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## **AAG Annual Conference—New Orleans, April 10-14, 2018**

*Sounds, Scenes and Urban Policies: Contemporary Issues and New Horizons for the Geographies of Music.*

IASPM (International Association for the Study of Popular Music)  
AAG (Association of American Geographers)

### **Music in surf town typology: Alternative spaces of a subculture**

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From the physical space in which music comes to life to a mythology built around ideological scenes, the place in which a type of music is developed or consumed plays a vital role on its evolution and its conservation. In the most representative places, there is an effort to cultivate and support musical activity in order to locally activate new forms of creative cultures and identities.

This paper focuses on the conveyance of the surf lifestyle through surf musics anchored in geographical and social spaces prone to cultural creativity and allowing representational and inclusive aesthetic dynamics to thrive. We look at the way a Cocoa Beach based sunscreen company named Sun Bum dedicated their space to musical performance in order to promote a local surf lifestyle associated to the surf town.

We move past the myth of a surf music culture marked by Californian exclusive aesthetics to get closer to a legitimist music used as a platform that contributes to mark local identities and economies by promoting a singular “surfanization.”

Sun Bum’s usage of office space as a stage relocalizes surf music: it is displaced, branded, and displayed as a Cocoa Beach surf lifestyle and identity. Local surfers see it as the validation of their singular identity while tourists associate these musical events to the surf town. Infrastructures developed by aesthetic, social, and geographic communities have enabled the growth of a subculture inherited, commodified, and reorganized according to local codes in a process which clarifies the space-music-activity relationship.

**Key words:** Surf-town, Music, Soundscape, Lifestyle, Surfanization

From the physical space in which music comes to life to a mythology built around ideological scenes, the place in which a type of music is developed or consumed plays a vital role on its evolution and its conservation. In the most representative or stereotyped places, there is an effort to cultivate, support, and maintain musical activity in order to locally activate new forms of creative cultures and identities.

This paper focuses on the conveyance of the surf lifestyle through surf musics anchored in geographical and social spaces prone to cultural creativity and allowing representational and inclusive aesthetic dynamics to strive. We look at the way a Cocoa Beach based sunscreen company named Sun Bum dedicated their space to musical performance in order to promote a local surf lifestyle associated to the surf town. We move past the myth of a surf music culture marked by Californian borders and exclusive aesthetics, and we shift closer to a legitimist music used as a platform that contributes to mark local identities and local economies by promoting a singular *surfanization*.

Sun Bum's usage of office space as a stage is a way to relocalize surf music: it is displaced, branded, and displayed as a Cocoa Beach surf lifestyle and identity. Local surfers see it as the validation of their singular identity while tourists associate these musical events to the surf town. Infrastructures developed by aesthetic, social, and geographic communities have enabled the growth of a subculture inherited, commodified, and reorganized according to local codes. The process allows the activation of know-hows and clarifies the space-music-activity relationship and the way it can be cultivated and supported locally.

### **1. The surf town**

#### **1.1. Cocoa Beach and the surf lifestyle**

Cocoa Beach is a Floridian town established as the hub of surfing on the east coast of the United States. Located in Brevard County, it is home to legends of surfing such as Kelly Slater and his mentor Matt Kechele, or the Hobgood brothers. In spite of the poor quality of the waves, a real surf culture has strived there over the years as Cocoa Beach has developed a strong surf industry. Staples such as Catalyst surf shop or Ron Jon, the biggest surf shop in the world, were created in Cocoa Beach. Innovative surfboard shapers such as Ricky Carroll or Neilson have created news ways to surf in Florida's inconsistent conditions ("Florida Surfboard Shapers," n.d.). Lifestyle brands, such as Sun Bum, have added cultural cohesion to a town which was built with the beach in mind and its corollary: tourism. Visitors and locals coexist on this small strip of land for their common attraction to the beach lifestyle. The locals have developed and maintained the original surf lifestyle characterized by the figure of the

overall waterman (surfer, boater, fisherman), a DIY form of creativity, and music as an alternative space where a sense of cultural identity is built.

### **1.2. Surf music redefined**

Surfing is the only sport that has a music named after it. Surf music is an aesthetic movement by surfers and for surfers. What we usually refer to as surf music is in fact a historical genre that has been coopted by a trend of nostalgic revisionism to maintain the hegemonic idea of a Californian creation, which according to this same logic, no longer exists<sup>1</sup>. However, I claim that as long as there will be surfers, there will be surf music because it is an intrinsic component of their lifestyle<sup>2</sup>. Surf music as a movement consists of a combination of multiple stylistic units displaced, adopted, and transformed into singular subcultural hubs scattered around the surfing world as musical crossovers<sup>3</sup>.

In order to explain in the simplest way possible the attraction to music and the possibility for various strands of surf musics to take form, I draw from Regev's (2013) classification of sonorities into two dimensions—physical and rhetorical (p. 162), to which I add a cultural dimension. According to this new classification, musical taste is determined by the physical dimension of music (“sonic textures and effects”), the rhetorical dimension (“meaning and symbolism of specific musical phrases”), and the cultural dimension (affective attachment to a local history). While it would be wrong to assert that a whole town can display homogeneous tastes, individuals develop their sense of taste in relation to one another in a collective effort to reinforce their social identity (Regev, 2013; Small, 1998).

