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# Surfing through music

Sharing the surf lifestyle on a reggae frequency

Anne Barjolin-Smith

When I say I try to understand the ways in which surfers interact with music in their everyday life, I hear a lot of “Yeah, the Beach Boys!” or “Yeah, the Jack Johnson effect!” I am not really sure what this means. What I do know, as a lifestyle sports participant and former snowboard instructor, is that music has always been an important part of my practice on and off the terrain. When I moved to Florida six years ago, I was astonished by the effervescence of its surf industry. The peninsula is known for its poor surfing conditions but in spite of this bad reputation, the Space Coast is recognized as the crib of surfing on the East coast of the United States. The beach lifestyle has blended with a surf lifestyle influenced by the Caribbean and the intrinsically diverse nature of the Floridian population to form a singular surf culture in which surf music has become a local surfers’ construct.

In this article, I look at the ways in which surfers from Cocoa Beach<sup>1</sup>, while acknowledging the historical heritage of surf music, have developed a taste for a style of music that reflects their laid-back

1 Cocoa Beach is a surf town located south of Cape Canaveral and an hour east of Orlando. The city has developed a strong tourism industry based on surfing and the beach lifestyle.

approach to surfing and allows them to collectively define their local community in a global surf culture<sup>2</sup>. Reggae is not the only music surfers listen to but it seems to be the common denominator among Cocoa Beach surfers. Through concerts and radio programs, reggae has enabled surfers to share their culture with their beach community, “getting everybody on that frequency.” In my research<sup>3</sup>, interviews with local surfers highlight the ways in which a sense of social identity is built, articulated, and shared through musicking, a concept borrowed from Small (1998) for whom “To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (p. 9). This piece reflects

2 Forming the hub of the surf industry on the East coast of the United States, Cocoa Beach surfers have contributed to build the global surf culture and industry through their technical and practical innovations (some of the world’s best surfers and surfboard shapers such as Matt Kechele, Kelly Slater, or the Hobgood brothers are from the area).

3 In my doctoral thesis, entitled *Ethno-aesthetics of surf in Florida: Musical expression and identity marking* (translated from French), I explore the ways in which Floridian surfers interact with music in their everyday lives.

the experiences of various Floridian surfers, among whom are two DJs: Lance-O, a specialist of reggae music, and Bart Kelly, the anchor of a local surf radio station called Endless Summer Radio. Both DJs work in coordination with local surf businesses such as Sun Bum, a lifestyle brand, which hosts in its backyard free intimate concerts called Sonny’s Porch<sup>4</sup> (reggae artists like Mike Love and Collie Buddz have performed there—see videos). The two DJs and the surf brands sponsor musical events including the annual Rootfire at the Park festival in Cocoa. In order to understand how these surfers share their lifestyle through their surf music, they and I had to consciously question the paradigm of historical surf music. I asked participants to reflect on their own musicking and to define their aesthetic preferences because in my research, I do not just work on subcultural communities, I collaborate with them. This perspective has enabled me to argue that surfing is characterized by a lifestyle crossover founded on a cultural palimpsest: surf music can only be known as such by participants whereas non-surfers may simply view it as reggae, rock,

4 As part of my research, I participated in these concerts—sometimes as a photographer for the events (Sun Bum, n.d.).

punk, etc. According to a surfers' saying, "only a surfer knows the feeling," then only they know what constitutes the surf music that they use as a platform to share their subculture. Therefore, my approach to surf music as a cultural vector is a three-step process that first deconstructs the paradigm of historical surf music, then lets the lifestyle participants redefine their music through sonic, semantic, and cultural palimpsests so that finally only they can claim ownership of their ethno-aesthetic<sup>5</sup> signatures founded in a lifestyle crossover that is shared through local reggae radio programs, concerts, and festivals.

## Deconstructing the aesthetics of surf music

In this article, aesthetics is conceived in relation to surf music: it consists in the activation of stylistic choices implemented according to expressive and representational criteria of various surf subcultures. The aesthetic trend we look at here is understood as the experiences of an idiosyncratic reality<sup>6</sup> that pertains specifically to the Cocoa Beach surfers community through their construction of a surf music adapted to their implementation of a surf lifestyle.

