Artificial Authority: Our Relationship to Music and Genre Labeling

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For my senior capstone-project I elected to compose and record a full-length album. During the process of writing and recording what I would label as "rock music" I began to feel weighted down by certain expectations and external factors. I felt as though by making a "rock" album I was letting down different people and forces in my life. Mentors and family members who had introduced me to genres such as jazz and soul, friends who taught me to love heavy metal, and finally I felt as though I let down my own music department as I had not composed much classical music during my time at Colorado College. This line of questioning led me to wonder where such expectations originate. I began to examine the role that expectations and external influences play in our relationships with music as well as what gives those external influences the perceived "authority" to do so.

I believe authority in musical choice is derived, in part, from the way in which we categorize music. Objectively assigning a label to something such as music, which is subjective in nature, gives rise to a series of value judgments and expectations. I have come to define the judgments and expectations placed on music as "artificial authority." In his book *Studying Popular Music*, Richard Middleton writes that a society's organization of taste is a function of the force field through which the power relations of that society are expressed in cultural practice. This is not to say that genre labels should be eliminated. Instead, I argue that we should consistently ask ourselves the foundational question, "What kind of music am I listening to and why?" This inquiry allows us to be more aware of how genre labels function as tools of distinction and how easily they can be manipulated, that in turn may affect us in ways in which we are not aware. Rather than attack genre labels, my objective is to to gain a different perspective on how genres can be used as tools of influence by the "artificial authority."

My discussion of this topic is separated into four discrete sections: 1) Defining genre labels in popular music; 2) Exploring the origin of "artificial authority"; 3) Examples of how

"artificial authority" works; and 4) An examination of musicians and composers each of whom rejected being categorized.

What is a Music Genre in popular music and how can it act as a label?

Historically, musicologists have used tangible methods for categorizing music and deriving meaning or value from those categories. They study various elements such as melody, rhythm, cadence, timbre, texture, and tempo considered important by the field. According to musicologist Richard Middleton, this style of analysis may work for Western Art music, which has attempted to distance itself from subjectivity and issues of personal identification. However, he acknowledges that we require a wider scope for popular music post 1900.[1] When dealing in the realm of popular music in the twenty-first century, form and musical characteristics alone will not suffice in order to define the "ideological luggage" that comes with musical genre in this context.

Musicologists such as Philip Tagg, Allan Moore, David Bracket, and Simon Frith propose an interdisciplinary system for organizing and identifying popular music genres. Tagg argues that traditional musicology has ignored music as a symbolic system, choosing to focus solely on objective aspects such as form and design. Tagg admits that popular music is a system that is 1) conceived for mass distribution; 2) stored and distributed in non-written form; 3) only possible in an industrial monetary economy; and 4) subject to capitalism. Therefore, "the music requires the use of readily recognizable stereotypes of musical code as a basis of production."[2]

Allan Moore argues that the difference between conventional musicology and popular music scholars and their individual uses of the terms of style and genre, stating that traditional

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[1] Middleton, 248-249.
[2] Tagg, 37-67.

musicologists prefer to use the term "style" while popular music scholars favor "genre." Moore provides three ways that we can approach this distinction. First, we could accept that the terms are purely interdisciplinary. Alternatively, we could insist that one is superior to the other. The third option (the route he pursues) suggests that we attempt to find a middle-ground wherein the differences can be accommodated and a holistic approach where the two terms are included can be attained.[3]

Italian musician and musicologist Franco Fabbri attempted to create a five-part system for determining genre labels. He accounted for aural characteristics, the ways in which meanings are conveyed (semiotics), behavioral rules, social and ideological rules, and even commercial and juridical rules. However, according to Brackett and Jennifer Lena this five-rule system is too static to capture the meaning of popular music categories.

Jennifer Lena defines musical genres as "systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that bind together industry, performers, critics, and fans in making what they identify as a distinctive sort of music."[4] Lena goes on to define musical genres as "systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that bind together industry, performers, critics, and fans in making what they identify as a distinctive sort of music."[5]

Brackett states, "Genres are not static groupings of empirically verifiable musical characteristics, but rather associations of texts whose criteria of similarity may vary according to the uses to which the genres' labels are put."[6] Musicologists such as Brackett, Lena, and Frith believe that genre labels in popular music encompass a wide array of factors and associations outside of musical style such as class, race, gender, industry, performers, critics,

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[3] Moore, 432–442.
[4] Lena, 5.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] Brackett, 3.

and fans. If we are to agree with them, then we must also be aware of the danger that comes with labeling such categories.

