. Players

first learn the rudiments of their instruments through self-study or from taking lessons, then they listen to recordings and other players and attempt to copy what they hear. They also learn in groups where they have an opportunity to watch and imitate other players and discuss techniques. Finally, rather than adopting the classical method of learning scales and theory and then working up to complex compositions read on sheet music, folk musicians typically attempt to play their own interpretations of existing compositions. For these people, learning songs often begins when they locate an open jam.

Unlike coffeehouse open mic sessions where individuals or small groups perform before an audience for fifteen or thirty minutes, open jams operate under a different set of rules. They take place at private homes, bars or folk festivals (cf. Gardner, 2004; Kisliuk, 1988) where all participants sit in a circle. Often the host will start by playing tunes that come from a common repertoire of approximately 2,000 instrumental compositions of American, Irish, Scottish and Quebecois origin. Although songs with lyrics are played occasionally, they too tend to be hundreds of years old rather than selections that were popular during the 1960s folk revival.

The literature reviewed above serves as a foundation for examining why hobbyist folk musicians play. Because the findings of previous studies that focused on musical motivations can be understood in terms of Christenson and Roberts's (1998) *quasi-social*, *socializing*, and *cultural* functions, I predicted that an examination of folk musician hobbyists would yield results similar those obtained by other researchers.

## **PARTICIPANTS AND METHOD**

I began playing guitar, bass and mandolin in 1984 and devoted many years to covering pop, rock, metal and second wave folk revival music of the 1960s. I also joined rock bands that regularly performed at bars, along with a few benefits and festivals in between. Most gigs involved money, free alcohol and local fame.

In 2004, I was introduced to a different side of music performance after a co-worker suggested that I attend a traditional folk music house party hosted by an acquaintance of hers. I arrived to find a group of approximately thirty people playing various acoustic instruments. Having never been in this setting, I was amazed at how quickly the group played through tunes—they repeated one tune approximately five times, then seamlessly began another without missing a beat. I stayed near the back of the group and attempted to follow along, albeit with limited success. Although I left that night with a new appreciation for the genre, I also felt overwhelmed. The party's host asked me to return to his weekly jam session, but several weeks passed before I felt brave enough to do so.

About a year after I attended my first folk music party, I formed a duo with the party's host, who had been involved in the folk community for over 30 years. A 57 year-old fiddler/mandolinist/guitarist, he taught me the basics of the folk guitar style that was highly dissimilar from the rock and metal I had played previously. I became his backup guitarist and we travelled to numerous jam sessions and festivals. As I met

more musicians, I was struck by how their attitudes, beliefs and behaviors differed from those of rock musicians I had encountered over the years. Given that music is typically enjoyed as a solitary hobby (e.g., the so-called “bedroom guitarist”) or by meeting regularly with band mates to prepare for performances, I was particularly interested in learning what motivated people with day jobs and families to play with other musicians in locales where audiences are often not present and tangible rewards are usually not involved. In 2006, I began to interview musicians at various traditional folk events. Like Gardner (2004), I was a participant observer in the present research. Although my background was completely different from that of most musicians I met, my desire to learn both the musical style and culture of the community allowed me to become quickly accepted as a folk musician. The people I spoke to were very willing to discuss their thoughts and experiences.

Between 2006 and 2008, I conducted interviews with musicians at house parties, jam sessions and festivals. All interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and transcribed by the author. Additionally, I used a Celtic music listserv to solicit responses via email from people I had met at sessions. Most interviews took place in the rural regions of northwestern Pennsylvania and southwestern upstate New York. Celtic and American old-time music were the dominant styles played by the musicians in this region. I asked participants, “Why do you play music?”, and allowed them to respond freely. My sample consisted of 15 men and 9 women whose ages ranged from 15 - 77. All respondents were white and none earned a living from playing music.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Several themes consistent with Christenson and Roberts’s (1998) description of the three functions served by using music emerged in my interviewees’ responses. Results are presented below in the context of each function.

