

Miley Cyrus: (singing)

Sarah McConnell: People of all political stripes have long used pop music to define what it means to be American. Sometimes the songs are just lighthearted summer jams, like this one from Miley Cyrus, Party in the U.S.A. But other times these musical arguments are serious. For example, when Jay-Z raps about selling drugs in order to pursue the American dream, he's also critiquing how race and class exclusion left his family behind.

Jay-Z: (singing)

Sarah McConnell: From Virginia Humanities this is With Good Reason, I'm Sarah McConnell. Today, we're tracing political and social change through popular music, from party anthems to protest songs.

Frank Ocean: (singing)

Sarah McConnell: And later in the show, tracing America's democratic identity through music, both during the early days of the republic and today.

Nancy Hanrahan: What kind of music are we as a democratic society going to produce that can help us identify ourselves as a nation?

Sarah McConnell: But first, Charlie McGovern argues that American popular music has always been fiercely political. McGovern is a Professor of American Studies at William and Mary. His forthcoming book is Body and Soul: Race, Citizenship, and Popular Music, 1930-1977.

Sarah McConnell: Charlie, as you're looking into popular music after World War II, are you finding a lot of it is patriotic music?

Charlie M.: Well the war made so many people conscious of both the fragility of the nation and its strength. And as the war gave way to... The years after when the Cold War of course become the dominant policy, and civil rights and other movements for social change came to national prominence, all of that was expressed in the music. People loved this country and they wanted this country to better.

Sarah McConnell: What sorts of American ideals were people singing about? Were these mostly white songs?

Charlie M.: Oh, no. This was a great conversation if you will, so that people meant different things by freedom. They meant different things by equality. They meant different things by what it meant to belong, to be a full person, to have respect.

Sarah McConnell: Take me through a few of the songs that show me how World War II was a player in this story, where people were singing about patriotism, or American ideals, or what it is to be American.

Charlie M.: Sure. The pop music of the time tell stories about people parted, absent lovers. And my favorite of all of these songs is by Glenn Miller and the Army Air Force Band, and it's a song called Goodnight Wherever You Are.

Glenn Miller: (singing)

Charlie M.: The song could be about anybody anywhere, except that in that... At the very end, Johnny Desmond, the great vocalist, sings, "With all my heart, I pray everything is all right." The song is both in that sense talking, communicating to that loved one who is in danger, but a prayer for their safety.

Sarah McConnell: What year was this? This was during World War II.

Charlie M.: This was. This was in 1944. While these kinds of songs, these romantic ballads of absent lovers were the most prominent, if you looked over toward the sides, or if you will off of that mainstream, you found folks in country music as it was coming to be called, and folks in blues music who are often much more direct in their patriotic sentiments. And a fabulous example of this is Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, and they did this fabulous song called Smoke On the Water, in which the singer, Tommy Duncan, calls out the axis dictators by name, and threatens them, that the United States is not just going to defeat the Axis, but in effect burn it to the ground.

Tommy Duncan: (singing)

Charlie M.: It wasn't as if the idea of Smoke On the Water, that you're with us, or against us, was pervasive. There was a great deal of questions raised by the war, about how are we as a society united in war, but divided in so many other things. How are we going to live together? And after the war, pundits, politicians, and artists all were very concerned with what used to be called tolerance, or belonging. And Frank Sinatra, who had just become the most popular singer in America, devoted a lot of his time as a young artist to doing work for racial and ethnic tolerance, and one of the cornerstones of his efforts was his song, The House I Live In.

Frank Sinatra: (singing)

Sarah McConnell: What about African American singers at this time? Were they also singing patriotic songs during this period?

Charlie M.: African Americans' patriotism has always been on display, but because their experience has been so horrific living as enslaved people, African American singers often call for, even demanded respect, brotherhood, solidarity, and

especially a place for them. And there was nobody who did that better than Nat King Cole, and this song from 1952 called My Brother is a fabulous example.

