#Duet Me: TikTok as a Virtual Traditional Music Community Environment

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Abstract

#Duet Me is a masters thesis that explores FolkTok, which is a community on TikTok surrounding traditional folk music, as well as the virtual sense of place that this community inhabits. FolkTok exists as an extension of physical world music communities, as people from various such social environments use TikTok to communicate with each other, and to share their experiences and repertoire. Yet it also exists as a separate place in a posthumanist cyborg sense. FolkTok is not merely a matter of mediated communication, but it is itself the thing that would be communicated, being a concrete social environment in spite of its lack of biology or physicality. These conclusions are supported by fieldwork in the form of participant observation and interviews with community members. This work largely took place in 2021, which is the timeframe on which this thesis specifically focuses.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

This work began in the winter of 2020/2021, during the COVID-19 lockdown. It seemed like the whole world was withdrawn and restless, craving human connection. One of the biggest losses for many people was live music. A pandemic lockdown meant no live shows, no singing in churches, and no sitting around a table with instruments and a few choice songs. With the physical world seemingly shut down, many of turned to the internet to fill these absences in our lives.

This was certainly my experience during this time, which I spent living with my family in the rural northern reaches of New York State. We were fortunate to have each other's company, in a reasonably large house, with easy access to fresh air and natural (i.e. pandemic-friendly) spaces. We were lucky that our careers were safe. Even so, life lost a little of its sparkle, and I spent many hours on the internet, trying to fill my human desire to connect with others in a time of isolation. One of the main ways I did this was through the app, TikTok.

I had been on the social media platform TikTok since 2019. At the time I was rediscovering a childhood fondness for traditional folk music, and I was disappointed to find relatively little of such music on this app when I joined. While I found a few accounts from traditional musicians, and posted some videos of myself playing the mandolin, folk music on TikTok was minimal. This would change in late 2020, during the throws of the pandemic, when the sea shanty craze hit.

Nautical folksong ran rampant on TikTok during this time. It was as if anyone who could carry a tune was posting videos of themselves singing shanties, and collaborating with other singers. More varieties of traditional music began to flourish in

my feed. Increasingly people joined the app, bringing their jigs, reels, banjos, and ballads. The shanties had opened the gates of TikTok for traditional folk music at large.

I found myself in a community and virtual space known by many as FolkTok. I realized that this was a noteworthy phenomenon, where musicians were continuing centuries-old music traditions using the distinctive media tools that TikTok was trailblazing. Being fascinated by FolkTok, I began to conduct research, interviewing other musicians and engaging in participant observation as I continued to use the app, posting my own musical performances. That research would eventually become this thesis.

TikTok

While it is likely that my readers are aware of TikTok, some might find a detailed description useful. TikTok is a social media app[1] where users make posts in the form of videos[2]. These videos play across the entire screen with text description and interaction buttons placed over the edges of the video. There are the usual array of social media features, such as liking, sharing, commenting, and direct messaging. The experience of the app is heavily shaped by its content recommendation algorithm. When the app is opened, it automatically shows the "For You Page," also known as the FYP. On the FYP, one scrolls through an endless stream of videos, each recommended based on how the

[1] TikTok can be accessed through a web browser, but is primarily known as an app, and is addressed as such in this work.

[2] One can now post photos as well, although this was not a feature during data collection.

user interacts with different types of content. There are other ways to watch TikToks[3], notably the "Following" page which shows content from accounts one follows. The FYP is, however, the app's default place for consuming content.

One of TikTok's strengths is that it allows creators to recontextualize existing media, especially published recordings and other TikToks. One can, for instance, select an existing sound[4] to play during a video. This sound could be from a TikTok someone else posted, or it could be one of the excerpts of professionally published music available on the app. One can then use the sound as background audio, or create a synchronized performance by dancing along or mouthing words. One can also incorporate video content from other users into one's own TikToks with the "stitch" and "duet" features. The former inserts up to five seconds of another video in front of one's own, and the latter creates a TikTok featuring an existing video playing next to a newly created one. The app is thus a rich site of folkloric process, with distinctive features centered around creating variations of existing expressive works.

ShantyTok

The first years of the pandemic were a time when people were cut off from normal social interactions, and were forced to find other things to do with their time. It seemed like everyone I knew was developing their hobbies. I found myself practicing music far more diligently than I typically did beforehand. I was not the only one to take

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[3] TikTok refers to the social media platform itself, as well as being a term for posts made on the app, e.g. "I opened TikTok, and watched a lot of TikToks."

[4] In the context of TikTok, a "sound" or "audio" can refer to the specific snippets of audio available for use on the app.

to music during this time. Yet the lack of human connection made it difficult to connect with other musicians. This was the state of the world when sea shanties started trending.

Sea shanties had been brewing as a part of internet culture for some time before reaching TikTok. Take the song "You Are a Pirate," which originated in a 2004 episode of the children's television show *Lazy Town*, and quickly started appearing in internet culture (Know Your Meme 2004). For many years it enjoyed sporadic popularity among netizens; I first discovered it around 2017, a time when *Lazy Town*-centric memes were popular on YouTube. "You Are a Pirate," is not itself a sea shanty, but its rousing chorus of, "yar har fiddle-dee dee, being a pirate is alright to me," evokes a sense of imaginative shanty-ness. It is an example of nautical music, in a romanticized and meme friendly way, resonating with people online.

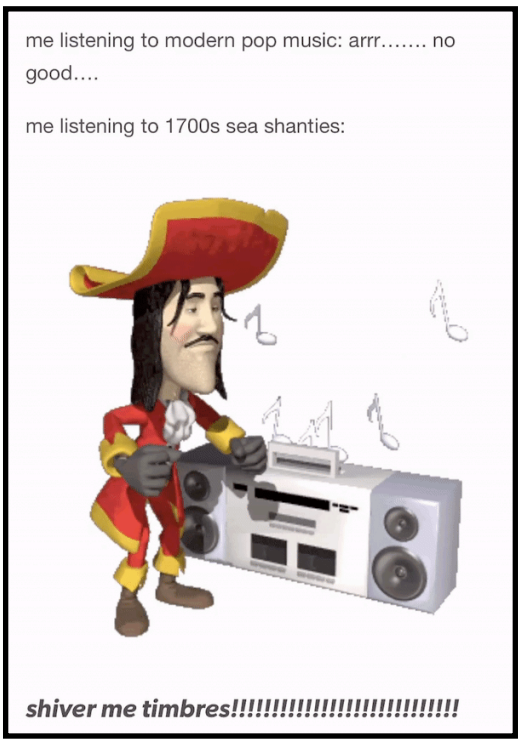

Figure 1.1. An early sea shanty meme.

Know Your Meme, a site dedicated to documenting memes and referenced by netizens and internet culture scholars alike, suggests sea shanties as a meme took off in 2018 on the microblogging site Tumblr (Know Your Meme 2021). They point to a particular post, featuring an animated gif of a pirate dancing next to a boombox, declaring their love for 18th century shanties and distaste for modern pop music. This led to YouTube memes where this animation was played over thematically appropriate recordings like the song "Drunken Sailor."

In 2019, a vocal group known as The Longest Johns went viral for singing shanties and sea songs to other players in the pirate-themed video game, *Sea of Thieves*. In *Sea of Thieves*, players team up to crew sailing ships, and can interact in-game with other players online. The Longest Johns, who describe themselves as an "a capella folk music band," sang to their in-game crewmates, much to the gamers' surprise and delight (The Longest Johns 2019). The YouTube video of them singing "The Wellerman" in this manner grew to be fairly popular, arguably starting the ball rolling on what would be one of the most iconic moments of pandemic-era internet culture.