Where does artificial authority come from in genre labels?

In the early twentieth century there may have been a far more binary sense of class distinction, dominant and subordinate, which ties into the musicological discussion between art and popular music.. However, the ideology today is more fractured and diffused. This creates a more elaborate form of social organization. Middleton believes that the ideological work responsible for the social organization of musical taste in our present culture is the articulation and inflection of a multitude of lines of force, associated with different sites, audiences, media, production apparatuses, and discourses.[7] This takes the discussion of music into a much larger context, a more global perspective in which there are three main agents of artificial authority at work in our society: big industry, established institutions, and interpersonal influences.

"Industrial authority" is created when powerful commercial organizations such as record companies operate on an assumption that there exists a direct relationship between the genre and the consumer's tastes. This is derived from further assumptions about the consumer's age, gender, ethnicity, and disposable income. Pretty quickly an idealized consumer is derived and thus, large groups of people can be aggregated into assumed ideological categories purely on the basis of what they listen to.[8] According to Frith, this allows the record industry to ascertain what people like and why they like it, because they see a direct relationship between specific genres and communities of people which in turn can have a great impact on self and group identification for listeners.[9]

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[7] Middleton, 248-249.
[8] Frith, 85.
[9] *Ibid*.

At the same time, "institutional authority" is asserted when academia permits value judgments to be made about genre categories created by the music industry. There is a role for academia to play and that is to question authority at work, not comply with it. When the analytic tools of academia do not specifically align, the missed calibration can contribute to this sense of artificial of authority. An example of this appears in the following section.

Authority from external forces is not limited to major commercial or academic establishments. Bourdieu argues that cultural capital is acquired like a possession and creates a "high" and "low" cultural dichotomy. Frith takes Bourdieu's argument one-step further, stating that even in low culture, such as the realm of popular music there exists a similar value based dichotomy. Popular cultural authority is vested with the fans of music, that is, the listeners who are determined by deejays, A&R (Artist and Repertoire) departments, and music critics.

Frith also states that in order to define a genre ideologically it must also be defined against other ways of music making, therefore creating what he refers to as genre boundaries.[10] This serves as a form of artificial authority in that if a song or composition is selected or categorized under one ideological group an assumption is formed in opposition to a different ideological group. This approach is highly formulaic and appears to be the product of an omnipresent music industry and the wide range of interpersonal influences and tastes. This form of influence seems to flow from both big industry and interpersonal influences. Middleton believes that social organization leads us to a point where our musical tastes are not chosen freely. In fact, the involvement of a subject in a particular musical pleasure has been constructed.[11]

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[10] Frith, 86.
[11] Middleton, 248-249.

Concrete examples of artificial authority infused in the act of genre labeling:

The widespread use of *Billboard Magazine* in the U.S. provides examples of artificial authority and influence from the commercial music industry. For decades, *Billboard Charts* were based on record sales and radio airplay. However, as Brackett points out, the two influences are not disjointed. Radio airplay directly influenced record sales while simultaneously being based off of record sales and promotional pitches from record companies. A confluence of influences emerged and perpetuated formulated outcomes. Brackett quotes Irv Lichtman, Editor of *Cash Box,* another music industry trade journal that influenced record buyers. "A lot of the chart was intuitive; it was projecting based not on actual statistics necessarily but perhaps a buzz, perhaps something more concrete."[12] Example One (see page 16) provides the annual top ten lists for the *Billboard's* R&B/Hip Hop Chart is presented as published in November of 2013. This chart historically covered music made and consumed by black audiences. Upon closer inspection one might ask why the most popular songs identified in the R&B/Hip Hop category are created and produced by predominantly white artists. Pop chart columnist Chris Molanphy credits this to *Billboard's* 2012 decision to change their methodology for evaluating popularity in this category. For forty years the *Billboard* R&B chart was accurately depicting what the R&B community was listening to by placing limits on what they counted as airplay and record sales through the monitoring of "core R&B stores": retailers, many black-owned, which primarily sold R&B records to a largely black clientele.[13]

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[12] Brackett, 28
[13] Molanphy, 2014.