Nat King Cole: (singing)

Sarah McConnell: It's interesting. It's so beautiful, but it's also a very subtle message, we're all one, right?

Charlie M.: Yes, yes. But by the early 1960s, African Americans were getting more and more impatient. And Lena Horne, pinup idol of black and white soldiers during World War II, she comes out with a song called Now. It's one of the most popular civil right's songs that ever appeared on a pop 45.

Lena Horne: (singing)

Sarah McConnell: Aw.

Charlie M.: Yeah.

Sarah McConnell: But it didn't sound like a censorable song to me. She's just saying let's get action now. She's not calling for violence. Why was this song disturbing to black and white radio stations?

Charlie M.: It was disturbing, I think because by saying now, she was putting the lie to the politeness that still surrounded political discourse, and this is Lena Horne, when she gets angry and she says now, people have to pay attention.

Charlie M.: The Drifters performed a song called Up In the Streets of Harlem, which made that story of activism, and activism now, brought it down to the local and to the personal level. And this song is about of course Harlem in New York, but because Harlem was often a codeword for black communities everywhere, the song spoke to black folk in all of their situations.

The Drifters: (singing)

Sarah McConnell: And what is he saying? I'm going to leave and help out?

Charlie M.: Right. And he can no longer put up with the expectations of the white world, that black folk like him just sort of grin and bear it, and so he's leaving. And if you listen to the lyrics closely, he's not going to the Vietnam War, he's going to join the movement. He's leaving the streets of Harlem to go work for a better racial world.

Charlie M.: As the '60s progressed, there are riots and uprisings, violence, destruction, and the poverty has not gone away, and by 1968, the United States is on fire. The time for restraint had passed. And Curtis Mayfield and his group the

Impressions, Curtis says that being enslaved, and working for freedom has made black Americans just as important, and just as entitled as anyone else. And so that's what's going on in This Is My Country.

Curtis Mayfield: (singing)

Charlie M.: This song is so infectious, it is uplifting, even as they are telling us a really, really hard truth, that in 1968 most white Americans were still not dealing with. The idea that the United States was perfect, and the idea that the United States was a work in progress have always been in tension, and it's that debate over patriotism that we still face today. What is different from the World War II era, or the 1950s and '60s, is that we have so many more people now that are not going to put up with the built-in racism in our country.

Charlie M.: There's a reason why people remember Sam Cooke's A Change is Gonna Come, and celebrate Sam Cooke, and Aretha Franklin, and Ray Charles today, because their music not just crossed over into audiences, but their music inspired people, along with others like Nina Simone, to make change, and it sustained them when things weren't going well.

Sarah McConnell: Charlie McGovern, this is fascinating. Thank you for sharing this on With Good Reason.

Charlie M.: Thank you, Sarah.

Aretha Franklin: (singing)

Sarah McConnell: Charlie McGovern is a Professor of American Studies at William and Mary. His forthcoming book is Body and Soul: Race, Citizenship, and Popular Music, 1930-1977.

Sarah McConnell: Coming up next, how today's streaming services are changing how we view music, and perhaps the very idea of democracy.

Sarah McConnell: My next guest is Nancy Hanrahan, a Professor of Sociology at George Mason University. Before becoming an academic, she spent ten years in the music business in New York City. Now she studies the sociology of music. She argues the American ideas of democracy and citizenship are interwoven with how we experience music, from orchestral performance to digital streaming.

Sarah McConnell: Nancy, so people have been debating the notion of how music furthers democracy, or is representative of our democratic ideals for a long time. When did you first see that emerge in American culture?

Nancy Hanrahan: It goes back to the 1830s. At that time the concern with democracy was a way of distinguishing the culture of these United States from the elite and

aristocratic cultures of Europe. I mean de Tocqueville asked this question in Democracy in America, and it was a beautiful statement. He said, "What kind of culture would an egalitarian society produce?" Because up until that point, "culture," and I'm using that word in quotes, was really associated with aristocratic, or elites in society.

