

MAS Award Outcome Report  
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## American Pop Music Abroad: Cultural Diplomat or Cultural Despot?

*Initial interest: "Our music is mostly just your music."*

Last summer I spent two months abroad in Aix-en-Provence, France to research the phenomenon of informal cultural diplomacy through the lens of American popular music as it functions in French society. This research concept grew out of my first encounter with French culture during high school. Whilst staying in a host family in Aix, I was curious to learn more about French popular music—which I define for the purpose of my research as what is often heard on the radio—and asked my host sister what she typically listened to. I was surprised and disillusioned by her response: "our music is mostly just your music." My resulting research was intended to explore the implications of that curious sentence: How is national identity affected when music – a widely shared activity or experience – is dominated by material from another nation? How does foreign music influence the domestic music industry? Does an influx of American music affect perceptions of America itself?

Exploring these questions gave me an opportunity to delve into an extended period of ethnographic research techniques under the supervision of my advisor, Prof. Nomi Dave of the McIntire Department of Music. My aim was to engage in observational research techniques within various frameworks of everyday French life: where do I encounter American radio music in public venues like grocery stores, weekend festivals, public squares, night clubs, etc. Additionally, I planned to conduct informal interviews—or rather, organic conversations—on the topic of culture and Americanization. During my time in Aix I spent 5 days each week as an intern with the Festival d'Art Lyrique d'Aix-en-Provence, one of Europe's premier summer festivals in opera and classical music. The network resulting from my work with the festival proved to be invaluable, and resulted in some of the most enlightening conversations on my topic of interest. With spare days and evenings, I spent time exploring the city itself, getting to know its people and keeping an ear out for musical encounters.

*Findings: "Elle connait tous les paroles!" & "It's not the better culture, it's just the bigger culture"*

By the end of my stay, two observational trends were particularly intriguing: a separation of music from its textual meaning, and a series of skewed perceptions of American culture. The first refers to the way musical enjoyment changes when lyrics cannot be understood. I've come to recognize how important sing-alongs are to how music is consumed and appreciated in the U.S. Enjoyment of popular music at school dances or large concerts are as much an exercise in collective music making as they are collective movement. Having never known anything different, I

was surprised by my colleagues' response as I confidently sang along with Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, and Sia at a staff party early in my stay. At least 90% of the music produced in the U.S., and I knew every song. One co-worker exclaimed, "Elle connais tous les paroles!" ("She knows all the lyrics!") Later, I would ask my interviewees what it was like to experience so much music without an understanding of the language. One offered that it must be strange for me since singing along was an American norm, but that not singing had become the norm in France so "good" music was more about a danceable beat than intriguing lyrics. Despite that statement, though, there was clearly a persistent impulse to sing. Often people would join in at the choruses of English language songs, using actual words if their language skills were sufficient, or just making nonsense sounds that mirrored the English text if not. There is, I learned, an actual French phrase for making nonsense sounds: *faire le yaourt*. Furthermore, I could not help but notice a clear change in energy whenever a token French song was played at social events. Everyone would join in, fully committing to the song with the song, and creating the type of atmosphere I am used to experiencing at home in the U.S. These observations led me to realize how much we take complete musical experience for granted, and to wonder whether music created domestically in a nation's own language should be considered a cultural right in resistance to foreign invasion.

The second trend I observed refers more to the effects of prevalent American culture generally than to music specifically. It became clear over the course of many conversations just how deeply cultural Americanization runs in France, particularly amongst French youth. One colleague, a fellow college student, told me how his childhood was largely characterized by American film, television, and music: "You grow up thinking that American culture is better and that you have to go there someday. But then you get older and realize that it's not the better culture, it's just the bigger culture." I found that statement, so well articulated in his second language of English, to be enlightening and perhaps a bit sad. What may be more unsettling, however, are the skewed images that make up perceptions of the "bigger" culture. As an example, I found that many French had visited or wanted to visit Miami. From my point of view this seemed an unusual choice of tourism, given the host of other cultural cities that I would consider to be worth a visit. When I inquired, *Baywatch* was always cited as the reason behind this curious choice. As it turns out, the television series of the 90s remains one of the most streamed American TV shows abroad. If just one television show has such a pervasive observed effect, imagine how the sum total of American cultural exports must effect perceptions of our culture and lifestyle.

### *Continuing Work*

My experiences and observations this summer—so generously by the Millar Arts Scholars award—has since inspired a great deal of further research for what will soon be my completed thesis paper in Arts Administration. I learned that Americanization in French musical life is just one apparent effect of a much larger "culture crisis," or perceptions of a "France bloquée" or a "malaise Française." In terms of culture, specifically, this is manifested in artistic roadblocks like

protectionism, aesthetic traditionalism, and institutional control, all of which differ from the (allegedly) free-market, decentralized, democratic approach to culture in America, which seems to be ever dominant on the global stage. This summer's work was integral to my discovery and exploration of this complex contemporary issue.