Music, Culture, and Aesthetics: A Final Essay
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This NEH Institute has illuminated a number of important topics for me. I was fascinated about exploring the issue of segregation through the readings, discussions, and my independent research during the Institute. Growing up in the Pacific Northwest, the opposite corner of the country from the segregated South, we sometimes lose sight of the blatant discrimination that existed in the United States as recently as the 1960s. The documentaries I discovered contained moving footage and firsthand accounts of the struggles of the civil rights workers to achieve equality in the South. These sources and the films we viewed in class helped me to gain a better perspective on the issue, and made it seem more “real” to me.

Protest music is a substantial part of my curriculum and has always been a personal interest. In looking at the history of the 1960s, we often find the Civil Rights Movement overshadowed by the Vietnam War, especially in the topic of protest music. When examining protest music in the past, I have primarily considered the lyrics, analyzing the words as poetry. I typically consider the musical aesthetic only when it either supports or contradicts the literal meaning of a song. However, this Institute helped me to put the musical aesthetics of a song into the context of the culture at the time in a broader sense.

The jazz of the time period we studied, especially that which was labeled “free jazz,” had always been fascinating but bewildering to me. I didn’t really understand its purpose or why people listened to it. I had a hard time defining its target audience. It was interesting to learn in the Institute that many of the jazz records were used as status symbols, and that possession of
certain records was considered evidence of intellectual elitism. Some were intended to be displayed perhaps more than they were meant to be listened to, which is why there was so much emphasis on cover art and label awareness. The gap between white jazz and black jazz during this period was a lot wider than I had initially thought. While I consider jazz as a whole to be a black art, I find most of the innovative black jazz recordings of this period hard to listen to, whereas the white jazz artists that were performing and recording at the same time appeal to my classical sensibilities. The institute has helped me to develop a greater appreciation for the eclecticism of jazz in this era as compared with other periods in the history of jazz.

Our discussions about Motown helped me to understand the commercial aspects of the music business during this time. As a musician, I tend to focus more on the aesthetics of music, dissecting and characterizing the sound based on the timbre of the voices, the complexity of the melody or chord progressions, the texture and the groove. Reading from the biographies about the musicians and executives of the Motown record company got me thinking about the process of determining what makes a hit, identifying a target audience and shaping musical taste. Perhaps most surprising to me was that the performers of Motown didn’t have much influence in the creative process, and often did not even agree with the artistic decisions that shaped the sound of their music. Motown generated a great deal of controversy within the black community over the issue of authenticity. With their polished presentation and effervescent sound, Motown artists were often accused of betraying their black roots in order to be commercially successful.

Beyond the content of the course, I believe the most beneficial aspect of the Institute was the opportunity to learn from such a distinguished and diverse panel of instructors. For teachers, it is always valuable to spend time on the “other” side of the classroom and experience education from the perspective of a student. Each of the guest lecturers brought a great deal of expertise to
our classroom. It was very helpful to hear so many perspectives on the topics we studied, presented using a wide variety of methods including music clips, visual artifacts, PowerPoint presentations, and discussion prompts. As a teacher in the role of a student, I was able to analyze which instructional styles and techniques were the most informative and led to better understanding. This will help me to refine my own teaching practice to better target the needs of my students and keep them engaged in the process of discovery.

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