Nancy Hanrahan: It became a subject of quite fierce debate in the 1830s, '40s, '50s, you know really all through the 19th century. And the question there was, what kind of music are we as a democratic society going to produce that can help us identify ourselves as a nation? The debate has really caught up with this whole question about national identity. It's later also caught up with the question about morality, shared values, right? And the idea that somehow a music that is authentically American would express those shared values, and would help to unite, and identify the nation.

Sarah McConnell: What music did we identify as uniquely American, let's say in the 1800s?

Nancy Hanrahan: There were of course many different camps for this, and for this debate. Some people... For instance, John Sullivan Dwight, who represented the sort of Bostonian view, suggested that democracy in music was making the best European classical music available to the largest number of people. Other people like William Henry Fry, who was based in New York, felt that American music had to be different. And many of the ways in which it was different, is, was... There was a lot of experimentation between European classical forms, and what were considered more popular American forms, like the singing families of the Hutchinson's, and the Chaney's.

Nancy Hanrahan: But if you actually put those musics side by side, that sort of bel canto tradition, and the singing families were using a lot of the same material. There wasn't quite that separation between what we considered to be high culture, and popular culture at that time. This idea of sort of mixing the classical and the popular. One of the exemplars of that was the opera singer, Jenny Lind, who was Swedish, who gave a concert tour from 1850 to 1852 in the United States. And if you look at the press at the time, people were claiming that this was an example of democratic culture and democratic music in action. Because she sang in English, which was unusual at that time, and also because the actual songs, the bel canto songs that she was singing were sort of adjusted to a more popular audience.

Nancy Hanrahan: She would add certain repetitions to sort of heighten the sort of drama, or the affect of a particular section of the song. The climaxes were also heightened and extended. There was a sense that this was a merging of the popular and the classical, the European and the American.

Sarah McConnell: But it's interesting. It sounds like in a way it's considered dumbing down the song a bit to appeal to the more unknowledgeable masses?

Nancy Hanrahan: That is certainly how we would interpret it in a contemporary discourse, but that wasn't what was being said at the time, and I think it's because popular, and what we would consider high art cultural forms were being enjoyed by virtually everybody. I mean everybody went to opera. Everybody went to Shakespeare plays. It wasn't until much later in the 19th century, toward the end of the 19th century, that the notion that we have of high culture actually emerges.

Sarah McConnell: What happened at the turn of the century? As we saw the advent of radio, phonographs, were these new technologies considered the democratizing of music also?

Nancy Hanrahan: Yes. And it's actually an important touch point in terms of comparison with the contemporary discourse about democratization. Because when we think about that now with digital technologies, we're thinking in terms of technological affordances. People have access. They can listen to whatever they want. There's a multitude of possibilities out there. That's a very different conception of what democracy means with respect to music than certainly it was in the 19th century. The idea was that through radio and those sort of major broadcasters, that this would unify the nation because everyone is listening to the same thing.

Sarah McConnell: Huh. So, it's more a cultural democracy. It's like later we talked about the three major networks, we're all watching one of them.

Nancy Hanrahan: That's right. The notion of democracy is still tied to a very strong sense of the nature of some social and political collective. Democratization means bringing everyone into the framework of these "democratic", quote unquote, media.

Sarah McConnell: Was the debate about music and democracy in the early 20th century also about, "Look, we can bring you any kind of music from any corner of the country," so we can all hear Appalachian music, or country, or high music, high art music?

Nancy Hanrahan: The debate was raging. Okay?

Sarah McConnell: Right.

Nancy Hanrahan: Some people actually felt just the opposite because before the major networks, before radio is as widespread and available as it became, radio was like people sitting around with little shortwaves and trying to reach each other. It was a very individual and very local product. There might be a small station someplace that's broadcasting within a very, very, very small range.