### QUASI-SOCIAL FUNCTIONS

Christenson and Roberts (1998) proposed that at the intraindividual level exists a *quasi-social* function of using music to manage mood, express emotions and prepare for future interactions with other people. Respondents in both the present and prior research report using music to manage moods and emotions, which often results in an enhanced sense of well-being.

**Mood management.** Similar to responses given by interviewees in previous studies who indicate that they used music to relax (e.g., Adderley, *et al.*, 2003), three of my participants specifically mention relaxation, and one interviewee notes that whereas in his youth he felt driven to play, “Now the emotions are all drained away” (Tim, 60s).

One teenaged respondent states that playing music provides a brief reprieve from the perception of constant evaluation by others: “I play music because music doesn’t judge. You’re out there in the world and people are constantly judging you on every action that you make, and when I play music, I tend to forget things that go on

around me, forget things that I worry about. It doesn't make problems disappear, but it makes it better for awhile" (Jessi, 15). Though having an avenue for escape from life's problems is sought by many individuals, this may be especially important for adolescents who might otherwise turn to risky behaviors like engaging in substance abuse or seeking acceptance in peer groups that participate in antisocial activities (Campbell, *et al.*, 2007).

**Emotional release.** Eight respondents in my sample mention variations on the theme of emotional release, which they sought due to major life changes (e.g., divorce) and seeking outlets to express their feelings. One interviewee indicates that music allows him to communicate his feelings after he engaged in arguments that ended with an inability to talk to the other person. Other respondents observe that playing music elicited feelings of contentment, happiness, inspiration, fulfillment, raised spirits and peace. People in general tend to participate in hobbies that allow them to relax, but for musicians the ability to use their instruments as an extension of themselves appears to allow them to convey emotions that they may have been unable to articulate otherwise (cf. DeNora, 2000).

**Flow.** Csíkszentmihályi (1990) describes the concept of flow as becoming so absorbed in a task that one loses track of time and the sense of self-awareness, both of which have been observed in musicians' reports of their playing experiences. Bloom and Skutnick-Henley (2005) found that musicians who are confident and wish to express their feelings through music are most likely to experience flow when they became completely immersed in playing. Flow experiences also correlate with musical skill, performing challenging musical tasks, experiencing trancelike states, reducing anxiety and being actively engaged with playing (Bailey and Davidson, 2002; Bakker, 2005; Cope, 2005; Custodero, 2002; O'Neill, 1999; St. John, 2006). Four of my interviewees' responses appear to describe flow experiences.

Bob (mid-50s): I can't tell you what I think or don't think when I am playing. I can hear my neighbor players and the room sound in general. Once or twice or every so often you transcend into another mind experience that you can't describe, only experience. This does not happen often, can never be counted on, and cannot ever be pre-determined. Once you experience that, you can't help but look back and say, "Wow, did anybody else get that, whatever that was?"

Pam (early 50s): I play because when the tune is just right, and everyone is clicking, or the song is just right, it's a transcendental experience.

Barb (50s): Why do we play and sing...Mostly for those elusive moments when everything falls into a groove, everybody is clicking on the same level, when the notes aren't getting in the way of the music—I think the closest word is "craic" (English doesn't have a word for it).<sup>2</sup>

Tom (50s): A noted psychic years ago stated that "Music is the only physical bridge to the spiritual world." I'm sure that statement has different meaning for everyone. For me it has much meaning...Music is the voice of the Universe. The Universe speaks to me when I feel that groove we share while playing in sessions.

<sup>2</sup>The Cambridge Dictionary Online defines "craic" as an "enjoyable time spent with other people, especially when the conversation is entertaining and funny."

Just as musicians use music to communicate with other people (e.g., Campbell, *et al.*, 2007), these interviewees' responses suggest that music may also be used to connect with higher powers at a spiritual level (cf. Clift and Hancox, 2001).

**Midlife crisis.** One respondent indicates that music is his way of handling what he perceives to be a midlife crisis. At the age of 45, he attempted to learn violin from a classically trained musician, but quickly grew frustrated with the instructor's rigorous demands and discontinued the lessons. He later located a teacher willing to show him how to play traditional Celtic music, and eventually connected with members of the folk community in his town: "My first trip into the [traditional] music world was going down to Sherry and Ron's place...I got there at 1:30 and left at midnight. I was hooked" (Bob, mid 50s).

