One good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain.
—Bob Marley (Trenchtown Rock)

Your edu-ma-ca-tion ain’t no hipper than what you understand.
—Dr. John (Qualified)

A theory of art is thus at the same time a theory of culture, not an autonomous enterprise.
—Clifford Geertz (1983, p. 109)

Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that musicians are public intellectuals. This idea is important for at least three reasons. First, music is part of people’s daily lives. It is a way of knowing that is understood both cognitively and affectively (Crafts, Cavicchi, Keil, the Music in Daily Life Project, 1993; Nettl, 2005). Regardless of one’s role in the processes of making music, the power of music equally affects musicians as it does listeners. Second, whether one is practicing alone or on stage in front of thousands, the act of making music is an inherently public act. Finally, music contains knowledge. The organized/emergent sounds that are music pass implicit and explicit ideas to those who hear it. When we remember lyrics that resonate with us or when the hair stands up on our necks at a particular song, we are learning. Ellsworth (2005) describes such ways of knowing as a literal “making sense” (p. 1), understanding the world and our relation to it through the senses, a concept to which I will return later in this chapter.

The central point around which this chapter is organized is the idea that not only can musicians be public intellectuals but that all musicians are public intellectuals. Overlooking one musician in favor of another, or categorizing one musician as a public intellectual rather than another, misses a key aspect of music—music matters to people differently, yet all music has the potential to resonate with listeners and impart knowledge to them in the process. In order to explicate this point, this chapter is organized in the following manner. I first present some of the difficulties in current constructions of musicians or musicianship and their implications for understanding
musicians as public intellectuals. Second, I discuss the relationship between public intellectuals, music, and musicians; provide an examination of the term “public intellectual”; explore public intellectuals as musicians; and posit one possibility of musicians as public intellectuals. Next, noting the experiential and thought-provoking nature of entertaining ideas and embodied knowledge, I expand the definition of musicians as public intellectuals to include aesthetic/sensual as well as cognitive/intellectual ways of knowing. Finally, I note the possibilities in such a framing, shifting the focus from who counts as a musician and/or a public intellectual to the ideas and ideals musicians convey and how listeners interpret those concepts and constructs.

The Problem of a Measuring Stick Approach to Understanding Musicians as Public Intellectuals

When first approached to write this chapter, discussions largely focused on a utilizing a particular individual or kind of musician in order to illustrate how musicians are public intellectuals. As I continued to think about this topic, what began as a somewhat implicit discomfort blossomed into an explicit problem: The difficulty of using a particular kind of measuring stick to discuss the possibility of musicians as public intellectuals is that such discussions seem to devolve into questions of the intrinsic value of a given musician’s worth.

Discussions of both music and public intellectuals are riddled with the impulse to categorize and rank-order. For example, following the Billboard charts in the United States, many nations literally list the top 100 songs and “albums” according to pre-established categories such as “R&B/Hip hop,” “Country,” and “Latin”; music magazines such as Downbeat and Rolling Stone produce similar annual lists of critics’ and subscribers’ rankings. As this chapter shows, the literature about who might count as public intellectuals or the activities that constitute public intellectualism also carry an explicit or implicit sense of ranking and status (Melzer, Weinberger, & Zinman, 2003; Sandhu, 2007). I am not arguing against intellectual discussion in the academy, nor making an argument for a proper location of public intellectualism or what should constitute an intellectual discussion. Rather, I seek to discuss what might be considered public or intellectual and, in light of this understanding, whether musicians might not “count” as public intellectuals.

Because music is a social construction (Post, 2006), what music one considers to be of value is highly dependent on the kinds of musics (Nettl, 2005), ideas, and feelings that feel normal and personally valuable. These understandings are, in turn, strongly informed by surrounding sociocultural contexts that inform one’s decisions about what music a person enjoys, and what might constitute “good” music. Thus, differences in the kinds of music one values exist not only between but also within a given musical category. For example, a person who deeply appreciates A Tribe Called Quest and Queen Latifah but is not a fan of Will Smith or Lil’ Kim, and another person who holds these views in reverse can both claim to love hip-hop. When one begins to think of the myriad musics and musical traditions across the globe, the list of such possible preferences is literally endless.