Nancy Hanrahan: One side of the debate is, "Isn't this fabulous? This is democracy in action. This is national unity. This is a shared culture, shared morality." Very much drawn from the 19th century discourse. And on the other hand, many people were saying that this is industry consolidation, and it's going to obliterate local cultures.

Sarah McConnell: This is another debate over democracy in music, the proponents of digital music would say, "Any of us can get anything we want, it's right at our fingertips. We have freedom of choice."

Nancy Hanrahan: Yes. They say that.

Sarah McConnell: Right. What's the counter argument?

Nancy Hanrahan: Well I think it's less of a counter argument about democratization, than it is to really explore how different the meaning of that word is. We can talk about democracy as essentially something that is technical. Okay? Access, choice. But none of that actually speaks to the kinds of questions that were being raised in the 19th and early 20th centuries, which is really about the content of American democracy, and what that means. It's almost as though we've shifted, or the discourse has shifted from, who are we as a democracy? What does that mean for the production of culture in this country? How do we distinguish ourselves from the Europeans? How do we stake out new territory as a new nation?

Nancy Hanrahan: And there are 20th century versions of that also. Certainly, questions around African American music, and around jazz, the Civil Rights movement, those were also questions about democracy. But when we talk about digital technologies democratizing culture, none of that is being invoked. In fact, it's quite the opposite because these technologies are advertised, and in fact do provide a fairly personalized experience. The idea that democracy is something... It's not just about individual freedom, it's not just about individual choice, it's about something collective, is really lost.

Sarah McConnell: You interviewed some young people about what they listen to, and how they get their music, what did you sort of broadly find with how satisfied these young people were with their digital music choices?

Nancy Hanrahan: People feel a great deal of frustration with the streaming services and what they're able to discover. People are able to get something new, or hear something new, but not really new. Here's something that's a little bit different from what they've heard before, in the sense that it's not exactly the same song. But one level of frustration is that people don't really feel that even though all this music is out there, that they really are able to access it because there is so much out there, people need help navigating all the possibilities. So, they rely on the streaming services, and to some extent also their social networks. But what is technically available, isn't necessarily audible because if the song isn't absolutely right, next, next, skip, skip, skip.

Nancy Hanrahan: Skipping rates are astronomical.

Sarah McConnell: It's so interesting. We're choosing our music like we choose Tinder dates, right?

Nancy Hanrahan: Right.

Sarah McConnell: Swipe, swipe, swipe.

Nancy Hanrahan: Swipe, swipe, swipe.

Sarah McConnell: Yes.

Nancy Hanrahan: Exactly. I think that's where the debate is with respect to the digital technologies, at this point it's about the market. Is this a question about democracy in any real sense? I don't hear that. I really don't hear it.

Sarah McConnell: Nancy Hanrahan, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

Nancy Hanrahan: It's really been such a pleasure, Sarah. Thank you so much for having me.

Lizzo: (singing)

Sarah McConnell: Nancy Hanrahan is a Professor of Sociology at George Mason University. Her current research project is called Music and Democracy, which explores two centuries of discourse about popular music in the United States.

Sarah McConnell: This is With Good Reason, we'll be right back.

Sarah McConnell: Welcome back to With Good Reason, from Virginia Humanities. I'm Sarah McConnell. Music is a political force. Across the world it's an integral part of how cultures and communities tell their stories. But in Sub-Saharan Africa some important music recordings have been buried away in old colonial archives. Noel Lobley, a former radio DJ, wants to unbury them. Lobley is an Ethnomusicologist at University of Virginia. He works with South African musicians to bring field recordings of traditional music to the people, even if that means turning donkey carts into DJ stands.

Sarah McConnell: Noel, when did you first fall in love with African music?

Noel Lobley: I was working as a professional DJ in clubs and on radio decades ago, and in 2001 I think, a friend of mine, an anthropologist, invited me to go and join him and traveled, and live in Kenya for three months. It was my introduction to anthropology. How you hung out with people, how you work with cultures, and the natural musician in me started to apply that to music. And following a lot of music luckily throughout Kenya, the mix of tradition and modern, how it was everywhere, how in the smallest tiniest churches it would be blasting out on the streets. You'd hear hip hop music being played in situations you wouldn't expect to hear it. Elder communities are listening to it. And it just felt like it had a special place to me.