<sup>5</sup> My doctoral thesis is based on a rehabilitation of the concept of ethno-aesthetics developed by anthropologist Jacqueline Delange (1967). I use it to determine the aesthetic relations between surf and music in the singular space of a given surf community constituted through identifiable history, cultures, and society.

<sup>6</sup> There are various ways of conceptualizing surf culture. The idiosyncratic approach focuses on the possibilities to organize one generic surf discourse in different ways according to the affective, experiential, and cognitive inclinations of each individual. Cocoa Beach participants consume commodities but also produce trends and evaluate surf praxis within their subculture. Through their professional activity as surfboard shapers, lifestyle brand managers, DJs, etc., the participants I interviewed set up trends in what surfing and the surf lifestyle ought to be in Cocoa Beach.

Surf music does not constitute a consistent and homogeneous genre such as for instance, country music, which arguably in the United States follows a consistent thematic logic (oversimplified as manual labor, trucks, love, and beer) as well as characteristic vocal and instrumental techniques (twang, banjo, guitar, etc.). On the contrary, surf music is a movement or a super-category that comprises a multitude of musical genres determined by spatiotemporal factors as well as by the cultural and aesthetic capitals of the subculture's members. In my work, I question the canons of surf music that rest on a nostalgic and idealized conception of surf music that intrinsically confines it to white California from a set period spanning from the 1960's to the 1980's (Crowley 2011; Blair 1978, 2015). What I call historical surf music is characterized by semantic and sonic elements such as the texture of the reverb sound of electric guitars still functioning today as a reminder of a so-called authentic surf music discourse. Anybody who does not surf can assign this music to the surf music category. Therefore, a more relevant approach is to identify surfers' musics (constituting strands of surf musics) that are deprived of these obvious sonic characteristics and that can only be understood as surf music by participants who share a knowledge of their subculture built through collective praxis. Their implementation of semantic and sonic discourses distinct from the historical surf music rests on their cultural capital, their identificatory needs and appropriation skills. In other words, one musical genre can bear different meanings and foci according to its audiences' socio-cultural objectives, perceptions, evaluation, and means of implementation. More than a set of symbols, surf music as it is implemented by communities of surfers is a space dedicated to the articulations of the being, the thinking, the acting socially within

the social ecosystem of the surf lifestyle.

## Reconstructing surf music through palimpsests

In my research (Barjolin-Smith 2018), I claim that regional contemporary surf musics (each surfing community builds a surf music from various music genres) have diverged from a generic movement and emerged following two different processes: by creating new content with old content, or by completely shifting away from the historical movement. Hence, surf music has been subject to a form of cultural palimpsest, which in its original acceptation is a physiological mechanism that allows newly memorized data to replace those that pre-existed in memory. In the surf culture, palimpsests happen beyond sonic memory and can be cultural. They occur in the surf lexicon (anglophone words have replaced Hawaiian technical terms and have become the norm around the world), in history (the historical Hawaiian origins of surfing are mythified while the birth of the Californian surf culture is enthroned), in the practice and the ideology (the Hawaiian royal sport<sup>7</sup> has become a global counter culture). To understand a cultural palimpsest, one must possess the linguistic and cultural tools to decode and perform the substitutions and to appreciate their sonic, cultural, practical, and historical foundations. The palimpsest is not meant to provide an interpretation of the surf lifestyle but it is meant to highlight cultural variations within a subculture, and to allow participants to keep control of their subculture. The coding and decoding induced by the palimpsest imply a knowledge

<sup>7</sup> In 1911, Jack London published his *Cruise of the Snark* travelogue in which he described his surfing experience in Hawaii. In this ode to surfing, he called the practice "A royal sport for the natural kings of earth" (p. 75).

of the culture which gives the participants the means to recognize each other and to mark out their communication space<sup>8</sup> (Galissou 1993: 43). The capacity to partake in the conversation legitimizes participants and confirms their belonging to the group. For instance, this occurs when a surfer shows awareness of a region's surfing style or aesthetic trends that are validated by the community even if they do not reflect a mainstream approach to surfing. Surf music conceived through the lens of the palimpsest aggregates individuals who recognize themselves in it because they master the know-hows of a subculture built collaboratively. In Cocoa Beach this is achieved by substituting historical surf music for reggae music. As surfboard shaper<sup>9</sup> and musician, Ricky Carroll, explains: "nowadays each area just kinda does their own thing and claims it as that's their surf music" (June 13, 2017). This form of cultural palimpsest endows surfers' communities with the cultural, linguistic, and aesthetic tools that enable them to distinguish their subculture from the stereotypes of surfing and to share their approach of the subculture with the beach community or anyone willing to experience their lifestyle, to be on their frequency.