However, with the rise of the digital revolution in the early 2000s, something began to happen with the black music charts. *Billboard* chose not to factor in online music sales in their R&B chart in order to remain accurate with their coverage of radio play and sales of black music. By doing so *Billboard* was ignoring a significant and growing segment of R&B/Hip-Hop sales. Like most record shops, "core R&B stores," were finding themselves unable keep up with the music sales of online services, thus black music sales became misrepresented. In 2012, Molanphy wrote an article in *The Village Voice*, highlighting this issue, but warned *Billboard* of the even greater misrepresentation that could occur if they chose to simply use any and all online sales of music that could fall under the R&B/Hip Hop category. This is where categorization of genres became distorted.

Unfortunately, *Billboard* did not heed Molanphey's warning. As a result, today's R&B/Hip-Hop chart serves more as a condensed version of the magazine's Hot 100. By permitting the adoption of a more amorphous representation of the music, *Billboard* created an inaccurate musical depiction of an entire music genre and, more importantly, a misrepresentation of an entire demographic of American music consumers.

In a 2014 interview with the *New Yorker*, Molanphy states "we've actually got a system now whereby, in order for something to appear on the charts, there is a gatekeeper in the sky, which in this case is *Billboard*."[14] Brackett asserts that these charts function as a form of symbolic, expressive coding in our culture. That they provide information about distribution of resources that become categories of sound according to implicit social divisions. Furthermore, these charts can also aid in the production of imagined or constellated communities by synchronizing the popularity of recordings across widely dispersed regions.[15] Therefore, the act

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[14] Molanphy. 2014.
[15] Brackett. 28

of defaulting to a methodologically flawed and numerically misinformed "gatekeeper" such as *Billboard* results in a misrepresentation of the music and its audience while maintaining *Billboard's* role as an influencing agent in the commercial market.

The R&B chart possesses a long history which can be traced back to a genre known as "Race Music." By studying this lineage we can understand how artificial authority arises in the institutional setting. In Example Two (see page 17) Brackett outlines four major popular music genres that were broadcast in the U.S. in the early twentieth century and the demographics that were associated with them. "Race Music" was broadcast to the black communities both rural and urban. The "Mainstream" category was for affluent, urban, predominantly northern whites. The demographic for "Old Time Music" was aimed at a condensed group of rural white southern workers as well as a group known as white "Mountain Men." Finally the category of "Foreign Music" was attributed to a wide variety of music brought to the U.S. by immigrants.[16]

If we take a closer look at the genre known as "Race Music", we see an amassing of the entire black demographic into a single genre label, regardless of religion, environment, or other external factors. Brackett calls this a "collapsing of internal distinctions" and states that such actions can have an adverse impact on the communities of people being grouped together. Brackett believes that sound recording and cinema has the ability to make people aware that they belong to a group they never knew existed, or that they might be categorized with people whom they had previously believed were very different from themselves and whose primary awareness of one another was through the mass media itself.[17]

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[16] Brackett, 20.
[17] Brackett, 22.

Author of a book titled *Race Music*, Guthrie Ramsey, states that black music is not comfortably articulated with the tools of traditional musicology and therefore, research on black music has typically focused on performative representations of the art while ignoring the arena of the culture. Ramsey credits a long lineage of falsely representing black ethnicity to what he calls "institutional blind-spots."[18] Allowing only performative representations of black art to thrive is exactly how the R&B chart arrived at its present state. This demonstrates that the influence of artificial authority can be derived from inaction as well as intentional choices. It is in this instance that the institutions and scholars of academia present the most powerful role in preventing or allowing misrepresentations of culture and music to continue.

In order to understand how interpersonal authority works we can take a look at a 2011 study where researchers Lonsdale and North investigated the use of the representativeness heuristic in the act of predicting and judging the musical taste of others. The representativeness heuristic is a cognitive bias used when people judge the likelihood of an event according to its perceived similarity to typical group members. In this case whether or not someone will like a certain type of music. In Lonsdale and North's study participants were asked to identify the likely musical preference of ten fictional individuals. In their second study, participants were asked to rank ten styles of music in order of how similar the individuals described were to the typical fan of each musical style.