In late 2020 into early 2021, sea shanties on TikTok set sail in full force. They became so popular that mainstream media outlets like the New York Times and Rolling Stone reported on it (Renner 2021, Millman 2021). I found this to be a refreshing change, as it was the first time I had seen major media outlets report on TikTok in a positive light. This phenomenon became known as ShantyTok, following the practice of adding "Tok" as a suffix when making hashtags or naming a side of TikTok[5]. The song "Wellerman" was front and center, becoming iconic of the era.

These sea shanty videos on TikTok came with a specific audiovisual aesthetic. Visually, the performer would sit center frame, seated with a confident stance. The lighting would generally be stark and dramatic, making use of hard indoor lighting or the flat-on look of consumer ring lights. A solid example is Nathan Evans' viral "Wellerman" video, a stoic performance in black and white. Sonically, fist pounding was a staple, fists slamming in even quarter notes along with the beat. Use of TikTok's 'duet' feature allowed for musical collaboration, with different singers adding rich harmonies

[5] Look to BookTok, a TikTok community of avid readers, as a popular example.

or sometimes instrumentals into the mix. Particularly striking were the low notes, and at the time it seemed to me that anyone who could hit the deepest bass notes could score thousands of followers on that talent alone.

While these sea shanties may endure over the centuries, internet memes fade quickly. ShantyTok was no exception. Maritime folk repertoire remains a familiar piece of TikTok culture and common among the app's folk singers, but the trendiness has mostly died off. Yet the impact of ShantyTok continues to be influential. When I began to ask the folkies of TikTok what brought them to the app, ShantyTok duets were the most common response.

Sea shanties were the main topic of conversation when speaking with Matthew Bram. Matt was excited to find a younger generation get into sea shanties on TikTok. He explained that he had been singing them for five decades, and yet was one of the younger men at the shanty sings he has frequented. Now there is a new generation singing these songs, albeit with their own preferences. Matt pointed out that singers on TikTok tended towards "a different bunch of songs than the ones that really excited us…. I'm seeing, oh, many versions of 'Leave Her Johnny Leave Her…' a lot of the mushy stuff, like 'I am my Mother's Savage Daughter[6].'" This is not to say that Matt and his cohort disliked this repertoire, but that there was a generational shift in taste. Ultimately the aspects of shanty singing that seem the most meaningful to Matt were maintained in this younger, digital scene: bringing people together, and helping them endure in hard times.

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[6] "My Mother's Savage Daughter" is a modern song by Karen Kahan, with themes of Germanic heathenry rather than maritime tradition. It is, however, composed in a similar style, and was commonly adopted by ShantyTok singers.

Research

This thesis is rooted in fieldwork conducted in the spring of 2021. This was the heyday of FolkTok as described in this thesis. Much of what is written here still applies, but the quickly shifting landscape of social media has transformed the community. App updates led to the proliferation of different types of content. Social changes, in the lives of individuals as well as on wider social level (e.g. the lifting of pandemic restrictions and the growing popularity of TikTok), led to a large turnover in who is regularly involved with traditional folk music on the app, who they interact with, and what content they post. The scope of this work is thus focused on 2021, especially the first half of the year when FolkTok was emergent and vibrant.

Given my engagement with FolkTok since prior to research collection, participant observation plays heavily into this thesis. Both out of personal motivation and academic pursuit, I have been posting and watching videos of traditional folk music on TikTok, as well as engaging in the community. The latter has involved connecting with people in comment sections, direct messages, and on other platforms, notably Instagram and Discord. Except when connecting with people in a purely personal context, I have consistently made my academic intentions clear. Since beginning this project, I have been open about my status as a researcher, posting about it, mentioning it in my TikTok profile, and generally becoming known to many as, "that person studying folk music on TikTok."

I approach TikTok as a field site similar to a physical location, through which I can navigate and interact with others. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook*

of Method establishes how rich interactive environments function as a place and thus invite many traditional ethnographic practices (Boellstorff, et al. 2012; see also Kaplan 2013). Similarly, I treat TikTok as space to be experienced and described. This relates to Trevor Blank's approach to digital cultures. In "Hybridizing Folk Culture: Toward a Theory of New Media and Vernacular Discourse," he argues that using digital devices is, "actual reality for engaged users, despite any lack of real corporeality" (Blank 2013, 118). This does not suggest that there are no differences between the digital and physical realms. Yet the scholarship indicates that digital environments engage our senses, emotions, and sense of place in a tangible way (Cocq 2013; Thompson 2019). As such, I explore TikTok less like a media repository and more like a field site where culture actively takes place.

Due to my closeness to the material and TikTok's personalized nature, I find the environment well suited to qualitative research that values personal experience. The app is designed around the 'for you page', which shows an endless string of videos provided by a content recommendation algorithm, and makes it inconvenient to find content by other means. This creates a customized experience for each user, making the platform highly experiential and difficult to quantify.

Since this is an app based on individualized, algorithmically curated experience, it is difficult to form an understanding of FolkTok as a whole. To balance this, I have found ways to establish wider context. Interviewing other musicians has allowed me to approach the subject from different perspectives. There are some aspects of this work that spill out into other media, such as the news coverage of the initial sea shanty craze, which provide some third-party documentation. I have also found it useful to employ

the in-app features to tease apart trends. For instance, when I enter 'FolkTok' in the app's search feature, I can filter the search to see how that term has been used over the past month compared to the past six months. Similarly, when I see a post that piques my interest, I can tap an icon in the lower right and see if people have engaged with it using TikTok's collaboration functions. These methods have provided a modicum of objectivity to this research on a highly subjective social media platform.

Interviewee Bios

Interviews were largely conducted during the first half of 2021 over Zoom video calls[7]. When I began this research, I made a TikTok about the project, in which I expressed interest in interviewing community members. A few participants reached out to me because of that post. The others I approached myself after finding them on FolkTok, and recognizing the value of their perspectives. These interviews were a balance between structured questions and more conversational discussion. While there were recurring questions and themes, each interview was tailored to individuals' expertise.

Abigail Pryde (@abigail_jamie) is a fiddler and singer-songwriter from the west coast of Scotland. She both a solo artist, and the vocalist/fiddler in the Scottish modern trad music group Heron Valley. She took to TikTok during the COVID-19 lockdown, performing tunes and sharing Scottish culture. Although she is a professional musician, Abigail explained that TikTok is more of an informal, social place for her. "If you sell

[7] This timeline has two exceptions: Rachelle Landry, whom I interviewed over Zoom in January 2022; and Anna Seda, whom I interviewed in person in May 2023.

yourself at the same time, sell a CD, great, but I know I'm definitely doing it just to join in and have fun."

Anna Seda (@doescellothingz) is a lifelong cellist based in Boston. While much of her training and career is based in classical music, traditional folk music has been an important part of her musical life ever since attending a fiddle camp as a child. "It changed everything that I understood about music," she told me, "and I realized that there was a whole culture around it. I didn't have to stay within the box of classical music."

Ester Magnusson (@mesterspets) is a Swedish textile historian from Gothenburg. Her content on TikTok covers a variety of cultural topics, from telling folk tales, to discussing linguistic tidbits, to sharing her expertise in textiles. She is also a folk singer in the Swedish tradition, with a particular affinity for murderously grim balladry.

Lukas Simpson (@lukassimpson1) is a multi-instrumentalist based in St. Louis, Missouri. He plays a lot of American Old Time music, with particular attention to regional music tradition in Missouri and the American Midwest. A self-described social media refugee, he was mostly avoiding social media before fall of 2020 when he joined TikTok as a way to share music and collaborate with other musicians during the pandemic. This made him an early adopter in the FolkTok scene, and he was likely the first folkie I met on TikTok.

