CultureCase

Understanding music-making as an act of civic engagement

This research was conducted by **Samuel Byrd** at **Hunter College, City University of New York, USA**.

Summary

In interviews with immigrant musicians at concerts and festivals, the author found that music making becomes political through both social and physical processes. It creates opportunities to understand, assess, and debate the political challenges faced by immigrant communities in a less traditional way: through their own music-making.

Charlotte, North Carolina has a large Latino immigrant population

For many of these immigrants, economic, legal, and social challenges make it difficult to participate fully in the American political system. As a result of these barriers, some Latino immigrants decisively abstain from engaging in traditional forms of American civic participation.

Music, and its reception, provides fertile ground to explore political issues outside of official channels

Politicised dialogues circulate at concerts and through album reviews in newspapers. Concerts allow musicians to perform songs with lyrics that advocate for immigrants' rights and to comment on day-to-day issues they face, and newspaper reviews expand the songs' exposure and add a new level of interpretation to the songs' lyrics. Concerts also build networks through which immigrants debate issues and forge political and social bonds. Physically, group dances performed during concerts, such as a popular dance known as

the collective circle, express politicised dialogues through movement. By forming a circle and linking arms, participants add a physical dimension to the concerts' political content.

Charlotte's Latino immigrants are much more active in local politics than is immediately apparent

Grassroots music making allows them to respond to the legal and social limitations experienced by their communities. Through music making, they are able to actively engage in American politics in a way that reflects their own cultural traditions and identities.

Adapted from a summary by Kerri Malone that first appeared in Issue 7 of *The Digest* from the Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago

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