The Shared Values of Authenticity in the Northeast Ohio Cover-Music Scene

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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.......................................................... iv

INTRODUCTION.................................................................1

LITERATURE REVIEW..........................................................3

Different Approaches to Authenticity........................................3
Authenticity in Scenes.........................................................5
Claiming Authenticity.........................................................8

METHODS...........................................................................10

Interviews...........................................................................10
Data Analysis.......................................................................11

RESULTS.............................................................................11
Doing Justice to the Music.....................................................12
“Playing Your Own thing”.....................................................12
Costuming...........................................................................15
Song Selection......................................................................18
Technical Ability and Passion...............................................22
Born Versus Trained Musicians.............................................26

DISCUSSION.......................................................................28

LIMITATIONS.....................................................................32

REFERENCES.....................................................................34
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INTRODUCTION

The concept of authenticity serves the purpose of defining how one becomes a part of a group or scene and how members maintain their status within that group. This research project deals with the scene of working musicians in Northeast Ohio and the musicians themselves, specifically musicians in “working cover bands.” I explore how these musicians construct the concept of authenticity in musical performance and identity within their local scene. I define “working cover band” or “working musician” as a musician who primarily performs songs originally written and performed by other “popular music” artists (individuals or groups). For the purposes of this work, popular music includes but is not limited to: Classic rock, modern rock, metal, and classic or contemporary rhythm and blues. Musicians who were excluded included those who exclusively played the music of one particular artist (a “tribute” act, as opposed to a cover act); those who on average play more original songs than covers; those who play primarily blues, jazz, or pre-rock and roll standards; and country artists.

For the term “scene,” I refer to Silver, Clark, and Rothfield (2008), which describes a scene as a distinct area that offers like-minded consumers with similar lifestyles amenities that appeal to their individual tastes. The scene described in this research is that shared by the working musicians of Northeast Ohio, mostly made up of the music venues they frequent (bars, coffee shops, neighborhood festivals, etc.), other musicians, and their patrons.

For the term “authenticity,” I refer to Grazian (2003: 10), who describes authenticity as having two separate attributes: (1) “the ability of a place or event to conform to an idealized representation of reality”, and (2) “the credibility or sincerity of a performance and its ability to come off as natural and effortless.”

There is currently no published research about the concept of authenticity within the scenes of working cover-musicians. However, Nowotny et al. (2010) and Grazian (2003) ap-
proach the topic from the perspective of other types of musicians. Nowotny et al. (2010) de-
scribes the meaning of authenticity within Latino music scenes, which includes not only the mu-
sicians, but audience members as well. Grazian (2003, 2004) explored authenticity by conducting
ethnographic research in the blues scene of Chicago. These two scenes and The Northeast Ohio
cover band scene have the common issues of musicians playing well-known songs for audiences
to whom the music is both an important part of their social setting, but secondary to dancing and
socializing.

However, the dynamics of these two scenes differ from that of the working musicians in
Northeast Ohio in two major ways: location and the traditions within the scenes. Northeast Ohio,
Chicago, and the American Southwest (the setting of most of Nowotny et al.’s research) have dis-
tinct musical histories and traditions that inform the norms of their scenes. There are also differ-
ing values within the scenes of the genres of pop/rock (Northeast Ohio), Latino music, and tradi-
tional blues.

Nowotny et al. (2010) present the case that a new or emerging scene often includes loose
scripts and guidelines for behavior. As a scene solidifies, these scripts and guidelines also solidify
to become a part of what defines its concepts of authenticity. The scripts of the Latin music scene
they studied incorporate the perception of the degree of authenticity in the music and the scene
itself. These perceptions are an important aspect of the scene to all participants, artists and audi-
ence.

Silver, Clark, and Yanez (2010) also explain the social impact of scenes, stating that
scenes provide members with a method of social belonging centered on lifestyle rather than fami-
ly, religion, or political affiliation. A cohesive scene gives members an idea of what is artistically
(as well as personally and socially, though the artistic implications of a scene is the relevant in-
formation here) good or bad, right or wrong, authentic or inauthentic. In light of these works on
scenes and authenticity, viewing the community of musicians who participated as members of a
scene allows this research the ability to better draw conclusions about the scene as a whole and its shared conception of authenticity within it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Different Approaches to Authenticity

Using a framework similar to those of Peterson (1997), Grazian (2003, 2004), and Nowotny et al. (2010), I will explore how authenticity is conceptualized and perpetuated in the Northeast Ohio cover-music scene. I will then discuss how the factors explaining authenticity within other scenes do or do not apply to this scene, and how existing cultural-sociological research on authenticity might help to explain the concept of authenticity within the Northeast Ohio cover-music scene.

Sociologists have two perspectives when defining and discussing authenticity: social-psychological and cultural. As I will describe, it is best to use the cultural-sociological perspective here, but first I will briefly explain both perspectives and why the cultural-sociological perspective best fits this research.

First, the social-psychological approach is best described by Goffman (1959) and Erickson (1995). Goffman asserts that people perform their identity (their front stage) for others, often in the context of a certain setting that is appropriate for their role. Although this view of authenticity is more aligned to the social psychological side of the concept of authenticity in sociology, Goffman’s approach applies here because a working musician is in fact a literal performer in a specialty setting, for which the audience has certain expectations. He asserts that social actors, especially those in service industries (which includes working musicians) utilize their fronts and settings in order to dramatize their work, or “making invisible costs visible” (Goffman 1959: 21). In the context of a musician, this may include making clear the distinguishing marks of high end musical equipment, nice clothes, or any other signifiers of the hidden cost of their profession.
Erickson (1995) represents the social-psychological concept of authenticity by both making a clear distinction of authenticity from sincerity and linking the concept of authenticity to the self. She uses the work on authenticity and sincerity by Trilling (1972) to argue that the two terms should not be used interchangeably; that sincerity is a concept that refers to one’s presentation of self to others, while authenticity best represents the relationship that one has with themselves.

Peterson’s (1997) historical analysis of country music and Grazian’s (2003) ethnographic work with blues musicians both approach the concept of authenticity from a cultural sociological perspective. Peterson’s concept of authenticity refers to a propagation of tradition, both the traditions of the region of the country where country music is mythically to have originated and the traditions of the country music artists that came before.