Matthew Bram first dug into sea shanties shortly after a sailing mishap in his mid-teens, and continues to be passionate about them decades later. “I worked in IT,” he told me, “but [singing sea shanties] was my love.” His singing, study, and collection of sea shanties has made him close friends, brought personal fulfillment, and helped him through hard times. He was particularly excited to find a younger crowd inspired to sing shanties together on TikTok, especially with social shanty singing in-person off the table during the pandemic.

Memphis Gerald (@memphisgerald) is a Scottish guitarist and vocalist whose solo work bridges Celtic and Appalachian folk music traditions. He also performs with various artists, such as the electronic/trad crossover band Elephant Sessions. While his years of training on the guitar have made him a capable instrumentalist, he prefers to emphasize his musical role as an arranger or accompanist rather than as a guitarist. This song-first approach has not gone unnoticed, as his covers of pop punk songs in a folk style brought him an appreciable following on TikTok.

Maura Volante is a singer who performs traditional folk songs of Ontario, where she is based. She caught my attention on TikTok with her clear, a cappella traditional vocal style that stands out against the popularity of instrumental accompaniment and aesthetic flairs. She is a veteran folkie whose solo album, *Safe and Sound,* was released during the writing of this work.

Paul Nabil Matthis (@paulnmatthis) has worn many hats, including that of software engineer, musician, audio engineer, and author. He has held an appreciation for folk music since Johnny Rotten introduced him to it while he was working at a Hollywood recording studio. This appreciation eventually led to his participation on FolkTok. An Arab American himself, he now mainly makes content about the people of the SWANA (South-Western Asia and North Africa) region, both as a cultural educator and a resolute activist.

Rachelle Landry (@prairie_fiddler) is an educator and fiddle player from central Canada who has used TikTok to promote her Métis culture through finger weaving and fiddle playing. Rachelle's personality and capable fiddle playing made her a welcome presence in this internet niche. Currently she does not post much, instead sharing music through her profession as a teacher.

Saskia Tomkins (@saskiatomkins) is a veteran musician whose expertise crosses multiple bowed instruments and musical disciplines. Her recent work as a traditional folk performer includes the stylistically versatile folk group Medusa, and the duo Steáfán & Saskia. The latter also features her husband Steáfán Hannigan, who is himself an accomplished musician and ethnomusicologist. He has followed Saskia's experience on TikTok from behind the scenes, and joined in our conversation. While Saskia is from the UK and Steáfán from Ireland, they are currently based in Canada.

Tori Nelson (@imgonnasayitnow) became connected with FokTok through their expertise in 1960s counterculture songster Phil Ochs, as they would share Ochs centric content on TikTok and through their podcast. In my research I found that, running parallel to FolkTok, there was a current of protest-oriented songwriter centric content that referenced and reflected the socially aware musical movement of the 1960s of which Ochs was a part. I spoke to Tori for their thoughts on this connection between traditional folk revival movement and protest music both in the mid-20th century and on TikTok.

Terms and Language

FolkTok is what one might call a "side" of TikTok. A side of TikTok is a term that emerged to describe how people can have varied experiences with the app due to its personalized content recommendation. One could for instance be on the "carpentry side," or "the foodie side" of TikTok, based on what content one regularly sees on the app[8]. This is a way of describing how different groups of viewers and content creators emerge around different subjects in an organic way. This is in contrast with communities on platforms like Reddit or Facebook, where one intentionally opts in to groups, rather than naturally emerging based on algorithmic sorting as they do on platforms like TikTok.

The term FolkTok follows a common naming convention that developed around the different sides of TikTok, wherein the suffix "tok" is added to a term for the subject

[8] While this terminology was widespread at the time of data collection, I have not noticed much lately. Perhaps a second study may reveal a change in language and community on the app.

itself. You may recognize this from the sea shanty side of the app being called ShantyTok, for instance. This is typically associated with a tag, with many ShantyTok videos for instance tagged with #shantytok, working much like tagging systems on platforms like X (formerly Twitter) to help both humans and software to associate thematically similar content.

The term FolkTok is complicated by the ambiguity of the term "folk" itself. The genres represented on FolkTok, which include such related styles like anglophone folksong, American Old Time music, and Irish fiddle repertoire, are involved in discussions around labels like "folk" and "traditional." I use these as umbrella terms, in the way they tend to be used by the musicians on FolkTok."Traditional music," often shortened to "trad," has a tendency in this context to refer specifically to the traditional folk music of the Celtic nations, England, and their most immediate relations. Unless specified, "folk music" refers here to the old and enduring popular music genres that are represented on FolkTok. Finally, I periodically combine the terms, referring to "traditional folk music" to emphasize my use of the term "folk" and create distance from more modern definitions of the word.

The more modern usage of "folk music," denoting a style of modern pop music that heavily favors acoustic instrumentation and original songwriting, complicates the use of the term FolkTok. A search for #folktok or #folkmusic on TikTok will conjure a lot of such modern music, with traditional folk being more sparse in the mix. This may challenge the term FolkTok as it is used in this thesis. However, FolkTok remains as the only recurring name used within the community to refer to itself, and making it a clear choice for a community label.

The terms “folk” and “traditional” have given rise to the corresponding terms “folkie” and “traddie” for those involved in these folk music communities. I occasionally use the former term, though I tend to avoid the latter as I have not personally experienced it in my own communities and have only discovered it through literature.

This thesis also makes use of TikTok specific terminology. The “For You Page” (FYP) refers to the main section of the app, which displays personalized, algorithmically curated content. Because this content is different for each user, the term can informally refer not only to the section of the app, but the individualized content stream itself. An individual unit of content on TikTok may be called a video, a post, or simply a TikTok (e.g. “I saw the funniest TikTok the other day…”). A TikTok is composed not only of the media in question, but all the accompanying materials. This includes such things as tags, likes, comments, attached sound, and video description. There are specialized types of TikToks, created by using its different collaborative features. The primary ones are “duets” and “stitches,” which each allow for a new post that incorporates another person’s video. These terms can refer to the feature itself, as well as posts made with these features (e.g. “look at this new Wellerman duet). They can also be used as verbs (e.g. “someone stitched my video about Scarborough Fair”).

Literature

The study of digital culture has come a long way since Walter Benjamin’s essay “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Benjamin 1935). One of Benjamin’s more timeless concerns is with authenticity of reproduced media. Something like a film or a poster, he argues, lack the essential nature of their preindustrial predecessors like live

theater or oil paintings. The same argument is frequently applied to internet-based experiences. Digital media and socialization are often considered imperfect artifices of the real thing, as seen in debates about digital audio versus vinyl records, or whether children should be playing with toys like LEGOs instead of video games.

Before digital folklore became an established field, realness of media was a major concern in folkloristics as well. This is an issue addressed in the introduction to *Folklore and the Internet*, edited by Trevor Blank, who points out that the field has a tendency towards face-to-face connections which contributes to a relative lack of interest in digital cultures (Blank 2009, 4). Yet, digital experiences are real and evocative. We may debate whether a digitized experience can effectively replicate one of the real world, and whether one is better than the other, but it is undeniable that meaningful social and cultural experiences happen on the internet. This has become increasingly clear to folklorists in recent years, due to the work of scholars such as Trevor Blank and Robert Glenn Howard, whose work includes their collaboratively edited and highly useful volume *Tradition in the Twenty-First Century* (Blank and Howard 2013).