It is this wonderful multiplicity of musics, the socially constructed nature of the music one values, and the complications of personal taste that combine to render the ranking of musicians, as well as their ordering as public intellectuals, largely meaningless. For example, how would one begin to evaluate the intellectual content of music without lyrics? How would the more freely improvised music of such musicians as Muhal Richard Abrams, Derek Bailey, Joëlle Léandre, or Susie Ibarra be measured? Similarly, where would one draw the line of which musicians are not public intellectuals? If Ani DiFranco, Chuck D., Pete Seeger, Marvin Gaye, Yo-Yo Ma, Ravi Shankar, and Miriam Makeba are in, who is out and why?
Yet this chapter is dedicated to the presentation and discussion of musicians as public intellectuals. How, then, might one make such an argument and on what grounds? My answer to this question is simple: all musicians are public intellectuals. Surely, you may well be thinking, (Insert Song Title Here) about (Insert Topic Here) by (Insert Musician’s Name Here) has no intellectual value, no public worth. To which I soundly respond, yes it does.

The dissonance lies not in the musicians but in their framing. It is the explicit and implicit norms and values contained in constructions of the “public intellectual” rather than musicians themselves that create a framework where the sociocultural role of musicians might be viewed as non-intellectual. Similarly, it is the false understanding that one must rank-order musicians according to some construction of their “talent” that creates a façade of needing to rank the supposed power or importance of one musician over another. Furthermore, from Sesame Street to hundreds of years’ old traditions such as the sol-kattu of South Indian Carnatic music or the griot traditions of West Africa, one of music’s central roles is education. As the following sections demonstrate, intellectual is not necessarily elite, thinking is not necessarily removed from experience, music is not removed from the intellectual, the public, or an experience, and whether or not music is intended to educate, it almost always has the potential to do so.

Public Intellectuals, Music, and Musicians

Definitions of what it means to be a “public intellectual” are often framed in terms of their role as critical commentators on sociocultural norms and values or the actions of those in power in a given culture, society, or nation/state (Bourdieu, 1998; Foucault, 1980; Gramsci, 1996/1971; Rorty, 1989; Said, 1994). However, the precise role of public intellectuals and their relationship to “the people” is the source of much debate.

As Sandhu (2007) notes, Rorty, Bourdieu, and Foucault all work to redefine previous constructions of public intellectualism rooted in Marxist notions of truth, intellectual labor, and the role of public intellectuals as truth tellers to a generally unconscious public (Jennings & Kemp-Welch, 1997). Rorty asserts there is no ultimate, knowable truth, as all truths are contingencies and that the central reason for intellectual pursuit is to advance discourse. Yet he largely retains a strong divide between public intellectuals and “the public.” Countering such assertions, Bourdieu (1998) posits the notion of a “critical intellectual” whose role is not that of “interpreter” and “translator” but instead marks “the emergence of a ‘new’ individualistic intellectual” who resides firmly within the public (cited in Sandhu, p. 4). Foucault’s (1980) conceptualization of a “specific intellectual” functions similarly, as does Collini’s (2006) call for recognizing the “ordinariness” of public intellectuals, a dismantling of the idea that public intellectuals are somehow separate from the people (Sandhu).

While Sandhu (2007) agrees with Collini, Bourdieu, Foucault, and others who critique a construction of public intellectuals as separate from a less-aware public, she believes that their work does not go far enough in troubling the status or location of public intellectuals. For example, she is critical of Collini for his continued explicit and implicit construction of a public intellectual as male, Western, and White. Yet, despite such critiques, Sandhu’s own work is missing an important aspect of the relationship between intellectuals and the people. Other than a passing notice of Toni Morrison, Sandhu’s own work is relatively devoid of any mention of the arts or popular culture, two arguably very public and central locations for the thoughts, feelings, and identities of any group that might be singularly referred to as “the people.”