Where the concept of authenticity matters at all to them (and to many it simply does not matter), the musicians in Grazian’s Blue Chicago have a similar ideal of what constitutes the authentic. Those concerned with the authenticity of the blues largely follow in the tradition of those who came before them of playing from the heart. Also, as one of his participants stressed, it is important for a musician to follow their own path and “play your own thing” (85) (emphasis in original).

While Goffman and Erickson’s concepts of authenticity are pertinent to the field of social psychology, the present study of musicians deals more with the relationship of musicians with each other and their audience than to an individual’s sense of self. There are, however, links between the two constructions of authenticity. Erikson, Grazian, and Nowotny et al. all put forth the notion of a scale of authenticity; referred to as a sliding scale of authenticity by Grazian (2003) and Nowotny et al. (2010), while Erickson (1995: 122) argues that individuals are capable of being “more or less” authentic. Though Goffman’s focus lies more with the individual than those around them, he gives explanations for behavior that are based on the social actor’s presentation to and relationship with their audience. These explanations are especially pertinent given the lit-
eral performance and audience of the working musician. Therefore, Goffman’s arguments about the nature of performance of self will be given consideration here.

**Authenticity in Scenes**

Sociological literature about subcultural authenticity often takes a symbolic interactionist approach, focusing on the social constructions of shared meanings that subcultures create about what is and is not authentic. Authenticity is often based on a shared group identity, and part of this group identity often involves the performance of being an oppositional force to the more broad (popular) culture. This was found to be true in Neo-Pagan communities (Coco and Woodward 2007), punk-rock music scenes (Fox 1987), and underground country and southern rock music scenes (Eastman and Schrock 2008; Eastman 2010).

In Fox’s (1987) ethnographic research on a small-town punk-rock scene, anything short of living the accepted punk lifestyle (including poverty, alcohol abuse, and counter-cultural clothes and hairstyles) was considered inauthentic and looked down upon as “playing cowboys and Indians” (362). Eastman and Schrock (2008) found that poor whites constructed an anti-middle class, anti-education, anti-northern identity that was “authentically southern”, while Eastman (2010) found that the construction of an authentic country identity was based upon being everything that the mainstream (in this case, the Nashville music industry) is not.

In other music-based subcultures, such as Straight-Edge (Williams 2006) and hip-hop (Harkness 2011; Hess 2005), researchers have found that it is not necessary to be a force of opposition to the mainstream, only different in specific ways. In the Straight-Edge community, a youth subculture based on strict abstinence from drugs, alcohol and promiscuous sex; classically a branch of punk-rock culture, Williams (2006) found that differences in personal taste affects who may be considered authentically Straight-Edge. To some members on the periphery of the Straight-Edge movement, the difference between their lack of substance use and the greater culture’s general acceptance of use was enough to distinguish Straight-Edge from mainstream. To
core members however, abstinence is only one aspect of several that define their culture. Participation in the scene, rather than existing on the periphery, is crucial to core members. To these core members anything less than full participation excludes anyone from being authentically Straight-Edge.

Some ethnographers (Grazian 2003, 2004; Eastman and Schrock 2008; Nowotny et al. 2010; Harkness 2011) have found that race can be a factor in determining the conceived authenticity of a performer. In Grazian’s (2003) ethnography of Chicago’s blues scene, black blues musicians were favored over all others, often to the extent of club owners breaking up bands that had what were deemed to be too many white musicians. Eastman and Schrock (2008) found that among rural southern whites in southern rock and underground country scenes, not only whiteness, but a necessary performance of whiteness is essential to the achievement of the status of authentic. Nowotny et al. found that the presence of non-Latinos within a Latin music scene was often enough for some to question the authenticity of a scene. Similarly, Harkness’ (2011) respondents stressed that white performers find it more difficult to be seen by peers as authentic because their whiteness served to label them as inauthentic in a minority dominated scene. While whites could still gain acceptance in this scene, they could only do so if they demonstrated that they shared in the struggle of their black colleagues to overcome barriers of class and race.

Grazian (2004) posits that at times the production of seemingly authentic music itself is a confidence game, defining a confidence game as:

1. a set of structural relationships in which operators, ropers, insiders, shills and marks are enmeshed,
2. the deployment of carefully planned strategies of deception, and
3. a pattern of success owed in part to the moral and financial motivations of insiders, the willingness of the state to assist in the enterprise, and the desire among victims to be swayed by the production (2004, 137).

Grazian did ethnographic research on Chicago blues clubs that exclusively hired black musicians, as the (largely tourist) crowd expects that authentic blues is played by black performers in Chica-
go. The musicians then play the part of the downtrodden working class musician, regardless of the reality of their individual lives. In both of these examples, race is not a determining factor in determining authenticity among performers, but is important to those to whom the performance is directed.

Not only are concepts of authenticity often racialized by performers or audience members, differing expectations of “authentic” are imposed on the sexes by cultural critics as well. The latent result of stereotypes and gender norms are seen in Schmutz and Faupel’s (2010) findings that there are differences in how musical authenticity is measured between men and women. Female performers are often described as having troubled pasts, or that their success came after the intervention of a male authority figure. However, music acclaimed and recognized as authentic released by men is described by adjectives such as “genius,” and “brilliant,” while the performers themselves are praised for artistic innovation. Similarly, Hutcherson and Haenfler (2010) found a heavily gendered notion of authenticity within the extreme metal scene. In this scene, masculine language (such as tough or raw) was used to connote authenticity, while feminine language (such as weak and feminine) was used to represent the inauthentic. They argue that entire subgenres of music arise because the existing music scenes have become inauthentic, while the new scenes bring authenticity with their implied masculinity.

Most examples of differing performances of authenticity show that claims to authenticity are easily challenged and conceptions of authenticity within groups are fluid (Williams 2006). For example punk-rock scenes that were dominated by antagonistic attitudes toward the mainstream in Fox’s (1987) ethnography had changed drastically by the time Force (2009) conducted his own ethnographic research on a small punk-rock scene. Norms of anti-establishment and anti-consumerism observed by Fox were replaced by three consumption styles: Possession of products internally sanctioned by the subculture, displays of knowledge of punk rock music and culture, and stylized punk appearance. Members of his scene often challenged one another informally, inquiring about knowledge and possession of cultural artifacts and esoterica. Core scene members
would continually challenge one another’s scene-sanctioned consumption habits. Those who failed these challenges would be chastised for being inauthentic. Similarly, Eastman and Schrock (2008) found among poor rural whites a feature similar to poor urban blacks who sanction their peers for “acting white.” Poor rural whites who attempt to gain an education or speak out against local hegemonistic identity norms are sanctioned for acting middle-class (or rich, or northern), just as poor urban blacks may be sanctioned for acting white.

