

Does A Performer's Cultural Origin and Roots affect their Development of their Craft?

-A Personal exploration of my identity and performance-

I was adopted at the age of two weeks from San Antonio, Texas. We don't know too much about my birth family except, that they were American, and my birth parents were of Hispanic origin. I have two birth sisters whom I've never met, and a brother who was also adopted from Texas. Whilst, my brother never had much trouble accepting his new surroundings, in contrast, I find it a challenge and this unease often follows me around.

Growing up and becoming more and more fascinated with music, I attempted to find my own style and taste. Music often reflects an artist's geographical landscape, home or culture for example, The Beatles. The Beatles all originate from Liverpool, UK and not only do they often reference their background in the way they speak but also in their music. In an article for the BBC America describing all the references ¹ 'Penny Lane' is a song that reflects the place they grew up. This kind of music is more personal and relatable to the listeners and may even persuade them to reflect on their own past.

When it came to singing songs, and writing my own music, I struggled to find a style which reflected my background with which I was really comfortable and connected with on a deeper cultural level. Like most teenagers, I had a lot of role-models growing up, and still do, who inspired me to write different kinds of music and develop not only my singing but also expand my music to appeal to different audiences. I loved artists like Jennifer Lopez, Ariana Grande, Katy Perry because growing up I always struggled with confidence and expressing my true personality. Looking up to these women whether or not it was a stage persona, they expressed true confidence and were true to themselves through their music and performance on stage. This confidence and self-assurance projected by these artists was definitely something I wanted to emulate through my own music and in performance. Further, I found myself especially drawn to Hispanic music and artists and occasionally country artists. I often questioned why I found them so appealing or was drawn to that particular music and style. That's when I began to question my cultural origin of sorts and began exploring if music could help me start to discover my own identity. I'm discovering what 'fits' into my voice type and how important a 'cultural origin' really is or if it is at all. In this essay I will consider the extent to which my birth origin has influenced the musician and performer I am becoming, by looking at the many role models and genres that have influenced me.

Whilst becoming interested in many artists and genres that are associated with Hispanic music, I feel it's important for the purpose of this essay to clarify what those terms mean.

Hispanic and Latino are often used interchangeably though they actually mean two different things. Hispanic refers to people who Speak Spanish and/or are descended from Spanish-speaking populations, while Latino refers to people who are from or descended from people from Latin America. ²

¹ <http://www.bbcamerica.com/anglophenia/2014/02/10-british-references-beatles-songs>

² <https://www.hnmagazine.com/2017/09/difference-hispanic-latino/>

For some time, I've wondered about how my life would have been if I did live back in Texas. I never actively thought that I wanted to live there but I think sub-consciously the music and artists I was interested in had cultural similarities. For example, I have had many Hispanic role models at different times. Jennifer Lopez has been an on-going one. She's so stylish and talented and represents Latino Culture to a global audience. For a while I felt like she was exactly who I wanted to be, her music is so fun and uplifting and she specializes in singing, dancing and acting, (Triple Threat). I was always fascinated in how somebody could have so much drive. JLo is a great example of someone who embraces her origin. She was born in The Bronx, New York with Puerto Rican family and parents. All of her music, her appearance, her attitude suggests this, whether it's Spanish music or frequently referring to her upbringing when she speaks. Her Hispanic roots helped her to create a career. The motivation and drive that she got from her parents who taught her English because it was a necessity for success. She is described as 'one of Hollywood's leading ladies' in one interview amongst many that takes place in her 2017 documentary 'Let's Get Real'³.

She frequently uses her platform to voice issues that are ignored by the American media. Such as her recent half time Super Bowl performance where she was accompanied by Shakira, an equally powerful 'Hispanic' performer and singer. Their performance had a strongly political message that was a strong clapback at Trump. "Latinos are going through a difficult time in the US right now," [Shakira](#), a native of Barranquilla, Colombia, told reporters in the days leading up to the game. "I think it's very important for us to convey a message of unity."⁴ This follows Trump's administrative policies that have had a negative impact on Latin and Hispanic communities throughout the USA.