An absence of the arts or popular culture in Sandhu’s critique is also somewhat ironic in light of Giroux’s (2002) critique of public intellectuals as raced, male, and Eurocentric. Largely predicated on a discussion of the relationship between Black public intellectuals, popular culture, and
the arts, Giroux contends that the devaluation of (American) Black public intellectuals speaks to a not-so-hidden race-bias in the academy and an accompanying disdain for popular culture as “low culture” that lies outside the purview of “intellectual discourse.” As opposed to such marginalizing constructions of public intellectuals, Giroux argues that aspects of daily life such as popular culture are central to discourse about the nature and role of public intellectuals.

Music is a key component of popular culture (Bennett, 2000; Shuker, 2008; Warwick, 2007). By overlooking or rejecting popular culture, a good part of the discourse that surrounds the nature of public intellectuals glosses or purposefully disregards the possibility that the arts in general, and popular music in specific, have intellectual merit. Contrary to most discussions about the roles and definitions of public intellectuals, the remainder of this section focuses on the work of four public intellectuals who use music in their writing and write about music.

Public Intellectuals and Music

Despite the overwhelming tendencies to neglect music’s relationship to the roles of public intellectuals, there is a corpus of work by public intellectuals that either uses music as a central metaphor or writes about music. For example, Said (1994) extended the notion of the importance of public-intellectual-as-amateur to his thoughts on amateur musicians and musical performance. Amateur performers, Said argued, are open to possible interpretations and political potential that could be closed to professional musicians because of their ties to tradition and rules of musical engagement (see Treager, 2008). Said also uses musical metaphors to explain his philosophical perspectives as in his use of the term “contrapuntal” as a central metaphor to describe his methodological approach in *Culture and Imperialism* (see Etherington, 2008).

However, it is important to note that Said’s writings about music focus exclusively on Western art (“classical”) music, in very Eurocentric and often gendered terms (see, for example, Barenboim & Said, 2002)—a framing that is in many ways contrary to his cultural critiques (Said, 1978, 1993, 2002). His use of musical metaphors from Western art music complicates possible relationships between music and public intellectuals—music can be simultaneously used to engender greater understanding and reinforce dominant norms and values about the nature and value of music.

In contrast to Said’s work, African American public intellectuals such as bell hooks, Cornel West, and Michele Wallace, use musical metaphors in their writings and write about music like a complexly voiced chord (hooks, 1994a, 1994b, 1995; Wallace, 1990; West, 1999). Their writings are a juxtaposition of the consonant and dissonant, enunciating the subjugated and co-opted nature of musics of the African diaspora while noting their often emancipatory, spiritual, and political nature.

Although they differ in expression, hooks, West, and Wallace share an understanding of music as a key location of Black expression, culture, and ideas. This notion of the importance of music to the African American experience is also understood as inexorably tied to questions of access, racism, and co-option:

> I focus on popular culture because I focus on those areas where black humanity is most powerfully expressed, where black people have been able to articulate their sense of the world in a profound manner…Why not highbrow culture? Because the access has been so difficult. Why not in more academic forms? Because academic exclusion has been the rule for so long for large numbers of black people that black culture, for me, becomes a search for where black people have left their imprint and fundamentally made a difference in terms of how certain art forms are understood. This is currently in popular culture. (West, 1999, p. 547)
As Black critical feminists, Wallace and hooks’ writings about music, popular culture, and race share West’s perspectives yet complicate the conversation in terms of gender, as hooks does here:

To white dominated mass media, the controversy over gangsta rap makes great spectacle. Besides the exploitation of these issues to attract audiences, a central motivation for highlighting gangsta rap continues to be the sensationalist drama of demonizing black youth culture in general and the contributions of young black men in particular. It is a contemporary remake of “Birth of a Nation” only this time we are encouraged to believe it is not just vulnerable white womanhood that risks destruction by black hands but everyone. When I counter this demonization of black males by insisting that gangsta rap does not appear in a cultural vacuum, but, rather, is expressive of the cultural crossing, mixings, and engagement of black youth culture with the values, attitudes, and concerns of the white majority, some folks stop listening. (hooks, 1994b, p. 26)

Despite differences between the ideas and uses of music in their writings, Said, West, hooks, and Wallace are public intellectuals who use music in their writings and write about music. Additionally, all four intellectuals conceive of music not in the abstract but in relation to people and audience. Thus, like Dewey (1934), Greene (1995), and Higgins (1991), they see music as an embodied experience, a point to which I will return below.