Moreover, the role of music in the singularization of surf subcultures is significant owing to the fact that music is omnipresent in surfers' lives. Admittedly, it constitutes the lifestyle's background in several ways: it enhances surf movies to such an extent that for DJ Bart Kelley, "There cannot be surf films without music" (June 13, 2017); it animates competitions; it reinforces forms of expression related to surfing<sup>10</sup>; it gives texture

<sup>8</sup> Translated from: "c'est donc ce qui donne aux interlocuteurs le moyen de se reconnaître, de baliser leur espace de communication."

<sup>9</sup> A shaper builds surfboards.

<sup>10</sup> The surf museum in Cocoa Beach

to surfers' everyday lives and practices—according to the DJ, "Most people, if they didn't have music, they would feel like their surfing is missing something" (ibid). All these implementations of their music take place in the public space so that surfers' musicking spontaneously involves both surfers and non-surfers. But surfers can also actively and voluntarily share their world when they implement and sponsor concerts and festivals such as Rootfire at the Park in which surf music functions as a cultural vector. In other words, music becomes a way to diffuse the subculture, or rather, the ways it is perceived<sup>11</sup> (Benard 2009: 70). Thus, surf music bears a cultural mandate that affords it a power of transmission, representation, and inclusion. In a dialectic of openness, the surf lifestyle is shared with outsiders through all the forms surf music may take.

### Reggae frequency: Sharing an ethno-aesthetic signature of surfing

Regardless of its stylistic characteristics, music is a way for participants to manifest a sense of belonging through various aesthetic experiences. Musical belonging is materialized in groups of affinity inscribed in a complex network of regional, national, and transnational sociocultural dynamics that give birth to communities on the beach, in concerts, in competitions, etc. Drawing from my participant observations, I argue that the notion of belonging sets cultures and subcultures in space and time thanks to discourses justifying their geographic, temporal, sociocultural, aesthetic, and identity legitimacy. For instance, most of my interviewees have travelled to hosts exhibits commemorating great surfers' achievements on the water or in the arts. Local bands animate private viewings.

<sup>11</sup> Translated from: "un moyen de diffuser la subculture, ou plutôt la façon dont elle est perçue."

Meccas of surfing such as Hawaii but justify their attachment to Florida based on its ability to provide a laid back all waterman lifestyle<sup>12</sup>. They conceive the region as an ideal space located in the heart of the Caribbeans, and they praise Cocoa Beach's singular capacity to produce surf champions, creative surfboard shapers, artists, etc. There is a mix between the objective geographic characteristics of the region and the construction of a sociocultural identity that does not stop with surfing but involves all the aspects of the lifestyle including the ways in which surf music is conceived. Floridian surfers find themselves at the ideological and physical crossroads between several cultures (Caribbean, redneck, Hawaiian, Californian, etc.) and between several identificatory fluxes (surf lifestyle, social status, etc.). According to DJ Lance-O, "as far as scenes, . . . Florida is different. Tallahassee is very different than Miami, and Orlando is very different than Titusville. . . . Then you go south, you've got the Latin mix, you've got the Caribbean mix" (January 16, 2016). Surfers navigate from one cultural identity to the other and are able to reorganize their position in their musicking. Therefore, in order to accurately determine the characteristics of surf musics pertaining to specific groups of surfers, I have developed the notion of ethno-aesthetic signatures of surfing. Apprehending musicking within a singular cultural context has allowed me to highlight the aesthetic trends of a cultural community and their implementation of music as a cultural tool. Tendencies observed among Cocoa Beach surfers

<sup>12</sup> The surf subculture is built on the idea of a lifestyle crossover in which authentic surfers are all around watermen experienced in boating, fishing, diving, etc. As one interviewee put it: "I think it's not only about being the lifestyle of the surfer, I think it's the lifestyle of a waterman. And so it's feeling comfortable in and around the water. It's fishing, it's boating, it's the beach, water lifestyle..." (September 10, 2016).