This thesis also builds on the study of traditional music within folklore. Among this old and expansive genre, I am particularly drawn to work relating to places I have called home. This includes Robert Bethke's *Adirondack Voices*, an ethnography of woodsmen-performers in New York's Adirondack Mountains (Bethke 1981). Sheldon Posen also wrote about folk song in lumber community in *For Singing and Dancing and all Sorts of Fun*, this time focusing on a community in the Ottawa Valley (Posen 1988). Similarly, *The Music of Our Burnished Axes*, by Ursula Kelly and Meghan Forsyth, explores song and storytelling among the woods workers of Newfoundland and

Labrador (Kelly and Forsyth 2021). Also worth mentioning are Colin Quigley and Kelly Russell's respective books on Emile Benoit and Rufus Guinchard, both fiddle players who made significant contributions to traditional music in Newfoundland and Labrador (Quigley 1995, Russell 1982). While these books initially connected with me based on contextual familiarity, they are well suited for understanding the background of FolkTok. On the island of Newfoundland, there is both a distinct sense of local musical identity, and a deeply felt relationship to musical neighbors to the east and west. The Adirondacks, which Bethke writes about, experience a similar ambivalence. European-American presence in the area is historically defined by seasonal lumber work, creating a regional identity that is caught between influences from such places as Ireland, New England, Ontario, and Quebec. These kinds of dynamics run through FolkTok, which brings traditional music community into cyberspace, creating nuanced relationships between localization and external influence.

An important element among the ethnomusicological aspects of FolkTok is the relationship to modern trad music. Perhaps most significant is the concept of the session, given its widespread presence in Irish and related music traditions, and its fundamentally social nature. Adam Kaul's work on trad sessions in Ireland is highly useful (Kaul 2006, Kaul 2007). Anthony McCann's "All That Is Not Given Is Lost: Irish Traditional Music, Copyright, and Common Property" adds further context to session dynamics (McCann 2001). "Living With Music: An Ethnography of Sessions in St. John's, Newfoundland," a masters thesis by Samantha Breslin, widens my understanding of my own community, and puts it into dialog with scholars like Kaul and McCann (Breslin 2011).

As Augusto Ferraiuolo writes, “what we now perceive as the typical pattern of a session… is a recent phenomenon… becoming popular during the folk music revival of the 1960s. In those years, the function and the venues of traditional Irish music changed radically: from dance music to entertainment music, from cottages to pubs. (Ferraiuolo 2019, 18-19). This puts sessions, and by extension FolkTok, as the two are related, into a revival context. *Transforming Tradition*, edited by Neil Rosenberg, is a volume of works on folk revival, focusing on movements in the USA and Canada in the 20th century (Rosenberg 1993). These revivals represent a shift in traditional music from something woven into everyday life, to something often performed in genre specific contexts like sessions, folk festivals, recording studios, and cultural events. FolkTok continues this story, representing a further progression of traditional performance into virtual spaces.

Although TikTok runs rampant with folkloric activity, relatively few folklorists have written about the app, with related literature focusing on the traditional culture of other platforms. Particularly relevant in this case are such musically oriented works as “Surfing the Tube for Latin American Song: The Blessings (and Curses) of YouTube” by John H. McDowell (McDowell 2015). McDowell’s study accomplishes many of the same goals as this thesis, except with a different musical culture and a different media context. Tok Thompson also writes about music and digital folk culture in his book, *Posthuman Folklore,* a work that has been an invaluable asset to my research (Thompson 2019). Thompson specifically writes about song mashups and beatboxing, articulating how these practices cross boundaries between physical and digital, showing how expressive culture can simultaneously defy physical reality and exist in direct relationship with it.

This thesis challenges commonly supposed limits of humanity, and as such makes use of a posthumanist mindset. Posthumanism takes the approaches and perspectives we use when studying humanity, and applies them to the nonhuman. The early and oft-cited posthumanist Donna Haraway, for instance, wrote about both animals and cyborgs in her works. While posthumanism has seen a rise in popularity among folklorists in recent years, its use in the field goes back at least as far as Jay Mechling's "'Banana Cannon' and Other Folk Traditions between Human and Nonhuman Animals" (Mechling 1989). While Mechling himself did not use the term, his intentional inclusion of animals as participants in culture is distinctly posthuman. Such folklorists as Sabina Magliocco and Tok Thompson have recognized this in their advocacy for posthumanism's use in the field. When discussing posthumanism's relevance to folklore, Magliocco points out that, "distinctions between human and nonhuman animals have generally been the province of formal knowledge systems with consolidated structures of power allowing humans to exploit other animals. Folk traditions and informal knowledge regimes tell a more complicated story" (Magliocco 2018). In this case Magliocco is particularly writing about nonhuman animals, but it can just as easily be applied to other entities, whether they be cyborg or purely biological.

Magliocco's observation that folklore in practice often problematizes the idea of a rigid human-nonhuman dichotomy is demonstrated by FolkTok. Conventional understandings of things like geography and live performance, which are typically assigned purely to meatspace, are brought into the realm of the cyborg. This is an understanding that draws from Haraway and Thompson. In "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," Donna Haraway defines

cyborg as, “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 2004, 7). Her argument is that our existence as humans is now so entwined with the realm of the synthetic, that we essentially live in a cyborg reality. Tok Thompson, too argues that the digital era has introduced new, cybernetic ways of existing, spending a significant portion of his book *Posthuman Folklore* exploring the cyborg implications of vernacular culture. This is not to say that predispositions to physical limitations are baseless or irrelevant. A cyborg is a hybrid being, including both the human and the non-human. This is a notion that expands perspectives not by transgressing the line between human and machine, but altogether challenging the supposed dichotomy. This discussion is inherent in an exploration of FolkTok, which is a fundamentally cyborg space.

#DuetMe

This thesis is named after a tag I frequently found on FolkTok posts: #duetme. Being an open invitation to creative interaction, this tag captures the ethos of eager and open collaboration that is a recurring theme in this research. The #duetme mindset is about taking the participatory, social nature of folk music and putting it online. This leads to a hybridized, posthuman community — that is, a community that exists in relation to but also beyond the realm of normal human possibility. The research presented here is intended to document the peculiar digital phenomenon that is FolkTok, and begin to pull apart its themes and wider ramifications.

These distinctive elements stand out as a possible blueprint for how expressive culture can find ways of existing in digital spaces going forward. FolkTok is not simply a

place where people post videos of performances, or discuss folk music. Having a dynamic, live-feeling environment[9], and collaborative features that have a low barrier of entry, TikTok is itself a natural site of performance. This makes FolkTok a strong example of virtualized expressive culture, in a way that could be a common model in the near future.

The profundity of FolkTok is in human connection. This is why the context of the COVID-19 lockdown is highly important, in spite of the pandemic having little to do with the day to day operations of the community. FolkTok formed out of a desire for artistic expression, and to connect with others over shared musical experience. It became a kind of a lifeline for me, as I had a need for this kind of connection, even though I was fairly new to this type of social folk music at the time. It was perhaps more important for veteran players, whose life was already deeply intertwined with musical expression and interaction. Anna Seda elaborated on this in a particularly meaningful moment in our conversation:

> In the pandemic, I saw my career opportunities just fall. There were a lot of very dark times for performing artists. I went from a full time freelancer to having all of my work just disappear overnight. And I think just saying, I'm here, we're still going, we're still doing it…. everybody just wanted to keep doing their thing… to find a way to do it.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, I frequently found myself describing online experiences as, “not a replacement, but an alternative.” Zoom classes, online game nights, and livestream concerts do not offer the same experience as their physical world counterparts. Yet, they offer other things that their physical counterparts cannot, especially in terms of access. People can participate in these events regardless of things

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[9] See chapter 2 for an involved discussion of FolkTok and live performance.

like physical location and certain disability needs. FolkTok is no exception to this, and it brings together musicians across oceans and continents. Time zones, social anxieties, travel budgets, and safety concerns are mitigated in a community like this, enabling human interactions that would be otherwise unavailable.