Sarah McConnell: What happened after Kenya? You went back to London sort of a changed man.

Noel Lobley: Yeah, came back determined to work with, to study African music, to find out what was underneath it. I studied ethnomusicology back at the University of Oxford in England. During this time... I knew African music, I knew world music, from the more produced side of things. You know, what we hear on radio, what's on record labels. But I became aware of these field recordings, these like snapshots, moments that are recorded in context. Music in the place where it's actually made, rather than overproduced in a studio.

Sarah McConnell: Field recordings by whom?

Noel Lobley: Field recordings by different collectors. Anthropologists, private collectors. The one that really turned my ear and head was a collection, recordings made by Hugh Tracey, who was an English pioneer, collector, ethnomusicologist, who in the 1920s moved to Southern Rhodesia, as well as fell in love with the local music making, and devoted the rest of his life to trying to record all of the... All of the music making of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Noel Lobley: He established the International Library of African Music. 30,000, 40,000 recordings. 200 language groups, 18 countries. That's an archive now. It's a teaching institution. But when I was first introduced to it, I could only find little tiny fragments online.

Sarah McConnell: Give me an example of an early fragment you found that just thrilled you.

Noel Lobley: One that stayed with me, stood out so strongly in these early days of listening was a recording of a Lesiba, mouth bow, played by shepherd boys in Lesotho. We'll listen to a short fragment here.

Noel Lobley: What you're hearing there, the Lesiba is a mouth bow. It's a stringed instrument that you blow rather than pluck. The main musician you can hear is vibrating a vulture quill in his mouth, and with just sheer skill is able to pull out a fundamental note, a main note, and a whole series of kind of scorched overtones. You can also hear whistling, and the expression happens, the kind of the grumbings, and the mumbings, they all happen at the same time as playing the instrument.

Noel Lobley: It's aesthetically stunning, but it's to communicate with animals. It's to communicate with space. It's very much of a place. It's also, it features on the national radio in Lesotho as well, as part of the... I think it's just before the news, so it's kind of gotten that iconic symbol.

Noel Lobley: When I first started hearing these sounds online, I responded purely as a DJ and artist to the sound. The quality of the sound. To me it sounded like acid house music, which I grew up on.

Noel Lobley: The distinctive sound in acid house is distorting a bass line. A machine distorts a bass line, and it makes this whole... It's been described as squelchy. The acidic sound is this kind of coruscated and scorching sound that just electrifies clubs.

Noel Lobley: Having grown up on that, and being involved with that scene, I had the same reaction to what I could hear in the Lesiba here. I'm not saying the traditions have influenced each other, but sonically there's something connected there I think.

Sarah McConnell: After you became so moved by the archival sounds from African music that you found, you went back to Africa. Tell me about the experience you had with a donkey cart and cassettes.

Noel Lobley: Sure. It struck me that this wonderful collection was unknown outside of academic circles, and it mapped history amongst 200 different communities in South Africa. It was recorded at a time when music and culture was hugely changing. This kind of rural to urban migration that was happening. People going to work on mines. So, there was massive social, cultural upheaval and change. It's supposed to be a moment of celebration of indigenous music and culture.

Noel Lobley: What interested me was working with local artists, local black South African artists, and whether this record would mean anything to them. And I was lucky enough to meet Nyakonzima Tsana, a professional musician, and choreographer, dancer, Who when I met him, was teaching kids to dance hip hop. And Xolile Madina, a hip hop artist and rapper.

Noel Lobley: I said, "Do you want to come and hear this archive?" They were like, "Yeah." And we came in, and we listened to it together, and we started to map a project together. Some recordings are like, "Yeah, this is our anthem. We still all sing this today, and it was recorded in the '50s." It was surprising to them to know that, that record existed.