**Personal growth and fulfillment.** Two respondents indicate that their musical experiences allow them to broaden themselves.

Carmen (73): If anybody out there is afraid of growing old, I'll tell you, I've never had so much fun in my life. I've been playing more and more. You take the instruments with you wherever you go...Music has allowed me to go places I never would have gone otherwise.

Rachel (25): It's so deeply a part of me that I can't imagine NOT playing music. I would feel like a big chunk of my whole heart and soul and spirit was missing if I didn't play music. I believe that there is a certain creative spirit built into every musician that needs an outlet. When I make music, all that creativity and all those ideas pent up inside get to live and grow. It's a creative outlet. I love how you can do things with the music to boost the energy level or create tension or do just about anything you want. Making music creates an indescribable feeling of fulfillment and satisfaction. I think we as human beings are programmed to have a certain need to be surrounded by beauty and by pleasant things. Hearing music is one way to feed that innate hunger for beauty. When we play music, we get to listen to it ourselves and hear the beauty and sense the satisfaction that comes from knowing we ourselves created that particular piece of beauty.

These interviewees' responses are consistent with those found in previous samples in which musicians report believing that playing enhances their sense of self-confidence and self-esteem (e.g., Beck, *et al.*, 2000; Coffman and Adamek, 1999).

## **SOCIALIZING FUNCTIONS**

At the interindividual level where interpersonal interactions require responding to others, music fulfills a *socializing* function of setting moods, filling silences and/or enhancing communication (Christenson and Roberts, 1998). Many of my interviewees' responses echo the sentiments of prominent folk musicians quoted in the literature review (Alarik, 2003) which suggests the existence of underlying universal motivations for playing traditional folk music.

**Connection.** Most of my respondents cite social interaction as a reason for playing. Several indicate that they enjoy the social aspects and teamwork of working together in a fun setting where there is no competition and everyone is on the same side. Five

interviewees' responses reflect the belief that music had allowed them to make nonverbal connections, served as a focal point for interpersonal relationships, and facilitated reconnection in existing relationships. One respondent states that "No one cares what you do for work, how much money you have, what your community or professional status is, etc. It is a special brother/sister hood we have and you can go to other venues or areas of the country and feel you have a common connection, the love of playing music" (Bob, mid-50s).

Another interviewee contrasts his folk music experiences with the lack of connection he felt when interacting with rock musicians and fans:

Bill O (54): The beauty of the words but also to me a lot the beauty of the melody and the singing, and again, maybe that's the sort of the connecting with people when you're singing together in an audience along with a performer there's a special kind of feeling that you don't get from going to a concert and watching or listening to a concert. And I don't think you get the same thing from yelling and screaming and throwing bodies around at a rock concert, especially if half the audience is trashed. Working with a folk audience for well over 20 years...general observation was that for performers, when they did a song which was a sing along and the audience joined in, the clapping at the end was much more enthusiastic in general than on the songs they did which did not lend themselves to joining in. Part of the enjoyment is the sound that everybody produces and the fact that you're doing it together.

Both of these responses reflect previous observations of how the participatory nature of folk music can create connection and a sense of inclusion in social situations (e.g., Alarik, 2003; Gardner, 2004).

**Acceptance.** Skill requirements for entrance into communities of practice vary, but because in some respects (e.g., song structure and melodic simplicity) folk music is basic and easy to play, the folk community is attractive to novices seeking connection. Individuals who are new to their instruments and/or the folk genre find sessions appealing due to the perception of advanced players as being welcoming and forgiving of mistakes (Gardner, 2004). Three of my respondents describe the phenomenon of acceptance by folk musicians.

Bill O (54): It's just welcoming and non-judgmental type of people in general with very rare exceptions. These people that get into folk music that are eccentric. There are people who have similarly had dysfunctional families who get into it because they, again, I think because of a sort of a substitute family...[it's] healthy and natural and normal and certainly probably a lot better than what they grew up with.