This work is divided into three chapters. The first concerns what happens on FolkTok. This includes topics such as social practices, media creation techniques, and musical style. This section follows the theme of cyborg legitimacy, evaluating FolkTok as a genuine site of folkloric activity rather than simply a communication tool. As such it takes a look at this community and its folkloric behavior.

The second chapter explores FolkTok's connection to social media, design, and technological mediation. FolkTok is far from the first social media to house community around traditional folk music. The musicians I interviewed spoke about a variety of experiences on sites like Facebook, YouTube, and video conferencing platforms like Zoom. Yet TikTok's design particularities and culture at the time of research helped FolkTok become a distinct community, based not only on sharing and discussion, but on active creation. The section closes out by exploring liveness on FolkTok, evaluating its ambivalent relationship with the concept of live performance.

The third chapter delves into FolkTok's identity, both in terms of the human community and FolkTok as a place. It begins with discussing the demographics of community, with attention to race and relationship to regionally and ethnically specific culture. This connects to the relationship between place and culture, the ephemeral and multifaceted nature of which comes heavily into play. FolkTok exists as a region unto itself, and yet in many cases it exists as an extension of existing places and cultures.

Chapter One: What Happens on FolkTok

When I tell people that I have been researching traditional music community on TikTok, I am typically met with one of two responses: some people react with interest, and immediately bring up ShantyTok. Others react in surprise. How could something stereotypically old and venerable thrive on a platform that is emblematic of youthful trends? TikTok is folk culture in motion. The app is built on folkloric principles like transmission, variation, and expression. Traditional folk music's comfortability on the platform comes from the app's design and the behavior of its users.

Video Production on TikTok as Folk Art

While most of this thesis puts emphasis on the social, environmental, and musical aspects of FolkTok, one must also recognize the importance of video. One can consider the creation of social media video as folk art, in that it is the skillful practice of making objects in a vernacular context. Digital video, especially on social media, is an established point of interest to folklorists and related disciplines. YouTube especially has been a site of research, with John McDowell's "Surfing the Tube for Latin American Song: The Blessings (and Curses) of YouTube," being especially useful for this work (McDowell 2015). Yet these tend to regard the content, context, and social aspects of internet video. The act of creating the videos themselves remains an underrepresented front of study—something this subsection will make a small step towards remedying.

In "Hybridizing Folk Culture: Toward a Theory of New Media and Vernacular Discourse," digital folklorist Trevor Blank has similarly argued for a material approach to modern media (Blank, 2013). Blank points out the importance of perception, when

evaluating the concreteness of the digital realm. As humans we respond to sensory input, regardless of whether that stimulus is physical or transmitted. An official email elicits the same serious tone as a physical letter, and a picture of a cute cat can make one smile as if seeing the cat in person. Another element of Blank's argument is using material behavior studies to show how people interact with digital media similarly to how they interact with material media. He gives the example of websites and blogs, which organically develop in the same way as other creative vernacular practices. He writes, "aesthetic values and preferences for creating an appropriate website or blog are constantly being acquired through cultural osmosis and the subconscious consumption of predominant schemes found online during casual browsing" (Blank 2013, 112). This is also the case with the creation of social media videos. Social media videos like vlogs, "get ready with me" videos, or TikTok street interviews are not institutionally evaluated. Most creators pick up on aesthetic goals and values from their peers and environment.

I have spent several years around first-time learners of video production, both as an instructor and as a student myself. While formal concepts like three-point lighting and shutter speed need to be taught, most students are already familiar with the visual language and aesthetic expectations of web-based video genres like vlogs and gaming videos. Even the children I know through their parents or from working at a summer camp are typically familiar with these styles, and commonly referencing them or even making their own content. Similarly, Simon J. Bronner describes how folk objects are usually, "learned by imitating the work of community or family members and by participating in local customs" (Bronner 1986, 199). Especially when considering that

different video platforms have localized aesthetic standards and genres[10], one can see how digital video fits into a well-established conception of vernacular pedagogy.

While official avenues of video production education certainly exist, most people learn through internet tutorials, personal relationships, and hands on experience. I have spent some years in formal video production education, both as a student and as an instructor, but these unofficial resources have still been important for myself, my peers, and my students. Admittedly, there are a variety of freely accessible video education resources that teach from an official capacity, made by film school associated filmmakers and working professionals. However, many working professionals have gained their status with skills they learned through informal learning. It is also worth noting that a study of how-to videos on YouTube by Sonja Utz and Lara N. Wolfers found that perceived value of a tutorial video is typically based on social factors of gender and communication style of the instructor, rather than authority in a formal sense (Utz and Wolfers 2022, 969). Perhaps informal informational sources are not only common online, but in many cases preferable.

There are also distinct stylistic differences between videos with institutional background, and these vernacular examples that are seen on social media. For example, professional productions follow rules like maintaining the fourth wall[11] and the 180

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[10] For example, one can find a plethora of hour-long widescreen video essays on YouTube, while short vertical "fit check" videos are better known in places like Instagram Reels or TikTok.

[11] The fourth wall being a metaphorical wall between the action and the viewer. Productions observing this rule will, for example, ensure that behind the scenes crew and equipment remain unseen and not acknowledged by actors, thus maintaining an illusion of realism.

degree rule.[12] In vernacular genres, however, these rules are typically unnecessary, and often antithetical to the intended style. In the early days of video blogging, for example, the common style was to use an excessive number of jumpcuts, which would be considered poor editing in established professional contexts. On TikTok, recording in front of a mirror is an established style, and shatters the fourth wall by showing the camera clearly and speaking directly into it. Both of these examples are well established stylistic choices, in spite of breaking formal filmmaking rules.

Official and unofficial forms of video also largely use different techniques and tool sets. Even a low budget cinema rig could easily include a camera, lens, monitor, focus system, video recorder, battery, and mounting rig, to simply accomplish the same functions of a video enabled phone. Beyond the camera, industry experts in areas like light, sound, and editing similarly use equipment that is inaccessible to most people. Everyday video that is seen on social media uses its own set of tools, using fewer specialized tools in favor of what is accessible. This follows the tendency for folk objects to be made with the resources that are most commonly available (Bronner 1986, 209). While a film industry professional with twenty years of experience may be able to assemble a cinema rig blindfolded and operate a camera while running backwards, their 17-year-old cousin who posts book reviews on TikTok may be far more knowledgeable about which filters look the most natural.

FolkTok makes for a compelling example of video as a folk art. Largely consisting of musicians without formal video production training, knowledge in the community

[12] The 180 degree rule limits camera placement, especially during dialog scenes, to maintain the relative direction and placement of key figures. This keeps the viewer spatially oriented and avoids unnecessary confusion.

around how to effectively make videos is correspondingly vernacular, based on observation, peer advice, and experience. This is particularly demonstrable through duets, as they are distinctive to TikTok and require particular finesse to get the synchronization to work effectively for music.

I, for example, would typically set up my phone in a tripod with an attachment to hold the phone. Along with being convenient, it allowed me to plug headphones in the bottom—something I would not be able to do if I was propping the phone up on a flat surface. Headphones are essential for a duet rig, as they help prevent the sound of the original video from bleeding into the finished duet. I would then use the app's features to balance my volume with the source material and add any appropriate text or filters. This is a fairly standard approach, with each musician typically making their own little tweaks, such how the phone is held or propped up.