Looking up to JLo, whilst growing up, not only gave me what I felt was representation but the confidence to succeed and inspire me to write some of my own Spanish music and just widen my understanding of the Latin American music I felt it would have been part of my culture and had I stayed in Texas. The songs that I've written that are were the product of this admiration, are some of my favourite songs that I've written. I wrote a song called 'Letters to Juliet'⁵ that expressed another commonly portrayed theme in Spanish music, Love. <https://soundcloud.com/romy-florin/letters-to-juliet/s-GyLh3zATtpv> the song is about a constant longing for love and for that other person. Spanish music is all about expressing passion and feeling, I tried to portray a bit of this in both the verse and the chorus. The expression 'I'll write letters to Juliet' is so romantic and love driven by the narrative that is the tragic love story of Romeo and Juliet.

Associating myself with powerful women such as Jennifer Lopez and Becky G gave me the space to begin writing. This led to developing my production skills allowing me to create my own tracks and perform them. Looking at clips of my favourite artists getting ready for shows, or life on the road, is beyond mesmerising and influential. Watching Ariana Grande's 'Honeymoon Tour' Diaries and witnessing the concert live changed the music I was writing. Something I've learnt from years of listening to a variety of contemporary artists, is how to 'Riff'. A "riff" or a vocal 'run' is 'The movement/flexibility of the larynx which enables the

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmIq4iNN9-c>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/feb/03/jennifer-lopez-shakira-super-bowl-half-time-show-latino-political>

⁵ <https://soundcloud.com/romy-florin/letters-to-juliet/s-GyLh3zATtpv>

voice to hit individual notes at a fast speed.⁶ It is a difficult technique used by many singers and performers and is highly admired. This is something Grande does frequently and listening to her I wanted to be able to do it. Years and years of practice have allowed me to develop this skill and put it in my own music, something I do very frequently. This is definitely something that I feel has given me part of my own singing style. I use this technique in so much of my music now, there isn't a song that highlights it more than others, however there is a song I've written where there is a significant run build up before the final 'louder' of the chorus. The song is called 'Louder'⁷ This is where the riff fits into the song.

Latin music contains a specific character and charisma that 'mainstream pop' just doesn't possess. Despite most Hispanic/Spanish/Spanglish music being technically different in terms of frequently and commonly used rhythms or drums for example, 'reggaetón'⁸, the entire feel of the music is happier, or some might even say sexier. An instrument that is frequently used in Spanish music is the guitar. After listening to Spanish/ Hispanic music I am often inspired to write songs that are similar, however if you can't speak Spanish its incredibly difficult to find words that fit. Spanish songwriters often merge many words into the same sentence and when you hear it you don't realize until you break the words down. For example in Becky G's song 'Sola', there is a lyric that says 'que hago contigo' but sped up and softly pronounced, the words combine together and sound more like 'qhago contigo'. I realized quickly how difficult it was to write the words in Spanish and focused more on the instrumental. Spanish music has a particular sound that's made with a particular beat and the same set of instruments. The 'reggaetón' beat is something that is very popular in Spanish music. it creates a more grooving and constantly moving feeling in the music that makes you want to dance. I included this in my song and used a combination of Spanish guitar and a simple bass line while choosing amongst chord progressions I heard in some of my favorite Spanish songs and some of my own. I wrote a song called 'Asi Asi Asi'⁹ which loosely translates to so and so or on and on. This song to me is a perfect take of a fun and grooving Spanish song. It has the reggaetón beat and trumpets for an authentic feel. I love writing music like this that I feel people can really dance to.

Spanish music is definitely prominent in Texas, but another important music and style is country music and dance. After watching the 2011 Craig Brewer remake of the 1984 American musical drama film, 'Footloose', directed by Herbert Ross, my idea of my own identity and who I wanted to be flipped completely. Footloose is a thriving, youthful and extremely captivating movie with incredible music and an impressive soundtrack. There is a wide range of songs by various artists such as Blake Shelton and Deborah Lurie. I was drawn to characters like 'Ariel Moore' a savvy young woman who has a layered personality of attitude and passion for dancing and moving. My best friend at the time and I learnt the line dance from the movie. The dance is to the song 'Fake ID' by Big and Rich ft Gretchen Wilson. 'a style and genre of largely string-accompanied American popular music having roots in the folk music of the Southeast and cowboy music of the West, usually vocalized, generally simple in form and harmony, and typified by romantic or melancholy ballads accompanied by acoustic or