converge toward a lifestyle, which they claim is founded on a “fun and simplicity” axis influenced by the Caribbean culture of reggae. In fact, surfers interviewed in Cocoa Beach share a vision of surfing that is sometimes opposite to that of their neighboring regions. For instance, interviewees criticize other communities of surfers for being too “aggro.”<sup>13</sup> They consider that their own practice and lifestyle should be laid back and simple because their goal in surfing is to have fun. When asked what a good surfer is, most interviewees respond that it is an easy-going person who is having the most fun. This “fun and simplicity” motive needs to be present in a music which according to Lance-O: “[i]s very deeply rooted in a positive message. It’s about love, or it’s about having fun” (January 16, 2016). For him, music should display optimism, love, and joy and the melody should convey these notions that are evident in reggae. The same semantic imperatives are shared by Bart Kelley: “I try to keep everything positive, and I try to keep everything fun” (June 13, 2016). This is especially true for one of his programs called Sun Bum Positive Sunday<sup>14</sup> in which the DJ mainly broadcasts reggae. According to him, this genre constitutes the positive and fun music that best represents the surf lifestyle in the region. For these two DJs and surfers, pleasure goes beyond listening to music. It is the ability to assemble musics in order to participate in the construction and the implementation of the local surf narrative accessible to the entire community. Therefore, while it is suggested here that historical surf music was built upon principles of rebellion, hedonism, and exclusive forms of sonic experimentation circumscribed in eras<sup>15</sup>, Floridian

13 “Aggro” stands for an aggressive and territorial behavior displayed by surfers.

14 Endless Summer Radio created a partnership with Sun Bum.

15 For Kent Crowley (2011), surf

surf music was built as a cultural aesthetic inspired by optimism, hedonism, and inclusive forms of sonic experimentation. The music that Cocoa Beach surfers relate to, implements their perception of their practice, which they share at-large with the beach community. Live or broadcasted surf music as it is conceived by Lance-O and Bart Kelley allows outsiders to experience the relations that surfers entertain with their activity in a positive and fun spirit. Accordingly, the emotional response triggered by musicking gets people together. According to Small (1998):

“So, if ‘to music’ is not just to take part in a discourse concerning the relationships of our world but is actually to experience those relationships, we need not find it surprising that it should arouse in us a powerful emotional response. The emotional state that is aroused is not, however, the reason for the performance but the sign that the performance is doing its job, that it is indeed bringing into existence, for as long as it lasts, relations among the sounds, and among the participants, that they feel to be good or ideal relationships. (137)”

The success of the two DJs’ performances as well as the success of local festivals and concerts demonstrate music’s ability to give corporeality to surfers’ joyful emotions in ideal relationships between sounds and the aesthetic reality of surfing. Shared through musicking, pleasure can become a social power since according to Guilbault (2010), the feeling searched for and shared allows communities to form and to be cultivated:

music stems from a 1960’s revolution which took place in Southern California and “usher[ed] in folk-rock, fusion, punk, grunge, and most importantly, heavy metal” (p. 4). These waves of rock and punk broke away from other forms of popular music by transgressing established aesthetic and social categories (Regev 2013; Brackett 2016).

[P]leasure in live performance . . . is not innocent. It transforms audience members ‘in the know’ into subjects of community and, simultaneously, it constitutes the outsider as the necessary, even welcome—even though not fully accepted—counterpart of its formation. In so doing, pleasure then becomes a productive force of power. (287)

In the demonstration of pleasure (in concerts or through repertoires built around this axis—see videos and radios) participants adhere to the aesthetics of the Floridian surf subculture and valorize the character of the beach community as a whole. The music that prevails in Cocoa Beach reflects the state of mind of the Floridian surf subculture that participants qualify as positive and fun. Even though other genres are included in this surf music, a majority of surfers incorporate reggae in their surf music in a movement that goes beyond principles of collective consent and toward a collaborative effort. For one interviewee, surf music “has some sort of element of rock’n’roll, and then some sort of element of reggae . . . where it’s slower, and just associated to those things, the sunshine, the beach, the water, things like that” (September 10, 2016). Once they have overtaken their acquired knowledge of the canon that constitutes historical surf music, Cocoa Beach surfers assign to reggae the capacities to best represent their lifestyle and the beach lifestyle based on their fun and positive approach to surfing. These surfers are aware that reggae is specifically prominent in the south and central regions of Florida, which are closer to the Caribbeans. For Bart Kelley, “You can go up north on the beach and they don’t want a red, yellow, green anything.” In this joint interview, shaper Ricky Carroll agrees: “They don’t identify with the culture for some reason. The surfers here 45