Claiming Authenticity

Just as constructions of authenticity within a subculture itself are fluid and ever evolving, so are the meanings of the concept of authenticity to its members. Peterson (1997) found that what has been considered authentic in mainstream country music has changed drastically throughout the years, from the image of the hillbilly to the rhinestone cowboy. Torkelson (2010) also found fluidity of the concept of authenticity within the music-based Straight-Edge subculture. Rather than a conception of authenticity changing through generations as that of country music, the concept of authenticity within his participants themselves changed over a relatively short period of time; he found that members of the substance-abstaining Straight-Edge subculture reflected on their time in the community as being inauthentic for the same reasons they saw it as authentic when they were active participants.

In his ethnographic work on competitive swimmers, Chambliss (1989) addressed the effortless nature of a well-rehearsed performance. He argues that excellence in most endeavors has little to do with talent, but is instead built through mundane habits that come together to foster high-level performance. Like excellent musicianship, Chambliss explains that excellence in swimming is the culmination of the correct habits combined with the desire (or patience) to devote sufficient time and energy into the craft in order for these collective habits to develop into what appears to the common observer to be overall skill. Weber’s (1968) notions of affective versus instrumental action are also relevant when discussing any skillful performance. He bases the
motivations necessary for success in performance in either an affective rationality, where performance is for its own intrinsic emotional and creative value, or an instrumental rationality, where performance is a tool for reaching a further goal.

There are also relevant sources outside the discipline of sociology. The most pertinent example is Philosopher Walter Benjamin’s (1936) influential “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” he argues that the authenticity of something lies in its uniqueness. A song may have been written for its "cult value" (its value as a representation of the sacred, or pure art); for the sake of creation itself or the self-fulfillment of the artist, which is the most authentic experience possible. When it is played outside of that purpose, it is for its “exhibition value.” A recorded song is created to be copied countless times and viewed or heard for its exhibition value.

Following Benjamin’s argument, performing for a recording device, as is done for the studio recordings familiar to most music fans, separates the song from its cult value and the audience from the artist. The artist is not performing for the audience, and therefore audience identifies not with the artist, but the recording device. In the context of the working musician, any cover song performed on stage is done with the intention that the audience is already familiar with the song, presumably from repeated listening of a studio recording. Following Benjamin’s argument, in this case a live performance by a cover band is less unique and therefore less authentic than a performance by the original artist. However, performances from both the original artist and a cover artist are more authentic than a mass-produced recording. Therefore, from this perspective listening to a talented cover artist performing Pink Floyd’s “Comfortably Numb” might actually be the most authentic possible experience of hearing the song, because the members of Pink Floyd who wrote and originally performed the song will never play together again.
METHODS

Recruitment

To be included as a participant, each individual must have at the time of the interview or up to a year prior, have been a member of a working cover band as defined above. I recruited participants through snowball and convenience sampling during the period of May 2012 through September 2012. I posted calls for participation on several different, active musicians’ internet forums used by members of the Northeast Ohio working musician scene. These posts followed scripts that were IRB and committee approved, detailing issues of confidentiality and non-coercion. In the interest of variety, there were two additional methods of recruitment that yielded no results. I attempted to utilize my own social networks as a musician for recruitment. This approach potentially had the advantage of having my status as a researcher and fellow musician verified by mutual acquaintances. However, my own social network failed to deliver any active participants. I also attempted to recruit musicians through the websites of popular cover bands in the area, again using IRB and committee approved scripts that detailed issues of confidentiality and non-coercion. This approach also failed to deliver any active participants.

I provided potential participants the option of contacting me through email or my personal phone number. Upon contact, I informed them of the details of this research project, including a time line for completion of data collection. I explained the steps taken to ensure confidentiality, and assured them they could cease participation at any time.

Interviews

After initial contact, I scheduled to meet each participant individually for semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews. These interviews occurred at a time and location chosen by the participant. Ten interviews were conducted at public parks, six at coffee shops or quiet bars, and two at participants’ homes. Each interview lasted between 35-124 minutes (67 minutes on average). I briefly explained the research process and participant rights to each participant and obtained writ-
ten informed consent. Interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder, and any written notes were taken in an unobtrusive manner throughout interviews to capture sensory data to build a comprehensive account of participant opinions and attitudes about music and musicianship, and how they relate to the construction of authenticity. The interviews focused on the participant’s history as a musician, including their goals and objectives for first learning a musical instrument; types of music they have played before and wish to play in the future, including which styles they like and dislike playing; opinions about the songs their bands choose to play; the image often invoked in music performance; and attitudes toward their audience. Exploring these areas of interest help to bring together attitudes about different aspects of music and musicianship to detect patterns in the construction of authenticity by the participants.

Data analysis

I analyzed data collected through the above processes to create a complete picture of the construction of authenticity by working musicians in the Northeast Ohio scene. I transcribed audio-recorded interviews using Express Scribe software and coded using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis and research software. Codes emerged based on the findings present in the data, and were based on constructions of authenticity similar to those described by Goffman (1959), Peterson (1997) Grazian (2003), and Nowotny et al. (2010).

RESULTS

There were 18 total participants representing a variety of perspectives of the Northeast Ohio cover-music scene. Participants ranged in age from 30 - 71, with 15 men and 3 women. 16 participants were white (non-hispanic), with 2 hispanic male participants. Each individual approached the standard questions from their own unique perspective gained from years of experiences playing music in different venues and contexts. I use quotes from the interviews that best illustrate the consensus points made by most or all participants. Though each participant gave thorough and independent responses, there were broad patterns that occurred throughout most or
all interviews. These broad patterns were condensed into three separate categories: Doing justice to the music, doing justice to other musicians, and a tension between technical ability and passion.

*Doing Justice to the Music*

Although there are differences in how this is accomplished, nearly all participants stressed the importance of doing justice to the music being played. Doing justice to the music being played was framed in three ways: (1) “Playing your own thing” versus mimicking original artists, (2) Using the imagery of costumes to accompany the music played (costuming) or not, and (3) Respect for the craft and artistry involved at all levels of music performance. The commonly held value among Northeast Ohio’s cover-musicians of doing justice to the music reflects the concepts of Peterson in his ethnographical and historical examination of authenticity as the propagation of tradition in country music. While Peterson’s propagation of tradition involved reverence for both the regional origin of the music itself as well as the artists who proceeded and influenced modern country musicians, working musicians’ reverence is largely reserved for the musicians who came before.