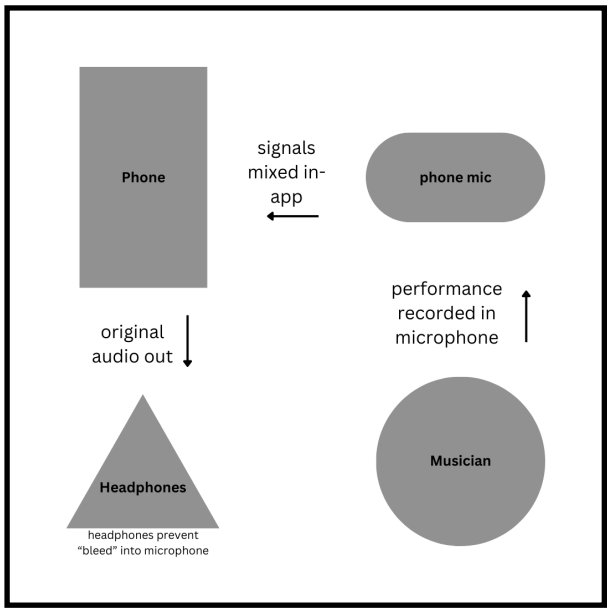

Figure 2.1. Diagram of a basic duet setup.

Various approaches to TikTok's duet feature have emerged on FolkTok. A duet allows users to share someone else's video, with a video of their own playing next to it. These videos are synchronized, allowing creators to accompany each other. The accompanying screenshot is an example of a typical FolkTok duet. Julie from the duo

Kinnfolk saw someone on TikTok playing bodhrán[13] while singing. This original performance can be seen in the right hand side of the screenshot. With a couple of taps on the TikTok interface, Julie was able to record herself while singing along to the video. The app then combines both videos, resulting in the finished duet as seen here. The end result is a new video, to which Julie added the lyrics (see the orange highlighted text). Attribution is handled via automatically generated links to the original post. This ability to record original content in sync with existing media is a core part of TikTok, which was originally known for lip-sync and dance videos.

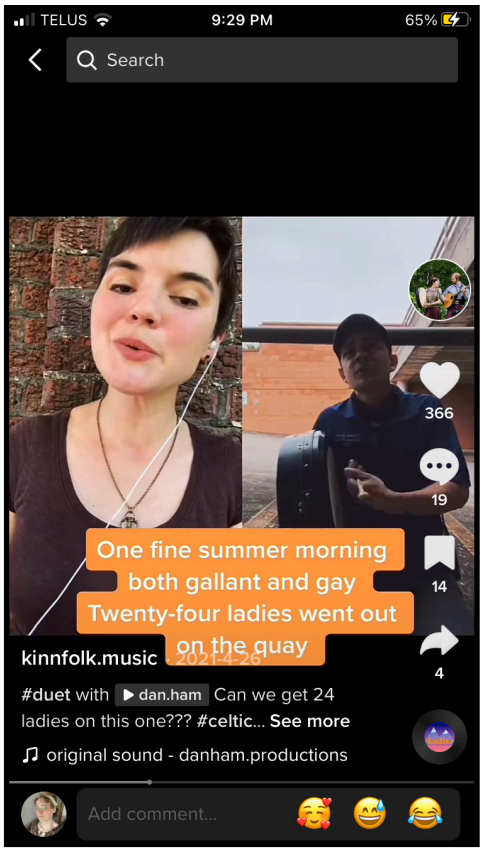

Figure 2.2. A duet by @kinnfolk.music (left side) adding vocals to the original video (right side) posted by @dan.ham (Kinnfolk 2021).

Various higher effort techniques emerged to optimize duets, allowing one to use better microphones and resolve synchronization issues. While TikTok does a decent job at synchronizing both parts of a duet, the precision is a bit lacking for ideal musical timing. One strategy to get around the timing difficulty is to route the phone's headphone jack into a mixer, manually combining new sound with what the musician hears as they play along to the original video. This negates the need for TikTok to combine signals after the fact, bypassing the synchronization issue entirely. Another technique is to create duets manually by downloading the source material and editing

[13] The bodhrán is a form of drum typically associated with Irish traditional music.

the two videos together in separate software. I did not see this on FolkTok, but seemed to be popular in more tech-friendly music spaces on the app at the time.

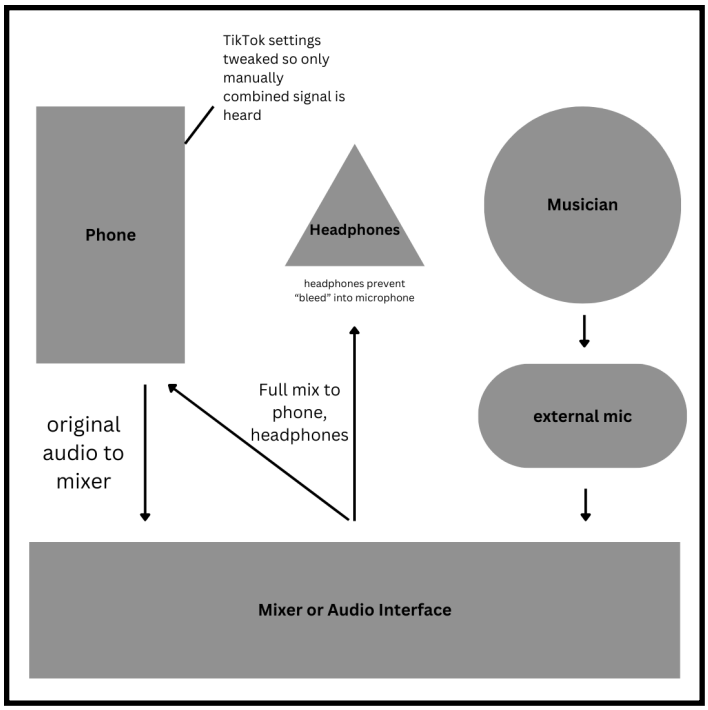

Figure 2.3. Diagram of a zero-latency duet setup.

A musician with orchestra experience suggested a more analog approach.[14] When playing in massive venues with large ensembles, sound cannot travel fast enough for everyone to be in truly perfect time with each other. With practice, musicians can offset their playing a minuscule amount, making everything come together perfectly. With practice one can use this technique to adjust to the timing discrepancy on TikTok as well. This has been my go-to technique, and while I am by no means skilled at it, I do find it tolerably effective. A final method has proved, in my experience, to be the most effective overall: being patient enough to try again another time, since the latency issue is inconsistent and may be better at a later moment. These techniques have been shared informally on the app, with different musicians making videos to share their duet practices, sparking discussions and inspiring variations.

Another aspect of app design to influence the video production practices of FolkTok was the decision to overlay interface controls and video descriptions on top of

[14] I believe this was Anna Seda, but I'm not certain. It was before I began doing fieldwork in earnest, but the anecdote stuck with me.

TikTok videos. TikTok's buttons for switching between different pages and engaging with content are placed on top of the video along the top, bottom, and right sides of the screen, and descriptive text added by the creator is placed towards the bottom left (see screenshot on right for example). While this leaves a large rectangle in the general upper left portion of the screen, the rest of the image is somewhat obscured. While TikTok now allows one to hide these interface features to show the entire video, this was not available at the time of my research. In order to compensate, creators needed to frame their TikToks with a bias to the upper left portion of the screen, or suffer their content being covered by the interface. This was further complicated by the fact that many of us on FolkTok would add on screen text, either as additional commentary or as captions.