In the first study (see Example Three on page 18) predictions based on stereotypical descriptions and photographs demonstrated high correspondence rates. In the second study (see Example Four on page 19) there was yet again a strong significant positive correlation between ranked similarity to stereotypical music fans and mean ranked predictions of their

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[18] Ramsey, 19.

likely musical tastes. "These findings show that an individual's similarity to stereotypical music fans might act as a heuristic 'rule of thumb' used by people to quickly and economically judge their musical tastes."[19]

Lonsdale and North cite the work of 2006 study by Bakagiannis & Tarrant in showing that people behave more favorably towards those perceived to share their musical taste than not, and therefore argue that musical taste functions as a "social badge" of group membership. Lonsdale and North's study proves that the representativeness heuristic has important implications for intergroup behavior in that individuals who closely resemble stereotypical fans of our favorite music are likely to be judged as sharing our musical tastes. Therefore, these individuals are more likely to be considered in-group members and subject to favoritism regardless to actual shared musical tastes.[20] Lonsdale and North conclude that, "In this context, an individual's similarity to stereotypes of musical taste is expected to significantly influence how people behave towards them."[21] When an individual's taste is judged by others, their identity is being brought into question. Lonsdale and North's supporting evidence of the representativeness heuristic in this context shows that expectations and artificial authority are entangled in our perception of ourselves and others on an everyday basis.

Artists who do not conform:

Although genre labels may act as powerful influencers for both listeners and artists alike there are several individuals who choose not to be directed by such forces. To understand the nonconformists, this section of the discussion focuses on the artists who are dedicated to the

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[19] Lonsdale and North, 140.
[20]*Ibid.*
[21]*Ibid.*

act of creativity and who have either questioned or entirely ignored this idea of artificial authority in their creative process.

It is difficult to discuss genre in popular music without mentioning the Beatles. One of the most celebrated groups in all of popular music history, the Beatles are typically classified as a rock/pop act. However, their music possessed a wide range of influences including orchestral, jazz, and Eastern traditional music. I believe a large part of their success came from their ability to bridge the gap between the polar opposites of high and low art that Frith and Tagg speak about. Their music was such a cultural force that it influenced highbrow art critics to consider pop culture for its richness and wide range while simultaneously introducing complex musical ideas to the average listener. What the Beatles' popular success suggests is that listeners may actually enjoy the demolition of genre barriers. It may be that our subconscious minds and ears are aware of and appreciate music's natural tendency to please us without artificially created categorizations. Of course without rules, there would be no rule-breakers. Maybe it is this sense of rebellion against genres that intrigues listeners so much with the Beatles' music.

There are similar rule-breakers in late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century music, many of which intentionally revolted against categorization and forged disruption with the creative process. Miles Davis discredited genre labels on the whole by showing that entirely different meanings could be attributed to the same terminology in different cultures. Never shy of confrontation Davis asserted in an interview discussing the inherent meaning of the term "jazz," in both European and American contexts. "When they say jazz they mean a concept that a person has that's not straight as legit white composers, old composers, Russian or whatever, have. Here it means that you're a n----r and you're playing an instrument that you didn't study.

That's what I get from it, so I ignore the critics."[22] Davis is demonstrating his very strong

disdain for the ideological baggage that comes with genre labels. Thus, recognizing the power

that such tools of categorization inveighed and the artificiality of such categories, Davis

avoided the labels others created.

When asked if Jazz had avoided the mainstream of American Music Davis responded:

Davis: "I don't like that word Jazz.
Interviewer: "You don't? What would you call it?"
D: "I think social music, all the social melodies out in the air. There's no jazz anymore."
I: "What do you think of most popular music or what passes for popular music today?"
D: "That's the social music I'm talking about."
I: "You think it's good?"
D: "Yeah. You take out what you want and leave what you don't like.
You know like food. It's no big thing, it's just the mind that picks it out."[23]

Davis arguably catalyzed more musical innovation in the twentieth century than any

other artist or composer. He could have easily been a snob about his music and used his

platform to direct his own sense of authority towards others. However, Davis did not allow

himself to think about music in the terms that the industry or the tradition of musical

categorization had given him. Instead, Davis had a much more holistic understanding of music

as a phenomenon that occurs naturally, rather than breaking it into specified, ideologically

pared styles.