Noel Lobley: And then as we went over time, we kind of drew out recordings that we thought might be of interest to people. But it was these were locked up in an archive, and they opened my eyes to methods that could expose the recordings in the townships to local communities. So, they're like, "If you want to get these things heard. Hire a donkey cart. We'll travel around singing the songs on the donkey cart. We'll set up a PA system, and we'll DJ them. We'll DJ the old recordings. We'll DJ house, and ragga, and hip hop. We'll do performance, and people will come."

Noel Lobley: And so we did, and they did come.

Sarah McConnell: How many communities did you visit?

- Noel Lobley: Probably dozens of different townships and surrounding areas. We got responses from hundreds and hundreds of people.
- Sarah McConnell: And tell me, you were playing old songs, or you're playing new songs?
- Noel Lobley: We were playing recordings from the Hugh Tracey collection. The ones we were using were all recording amongst Xhosa communities, X-H-O-S-A, in the 1950s. And we were playing those to contemporary Xhosa communities today.
- Sarah McConnell: Give me an example of one that really excited some of these communities to hear again.
- Noel Lobley: This is Somagwaza. This is actually recorded in Pondoland, a community in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. So, Somagwaza.
- Noel Lobley: (singing)
- Noel Lobley: When I was going through the collection with Nyaki, and Xolile. Nyaki was like, "Yo, this is our national anthem. Everyone knows this song. We sing this." And he'd tell me what it was, how it was used. What surprised him was that it had been recorded 50 years earlier, or 60 years earlier. He's like, "People want to hear this. They want to hear this." It became one of the selection of songs that we started to share with people, and it was the one that was most well-known. It was still performed a lot today, but what was fascinating about it was that Hugh Tracey wrote a couple of lines in the catalog about, "It's a praise song for the chief after he's slaughtered a cattle." So, that's what Hugh Tracey would have been told by someone, and across time and in different communities, it means so many different things. The debates, the different perspectives on what Somagwaza was as a song, what it meant to people was utterly fascinating.
- Sarah McConnell: What does that word mean?
- Noel Lobley: Somagwaza is something like father of the stabbing, father of the cutting. Something like that. It's because it's most strongly associated with an initiation ceremony, a circumcision ceremony, which is called an [foreign language 00:36:49], which is still practiced a lot, and it's quite controversial in some ways now.
- Noel Lobley: But people debated about who had the right to sing it, what it meant, who Somagwaza was, what the history of it was. It led to these whole kind of like storytelling, it ignited the... People's desire to communicate about who they were.
- Sarah McConnell: You lived and traveled around South Africa with these songs and these musicians for a whole year?

- Noel Lobley: For an entire year, yeah. I watched this method of kind of sharing them with people. One response has been to team up with a record label, to reinterpret, and remix some of this history and artists.
- Sarah McConnell: And is that the project called the Beating Heart Project?
- Noel Lobley: That's the one, yeah. Beating Heart is a record label based in London.
- Sarah McConnell: Recently, Beating Heart released an album. Tell me what's on the album, and how we should receive it.
- Noel Lobley: There's two parts to the album. There's the Malawi originals recorded by Hugh Tracey in the 1950s. They're the field recordings. And the remixes. 21 remixes down by international and Malawian artists. So, they exist side by side. And the international artists, many based in London, from the sort of electronic, dubstep, house scene, have responded very, very strongly to these original recordings.
- Sarah McConnell: Give me an example of an original piece on the album, and also a remixed piece by one of these modern groups.
- Noel Lobley: Let me play for you here... This is a song recorded by Hugh Tracey in Malawi in the 1950s, 1957. It roughly translates from [foreign language 00:38:27], as money is the devil.
- Noel Lobley: (singing)
- Noel Lobley: The musician is Beti Kamanga, recorded in 1957, playing the Bangwe, which is a raft zither. A stringed instrument that's played by hand, and he's obviously singing at the same time. Rhythmically, very complex. Very warm. So, it sounds so warm. And the topic, he's singing about the problems of money. What happens when you leave your community, and go and work on the mines in Johannesburg. There was huge rule to urban migration at this time.
- Noel Lobley: Let me play for you now the remix that was done of Money is the Devil. This was remixed by Rudimental, London based, very successful, very, very well-known house electronic 15 piece group.
- Noel Lobley: (singing)
- Sarah McConnell: How were London dance audiences responding to this?
- Noel Lobley: It's gone done really strongly at festivals. People have really gone for the sound, and I say the story behind it because Beating Heart is trying to work by using this sort of international profile of artists in the electronic house scene to help invest back in local community projects. All of the artists on Beating Heart Malawi