Bill G (55): Nobody else will put up with me...Folk is a gentler and more intelligent crowd than average that the people that are cued to this are social misfits almost universally. There are two broad general categories of social misfit that shows up at this thing. One is the person who is simply socially challenged in one way or another and finds a group of people that will tolerate their challenges, be it physical handicap, be it certain moderate amount of psychological or developmental problems of one kind or another. The other type of person that shows up at this is typically someone who is just too damn bright and just doesn't relate well to the bar crowd or the crowd hanging out at the nineteenth hole...likewise oftentimes don't relate well to

the average congregation either. And so, what are you going to do for community and social interaction?

Michael (63): I think one of the great things about folk music is that it was like the ukulele. People said “I could do that”...And that’s what I think the big message from folk music is: You don’t have to be somebody. Seems like in this day and age, TV says unless you’re somebody, you’re nobody.

The last respondent above, Michael, reflects further on a story he had heard about an individual who became involved in music in order to obtain social approval:

I once asked a guy why he did that...He said it was because he was wanting to hang out with a couple of guys at school when he was in high school and they wouldn’t given him the time of day. And they played guitars. So he took up the guitar just to get in with them. I mean, what a horrible reason for picking up guitar!

Even though Michael had a negative reaction to hearing an anecdote about a high school student’s reason for playing music, his story serves as a reminder that many adolescents do have a strong need for peer acceptance. For these individuals, engaging in music-related activities may be a more productive method for seeking approval when compared to potentially destructive or risky behaviors that may occur among teenagers.

Rogoff (2003) suggests that much of our learning occurs within “communities of practice”. In these settings, we observe how other people feel, think and behave, and we use these observations to guide our own development. Musical communities of practice are characterized by common knowledge of musical styles or musicians, a community of interested peers and friends, and practice sessions which enable musicians to become competent at their chosen activity (North and Hargreaves, 2008; Wenger, *et al.*, 2002).

As evidenced by my interviewees’ responses, folk music sessions appear to be an ideal setting for facilitating connection, communication and acceptance. Bill G’s observation that many folk musicians of his acquaintance are “social misfits” was echoed by other respondents who mentioned that joining the folk community gives them a sense of belonging they previously had been unable to find in other environments (cf. Pitts, 2004).

## **CULTURAL FUNCTIONS**

For some people, playing music allows them to express their identities, values or beliefs. The potential for a group to reach a wider audience than an individual performer may drive musicians to seek each other out.

Several interviewees’ responses indicate a desire to share their musical identities, values and messages through public performance. One respondent states that she experiences fulfilment as the cantor of her church because it allows her to praise the Lord. Although this individual does not explicitly state that she uses music to serve spiritual purposes, it is possible that serving as a cantor allows her to satisfy the need to publicly express religious beliefs and to use music to facilitate making spiritual

connections. Another interviewee observes that some musicians' extensive desires to exhibit their own identities in a performance setting may actually be detrimental to the socializing function of a performance.

Michael: I divide people into two groups. Those who say "This is a great song and I'm going to use all the talent I have to make people see how great this song is. I'm going to do this song the best I can." But other people [will] rewrite the words, they'll change the tune "just to show people how great I am." Either they're in front of the song saying "Look at me," or they're behind the song saying "Listen to this."

In contrast to the individuals described above, two respondents indicate that their motivations lay in sharing with and eliciting emotions from their audiences. One states that she performs to "intimately speak to all who listen", whereas the other notes that she enjoys "knowing that others' lives might be enriched by hearing something beautiful that I play" (Rachel, 25). For performers who actively seek connection with other people in general, forming a bond with both fellow musicians and audiences may provide a greater sense of fulfillment and well-being than that experienced by musicians who connect with only one group.

While the motivations behind these interviewees' responses may overlap somewhat with those described in the section on social connection, the present comments indicate a desire to connect with others outside one's circle of fellow musicians. Whereas some performers may be unaware of or unconcerned with an audience's reaction, these interviewees' statements suggest that they consciously seek feedback from listeners, and, when they perceive a connection being made, their sense of self is enhanced.