## **2. Soundscape in the surf town**

### **2.1. Music as urban sound**

Music has become an urban sound, and local communities expect musics that validate their collective taste to accompany their daily lives within their town. Strolling through the streets, we hear Anglo-American music coming from the stores, the open restaurants and bars, the cars, etc. These songs “set the city’s public musical soundscape” (Regev, 2013, p. 159). They become associated to this particular place as they build its singular aura and impact individual as well as collective memory. “While not necessarily recognizing the songs, the sounds that fill up the urban environment are nevertheless very familiar” (*Ibid.*). They reflect the

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1 The works of Blair (1995, 2015) and Crowley (2011) present surf music as such.

2 This point is argued in my doctoral thesis entitled *Ethno-aesthetics of surf in Florida*. The claim is supported by the results of a three year long ethnographic study of surfers’ musical consumption in Cocoa Beach.

3 Brackett (2016) defines the musical crossover as the blending of musical genres (p. 281). As such, it is also a transgression of social categories since by mixing different genres, we also blend ethnicities, societies, social status, etc.

communities' cooperation and they accompany everyday life in the town (shopping, eating, driving, surfing, drinking, and even walking in the city).

In a surf town, music is the surf lifestyle's background and serves as its original soundtrack. So surf music has two main functions: a conative one associated to the act of surfing (certain musics will alter the mood of surfers to match the way they want to surf, e.g.: aggressively, etc.) and a social one associated to all other aspects of the surf lifestyle (barbecuing with friends, participating in concerts, etc.). It is this function of surf music that we are looking at in this paper as its implementation highlights the ways in which the urban setting is used in the construction of a sense of collective aesthetic identity.

## **2.2. Sonny's Porch**

Sun Bum is a sunscreen company that has dedicated its space to the hosting of concerts called Sonny's Porch (Sonny being the name of their gorilla mascot). The whole look and feel of the brand is inspired by the casual Floridian beach lifestyle. The office is an old traditional Florida house open to the public. In its backyard, there is a wooden porch hidden from the street by areca palm trees and a shower that surfers can use on their way back from the beach. This is where the concerts take place. The rationale was that surfers like to gather around a beer and some music after a session so the branch manager, one of the founders of the brand and a surfer himself, wanted to reproduce this private backyard party experience for the public.

The artists can be from Florida or from anywhere in the world, as long as they satisfy the subjective construction of the community's surf experience, which needs to promote a "fun and positive" approach to the lifestyle (greatly influenced by the Caribbean culture)<sup>4</sup>. The artists invited to play at Sonny's Porch come from Hawaiian reggae (Mike Love), Barbadian reggae (Collie Budz), Californian psychedelic rock (The Growlers), Floridian garage rock (Jacuzzi Boys), Hawaiian surf rock (Donavon Frankenreiter), etc.

The office is right in the middle of the surf town, at the corner of the beach, Neilson surf shop, and Surfista (Kelly Slater's favorite cafe). It is a few hundred feet away from the most popular restaurant on the beach, "Coconuts on the beach." The concerts hosted on the porch are not acoustic and technology is used to amplify the sounds. Anyone hearing the music from the street is welcome to stop by and participate since Sonny's Porch is free and open to the public. In this process, surfers (organizers and participants) take possession of the public space through the musical events they participate in.

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4 My doctoral research has highlighted the fact that Floridian surfers tend to promote a less aggressive approach to surfing in comparison to some of their counterparts like Californians or Brazilians.

### 2.3. Glocal soundscape

Even though there is a diversity of musical genres played throughout the town, a trend is noticeable, which matches the programming of Sonny's Porch. It is a type of music that generates emotions of happiness and maintains a laid-back aura more so than a fast pace or aggressive one. Even though these musics are not all Florida-made, they are perfectly integrated in the feel of the town. Using Regev's (2013) words, we can say that there is "[a] sense of locality [of *Floridaness* that] is efficiently integrated with the global sounds of [surf music] to create one culturally coherent soundscape" (p. 159). In fact, a lot of the musics broadcasted in the public space are not from the United States, so their musical texture has been imported and included in the local surf music. Regev (2013) claims that "such textures have the potential to usher in new modes of individual and collective experiences, alter the physical reality of public spaces, and in general affect cultural performance at the individual and collective levels" (p. 160). For example, the inclusion of reggae in surf music has also led to the adoption of its characteristic colors (green, yellow, red) and its philosophy of life. A lot of surfers from Cocoa Beach wear these colors or support the reggae related Rastafarian doctrine. Two DJs working in collaboration with Sun Bum promote the intrinsic relationship between reggae and surfing. The first one deejays on a local surf radio called Endless Summer Radio and plays reggae on a program entitled Sun Bum Positive Sunday ("Endless Summer Radio," n.d.); the other one, whose label named Kulcha Shok specializes in reggae culture, sponsors local and national surf events ("Kulcha Shok" n.d.). These two DJs occupy public space and share it with other musical genres. The presence of foreign musics, such as traditional reggae, and of local musics, such as country for instance, makes Cocoa Beach share "much aesthetic common ground with those of other urban settings in the world" (Regev, 2013, p. 171). The inclusion of the global into the local and the interconnectedness of the local into the composition of the global is what Robertson (1995) has coined glocalization (p. 31). Surf music constitutes a glocal soundscape made of stylistic sub-units that anyone can be familiar with (there is no need to be a surfer to recognize rock or reggae). Regev (2013), argues that "[l]ocal urban musical environments thus become global [read, surf music] soundscapes, places where one feels local and global at the very same time" (Regev, 2013, p. 171). Surfers and surf towns are glocal because of the movements and hybridization of cultures. Thus, people's musical knowledge has given them the ability to belong to the local and the global at once through their urban space.