*“Playing your own thing”*

A reverence for the musicians who came before does not necessarily mean working musicians will mimic their styles of play, or even the way a beloved song was originally recorded. Some participants agreed with the notion put forth by several of the musicians represented in Grazian’s ethnography of the Chicago blues scene (2003) that in doing justice to the music they are playing one should take creative liberties and play songs as themselves (playing “their own thing” [85]) instead of attempting to replicate the style of the original performer.

To some, playing their own thing is where they took an opportunity to showcase their own creativity and originality. Will is a full-time professional saxophonist in his mid-forties who specializes in classic rock and R&B from the 70s and 80s. He referred specifically to the impor-
tance of “landmarks along the way,” which he described as playing specific musical phrases or chord progressions that are familiar or important to the listener, while taking creative liberties between the familiar places in the song.

So when I’m playing a pop gig, (Aretha Franklin’s) “Respect,” I start the solo like King Curtis started the solo on the record. So everybody knows, everybody can hear, “oh, I know what’s happening, I know what’s going on.” Then I can improvise a little bit within that, and perhaps end the solo as King Curtis did. And even though I did my own thing in the middle, people got it because I gave them the landmarks along the way… you give them landmarks along the way, they feel safe. It’s music that they know, they know where you are even though I’ve played my own thing in between that.

Some participants viewed playing their own thing as a matter not of originality, but of self-preservation and face-saving. Noel is a 60 year old guitar player who has found some success as a working musician, but has a successful career outside of music. He expressed the opinion that there is no true originality in music because everything has been done. Noel explains that attempting to mimic a song’s original artist only evokes an inevitable unfavorable comparison to the original. He says, “It’s going to be different. As a matter of fact, I would never try to play a song exactly the way it was recorded.” Noel illustrates this philosophy with an example of a former female band mate who attempted to perform a Janis Joplin song in Joplin’s own style. Noel explains “I said to her, ‘I hate to be the first one to tell you this, but Joplin’s dead. You’re not her. You can’t be her, you have to make it your song.’” He explains that attempting to perform a song exactly in the style of the original performer inevitably leads some in the crowd to make an unfavorable comparison to the original, which in their minds no one can match.
Not all participants saw value in playing their own thing, as others thought that audience expectations of songs outweighed any potential benefit of changing them. Jonathan is a 42 year old musician by night, stay-at-home dad by day, who is strictly a lead-singer. He told me:

When people go see a cover band, I think they’re expecting and wanting to hear the music the way they know it. So if you’re doing the song and you’re just simply singing it in your own voice, then I don’t think that’s OK.

To Jonathan, audience members want to be able to close their eyes and imagine they are watching a band they love, and there is no room for the cover band’s creative input. Jonathan’s approach may also come from his own perceived creative limitations. He commented several times that he performs covers because he does not consider himself to be creative or original, and his strength lies in mimicking the sound and mannerisms of a song’s original artist.

To many working musicians, the issue of taking creative liberties is nuanced. Jeff is a 35 year old guitar and bass player who plays music for fun and to supplement his income. He argues that the appropriateness of playing your own thing depends on the unique style of the cover band combined with the style of the original song. He says, “Doing a cover, to me, is more of a tribute to that artist... And I think sometimes when people add to it, it’s almost like they’re trying to show it up in some way.” Jeff further explains that if a cover band’s typical style is more complex, more simplified, or too different from that of the original song, it sometimes makes more sense to play their own thing. He stresses that whatever songs a band plays, they should be tasteful and respectful to the original. If a band’s musical abilities are below the skill level of the original, the difference in skill will be evident to the audience and may come across as disrespectful or distasteful. In these cases it is better to skip that song entirely.
Costuming

In many cases, bands will dress in elaborate costumes in order to invoke the image of the musical styles they play. Bands that specialize in psychedelic music from the 60s and 70s might dress as flower children of the era, while a band that performs mostly songs from the 80s might wear the leather, hair and makeup that to some might epitomize the era. Though dressing in wigs and costumes to evoke the image of the music is a trend noted by several participants, few seemed willing to engage in such practices. To some, the idea of “costuming” represented the in-authentic. Several participants felt that a band who relies on consuming is only compensating for lack of skill with a dramatic flair. Will felt especially passionate about costuming. He says of a talented, non-costuming band that tours playing songs by The Beatles:

You got it. They didn’t dress up… It sounded awesome, as opposed to, pick the name of your Beatles cover band where, you know they’ll wear the mop-top wigs for a little while, then they’ll go change and they’ll do the Magical Mystery Tour stuff and you know, the Sargent Pepper’s with the circus costumes and then they’ll, you know, put stick-on beards and do the Abbey Road stuff, you know. It just, that drives me nuts, man. You are not them. Can you play them as a player, as a singer, or can you not? ... I will never wear and wig and I will never wear a costume.

Dan is a 38 year old professional drummer who found success as a member of a neo-hippie jam-band featuring two Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees. Dan also criticized bands that utilize costuming, but with the caveat that it can be a benefit if it authentically reflects who a musician is off-stage.

When you have to have a costume to go on stage, when you go onstage wearing something that you might be embarrassed to be seen in if you had to go to the grocery store or the drug store, there might be a problem… I have negative respect for people who try to force other people to
contrive that, just from a marketing standpoint or something. But when it happens naturally I know it can do good things for an artist.

The specific original music scene where Dan found success is one in which bands and audience members alike tend to avoid costuming. While there are some within that scene who may favor a strange or outrageous physical appearance, it usually extends well past the stage and into their everyday lives. While most bands of the scene like Phish or the Grateful Dead espouse a come-as-you-are aesthetic, others such as Les Claypool, George Clinton, and Buckethead embrace a unique look both on and off-stage. Dan’s heavy exposure to the norms of his previous home scene could in part influence his outlook on costuming in the working musician scene. As long as an image is not contrived or forced upon band members, Dan advocates a live-and-let-live approach to costuming.