Even though American folk music has a history of association with political causes, only one respondent indicated it in passing as a reason why some musicians become involved in the folk community. However, no interviewees stated it as a reason for why they personally play. Additionally, none of the musicians in my sample mentioned having connections with the coffeehouse folk scene.

## CONCLUSION

Consistent with previous research, themes of mood management and desire for social connection dominate my interviewees' responses. In the traditional folk community, playing music to manage moods and create art with others may also underlie a broader goal of making connections with other people. Results of the present study extend previous findings into the realm of hobbyist folk musicians whose reasons for playing may not be immediately apparent to outside observers. Additionally, my interviewees' motivations fit into Christenson and Roberts's (1998) categories of quasi-social, socializing, and cultural functions. Future studies may be useful in determining if this framework is generalizable to the motivations of musicians who play music in other genres.

Notably absent from the interviews are goals of achieving money and fame, which are more commonly associated with stereotypes of rock musicians. This finding may be

due to the reality of few folk musicians attaining the level of wealth and stardom seen among pop and rock celebrities. As Irish session guitarist Jim (50s) states, “Well, 40 years or so ago the answer would have been because I was no good at football. It sure ain't for the money.” Jay Ungar observes that “I see a lot of people losing the meaning of their lives, feeling the things they do are meaningless except for their economic value. I feel so gratified by being able to play for social events like weddings or dances; to see how music provides a shared expression for the joys, sorrows, and everything else a community experiences in their lives” (Alarik, 2003, p. 360). These statements coupled with my interviewees’ responses underscore the important role that folk music plays in creating a sense of connectedness.

Modern folk singer Ani DiFranco, who has achieved mainstream success, observes that “Folk music is sub-corporate, community-based music o’ the people...It just tends to be unpretentious music that’s uncommercial, made by unpretentious people who are not interested in moving units so much as revolution or communication. That’s what I really, really like about it” (Alarik, 2003, p. 249). As noted above, the fact that many of my interviewees’ responses echo the sentiments of prominent folk musicians (e.g., Alarik, 2003) suggests that being accepted into a welcoming, friendly and close-knit community may be a strong motivator for playing music that typically provides few tangible benefits.

Relations formed within the community help to satisfy our basic desire to connect. Music has the ability to create a collective identity among people who come together to produce something for the enjoyment of themselves, their collaborators and anyone else who may be listening. Pitts (2004) suggests that playing music is unique in fulfilling people’s needs for friendship, mental well-being and a sense of group cohesion. Finnegan (2007) similarly notes that “People are moved not just by the love of music but also by the desire to be with their acquaintances, friends, teachers, peers, colleagues, relatives, and enjoy the whole social side of engaging in musical pursuits along with other people and with their approbation” (p. 328). This common thread of fostering community has likely united traditional folk musicians across time and space.

## REFERENCES

- Adderley, C., Kennedy, M., and Berz, W. (2003) “A home away from home’: The world of the high school music classroom”. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 51, 190-205.
- Alarik, S. (2003) *Deep Community*. Cambridge, MA: Black Wolf Press.
- Aldredge, M. (2006) “Negotiating and practicing performance: An ethnographic study of a musical open mic in Brooklyn, New York”. *Symbolic Interaction*, 29, 109-117.
- Bailey, B.A., and Davidson, J.W. (2002) “Adaptive characteristics of group singing: Perceptions from members of a choir for homeless men”. *Musicae Scientiae*, 6, 221-256.
- Bakker, A.B. (2005) “Flow among music teachers and their students: The crossover of peak experiences”. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 66, 26-44.
- Beck, R.J., Cesario, T.C., Yousefi, A., and Enamoto, H. (2000) “Choral singing, performance perception, and immune system changes in salivary immunoglobulin A and cortisol”. *Music Perception*, 18, 87-106.