### 3. Musical Surfanization

#### 3.1. Corporeality of music and appropriation of space

Music then, is mobile but it does not spread in a uniform way. Instead, it expands in a rhizomatic manner as it settles in non-hostile environments. Territories and musics are domesticated and help to define the cultural threshold of a community such as the Cocoa Beach surfers community. According to Barthes (1991), “[f]or the human being . . . the appropriation of space is also a matter of sound: domestic space . . . is the space of familiar, recognized noises whose ensemble forms a kind of household symphony” (p. 246<sup>5</sup>, cited in Regev, 2013, p. 169). Music is culturally linked to geographical spaces as we associate certain musics to specific geographic regions of the world, and to specific socio-political spaces (country versus city). Music can testify of human movements in space and time (through its mobility, we can retrace the journey of a people, their ideas and products—in other words, their culture). According to Regev, (2013), “[m]usic is territorial; its sounds fill up both closed and open spaces” (p. 168). Music materializes itself in bodies and spaces, “sonic textures and effects devised by studio technology as well as the timbral signature of the most emblematic musical instruments” (Regev, 2013, p. 162).

The corporeality of music (as texture and as invader of body and space through its effects on them—respectively dance, emotions, concerts, and space occupation, multidimensional organization) aggregates those who live with it into belonging communities. Membership to this community amounts to a collective aesthetic identity that is built by the repetitive encounter with music that is or becomes familiar and appreciated, which turns out to be what Frith (1996) calls “performing rites” (p. 273). These rites shape the cultural life of the town as well as its collective identity. In other words, the surf town of Cocoa Beach is shaped and modified as a cultural object by the materialization of sound as a blend of reggae music and other local genres, thus functioning as an actant.

#### 3.2. Surf town aesthetic identity

The combination of these specific sounds representing Caribbean aesthetics, local popular music, and traditional surf music styles such as punk, rock, and ska create the soundscape of Cocoa Beach. Thus, according to Regev (2013) music becomes instrumental in the singularization of what he calls ethno-national communities:

Music . . . greatly contributes to the specificity of cultural spaces, to the aesthetic uniqueness that sets apart one ethno-national space from another, and therefore to

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5 Barthes, R. (1991). *The responsibility of forms*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

the perceived familiarity, the sense of ‘being at home’ shared by members of ethno-national communities. (Regev, 2013, p. 169).

New musics have broken the walls of ethno-national communities, redefined traditional ways of conceiving music (like surf music) but also have given cities a new cultural dimension. It can feel like invasion or it can work but with the legitimacy gained by some of these new sounds (like the ones introduced by musical intermediaries such as Sonny’s Porch, Kulcha Shok or Endless Summer Radio), the sense of intrusion goes away and the domestic cultural space is reshaped. The co-optation of new elements allows city dwellers to engage in social interactions in their own reality, and to articulate a sense of membership through the sonic reorganization of the town.

What conveys its aesthetic identity to the surf town is the repetition of certain musical patterns or musical dimensions that have become cultural because of the sense of memory they have built in association to this specific urban setting.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The more we work on music, the more it feels hard to grasp because of its multiple aspects being intertwined in a global web of cultural practices and sonic experiences. But as Bourdieu (2002) points out, “The most ‘mystical,’ the most ‘spiritual’ of the arts is perhaps simply the most corporeal” (p. 158<sup>6</sup>). Therefore, drawing from original contributions from scholars such as Regev (2013) or Brackett (2016) in the field of music, we are able to see past the ungraspable features of music as a materialization of the human mind. The corporeality of music has allowed individuals and communities to mark their aesthetic identities within singular cultural spaces inscribed in a global network of cultural identities. For Frith (1996), music “gives us a way of being in the world, a way of making sense of it” (p. 272), and while music is being shared all over the world, its diversity is not disappearing. Cultural mobility allows the emergence of musical hybrids that shape and renew singular cultural spaces, as illustrated in the surfanization of Cocoa Beach.

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6 Original text : « Le plus ‘mystique’, le plus ‘spirituel’ des arts est peut-être simplement le plus corporel. C’est sans doute ce qui fait qu’il est si difficile de parler de musique autrement que par adjectifs ou par exclamatifs ».



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