Amy is one of only three female participants, as well as the youngest at 30 years old. She is a classically trained musician, and plays cover-music professionally as a means to launch a career in original music. She feels that costuming is an important marketing tool as a working musician, and argues that in a scene where the songs and fashions of most bands are often similar or overlapping, having a distinct image is one of few ways a band can distinguish themselves from similar acts. She said of costuming:

If you’re a cover band it’s not your art, it’s somebody else’s art and you’re just going to have a shtick to go with it… (Musicians who don’t engage in costuming) are just playing at biker bars and things like that where it doesn’t matter anyway. If you want to be like Tricky Dick and the Coverups (a popular and successful working band) yes you need an image and a shtick, and yes it’s important because it’s marketing.

Josh had similar thoughts about costuming making an impact on a band’s success. To Josh and his classic rock band, however, costuming was a matter of conjuring an emotion to match the music in order to make an impression on the audience.
Image is definitely a thing. I agree with wearing the outlandish clothes, and the looks and everything, depending on what you’re doing... Even when I’m going out to play in a nice little restaurant or something I don’t just wear jeans and a shirt. I wear something that’s kind of rock and rollish. People see you setting up and they’re already forming their opinions... I like to wear different types of jewelry, cut off shirts, make sure you show your tattoos and stuff.

Amy and Josh argued that having a distinguishing look, whether it could be considered costuming or not, is an important part of finding success in their scene. Amy alludes to the concept of costumes and image as the only art a working band can truly claim as their own, while Josh stresses the idea of a band’s image matching the audience’s perception of the music they perform. Without utilizing a distinct image, the band has fewer tools to manage the audience’s impression, which may lead to being seen as another faceless, nameless cover band in a vast scene of sound-alikes.

Even those who advocate for costuming may have limits when projecting an image. Amy discussed how she was passed over for some bands because she would not conform to expectations of sex appeal for female musicians. She recounts performing well in auditions only to lose spots in bands to women who more overtly express their sexuality on stage. She recalls thinking, “I’m sorry I didn’t come to your audition wearing stilettos and this much eyeliner, and if that’s what you want for your lead singer, fine, because that’s not who I am.” The other two female participants did not mention their gender as a factor in their musical success, but Amy recognized the social implications of her place in the music scene. She added, “with women it’s even harder because you even more so have the general pressures of society... it’s not even so much about talent, it’s about being good-looking.”
Song selection

The debates about performing songs verbatim versus playing your own thing and costuming are important for all participants, but the most important aspect of doing justice to the music is the ability to play the music well and to know when a song should or should not be performed. To some participants it is respect for the music and the original artists that drives this motivation, while to others it is respect for the audience that is listening. Will expresses both motivations when he says:

I’m not a big fan of destroying tunes…people don’t want to hear you fuck up tunes. They want to hear the tune, they want to hear it played well… What disrespect to trash somebody else’s tune. You can’t do it. What disrespect. Disrespect from your part as a musician, disrespect from a club owners part from hiring you losers. Don’t disrespect the music. You’ve got to do it as good as you can. As good as you can. And if as good as you can isn’t really good then I don’t want to hear you. I don’t want to hear you. I’m certainly not going to pay money for it.

Will shows a disdain for disrespect to and from any and all members of his music scene. In his opinion, a band who performs a song poorly is actively showing disrespect for both the original artist and the audience, while the venue that hires that band is showing disrespect toward both the audience and other more capable bands they could have hired instead.

To Noel, doing justice to the music is another matter of self-preservation. He stresses a band’s responsibility for respect to the original artist and the audience when he says, “You have to only play the songs that you can do justice to… I’ve never met anybody who can play anything. Everybody has their area that they fit into, that they do really well.” A band that stays within the limits of their own style and abilities can do very well in their niche, while a band who aims too high may end up guilty of the disrespect mentioned above by Will. Noel clarifies that while ambition is not always a bad thing in music, musicians must be honest with themselves about their
own abilities, because overzealous performers will certainly fail. “Not that you can’t venture out on the brim every once in a while,” he says, “but if you get too ambitious with that you’re not going to pull it off, it’s not going to go well for you.”

Will’s primary motivation in his music career is respect for music as an art form, both from his own perspective and that of an audience. Noel may have an equal respect for his craft as an art, but more so he stresses the importance of pleasing the audience and therefore, getting and keeping work as someone the audience will pay to see.

*Doing Justice to Other Musicians*

One norm that seems almost taboo to break among working musicians is doing justice to other musicians by always playing for a fair wage. In the opinion of most working musicians, any musician who does otherwise is underselling their trade and thus lowering the value of all musicians’ time and talents. Will especially takes exception to the practice of playing for free or under a standard market value. He explains how those who do will ultimately hurt others who rely on paid performances as a primary occupation rather than a hobby:

> Being underpaid really flosses me… Of course I know lots of sax players who will take any gig for any money. They might even pay *you* to play. That doesn’t help any of us. If you go to a club and hear a band, that club’s only paying between five and eight hundred bucks. So if you get a band that’s greater than five players… you’re not making good money per hour. You’re not making minimum wage, so I have a problem with that.

Here Will frames the issue of payment for his performance as one would with any other hourly or salaried non-creative job. Venues often pay a set-price regardless of the size of the band, so a wage that may be a good payday for a low-key trio will be a much worse deal to the bombastic and complex 6 piece band.
Noel takes issue with underpayment for the same reason. Although he performs as a hobby rather than an occupation, he notes that adding-in the out-of-pocket cost of practice and performance can result in a net-loss even for a performer who may be seemingly well-paid, stating:

It's not about the money, I mean you can't make any money anyway.

Most places don't want to pay more than about three hundred to four hundred dollars a night for bands, which you know is not a bad pay. If you're lucky you end up with about a hundred bucks per band member. If you factor in all the practice time it takes to get ready for a gig, you know you're working for about two bucks an hour. That's not enough to pay for your guitar strings or your gas to get to it.

Here Noel addresses the hidden costs of a performance (though maybe slightly exaggerated) such as practice time, equipment costs, and transportation. These costs may not be apparent to the casual observer or even most venues, which can lead to underpayment, intentional or not.

As Dan points out, the issue brought up by Will and Noel may be seen as one of not considering creative work as work at all. He says:

There is the dichotomy of, “when everybody else goes to their job they call it work, and when I do they call it play: ‘I’m going to go play.’” But there is a slight sense of not exactly respecting musicians, or respecting what we do as work. Certainly it would be nice to see respect and some commensurate monetary reward to go hand and hand with some sense of really being a musician.