Public Intellectuals as Musicians, Musicians as Public Intellectuals

Predicated on how his experience as a trained concert pianist shaped his worldview and uses of and writings about music, Tregear (2008) suggests that Said is a “musician as public intellectual” (p. 205). Cornel West describes himself as, “first and foremost a blues man in the world of ideas—a jazz man in the life of the mind—committed to keeping alive the flickering candles of intellectual humility, personal compassion and social hope while living in our barbaric century” (West, 1999, p. xv). He also has released two collaborative spoken-word/hip-hop albums (West, 2001, 2007). Should West and Said, then, be considered musicians-as-public intellectuals?

I am of two minds about how to answer this question. Because West and Said elected to pursue lives of critical inquiry through scholarship, their ideas are most often rendered in a non-musical fashion. From this perspective, I would disagree with Tregear’s construction of Said as “musician as public intellectual” and would similarly contend that West is a public intellectual who is also a musician rather than the inverse. However, I also recognize that the voice, in both written and visual form, is an instrument and that both men are indeed musical in their own ways of being and knowing. Additionally, while the question of who might or might not constitute a musician is certainly an idea worthy of further consideration, my focus here is on the role of musicians and whether or not those who enact this role might be considered public intellectuals. Therefore I wish to leave both possibilities open and move forward to explore the question from a slightly different angle.

One Construction of Musicians as Public Intellectuals

Where Said and West foreground music in their scholarship, musicians such as George E. Lewis represent the other side of the coin. Lewis is a consummate musician whose scholarship speaks to the social and political implications of the relationship between society and music. A member of the famed Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) since 1971 and
a recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship in 2002, Lewis is currently the Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music and the Director of the Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University. He is regularly recognized for his ground-breaking work using technology and/with music, as a composer and group leader, and as one of the world’s foremost trombonists. In addition to previously published works (Lewis, 1996, 2000), Lewis (2008) has also recently authored a critically acclaimed book on the AACM that locates the history of the group within broader sociocultural contexts, particularly in terms of questions of race, class, and representation, musical and otherwise.

As such, George Lewis is a musician who is a public intellectual, a person whose sonic and written contributions have critically questioned the social and musical status quo. Other musicians as public intellectuals in this mold include Trinh T. Minh-Ha, Pauline Oliveros, Steve Coleman, Laurie Anderson, and Meredith Monk.

However, an implicit problem with this construction of musicians as public intellectuals is that it carries embedded assumptions about the value of the written word over sound and the superior cultural capital of Western and written musics. I do not mean to imply that musicians such as Lewis, Oliveros, Coleman, Anderson, and Monk or figures in the Western musical cannon might also not be public intellectuals. Such musicians are artists of depth and great talent whose sonic and written work aesthetically, creatively, and critically engenders that rare combination of thought and pleasure. They are musicians as public intellectuals.

However, musical luminaries such as Beethoven, Duke Ellington, and John Coltrane are not only part of musical lineages but also musical canons that are often static in their framing and use. Jazz in particular has undergone its own processes of canonization and accompanying marginalization in recent years, a process that is in many ways embodied by its move firmly into the academy and epitomized in Ken Burns’ (2004) documentary series Jazz. While the creation of a dominant narrative in jazz has in many ways helped cement it as “America’s classical music,” critiques of Burns’ Jazz note that this framing of “jazz” also serves to marginalize many important artists and aspects of its history (see Brown, 2002).