When asked about the genre label for his music known as "Salsa," Panamanian musician

Reuben Blades asserted "I never liked that adjective. It was used for identifying a series of

rhythms coming from the Caribbean area in order to sell it to North Americans and the rest of

the world. That is to say, to simplify a form of musical information that is really complex…"[24]

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[22] Davis, Miles. *In his own words*. (Miles Davis Interview #1).
[23] Davis, Miles. Interviewed by Bryant Gumbel. (Miles Davis Interview #2).
[24] Lena, 14.

Gregg Allman had a similar response when asked about the genre label "Southern Rock" that was affixed to the music the Allman Brothers produced. "I do hate it, but the only good thing about it was we had our own slot in the record shop. I don't know why they came up with 72 different f---ing genres of music. Like, alternative. Alternative to what? To music?"[25]

The rejection of labels and any argument over whom "owns" the privilege of creating a particular type of music is observed in biases from both highbrow to lowbrow and vice versa. The acclaimed opera soprano Renee Fleming recorded what many labeled a "rock" album in 2010. The recording *Dark Hope* included songs by indie bands like Arcade Fire and Death Cab for Cutie, and was an experiment that raised the ire of the Indie crowd for "poaching" their turf. Meanwhile, Fleming's opera fans complained that their beloved diva was singing two octaves lower than usual and that they were disappointed in her choice. While the album did not please everyone it demonstrated that Fleming, who paid her way through music school singing cabaret and jazz club dates, was fearless and was following her own creative choices without regard for genre restrictions.

The fact that many artists are unsatisfied with the terms used to label their music may mean that there are inherent shortcomings and flaws in the categorization system. Genre labels, while part of the commercial sale of music do not have to be a part of the conscious creative process for the artists who compose the music. For some artists genre is more of an afterthought.

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[25] Allman, Gregg. Interview by Brian Ives. 2014.

With that said it is informative to examine one more perspective offered by Miles Davis in the same interview cited earlier:

I: "Is it at all important to you how people will ultimately rank you or judge you?"
D: "You mean like an athlete?
I: "Yes, like the best."
D: "When you say best...you can't say best in any form of the arts. There's no best dancer, no best actor."[26]

In Conclusion:

This last quotation from Miles Davis gets at the core of the argument at hand. Artificial authority is created when establishments, institutions, or people with an assumed cultural esteem attempt to rank or place objective value judgments on an art form that is inherently subjective. It is not the genre labels, but how those labels are used as leverage by powerful, external forces that infer authority. When I began the process of writing the music for my album, what inspired me had little to do with what the label "rock music" might infer. I simply set out to create some songs for myself. The process of doing so while tuning out the static, external forces, artificial authority, or whatever term one may choose to call it has been deeply satisfying. This seems to support something important that Frith wrote, "The essence of Rock is fun...a concept strangely neglected by sociologists, and we might add by musicologists and semiologists, and fun has to do with sensuality ...grace... joy... energy…vigor...and exhilaration."[27]

The intent behind this paper is not to move entirely away from genre labels. Namely, because we require categorization in order to function as a species. Furthermore, to erase genre distinctions would be similar to the act of saying "I don't see color," a statement that ignores powerful racial distinctions and ultimately does more harm than good. Instead, my intent is for

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[26] Miles Davis Interview #2.
[27] Middleton, 247.

listeners and musicians alike to become aware of the external forces that affect the creative process. Film scholar Frank McConnell proposes that we ask the question "who is the creator of a film?" in order to understand a wider set of answers and attitudes that will provide insight into the double existence of film as a made object and as a communal expression.[28] I am proposing that we ask a similar question "What am I listening to and why?" In order to get closer to the truth that not all of our tastes are chosen freely and that some are influenced externally.. In taking full ownership and control over what we listen to we will be taking a step towards understanding how genre and artificial authority affects our lives in all aspects.

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[28] McConnell.