work for nothing. It's a non-profit label, and the proceeds are invested back in local communities in Malawi. So, in this case, in Malawi, Beating Heart is working very closely with the Garden to Mouth program, which does sustainable nutrition programs in schools in Malawi.

Sarah McConnell: Do you worry that even in these days, in spite of the excitement and the chance to release it to a wider, people outside of Africa are still appropriating that music for their own excitement, and musical purposes?

Noel Lobley: Absolutely. It's a very, very pressing concern and question, to sample the rest of the world to feather your nest is a neocolonial pursuit. What's exciting... I think what's exciting about something like a Beating Heart Project is the attempt to be collaborative, to work with the international music industry, but closely with anthropologists, local communities, and kind of get that conversation, and that collaboration right. And the collaboration is the most important thing, you know? It's the equality of the exchange, and it's very, very difficult to achieve that. That's the challenge and the exciting challenge.

Sarah McConnell: Noel, this has been wonderful. Thank you for sharing your experiences and music with me today on With Good Reason.

Noel Lobley: You're very welcome. Thank you for having me. Thank you for your interest. And let me just play you one more song. This is Ndamutemba Nyanga. A kalimba, an mbira. People call it a thumb piano, but it's an mbira.

Noel Lobley: This is recorded by Hugh Tracey in Malawi, again in the mid-1950s. It's a cyclical form, so you get repeating cycles. But within that repeating cycle, you get stunning infinite variety. And the moment you hear, experience the music fully, it moves from hearing a loop into like a spiral moving from time, so you never hear the same thing again.

Noel Lobley: (singing)

Sarah McConnell: Noel Lobley is a Professor of Music at the University of Virginia.

Sarah McConnell: Coming up next, hip hop diplomacy.

Sarah McConnell: Ever since Louis Armstrong serenaded Egyptians on the banks of the Nile, the U.S. government has seen African American music as a key tool of diplomacy. Now, a State Department program is sending hip hop artists to conflict zones to build partnerships with local musicians, but bringing American music to conflict zones isn't always easy.

Sarah McConnell: Arthur Romano is a Professor of Conflict Resolution at George Mason University. He helps prepare today's hip hop ambassadors for their state sponsored trips around the world. Arthur, you lived in India for a while right after college, and

began to read Gandhi's writings. What did you read that really struck you to the core?

Arthur Romano: The little bit I knew about Gandhi was about his large scale resistance. But reading Gandhi, I really saw that a lot of the work was addressing issues at a local level, and often times in rural places as well as in the cities. Doing sanitation projects, and rethinking what schools could be like, so that they could integrate nonviolence into their education, reimagining policing. All of that made sense to me immediately, in terms of its potential impact.

Sarah McConnell: When you think of Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, and conflict resolution, it's not so much sitting down in dialogue between oppressors and the oppressed. It's more Gandhi and Martin Luther King finding ways forward to achieve their ultimate political ends, right?

Arthur Romano: It's both. In those circumstances where people sometimes don't have a seat at the table, an ability to influence policy, how are you going to have a meaningful conversation? When people come together like that to build a social movement, it brings issues that are hidden for the larger population to the surface, and the power dynamics can start to shift. At some point dialogue negotiation, mediation, those kinds of things become possible. That's one of the pieces where I think music is powerful.