- Becker, H. (1982) *Art Worlds*. Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Bloom, A.J., and Skutnick-Henley, P. (2005) "Facilitating flow experiences among musicians". *American Music Teacher*, 54, 24-28.
- Campbell, P.S., Connell, C., and Beegle, A. (2007) "Adolescents' expressed meanings of music in and out of school". *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 55, 220-236.
- Christenson, P.G., and Roberts, D.F. (1998) *It's Not Only Rock and Roll: Popular Music in the Lives of Adolescents*. Cresskill: Hampton Press.
- Clift, S., and Hancox, G., (2001) "The perceived benefits of singing: findings from preliminary surveys of a university college choral society". *Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health* 121, 248-56.
- Coffman, D.D., and Adamek, M. (1999) "The contributions of wind band participation to quality of life of senior adults". *Music Therapy Perspectives*, 17, 27-31.
- Conway, C.M., and Borst, J. (2001) "Action research in music education". *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education*, 19, 3-8.
- Cooke, P. (1986) *The Fiddle Tradition of the Shetland Isles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cope, P. (2005) "Adult learning in traditional music". *British Journal of Music Education*, 22, 125-140.
- Custodero, L.A. (2002) "Seeking challenge, finding skill: Flow experience and music education". *Arts Education Policy Review*, 103, 3-9.
- DeNora, T. (2000) *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Doise, W. (1986) *Levels of Explanation in Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eyerman, R., and Barretta, S. (1996) "From the 30s to the 60s: The folk music revival in the United States". *Theory and Society*, 25, 501-543.
- Finnegan, R. (2007) *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Gardner, R.O. (2004) "The portable community: Mobility and modernization in bluegrass festival life". *Symbolic Interaction*, 27, 155-178.
- Green, L. (2002) *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead for Music Education*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Hess, J. (2010) "The Sankofa drum and dance ensemble: Motivations for student participation in a school world music ensemble". *Research Studies in Music Education*, 32, 23-42.
- Hylton, J. (1981) "Dimensionality in high school student participants' perceptions of the meaning of choral singing experience". *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 29, 287-303.
- Kennedy, M.A. (2002) "'It's cool because we like to sing': Junior high school boys' experience of choral music as an elective". *Research Studies in Music Education*, 18, 24-34.
- Leonard, M. (2005). "Performing identities: Music and dance in the Irish communities of Coventry and Liverpool". *Social and Cultural Geography*, 6, 515-529.
- Kisliuk, M. (1988) "'A special kind of courtesy': Action at a bluegrass festival jam session". *The Drama Review*, 32, 141-155.
- Mitchell, G. (2007) *The North American Folk Music Revival: Nation and Identity in the United States and Canada*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

- Morton, F. (2005) "Performing ethnography: Irish traditional music sessions and new methodological spaces". *Social and Cultural Geography*, 6, 661-676.
- North, A., and Hargreaves, D. (2008) *The Social and Applied Psychology of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O'Neill, S.A. (1999) "Flow theory and the development of musical performance skills". *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 141, 129-134.
- Parkes, K., and Jones, B.D. (2011) "Students' motivations for considering a career in music performance". *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education*, 29, 20-28.
- Peterson, R.A. (1976). *The Production of Culture*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Peterson, R.A. (1997) *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Peterson, R.A., and DiMaggio, P. (1975) "From region to class, the changing locus of country music: A test of the massification hypothesis". *Social Forces*, 53, 497-506.
- Pitts, S.E. (2004) "'Everybody wants to be Pavarotti': the experience of music for performers and audiences at a Gilbert and Sullivan Festival". *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 129, 149-167.
- Revil, G. (2005) "Vernacular culture and the place of folk music". *Social and Cultural Geography*, 6, 693-706.
- Rogoff, B. (1990) *Apprenticeship in Thinking: Cognitive Development in Social Context*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stebbins, R.A. (1992) *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure*. Montreal, QC and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- St. John, P.A. (2006) "Finding and making meaning: Young children as musical collaborators". *Psychology of Music*, 34, 238-261.
- Stock, J.P.J. (2004) "Ordering performance, leading people: Structuring an English folk music session". *The World of Music*, 46, 41-70.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R., and Snyder, W.M. (2002) *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Kira Leck** is an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford. Her publications include "Dating on the Internet" (with H. Lawson, Editors, Belk and Llamas, *The Digital Consumer*, Routledge, in press), "Correlates of minimal dating" (*The Journal of Social Psychology*, 2006), and "Teaching personality theories using popular music" (*Teaching of Psychology*, 2006).