Although it promulgates an understanding that music is in and of itself a means of communication, the framing of musicians as public intellectuals outlined above is problematic because of its narrow scope. The privileging of the written word over musical experience is a particularly academic, Eurocentric, and in many ways gendered interpretation of what it might mean for musicians to be public intellectuals. It implies that musicians who do not write about their ideas might somehow not be public intellectuals, a position that would be soundly rejected by most musicians mentioned in this section. Such a construction could exclude musical luminaries such as John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk. Instead, a broader construction of the ways musicians relate to society and the critically creative ideas and ideals that musicians express is needed. It is to this topic that I now turn.

Entertaining Thoughts and Embodied Knowledge: Musicians as Public Intellectuals

One of the central reasons musicians are not considered public intellectuals is because of their relationship to entertainment and pleasure. Chabon (2008) argues that entertainment has gotten a bad rap because of its ties to pleasure: “at some point in its history, the idea of entertainment lost its sense of mutuality, of exchange” (p. 16). He continues:

entertainment—as I define it, pleasure and all—remains the only sure means we have of bridging, or at least of feeling as if we have bridged, the gulf of consciousness that
separates each of us from everybody else... as a job fit for artists and for audiences, a two-
way exchange of attention, experience, and the universal hunger for connection. (p. 17)

I would add another aspect of entertainment and broaden “pleasure” to sensuousness. According
to the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, to entertain is also “to admit into the mind;
consider” and “to hold in the mind; harbor; cherish.” Music as entertainment is then by defi-
ition not only an active pleasurable exchange of possibilities, it is also an exchange of ideas. Addition-
ally, while pleasure is certainly part of being entertained, it is but one aspect of the sensuous,
of embodied knowing through the senses (Ellsworth, 2005; Springgay & Freedman, 2007). The fol-
lowing description of how younger students make sense (Ellsworth, 2005) of entertainment
as I define it here—the ways in which their knowledge is an embodied, sensory experience of
ideas that both facilitate thought and give pleasure—is one such case in point.

In spring of 2009, I interviewed three African American fifth graders, Austin, Ashley, and
George, as part of longitudinal study of how urban, majority non-White, middle grades students
and their teachers use processes of music making to think about science content. Our conver-
sation moved from a general agreement between students of the kinds of music they like—“T-Pain
and Lil Wayne always go, they crush it when they do it;” “I like all kind of diff erent music”—to
the lyrical content of songs they enjoy.

As the conversation continued, George shared his thoughts about the latest Chris Brown
video:

“Did you see that video where Chris Brown did the Bird Walk [Soulja Boy’s recent signature
move]? And he killed Soldier Boy doing it!”

“There’s no “r” at the end of Soulja Boy, George” Ashley corrected him; all students, including
George, laughed.

This comment triggered a conversation about rap, rappers’ names, and what counts as good
rap. A few minutes later in the conversation, I asked the students about the kinds of music they
listen to at home. Soon after, students initiated a 10-minute discussion about their thoughts on
the importance of music in the “Black community/Black family,” an understanding that drew
from their constructions of history, sociology, popular culture, and personal experience.

Austin, Ashley, and George agreed that Blacks in the United States are born with an inherent
sense of music, musicality, and rhythm, a natural understanding due to their African ancestry.
Others (primarily Whites), they argued, could become good at music and rhythm, but their
skill was learned rather than present at birth as is the case for all Black families. Knowing that
students in this study are aware of my status as a professional musician and professor at a local
university, I asked them if they thought my predilection and skill (such as it is) in music was
something I had learned or was something I was born with as a non-Black person. All three stu-
dents stuck to their conviction that music was a learned set of understandings for me, not a way
of knowing that came with being born—they thought me to be a good learner and quick study.