⁶ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=vocal%20run>

⁷ <https://soundcloud.com/romy-florin/louder/s-Oj6N5VRI5gn>

⁸ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Reggaeton>

⁹ <https://soundcloud.com/romy-florin/asi-asi-asi/s-ohqaTBczGPH>

electric guitar, banjo, violin, and harmonica.’¹⁰ I had already written a lot of music that could be performed in a country style in the sense that we just changed the instruments to guitar, bass and drums. I performed one of my songs called ‘lies’¹¹ in a school concert with a couple friends of mine and some teachers. We made the song acoustic and changed the electric guitar solo to a harmonica solo that was played by one of my teachers. I love rewriting my music into different genres.

Other big shows I’ve been drawn to include the new Netflix series ‘Heartstrings’ about country star Dolly Parton, and the hit musical and film ‘Rock of Ages’. Country is a technique I feel my voice fits perfectly into, both the style and the genre. Singing country is very different to singing a pop or musical theatre piece. When singing country, I’ve found it allows you to relax your vocal chords and sing in a far more nasal placement. ‘The mouth and nasal resonances are the greyish colors while the head-nasal belongs to the bright color.’¹² In another article for singlikeastar.com there is a detailed description of this vocal technique and how to achieve it ‘For good singing, we are looking for a balance between these resonators, rather than an over-activation of the nasal cavity.’¹³ I’ve found this style and technique to be so useful when it comes to other styles and my writing in general. There is an obvious advantage of listening to different styles and having capability to write different styles or merge them together. I’ve found developing my voice to fit more into the country style has made it far easier for me to sing pop music, as I’ve found a healthier placement. Little bits of practice and variation in what I sing and write has had a huge impact on me as a performer and as an artist.

My passion and influence for performing doesn’t only stem from singer songwriters but also from musical theatre. I have always been faced with the career question many a time that is ‘what would you like to do when you grow up?’ The selection of musicals that I am drawn to still stems from the curiosity regarding my cultural origin. I was particularly drawn to *In the Heights* written by Lin Manuel Miranda. This is a musical that takes place in Washington Heights and follows a Hispanic family and their struggles with money and life. There is a young protagonist, Nina, who I felt particularly drawn to. She drops out of college and the people from her childhood have so much faith in her, so she struggles to tell them. I’m very young, but I still feel a sense of pressure amongst my family and my friends to succeed. It’s lovely having everyone believe you can do amazing things as much as it is a burden in some ways. Nina sings a song called ‘Breathe’¹⁴ which communicates Nina’s feelings at this point in the musical. It also uses some of the techniques I have already discussed, such as combining English and Spanish into the same song. I have performed this song on numerous occasions as I found it could be a piece of music that represented how I feel.

My love for theatre has grown so much over the years and I’ve found myself committing more and more. Lin-Manuel Miranda is a fantastical genius who has been involved in creating some incredible shows including *In the Heights* and tony award-winning musical *Hamilton*. Lin grew up in New York City explaining his love for rap music and his accent. His family, of Puerto Rican decent, and his parents having various Hispanic or Mexican spouses,

¹⁰ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/country-music?s=t>

¹¹ <https://soundcloud.com/romy-florin/lies/s-efk2D>

¹² <https://www.becomesingers.com/techniques/vocal-placement>

¹³ <https://www.singlikeastar.com/how-to-correct-nasal-singing/>

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0m2haH-m9k&feature=youtu.be>