To musicians like Jonathan, Will, and Dan, playing music is work. Jonathan began working as a full-time musician in 2004 in a successful Las Vegas 1990s alternative rock tribute act. Will has a degree in music from the University of Akron and has been playing professionally since 1980. Dan has a music degree from Kent State University and started playing paying gigs at 11 years old, only ever holding one non-music job for a brief time during college.
To those working musicians who perform primarily as a hobby, fair compensation is less crucial personally, but important nonetheless. Frank is a 60 year old hobbyist guitar player who, like Noel, chose to pursue another career for income and stability. Noel stated that playing music is an important part of his life, and that he would play for himself in his basement if there were no opportunities for paying gigs. Frank shared Noel conviction, explaining that not playing would leave a large void in his life. However, Frank explained that his respect for the needs of other musicians prevents him from playing for below a standard wage. As with all other participants, Frank is happy to donate his talents for community and nonprofit benefits, or at a party with friends. In explaining the difference between performances for which he will volunteer versus those that demand compensation, he states:

I’m not mercenary with it, but I do think that the people who should be paying for it should pay for it. And I don’t think it’s right for amateur musicians to do gigs for free which should be paid for, because it takes the food out of the mouth of the pro who needs the money.

Frank addresses an important factor here, that some amateur musicians will play for free without a full understanding of how it affects the professional musicians they may not be aware are competing for the same gigs.

In laying out the challenges present in trying to earn even a meager profit from musical performance, Amy demonstrates a critical challenge that is often outside the control of an artist.

Getting good gigs is hard. Yeah, you can play hole in the wall bars and maybe they’ll pay you like $100 to play four hours which is like, for a whole band, my whole band. Like we would play a couple shows when we were trying to get started, we would play 3 or 4 hours for $100. Like do you know how much work goes into a show like that for $100? That’s ridiculous, like slave labor. And then they’re a hole in the wall bar, they don’t have any clients to start with. They expect us to bring all the people
too. So yeah, how do I get the gig playing (in a crowded bar like) on like 6th Street downtown? You don’t.

Amy hints at the crux of the quandary for underpaid musicians: that they are often providing entertainment for bar patrons; creating profit for businesses at less than a net-profit for themselves. The other salient aspect of Amy’s grievance against certain venues is that often the burden of promotion and attendance is on the artist, making them de facto marketing representatives, show-promoters, and entertainment. Then, only if the artist is successful in all of these areas can they graduate into more popular venues where they can expect better compensation.

Of course there is the perspective of amateur musicians who are happy to play for very little pay or even for free. Jerry is a hobbyist in his fifties who plays drums for one or several performing amateur bands at a time. Although he also refuses to play for free or less than market value, he makes the point that most of the musicians who play for free are either: (1) adolescents or young adults who lack the stage experience to play for profit gigs, or (2) playing original music, where exposure to new audiences is often worth more than monetary compensation. Like other working musicians, Jerry is against the idea of performing for less than fair compensation, but he has a more nuanced opinion regarding those who do. He says,

I guess if you want to do it, I certainly did it a lot when I was young… I just think they’re really hurting themselves. It’s almost a race to the bottom. The problem is you’re never going to convince a bunch of 16 year old kids they shouldn’t play for free.

Technical Ability and Passion

The third common value among all participants is the importance of the technical ability of a musician or their passion for music. As with the other core values, not all participants are necessarily in agreement about the details. Some argued that the technical ability that comes with formal training is the most important aspect of musicianship, while others instead stress the }
tangible passion that cannot be taught, but only felt, as the most important. Most participants recognize the importance of both technical ability and passion, with the implication that one without the other is simply not enough. However it was discussed, the theme of technical ability, passion, or a tension between the two was always important.

Amy makes the case that technical ability is crucial in becoming successful as a musician.

You need to be actually trained. Like you need real skills, which a lot of people don’t have. Because I think at some point you just hit a wall there. Like if you don’t really know scales, if you don’t really know chords and chord progressions and if you can’t really understand music, you’re screwed.

Amy’s point here is that the knowledge and precision that comes with classical training is what separates the hobbyist from the professional; that there is a threshold that simply cannot be crossed without the skills that result from proper training.

Noel makes an argument similar to Amy’s, but frames it in the context of recognition of talent and acknowledging the process of achieving it:

When you see the technical ability in someone, even if they're not playing in a genre you would normally listen to, you recognize it as a musician, when you recognize that technical ability, you know what it takes to reach that kind of level. You know what kind of work it takes to get to the point where you can do the kind of things that that person can do.

Like Amy, Noel takes the stance that a musician’s technical ability is what makes the difference between the hobbyist and the professional. Although Noel himself is not a professional musician, he does consider himself to have a level of technical proficiency equal to that of professionals, but he has chosen his career as an engineer as primary because of the lifestyle it affords him.
While Amy and Noel argue that appreciable technical ability is paramount to success, others place a higher value on the intangible qualities that come with a passion for music and performance. Jonathan demonstrates this perspective as a professional musician who is neither formally trained nor (in his opinion) especially talented. In his opinion, passion for performance is what separates him from less successful singers. He says:

I don't really consider myself much of a singer, but I am an entertainer.
So when I hit the stage I put a hundred and twenty five percent into every single song. Every single song is a new act, you know it's like act one act two act three of the show, you know. I like to consider myself like singers from back in the day, like the old R&B singers from the sixties, like Sam Cooke or somebody, like Otis Redding, but of now, you know.
They put it all into it, they had song and dance and they sweat. They like, they captivate the crowd. If they don't, they're at least trying.

Jonathan’s passion for music and his performance of it is implicit in this statement, but comes across clearly as he talks. He states several times throughout our conversation that he does not consider himself to be an especially proficient singer, and that he does not play an instrument. Instead, his devotion to entertaining an audience by following and sharing his passion for music is enough to keep himself involved in music at a professional level. The famous musicians that influence his performance were themselves known for their performance on stage. Jonathan’s idols gave of themselves with blood, sweat, and tears in their live performances. To him, this is the most important factor in their success, and will ultimately be the deciding factor in any success he finds for himself.

Joe is a 53 year old hobbyist classic rock guitar player. Though unlike Jonathan he does possess some formal training, Joe echoes Jonathan’s sentiment about passion coming through in performance:
Music is an art and art is something that comes from who you are, from your inner being. It doesn’t matter whether you’re playing like Bo Diddley just strumming on C note or whether it’s Segovia sounding like he’s playing eight guitars when he’s only playing one. If you’re playing from your heart, if you’re able to express yourself, then that’s a good musician.