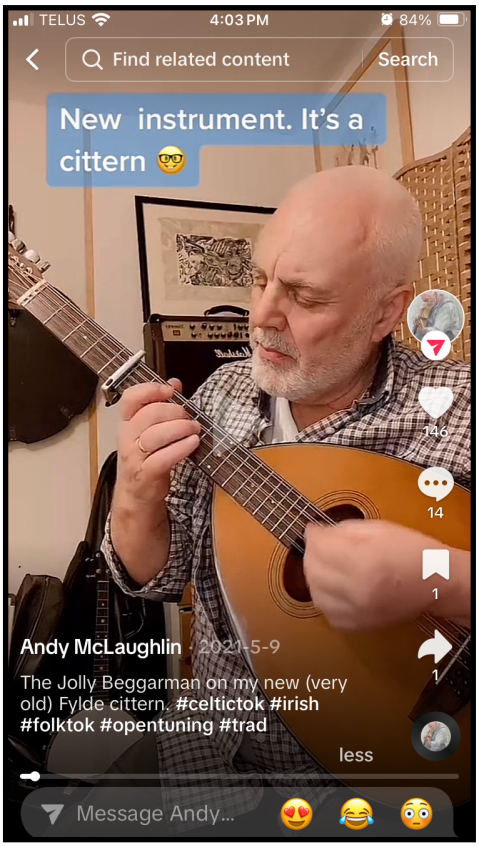

Figure 2.4. Screenshot of a TikTok by Andy McLaughlin (@andysoloceltic).

Much like other avenues of folkloric interest, there is not a hard line between vernacular video production and its institutionalized counterpart. If an industry production company produces a casual video blog, is it an example of folk art, or institutional? Similar questions arise when companies hire influencers to advertise their products, or a YouTuber shifts to making Hollywood-style movies. However, while these grey areas exist, FolkTok is comfortably within the realm of folklore. In terms of media creation, the majority of creators by far are creating their videos in a vernacular style,

using the resources they have immediately accessible, using community know-how and ingenuity to overcome technical problems and create good products.

FolkTok Practices

Musical Style

Content on FolkTok is typically straightforward performances of traditional music. Songs and tunes are played for the camera, typically without complicated arrangements or flashy visuals. As discussed in the introduction, much of it is music out of Celtic traditions, and related genres such as sea shanties and various forms of North American fiddle music. Much of the FolkTok repertoire is what can be most conveniently generalized as session tunes.

Sessions are, "now a worldwide musical phenomenon with local variations in structure and content," writes Adam R. Kaul, informed by his fieldwork in Ireland, "…in Doolin it is a musical context that occurs most generally in pubs, but also occasionally in private houses, with three or more musicians who play jigs, reels, hornpipes, slow airs, and other genres of traditional instrumental dance music primarily from the Irish and Scottish traditions" (Kaul 2007, 704). I find Kaul's description to aptly apply to St. John's, NL, which is unsurprising given that the first local sessions were started by musicians from Ireland (Breslin 2009, 48-49). A session is a semi-structured setting, with its own rules and expectations, while typically remaining an informal social environment where musicians can bond over tunes and drinks. While sessions are typically associated, as Kaul indicates in the quote above, with Irish and Scottish

traditions, there are exceptions. The sessions I frequent in St. John's can attest to this, as we frequently play local tunes from Newfoundland and across Canada. This indicates a kind of restrained diversity to this repertoire, with musicians playing whichever tunes are enjoyed in their own groups as long as it fits in the same general genre family as the Celtic jigs and reels. This was the kind of instrumental music I commonly found on FolkTok at the time of research.

While session-ready trad tunes and anglophone folksongs abounded during data collection, a number of other niche genres were also present. Lukas Simpson, for instance, has a particular affinity for the local folk music of his home region in the American Midwest. Likewise, Maura Volante specializes in Ontario folksong. Ester Magnusson is also a folksinger, primarily performing Swedish repertoire. Rachelle Landry plays Métis fiddle music. Saskia Tomkins is capable in several styles, even displaying her jazz chops from time to time. Anna Seda similarly crosses disciplines, playing both traditional music with a particular affinity for Scottish repertoire, as well as styles under the classical umbrella. Modern popular music has even found its way in the mix. While Memphis Gerald's bread and butter is a transatlantic blend of Scottish trad guitar accompaniment and American flatpicking, on TikTok he is best known for applying these techniques to a handful of pop punk songs. Similarly, Anna Seda's account initially gained attention by duetting a cover Lukas Simpson posted of "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen.

If there is a unified FolkTok musical style, it is not based in aesthetic ideals, but in a brevity and efficiency enforced by a sixty-second time limit[15]. Steáfán Hannigan suggested the term "précis folk." Précis is, in his words, "the French term for… what editors do, where you maybe have a thousand word assignment as a journalist, and the editor goes, 'you've got 200 words to say exactly the same thing.' So you're making it more precise. In terms of journalism, if you have a five-paragraph story, the first two paragraphs say everything you need, and the rest is back up and context." Similarly, by reducing tunes to what fits within a minute, musicians are left with no time for the variations and explorations that would normally lead to stylistic distinction. Tunes are reduced to the basics. This also lends itself to the broad range of musical skill levels at play. A significant portion of FolkTok musicians are in the beginner-intermediate range, and are therefore more comfortable with such straightforward arrangements.

The sixty-second précis folk aesthetic is most distinctive in terms of form, tempo, and genre. Trying to fit a certain amount of music into a time limit naturally leads to musicians playing faster than normal. Saskia compared this to 78rpm records, when musicians would have to rush to fit their music onto a small disc. "Sometimes its frustrating," she added, bringing up a time she was requested to play "Neil Gow's Lament on the Death of His Second Wife" on Nyckelharpa for TikTok. "In a minute!?" was her response. Yet she went for it, speeding it up and shaving things off until the tune fit the time limit. In the end she found the experience rewarding, saying that, "it was a really interesting challenge for me. I don't particularly like the way it sounds. But that

[15] The time limit was increased to three minutes after I had completed most of the interviews. Yet it set a precedent, and to this day I rarely see a tune last much longer than a minute on the app.

wasn't the focus. The focus was, 'can you squeeze it into this window?' Yes, I did it. That was the achievement, you know." Steáfán, sitting next to her, piped up with a possible solution. "You can always do one video for the A part and one video for the B part," he suggested. "Oh no," she replied. "That would be criminal."

The types of tunes which make a large portion of FolkTok repertoire typically consist of two parts, each played twice in an AABB form. While the sixty-second limit that reigned during initial data collection precluded repetition, I find it is generally enough to get a standard tune in. Anything longer generally needs its form altered. For instance, a tune that would normally be in AABBCC form would need to be abbreviated to ABC. This is especially an issue when it comes to lyrical songs. Traditional ballads typically have many verses, working together to tell a narrative. To fit this into a minute, one must lean into the précis folk approach and remove all but the most essential verses, and hope that would make it short enough, or to abandon the narrative and perform a few verses without context. A number of performers made do with these methods, but ultimately the time limit discouraged narrative folk song from proliferating.

Maura Volante pointed out that this time limit was more conducive to the sea shanties that were so successful on the app. "Sea shanties are functionally very different from ballads," she told me, "there's this focus on the chorus and… group effort. They're very, you know, accessible for a platform like TikTok." The point of a ballad, besides aesthetic satisfaction, is to tell a story from beginning to end. This is often not achievable in a minute. However, the point of a sea shanty is to energize and synchronize its singers. These goals are less perturbed by a time limit.