he learnt both languages and experienced different cultures. This deeper understanding and knowledge regarding both Hispanic and New York and street-smart slang shows in his writing. There is a similarity in his musicals in the sense that the story and each character is rich with detail and so dense with information, the story is far more believable. Lin is no coward to stating his opinions through his craft and in general no matter how daring. In an interview with The Atlantic, Miranda says 'All art is political. In tense, fractious times—like our current moment—all art is political.'¹⁵ Musicals in general always inspire me to write music and create stories. I think there's something special about how we as humans can be so captivated and moved by stories that aren't all true. There has been a couple times I have experimented with musical theatre writing, you have far more freedom that if you were writing a pop song. Theatre leaves room for the over the top and dramatic side of writing. One song I wrote as a response to Miranda's 'In the Heights', is called 'whats it gonna take'¹⁶ its urban and youthful and has a Hispanic feel to the music. Another musical that I've been very passionate about it the Broadway and Westend musical Waitress, written by Sara Bareilles. This show has almost been life changing. Through the show I have had so many amazing opportunities. The story follows a woman named Jenna who lives in rural America with her husband Earl. She works as a waitress in a diner on the side of the road where she makes 26 different varieties of pie every morning. Her husband is cruel and mean and abusive. She becomes pregnant with his baby and panics. Her two friends, Becky and Dawn, her co-workers at the diner, attempt to help her and advise her to see a gynecologist, who she ends up having an affair with. Jenna makes a lot of mistakes, yet the story allows room for human imperfection. It's beautiful and although I can't personally relate to it, I can't help but wonder if there are similarities in how my life, or my birth families, could've been if I had stayed in Texas. My voice fit surprisingly perfectly as soon as I attempted to sing the music from Waitress. One song in particular not only helped me to expand my vocal technique but allowed me to connect to the more confusing part of my life. The song is called 'She Used to Be Mine'¹⁷ it is sung at the climax of the show when Jenna, the lead protagonist, connects to the audience by sharing her complete hopelessness. It is in this moment where she finds strength within herself and from then on, becomes stronger.

I grew up in Highgate, a leafy suburb in north London, with my parents and my brother, Hugo. We live in a lovely white house in a beautiful gated estate surrounded by lovely neighbors and a big green garden. It is as far removed from a Texan lifestyle as one can imagine. I go to the private King Alfred School in Golders Green where I've studied my entire life. There has been no real sense of financial struggle or feeling limited. I am incredibly lucky to be where I am and live the way I'm living, however, sometimes it feels hollow and selfish that I'm here and my birth family are not. I always attempt to connect to that part of me, how-ever small it is and attempt to figure it out, but it stumps me. My music and my passion for music reflects this sense of confusion and misplacement in the jumble of different influences that I've described here. The confusion doesn't limit me, instead it slows me to explore my influences both here and across the pond. My song writing reflects all aspects of my identity whether they have been formed in the UK or with my connections to Hispanic, Latina and American roots. This allows me to succeed in a way I never believed I

¹⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/lin-manuel-miranda-what-art-can-do/600787/>

¹⁶ <https://soundcloud.com/romy-florin/whats-it-gonna-take/s-nbdWs8nRWAU>

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IT3Zj9jyUqM&feature=youtu.be>

could. My taste in music and performance expands every day allowing me to grow as a performer and learn more about different cultures. My knowledge of my cultural origin may never be complete however, I will not allow that to define my growth as hopefully my talent, vocal skill and passion for what I do will be something I can be proud of. that confusion isn't my identity, my growth and my voice, will be.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dly6p4Fu5TE> – Jenny from The Block'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmIq4iNN9-c&t=175s> – let's get real 'documentary

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCqYjYNARcY> -tour life, life on the road

<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000182/> -IMDb, movies show and music

<https://www.gq.com/story/jennifer-lopez-icon-of-the-year-2019>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50-oTkmF5I> – Shower Becky G

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=204RpkonU-s> – Becky from The Block

<https://twitter.com/ArianaGrande/status/40266680152240128> - italian quote

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffxKSjUwKdU> – No Tears Left to Cry

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<https://www.google.com/search?q=in+the+heights&safe=strict&client=safari&rls=en&sxsrf=AleKk007oFPPnUjoTmPhfSdIJierUz-nWLw:1586102112011&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=rNUO00e3Yt-GbM%253A%252CxbuNPW AMcmvM%252C &vet=1&usg=AI4 -kSB5sLwhtquebsJnFo-VQzSAST4qIA&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiE6drn0tHoAhWNIfwKHT-fmC0QQ9QEwGHoEAcQMw#imgrc=nnZSB9XMZcV9eM>