Examples

Example Number 1:

Billboard's R&B Top Ten Chart for 2013

1. Eminem: "The Monster" [ft. Rihanna]
2. Drake: "Hold On, We're Going Home" [ft. Majid Jordan]
3. Mike WiLL Made-It: "23" [ft. Miley Cyrus, Wiz Khalifa, and Juicy J]
4. Jay Z: "Holy Grail" [ft. Justin Timberlake]
5. Robin Thicke: "Blurred Lines" [ft. T.I. and Pharrell]
6. YG: "My Hitta" [ft. Jeezy and Rich Homie Quan]
7. Chris Brown: "Love More" [ft. Nicki Minaj]
8. Macklemore & Ryan Lewis: "White Walls" [ft. ScHoolboy Q and Hollis]
9. Eminem: "Rap God"
10. Justin Timberlake: "TKO"

Excerpt from Molanphy's 2014 article - Molanphy, Chris. *I Know You Got Soul: The Trouble With Billboard's R&B/Hip-Hop Chart*. Pitchfork, 4/14/2014

Example Number 2:

Table from Brackett article

TABLE 2 Record Catalog (before 1939) and Popularity Chart (after 1939) Nomenclature, 1920–97

Categories	1920–39	1939–49	1949–69	1969–82	1982–90	1990–97
Mainstream	Vocal with Accompaniment / Instrumental Dance	Popular	Popular / Hot 100	Hot 100	Hot 100	Hot 100
African American	Colored Records (1921–22) / Race Music (1923–42)	Harlem Hit Parade (1942–44) / American Folk (1945) / Race (1946–49)	Rhythm and Blues	Soul	Black	Rhythm and Blues
White, Southern, Rural	Old-Time Tunes, Old-Familiar Tunes, Southern Records (1924–33), Hillbilly (1933–39)	Hillbilly (1939–42) / American Folk (1945–49)	Country and Western/ Country (1962)	Country	Country	Country
Foreign Music	Foreign Music	Foreign Music (1939–44)				

Brackett, David. *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*. 1st ed., Oakland, California, University of California Press, 2016.

Example Number 3:

Lonsdale and North table 1

Table 1. Likely musical taste of 10 different individuals

	Type of personal description			Information manipulation
	Photograph & description	Photograph alone	Description alone	
Daniel (Heavy metal fan)				
Chart pop	1	8	1	10
Opera	0	3	0	3
Classical	0	1	0	1
Heavy metal	49	38	49	136
	$\chi^2 = 142.16^{**}$	$\chi^2 = 71.44^{**}$	$\chi^2 = 142.16^{**}$	$\chi^2 = 19.58^{**}$ (6)
Stacy (R'n'B fan)				
Country	0	3	0	3
Opera	0	4	0	4
Jazz	3	13	2	18
R'n'B	47	30	48	125
	$\chi^2 = 127.44^{**}$	$\chi^2 = 37.52^{**}$	$\chi^2 = 134.64^{**}$	$\chi^2 = 31.25^{**}$ (6)
Peter (Jazz fan)				
Jazz	46	47	38	131
R'n'B	2	0	0	2
Indie rock	2	3	9	14
Dance	0	0	3	3
	$\chi^2 = 119.92^{**}$	$\chi^2 = 127.44^{**}$	$\chi^2 = 72.72^{**}$	$\chi^2 = 17.26^{**}$ (6)
Nigel (Hip-hop/rap fan)				
Country	0	0	0	0
Hip-hop/rap	46	37	49	132
Indie rock	4	12	1	17
Jazz	0	1	0	1
	$\chi^2 = 120.56^{**}$	$\chi^2 = 71.12^{**}$	$\chi^2 = 142.16^{**}$	$\chi^2 = 15.18^{**}$ (4)
John (Classical fan)				
Indie rock	2	2	2	6
R'n'B	0	0	0	0
Dance	0	1	1	2
Classical	48	47	47	142

Source: Lonsdale and North. *Musical Taste and The Representativeness Heuristic*. Sage Publishing. 2011.

Ex 4: Lonsdale and North Table 2

Table 2. Correlational coefficients between the mean ranked prediction of musical taste and both: (1) mean base-rate population estimates; and (2) mean ranked similarity

	Mean base-rate Estimates (%)	Mean ranked Similarity	
		John	Jerome
Mean ranked prediction			
John	.47	.98**	–
Jerome	.42	–	.92**

Note: N = 10 in all cases. * p < .05; ** p < .01.

Source: Lonsdale and North. *Musical Taste and The Representativeness Heuristic*. Sage Publishing. 2011.

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