Did Soulja Boy, Chris Brown, Lil Wayne, or T-Pain mean to engender this kind of discussion?
While their lyrical content may suggest otherwise, this would be an interesting conversation to
have with these four artists. Did these artists’ rhymes inspire thought about what music means
and how it should be delivered, as well as lead to a conversation where students located music in
their lives? Absolutely. Furthermore, I have heard and recorded similar discussions of a class of
majority Anglo fifth graders from a neighboring community about the importance of music in
their lives and homes. Contrary to Austin, George, and Ashley’s construction of music and its
location in non-Black homes, these conversations differed largely in the kinds of music Anglo
students’ parents listened to and in students’ musical preferences. In sum, as my conversation
Entertaining Ideas and Embodied Knowledge

with these fifth graders demonstrates, music is an embodied way of knowing that is sensual in its understanding and expression.

Ethnomusicologists and others who have examined the many roles of musics have shown the importance of the relationship between music, culture, and society. While hardly a universal language, music is an integral part of most societies and cultures, regardless of its particular uses or incarnations (Nettl, 2005). So ubiquitous is its presence that its absence, in meditative practices for example, is noteworthy. The diversity of how musics sound, are practiced, and their sociocultural roles are windows into what a society or culture understands and values (cf. Neal, 1999; Post, 2006; Rose & Rose, 1994).

In this respect, the roles of musicians function similarly to those of public intellectuals: both are public pedagogues whose interactions are explicitly designed to educate. Musicians and public intellectuals are both performers who speak to audiences in an effort to move them, to entertain for the pleasure of thought through the senses. It is this making sense, the construction of knowledge through sensual experiences that Ellsworth (2005) believes to constitute the basis of learning:

...the thinking-feeling, the embodied sensation of making sense, the lived experience of our learning selves that make the thing we call knowledge. Thinking and feeling our selves as they make sense is more than merely the sensation of knowledge in the making. It is a sensing of our selves in the making, and is that not the root of what we call learning?...what...might [it] mean to think of pedagogy not in relation to knowledge as a thing made but to knowledge in the making. (p. 1, emphasis in original)

Musicians and public intellectuals alike understand and utilize their roles as public pedagogues. For example, George E. Lewis (2000) has written on teaching improvisation and one of bell hooks’s (1994c) more well-known works is Teaching to Transgress. In a similar vein, Chuck D. of Public Enemy once stated that, “Rap is CNN for black people” (cited in Decurtis, 1991, ¶ 7) In much the same vein, there are ample examples of connections between pedagogy, learning, experience, and music (Dimitriadis, 2001; Erickson, 2004; Gershon, 2006).

What these writings have in common is a point central to musicians and listeners alike (Zorn, 2000). Musics are ways of knowing that are at once public and private, interpretive, and interpreted (Dewey, 1934, pp. 236–237). Thus, if music is a way of knowing through experience, the role of musicians is that of a public intellectual, a person whose role it is to facilitate entertaining thoughts and embodied knowledge. Like a teacher, musicians are public pedagogues who simultaneously interpret and broadcast their sense-making so that others might make sense of it for themselves.

Pedagogy is a social construction informed by sociocultural contexts, the meanings of which are negotiated between student and teacher through daily face-to-face interactions (Metz, 1978; Nespor, 1997). Due to the interpretive, negotiated nature of meaning making in both teaching and studenting, explicit efforts at understanding between teachers and students do not necessarily equate to mutual understanding between them (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Education, then, is indeed an experience, a layered act of interpretation.

Therefore, any interaction that someone enacts in the role of “teacher” can be considered teaching, regardless of her intent, content knowledge, or skill. “Teachable moments” and epiphanies in learning are simultaneously both a result of such minute-by-minute negotiations and another iteration of those experiences. As such, both are also nearly impossible to quantify or predict.
This is also the case in music. Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA,” an homage to the difficulties faced by returning Vietnam veterans, was misinterpreted not only by those who thought its accompanying music video’s flag-waving images meant the song was a song of support rather than a protest. It was also infamously utilized in an unauthorized fashion by the 1984 Reagan campaign as a pro-American rallying cry until Springsteen insisted it be immediately pulled. If a musician of Springsteen’s fame, whose career is closely tied to public criticism, protest, and politics, can be misinterpreted, what does this say for the majority of musicians whose work is not as well known or those who are equally if not more famous but whose music lacks lyrics?