Joe makes the point that whether a guitarist is playing a simple rhythm like Bo Diddley (who was also recognized as an accomplished musical technician) or a complex technical piece like those of Segovia, the passion that comes through in either musical form is apparent and the most important part of either style. To Joe, performing with conviction is the most important part of playing music.

Similar to Joe, Dan makes a comparison of simple versus virtuosic musicianship. Using an anecdote where he illustrates the dichotomy between a technically skilled musician playing with little passion versus a less skilled musician passionately playing (putting in 125%, as Jonathan said) the same song, he says:

I can’t help but think if you took two guys and took those two completely different approaches… they might look identical on paper, but that doesn’t mean they would feel the same. I have to feel that on some level that kind of passion comes through; or lack of it. That kind of caring, just your motivation for why you’re there. It feels to me like you can just spot the people who are trying to sell themselves versus the people who might in some cases prefer not to be sold at all, but they can’t not do what they’re doing. They don’t want to become a commodity, but because they have to get it out of them, go ahead and make a living at it.

It is important to stress here that Dan is an accomplished professional musician with years of formal training and a music degree, but still feels that a passionate performance is more
valuable than a virtuosic one. On the surface he seems to be a polar opposite of Noel, a technically skilled hobbyist who throughout our conversation stressed the importance of selling one’s self, as well as technical skill above passion. However, just like Dan, Noel talked at length about his motivation for playing music being not about selling himself, but something he would do regardless of his access to an audience or getting paid.

Both Noel and Dan play primarily, as Dan said “to get it out of them.” Though the difference in the two men seems substantial, it is likely only a matter of differing perspective of the audience. From Noel’s perspective the audience wants to digest live music as a polished product, but from Dan’s perspective the audience views performance less as a product and more as an artistic statement. Noel referred consistently to the professionalism expected of a performance, which he defined by song selection and execution of the songs played. In contrast, Dan refers to passion expected in performance, which includes taking chances and performing as a means of personal expression.

**Born versus trained musicians**

Most of the musicians I spoke with did not think that the best musicianship lies with either purely technical prowess or purely passion for music, but felt that true musicianship comes from the combination of both. Frank represents this complex viewpoint as he describes three types of musicians, “born musicians, trained musicians, and people who are born and trained.” In elaborating the difference, he describes himself as a born musician who grew up in a family where music was always played and revered, and who started playing well without lessons. His wife is a trained musician, a classically trained bassoonist and flautist. He describes the difference between the two of them:

She had the jam trained right out of her. She can’t jam to save herself, no way. If I tell her, “hey I’m in the key of A and we’re going to do a 12 bar blues,” I might as well be speaking Chinese. But if I plunk a piece of
music down in front of her she can play it, like right now; boom, play it and get it real close. Whereas you put a piece of music down in front of me and that’s a project, but you put it on the radio, I’ll play it. So there’s trained and born, and some people are lucky enough to be born musicians and get the training early, and wow that’s when it really all comes together. You get people like Wynton Marsalis (a trumpet player well-respected as both a passionate player and a masterful technician) and, you know those kinds of people have it all I think.

Frank brings attention to a form of categorization of musicians that is especially relevant to the discussion of the dichotomy of technical ability versus passion: some musicians seem to have natural skill without formal instruction (purely passion), some owe all of their skill to formal instruction (purely technical ability), and others have some combination of both attributes.

Frank’s categorization rang true for many of the musicians I spoke with who argued that it is passion for music that leads to the motivation required to become technically proficient. Josh alludes to this process in describing what he imagined as an ideal type of musician. He summarizes the difference between those who fit the description and those who do not by describing the latter:

Not to be negative or anything, but there’s a lot of people I know that think they’re musicians that just don’t put the time in, don’t learn things correctly, don’t have the correct feel or timing. You have to have everything. You have to have the willing, the want, to put the time in, you have to have the technique... the feel, and the timing. There’s just a natural ability, something that you can’t teach.

Frank’s theory of three types of musicians may be a correct assessment, but it could also be the case that some musicians choose to show or hide more or less of the mundane realities that
contribute to success (Chambliss 1989) or the hidden costs of their performance (Goffman 1959) than their peers. Those fortunate enough to be “born musicians” might simply downplay hours of daily practice disguised as playing along to their favorite songs; they may even deny years of formal music lessons to give the illusion of natural, effortless talent. Likewise, classically trained musicians like Frank’s wife (who “had the jam trained right out of her”) might simply not have enough interest in rock and blues music to cultivate any improvisational (jamming) skills.

DISCUSSION

Looking at Northeast Ohio’s working cover-musicians as members of a collective scene allows the results of my analysis to be more generalized than if each individual’s opinions were considered outside the context of one another. Approaching this topic from a cultural-sociological perspective similar to those of Peterson (1997), Grazian (2003, 2004), and Nowotny et al. (2010), I have shown that, as with the scenes they studied, there are clearly norms and ideals that come together to construct the overall concept of authenticity that holds across the scene. These include the values of doing justice to the music being played, doing justice to fellow scene-members, and playing with a mix of technical skill and passion. Some of the methods of attaining the shared values and opinions are points of contention among scene members, but overall each value is cherished and upheld by each participant.

Each participant stressed the importance of doing justice to the music being played as a crucial part of playing music in their scene. How this is accomplished varies, but each approach is based on respect for the artists being covered. The differences in many participants’ opinions relies on their own opinion on audience desire and expectation. Whether they chose to play their own thing or to play songs as close to the original as possible, either approach is taken out of respect for the audience and the original artists. To Will and Noel the typical audience demands a high-quality performance that resembles but is not derivative of what they are used to; to
Jonathan the audience wants to be transported to another time and place; to Jeff the audience simply needs to be entertained to the best of his abilities.

In regard to costuming, those participants who view their role as entertainers first show respect to the music by attempting to recreate the auditory and visual components their audience associates with the music they play. For example, Jonathan shows respect for the music by attempting to embody the performers his audience loves. In his opinion, he stands as the audience’s proxy for the artist he covers. Josh shows respect for music by observing the importance of creating and meeting audience expectations. He does not attempt to imitate any particular artist, but he makes sure to provide a visual aesthetic that matches that of the music he performs. Creating an overall experience for the enjoyment of the audience is both men’s first priority as entertainers, and providing this experience for their audience is the highest form of respect for the songs they perform.