identify with the whole Caribbean culture, whereas up there [between Tallahassee and Jacksonville], it's foreign to them" (June 13, 2017). The reggae colors Bart Kelley refers to are displayed during concerts and festivals in the Cocoa Beach area. These symbols become relatable to surfers who have developed a hybrid identity founded on the multiple cultural identities that have shaped Florida and that constitute the surf community. Surfers have modified surf music in a process of hybridization matching their experience of the lifestyle that they share with their beach community:

*A musical text that is not a literal quotation can only be understood as participation in a genre if that genre is capable of being quoted outside of, or beyond, the initial context in which it was created, and if that genre is legible to addressees beyond the initial audience for the genre. (Brackett 2016: 13)*

The surfing community engages in musicking by annexing musics that weren't conceived as surf music. Reggae is not the original soundtrack of the surf lifestyle but today, it is inscribed in one of its manifestations as it is used by surfers in a form of aesthetic crossover, a concept envisaged here as the transgression of sociocultural categories induced by mixing different musical genres with different ethnicities, social statuses, and societies<sup>16</sup>. In Florida, the crossover happens as reggae is appended to surfing rather than rock or punk so that surf music can no longer be exclusively assigned to the historical canons.

## **The surfanization of Cocoa Beach**

<sup>16</sup> I derived the aesthetic crossover from the concept of musical crossover which consists in mixing various genres of music (Brackett, 2016: 281).

Beyond isolated concerts and festivals, the conveyance of the surf lifestyle through surf/reggae music in the Cocoa Beach area is a continuous process. Numerous local surf businesses rely on music validated regionally to promote a surf lifestyle associated to the surf town. Paradoxically, this music played in the public space generates an aesthetic of proximity substantiated in a form of intimist musicking (notably during the Sonny's Porch concerts hosted by Sun Bum—see videos). Music then, is used as a platform that contributes to mark local identities and local economies by singularly promoting what I call surfanization. In its social function, surf music's implementation highlights the ways in which the urban setting is used in the construction of a sense of collective aesthetic identity. Whether music is played in surf shops or in surfers' favorite restaurants, technology is used to amplify the sounds so that surfers take possession of the public space through their music while sharing it with others. Even though these musics are not all Florida-made, they are perfectly integrated into the feel of the town. Borrowing from Regev's (2013) observations, it is possible to say that there is "[a] sense of locality [of Floridanness that] is efficiently integrated with the global sounds of [surf music] to create one culturally coherent soundscape" (159). The inclusion of the global into the local and the interconnectedness of the local into the composition of the global is what Robertson (1995) coined glocalization (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). As a result of the movements and hybridization of cultures highlighted by the interviewees, the construction of a glocal musical scene in the urban

space has given people the ability to belong to the local and the global at once. The combination of these specific sounds representing Caribbean aesthetics, local popular music, and traditional surf music styles creates the soundscape of Cocoa Beach. Thus, music has become instrumental in the singularization of surfers' ethno-aesthetic signatures. The co-optation of new elements has allowed city dwellers (surfers and non-surfers) 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.

In conclusion, the members of a social or cultural group have different ways of engaging in the musical act and even if their interpretation differs from the intentions of the artist, it is coherent in its erroneous conception. This is what enables reggae music to become surf music and to cohere a singular surfing community. In the Cocoa Beach area, concerts sponsored by local DJs and surf businesses offer surfers a safe space to articulate their sense of their lifestyle with non-surfers since both groups take part in the concerts for similar reasons (aesthetic, cultural, and social pleasure) in a crossover validated by all. These events allow the expression of emotions linked to the surf lifestyle and thus allow the realization of identity potentialities of social individuals. In these cultural spaces, surfers are able to share their lifestyle on a reggae frequency with anyone willing to engage positively with one or several aspects of their subculture.

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