Sarah McConnell: You most recently have been working with the State Department, teaching peace practices to young hip hop artists and musicians. Tell me more about that program.

Arthur Romano: Sure. That program is called is Next Level. They go to various countries, often times conflict affected countries, with a group of hip hop artists, and reach out to a group of artists, and support them in producing music. I was speaking recently to a hip hop artist, and spoken word artist, G Yamazawa. He's Asian American, and explores issues of identity, race, class, and his experiences growing up in the south.

Arthur Romano: (singing)

Arthur Romano: I also had a chance to speak with Kane Smego, one of the Next Level artists that went to Zimbabwe. Kane explores a variety of issues in his work. Issues of immigration. Issues of whiteness in the United States.

Arthur Romano: (singing)

Arthur Romano: There you get a sense of his... The directness, to get people to think about it a little bit differently. Music plays an important role in social movements. We see that right now. There's a number of hip hop artists who have been engaging with issues of racial justice in the United States. Kendrick Lamar's performance, of course at the Grammy's brought up issues, and really exemplified issues of

the history of racial segregation and violence in the United States, that generated a lot of conversation.

Arthur Romano: There's been the work of Tef Poe in St. Louis, where he's really in many ways educated people nationally about the context that people are living in, both in St. Louis and Ferguson. And Kas from St. Louis, from Sauce Records, I have a track here that really talks about the impacts of police violence in his neighborhood. And that deep sense of loss that family members, and friends, and people in the community feel when they lose someone in a police shooting.

Arthur Romano: (singing)

Arthur Romano: Musicians have always moved movements. Right? Even if you're in a large crowd, and you're part of a march, a samba band, or a marching band comes, and it literally moves the crowd, right?

Sarah McConnell: Right.

Arthur Romano: Music has that element of internal movement and external movement. And so it's deeply embedded in social movements, where people are trying to often times educate, right? And engage larger numbers of people around an issue, and basically ask the question, how do we do this different? And how can we do this together?

Sarah McConnell: What about hip hop music in particular, what sort of power do you think that format has?

Arthur Romano: Well hip hop music in the United States really rose as a critique, right? Both to capitalism and economic exploitation that was happening. And to racism, I mean if we think about the early history of hip hop in the Bronx, we're talking about a community that was dealing with extreme poverty that was carved out by highways. That experience that folks were living through, and the resilience and creative response that people had was a big part of what gave birth to hip hop, and inspired artists and others all over the world.

Sarah McConnell: And therefore how is it helpful to use hip hop artists from America in conflict areas across the world? What is the power that they bring, and the opportunity that they bring for engagement there?

Arthur Romano: I think it's complicated, right? That's a mixed history, right? And it puts artists in a complicated place. While people may be relating to hip hop as a music of resistance abroad, they can also relate to it as a music of the West, or a music of the privileged, as a sort of imperial kind of music form, and that's something that in some conversations with artists, that they've raised as an issue. This is one of the things that we talk about in the workshops before they go. And I think in some ways just having that honest conversation itself is a big part of the work.

Arthur Romano: Artists are in learning mode, and I think that, that can be really effective, and helpful learning about how people understand them, understand these art forms, and then how do they leverage the power of music, of community, of collaboration, of creativity, to then push forward social change in the ways that they're hoping for. I think that's a natural process for them often times.

Sarah McConnell: Arthur Romano, thank you for sharing your insights into this on With Good Reason.

Arthur Romano: It was a pleasure to be here. Thank you.

Arthur Romano: (singing)

Sarah McConnell: Arthur Romano is an Assistant Professor at the School for Conflict Resolution and Analysis at George Mason University.

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Sarah McConnell: For the podcast go to WithGoodReasonRadio.org. I'm Sarah McConnell, thanks for listening.

Sarah McConnell: (singing)