

BUILDING THE NEW ENGLAND AMERICANA MUSIC SCENE

Leah Mendelson - Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering

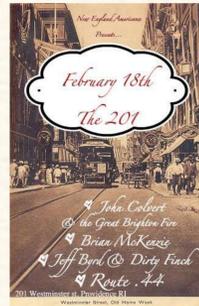
INTRODUCTION

Performers in the Americana music genre combine influences from a variety of American music traditions including folk, rock and roll, country, and blues. In New England, artists who fall within this broad label work towards the genre's recognition and growth. These efforts represent a collaborative grassroots effort to build a prominent and thriving music scene. Ethnographic fieldwork provided case studies in how the values and methods of this artist network impact the process of music scene formation and the structure of the community itself.

METHODOLOGY

The meaning of a musical experience comes from interaction between players and their listeners. Participation in the community is necessary to understand its dynamics. Thus, ethnographic fieldwork methods were used to study the scene including:

- ★ Observation and photography of performances
- ★ Informal discussion with artists at events
- ★ Phone interviews and e-mail exchanges
- ★ Participation in online fan communities (Facebook and NoDepression.com)
- ★ Following local media coverage (radio, print, and online) of performances



WHAT IS AMERICANA?

"Americana" is a loose term describing a performance with influences from a combination of American roots music traditions including folk, blues, country, and rock and roll. While pride in this history and an aesthetic of American heritage are prominent, Americana musicians also adapt roots music to today's issues, audiences, and environments.



"It takes the best elements of traditional American music and hopefully does something that speaks to today, but also is part of that tradition." - Kieran Ridge

"As much as we play within genre we also try to defy genre a little bit because that's kind of the nature of our multicultural society." - Koyama

MUSIC SCENES

A true music scene draws fluid boundaries between its constituents and the larger sphere of music makers and listeners within a region. The following attributes are characteristic of these communities.^[1]

- ★ Overlapping identities of performers and fans
- ★ Full recognition of the community's extents only after inclusion within it
- ★ Musicalized assertions of distinction and semiotic disruption
- ★ Encouragement of creative advances and potential overproduction of content
- ★ Lasting influence over the identity of the community and what performers identify with it

NEW ENGLAND AMERICANA

"A key component to any traditional, folk art is the idea of a collaborative, cohesive community of which the art is representative. The festival is about the idea of bringing together the people of that community, both players and listeners, in order to create more opportunity for interaction, new co-billing, new bands, new attention to the genre." - Noel Coakley, founder, New England Americana Association

PERFORMER NETWORK



"All these bands are coming together and trying to make there be a scene." - Brian McKenzie

"I've never seen so much networking going on between the bands" - Will James

A prominent collective of artists that exemplifies performer networking in the Greater Boston area is the New England Americana Association, a "grassroots" organization dedicated to fostering artist collaboration, camaraderie, and awareness. Americana artists demonstrate a consumption-based attitude with success defined by attracting listeners (as opposed to a production-based approach targeting sales), but promotional aggression is still necessary to achieve this goal. The association organizes shows, talks to local media, distributes promotional material, and secures sponsorships. Affiliation with New England Americana increases opportunities available to musicians as well. Audiences and other promoters may recognize and trust the New England Americana endorsement even if unfamiliar with individual acts.

REGION

Through the "New England" moniker, the association attempts to define wider geographic boundaries for the scene. New England Americana acts as a label to put on shows in cities across New England (current activity is in Boston and Providence, RI, with plans to expand into New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Maine) that listeners will trust is enjoyable and authentic. Individual performers still focus on more specific locations, and the level of reception, especially regarding original live music, varies among cities.



Boston's interest in roots music has fluctuated, but many artists thrived in this genre before the formation of the association and the resurgence driven by this collaboration. These performers have embraced New England Americana billing and brought their listeners to the association's events, resulting in a community described by one artist as the "most unified it's ever been."

RECORDING

"Just take a CD. We'd rather have you come back." - David DeLuca, Highway Ghosts

Americana recordings are a reflection of the live experience, produced in a few takes without extensive multitracking or post-production. Distribution of these recordings is primarily to draw listeners to live performances, with free or inexpensive downloads and CDs seen as a way to build listener familiarity and loyalty to an artist.

The New England Americana Project album in particular reflects the evangelical role of the recording. The album featured NEAA artists collaborating on songs in danger of fading from the public eye. In this way, the artists act as cultural gatekeepers, controlling what listeners have access to. However, by requiring collaboration between bands, the album pushes the scene forward creatively. A distinction between a music scene and music making communities in general is this encouragement for advancement and new directions in the music.^[2]



AMERICANA SHOWS

"It's all about trying to find your audience and just going out and getting them and doing whatever it takes to get people's attention." - Kieran Ridge

Artists use shared promotion and Americana-specific billing to attract live audiences. Through this approach, similar bands share fan bases and draw listeners interested in the genre as a whole in addition to those following specific acts.

NEW ENGLAND AMERICANA FESTIVAL

The New England Americana Festival, held for the 2nd time in 2011, is the flagship event run by the New England Americana Association. Over 150 performers as part of over 30 acts played during the event, only a portion of the artists who expressed an interest in performing. Festival organizers and other NEAA leaders were among the performers, though drawing new acts into the association was a major goal of the event.



Despite the increasing size and prominence of the event, its execution was still primarily grassroots in nature. The festival reflected the artist networking, regional reach, celebration of musical heritage, and focus on live experience that characterize the New England Americana scene.



CONCLUSIONS

"I don't know if it's going to become the mainstream so to say but I do believe that it can be something that actually does define the area for a while." - Brian McKenzie

- ★ The Americana music community in Boston feels an accountability for making America's musical heritage relevant to today's society and drawing attention to these traditions in addition to the success of their individual bands.
- ★ While the New England Americana Association does not explicitly attempt to filter what acts are affiliated with the genre, the association still holds considerable influence over the definition of Americana to regional listeners.
- ★ The broad definition of Americana draws a large volume of diverse artists to the genre's label and the association of musicians working within this identity.
- ★ Performers earn recognition through collaborative, not competitive efforts.
- ★ Geographic and spatial boundaries are drawn on several levels and include the New England organization as a whole and specific cities within this region. Virtual methods of networking help expand on human connections to cover this ground.

REFERENCES

- [1] Shank, B. (1994). *Dissonant Identities: The Rock'n'Roll Scene in Austin, Texas*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press.
- [2] Straw, W. (1991). Systems of articulation, logics of change: communities and scenes in popular music, *Cultural Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 368-388.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Donald James (Boston College) and Dr. Caitrin Lynch (Olin College) for their project guidance
Andrea Lai and Kathryn Sullivan for their peer feedback throughout project execution
Americana musicians and organizers Noel Coakley, Jeff Byrd and Dirty Finch, David DeLuca and Highway Ghosts, Mark Koyama, Brian McKenzie, Kieran Ridge, John Colbert, Comanchero, and all the performers at the 2011 New England Americana Festival for their welcoming reception and willingness to participate in this project