Just as anyone who enacts the role of public intellectual is a public pedagogue in that she has the potential to engender thought through the senses; any musician has the potential of serving as a conduit for ideas, regardless of her intent to do so. This is a notion that speaks to the ordinary, amateur possibilities of musicians as public intellectuals without excluding the possibility that those very commonplace experiences could also be critical or serve as a catalyst for personal awakening. Such a construction also denotes the potential for any music, regardless of the musician’s purpose, medium, or venue, to help another literally make sense of their world.

Conclusion: Understanding Musicians as Public Intellectuals

The idea that all musicians can be understood as public intellectuals is important, for it creates the space for any person to gain knowledge through an experience with music, moving the discourse away from a measuring stick approach and towards a discussion of what music means to the listener. Although placing these personal constructions of musical importance along a continuum might seem at first to be a strong way to frame musical experiences, the static, gradated, binary nature of continua limits how one experiences a given musician or music.

In fact, because maps have preset categories against which a listener must fit how she makes sense of her experience, any kind of mapping necessarily limits a listener’s interpretation of a musician or musical experience. Instead, I wish to advocate for discussions of that experience according to the ideas or the sensual knowledge a listener entertains—the boundaries between sensual experience, entertaining thoughts, and embodied knowledge are at best both fluid and porous. This framing focuses discussions on how a listener experiences music, regardless of the musician’s notoriety or the complex layers of meaning that combine to create a listener’s particular taste.

It is important to note that by suggesting all musicians are public intellectuals and arguing for a listener-centered interpretation of musician’s meanings, I am not advocating for an uncritical approach to a given musician’s values or that all musicians’ implicit or explicit messages should be valued. Similarly, I am not proposing that processes of music-making, available contexts for its dissemination, or connections such as those between music, society, and economy should not be part of discussions about music and musicians. Rather, it is my contention that conceptualizing musicians as public intellectuals creates the space for critical conversations about what music means and the contexts, ideas, and ideals that inform those meanings. Recognizing all musicians as public intellectuals affords us the opportunity to discuss the music that moves us, applying critical tools to those ideas in order to better understand what musicians are imparting intellectually and affectively. It is an explicit move away from the kinds of categorizations we use that (a) mask and devalue the messages being embedded and embodied by musicians and (b) create one-up-personship that functions as yet another kind of elite valuing of public intellectuals (Miles Davis is in; your local player is good but out).

For example, many hate groups have musical groups whose songs carry their messages and ideals. These musicians serve as public intellectuals within their communities. Recognizing
them as such allows us to put our critical lenses to their work and debunk it for the vicious hatred that it is instead of dismissing it out of hand, allowing those ideas and ideals to move forward unchallenged. Similarly, one’s predilection for considering the music of KRS-One as being of greater intellectual value than that of Kelly Clarkson will not preclude a conversation about the possible value of Clarkson’s messages to those who find her music to be sensical. Thus, constructing all musicians as public intellectuals does not remove the possibility of critically examining the content, creativity, or contexts that surround artists and their musics.

In sum, musical experiences are intensely personal, highly contextualized, and value dependent. Moving towards a discussion of how such sonic phenomena are experienced creates the space for a much more complex and meaningful discussion about music, where one person’s perspective need not be valued over another’s, and where there is room for everyone to be entertained in a way that enables them to make sense:

The spoken and written word are only two of the ways in which we communicate; there are symbolic forms of communication which are able to impart information that could be understood on levels that would be very difficult to express using words. I have always been attracted to the idea of using symbolic sound languages because they leave space for the interpretive powers of the listener. When sounded, these sonic symbols become a combination of the thoughts, intentions and experiences of the musician and the listener, thereby creating a third entity comprised of the relationship of both. I feel this is true of all music, indeed of all communication. (Coleman, 2007, liner notes)

References