Those participants who view their primary role as an artist show respect to the music by allowing the music to speak for itself. Will shows respect for the music by disregarding the personalities of a song’s original artist or any visual component of the performance to instead focus solely on the music he plays. Dan shows respect for music by treating the music itself as both art and craft. He respects those who wish to also express themselves in a visual manner, but disapproves of allowing costuming to overshadow the expression of art and creativity that is inherent in music. For both Will and Dan it is the music itself that takes first priority, and if an audience member can close their eyes and be taken to the emotional space associated with a song, they have done their job well.

One value that was not in contention among participants was the ideal of doing justice to other musicians by playing only for a standard wage. The consensus among participants is as Will and Frank argued, that performance for less than market value hurts all musicians. The professional musicians who rely on paid performances have the most to lose from others breaking from this core value, but the harm that comes from musicians underselling themselves is done to the
scene as a whole. Lower wages leads to fewer professional musicians, which leads to an overall lower quality of music, leading to unsatisfied audiences and poor attendance at everyone’s gigs.

Concern about standard pay is not only about profit, but also to keep musicians from losing money. Noel and Amy both illustrate Goffman’s (1959) arguments regarding the hidden costs of performance. This cost comes in the form of musical equipment, transportation to rehearsals and gigs, and time spent practicing and promoting. Regardless of whether a musician chooses to hide the costs of performance for the sake of authenticity (the effortless and natural performance) or to accentuate their use of high-end equipment, there are up-front costs associated with performance.

As Jerry noted, most of the musicians willing to perform for less than a standard wage are young musicians seeking experience playing in front of an audience or original acts less concerned with pay than with exposure to potential fans. In many cases these musicians are not aware of the norms of the cover-music scene, as they operate in scenes entirely outside of that of my participants, and therefore play to entirely different audiences. Jerry was the only participant who mentioned or seemed aware of this difference.

There was some contention on the subject of playing with passion versus pure technical ability. Amy and Noel expressed the opinion that technical ability is the most important part of any performance. Both argued that it is technical ability that allows a musician to evolve and succeed, and that a musician “will hit a wall” in Amy’s words, without the necessary skills that result from the proper training. Jonathan and Dan argue that technical skill without passion for the music being played results in a performance that is lacking something, and that an audience can feel the difference between a performance by a pure technician and a musician who plays with passion.

Most participants advocated a position that it is a mix of passion and technique that creates the best musicians. Frank’s description of born, trained, or born and trained musicians represents the tension most musicians expressed between pure passion and pure technicality. A per-
former’s intentions regarding their own front-stage behavior can be better understood by approaching this tension utilizing the ideas of Goffman (1959) and Weber (1968). As Goffman argues, individual actors might dramatize their performance in order to showcase their technical ability, or or they might hide or downplay certain aspects of their performance in order for their performance to appear natural and effortless.

Approaching the technical versus passionate performance from Weber’s perspective, these extremes can be seen as the result of each actor’s instrumental or affective action, which Weber argues are at odds with one another. The pure technician might argue that instrumental rationality is the crucial factor for success in music: that great musicianship requires a motivating factor outside of music itself. Whether the ultimate goal is to attract a mate or to make money, this separate goal leads an individual to do the work necessary to find success. The purely passionate player may argue that affective rationality leads to success: that playing music for its own sake gives one an intangible advantage that, although invisible, is clear to an attentive audience.

From this Weberian perspective, the notions of playing purely with technical skill versus playing purely with emotion are ideal types. Music must be approached either with affective rationality where music is played purely with emotion and for the purposes of emotional fulfillment, or an instrumental rationality where music is played using technical aspects of the craft learned through years of practice and for the purpose of achieving a further goal (such as fame and notoriety or financial success). As with any ideal type, examples of the extremes are rare. Some participants argue that pure technicality or pure emotion is ideal, but in the minds of most musicians there is a mixture of both. Some participants might frame their own intention as either purely instrumental or purely affective, but for the most part both are seen as crucial.

The difference in the social-psychological versus cultural concepts of authenticity is primarily in unit of analysis. The social-psychological concept of authenticity is focused on the individual actor, while the cultural-sociological concept is focused on a group of individuals within the same scene. The social-psychological, individual-focused approach of Goffman (1959) in re-
lation to front-stage behavior and presentation of self has been helpful in examining the differing behaviors of musicians, especially when paired with Weber’s notions of differing motivations. This individual focus is most useful when attempting to understand the individual’s motivation for front-stage behavior. However, when examining how a scene as a whole constructs and perpetuates standards of authenticity, the cultural-sociological approach of viewing authenticity as a set of norms and behaviors that allows one (an individual, a group, a scene, or a performance) to come across as natural and effortless in their performance is ideal.

This research contributes to the cultural-sociological concept of authenticity by building on the authenticity work of Peterson (1997), Grazian (2003, 2004), and Nowotny et al. (2010). By viewing a previously unstudied scene through the ethnographic lens of these researchers, I have shown that my findings regarding the concepts of authenticity in the cover-music scene of Northeast Ohio are consistent with their own results.

LIMITATIONS

Although important when analyzing other scenes, the topic of race (Grazian 2003; Eastman and Schrock 2008; Nowotny et al. 2010; Harkness 2011) was not mentioned by any participants, and gender (Schmutz and Faupel 2010; Hutcherson and Haenfler 2010) was discussed only briefly in one interview. My interview questions did not cover the topics of race or gender, and out of eighteen participants, only two were non-white (hispanic), and only three women. Both the lack of questions regarding race or gender and the fact that thirteen of eighteen participants were white men explain why this research failed to add to the discussion of race in music scenes. Of all interviews, only Amy discussed the challenges of being a female musician in this scene. She makes important points about the double standards regarding female musicians, especially in her statement that being attractive is seen as more important than talent, but ultimately there is insufficient data to make any generalizations about sex or gender in the Northeast Ohio Cover-Music scene.
Further research in this area could expand on issues of class, race, and gender by attempting to include more female and non-white participants, as well as creating interview questions specific to these issues. Further research could also take a longitudinal approach in order to add to the discussion of the evolution of norms and values within the scene. Similar research could be done within separate music scenes in Northeast Ohio to determine if there exists an overlap in the musicians and audiences in the cover-music scene.
References