The notion of précis folk, wherein musical explorations are dropped in favor of efficiency, is arguably a loss of character. On the other hand, the challenge of a time limit invites other forms of creativity. This certainly seemed to be Memphis Gerald's perspective. "I think part of the appeal for me… is that you do have to figure out 'how am I going to do this in 60 seconds?'" He explained, "I've always had this idea in my head that limiting yourself creatively can actually produce really good results," and brought up his cover of "Blackbird" by The Beatles, played for TikTok in his own style. He had to cut up and rearrange the pieces creatively, to maintain the sense of the original song while fitting it within a minute. What resulted was a pithy 45 second cover, arranged in such a way where it would feel natural when TikTok automatically looped the video, giving a satisfying song experience. This harkens back to the example Saskia Tomkins put forward, where she had to cram a long tune into the minute limit. While it was in some senses a frustrating experience for her, she was left with a sense of accomplishment for succeeding in the creative challenge. Ultimately the experience of FolkTok during the sixty-second limit was a balance between musical frustration, and creative enrichment.

Duets, Stitches, and Comment Replies

For the folkies of the internet, a major appeal of TikTok was the strength and simplicity of its collaborative features, especially duets. While audio-visual music collaborations are hardly new to the internet, they normally require a more involved process. Take the example of a similar video collaboration a friend and I made for

Instagram in 2020. First he had to record a video of himself playing his instrument. I then recorded myself playing along to it. I mixed the audio in a digital audio workstation, and combined the audio and video elements in a video editor. This is a process that requires back and forth communication, dedicated software, and at least intermediate audio and video production abilities. Livestreams and video calls provide a more immediate experience, but these sacrifice the ability for musicians to play simultaneously. I have attended several instructional workshops via Zoom video call, and every time the students had to be muted due to latency issues[16]. Duets, however, allow for synchronized musical collaboration. This synchronization is generally imperfect, hence the aforementioned techniques to mitigate duet latency, but it is functional. Duets require little technical skill and no communication with the original creator (who has the ability to prevent others from duetting their videos should they so choose), streamlining the experience.

The social value of duets was a recurring theme in my fieldwork. Making a duet would signify that you found the original video worthy of your time and energy. As TikTok sends a notification to the original creator whenever a duet is created, they would not miss the sign of respect and likely comment something encouraging under the duet. This made duets a kind of handshake, and a powerful tool for making social connections on the app. This could be done casually and without any prior association with the creator, though on rare occasions I have planned out duets ahead of time. Sometimes the original creator would not interact at all, especially if they were

[16] When transmitting media there is inherently a delay, or latency, between sender and receiver. A quality signal may sufficiently negate this for spoken conversations, but are currently not enough for competent musical collaboration.

particularly popular on the app. Yet duetting a popular creator still builds social connections, the way one might play a Led Zeppelin song at an open mic to connect with other classic rock fans and establish a rocker persona through association.

Duets were the feature that allowed shanty singing on TikTok to thrive as a collaborative experience. A singer would duet a sea shanty, and consequent singers would duet said duet, until the app was full of polyphonic 'duet chains.' "I joined first week of January of this year [2021] and just for whatever reason got directed to this group of shanty singers," Paul Nabil told me. "And we all just started singing shanties together. And they're wonderful people, super talented… we just have this group of buds." While having worked multiple roles in the music industry, Paul is not normally a folk performer. The way he described his experience with ShantyTok was more focused on the social aspect of sharing music and making connections. This is an attitude that often holds true at the shanty sings across North America that Matthew Bram described. While someone typically leads the group in singing a particular song at these events, this is primarily to facilitate group singing rather than it being an individual's performance moment. "Its just an excuse for us all to sing along with another person," explained Matthew, "we're just all doing this together." The social bond among these shanty singers is strong. "We're a tight family." Both the physical shanty sings and ShantyTok are collaborative contexts for this music, and both foster interpersonal relationships—a similarity facilitated by the duet feature.

It was this use of duets on ShantyTok that attracted many of the folk musicians I talked to. This makes sense as these musicians' experience with music is inherently collaborative. The musical styles represented by FolkTok are associated with folk

festivals, bluegrass jams, shanty sings, trad sessions, and social dances. Duetting makes TikTok a social experience, not merely in sharing and discussing music, but in the process of music creation itself.

While duets reigned supreme in the heyday of ShantyTok, they were never the dominant type of post on FolkTok, having a cultural importance that outweighed their use in practice. As previously explained, they were a major attraction for many who joined during the pandemic, attracting lonely musicians with the collaborative possibilities. Yet while duets were common at this time, standalone videos seemed to emerge as the default, with commenting being the primary method of interaction. Perhaps the fact that individual performances were more common helped duets feel special in comparison.

Another relevant TikTok feature is the stitch. Like a duet, it allows one to incorporate an existing video with original content, except the videos are played in sequence instead of simultaneously. Up to five seconds of the original video plays, followed by the new content. It functions much like other popular social media, where one can share someone else' post and add one's own commentary, except using video. Like duets, these stitches link back to the original video. This feature has been a core aspect of social development on TikTok, being instrumental to a wide array of memes and trends. This led to the practice of creating stitch prompts, where someone would ask a question in a video, encouraging others to make a stitch with their own thoughts. As stitches allow one to use an existing video as a starting point to discuss a topic, they made for a useful way to discuss traditional folk music.

In the same vein as stitches, one can create video replies to comments. When a commenter asked about the difference between a jig and a slip jig, for instance, Saskia Tomkins replied with a video, and was thus able to use visual aids that would not be an option in a normal text comment. A comment reply video like this is conveniently accessible in the comment section, as well as among the rest of the creator's videos on their profile. One can also link one's posts with other people by simply tagging other TikTok users in comments or video descriptions. Once a user is tagged, they receive a notification, and will often quickly engage with the post that invoked them.

This ability to share and interact with people and their ideas using linked posts means posting a video can be a directly social act. Every now and then, a particular video would get some discussion in the comments, leading to video replies and stitches involving multiple people. On one such occasion, the topic of bawdy folk songs arose. Soon a handful of us were posting examples, sharing our songs and thoughts. Another time it was spooky ballads featuring ghosts and murders (it was approaching Halloween, after all). The conversational flow would be maintained by using stitches or comment replies, launching each person's contribution to the trend off of someone else's. A handful of people would be tagged in these posts, making sure everyone in the conversation was included. These unplanned discussions functioned much like conversations I commonly have in pubs and living rooms, where one musician's tune or song would prompt the rest of the group to bring up and discuss similar examples.

Significant to TikTok, if less so to this thesis, is the app's livestream feature. This livestream feature has seen moderate use on FolkTok, with various creators giving it a go. I myself have used it a few times. Interestingly, the experience felt more like a form

of socialization than a stage performance. The closest comparison that comes to me is hosting a session, where one is responsible for facilitating entertainment but is operating in a social environment. While streaming, I was sharing my music with other FolkTok denizens who happened to pop in, and having small conversations where I would speak out loud and they would talk in the comment section. I did not find livestreams to get much use on FolkTok. While the feature did receive some attention in the community, it is not a significant part of the FolkTok experience.

Socialization

While many kinds of social dynamics exist on TikTok, perhaps the most significant to this research is that of "mutuals." Mutuals are people who follow each other, and often connect on a more personal level than your typical creator-follower interactions. This term is also used on other platforms where users connect with people they do not already know (I first heard it on Tumblr). The official term on TikTok is "friends," which I find this less useful than mutuals. Friends implies a relationship that may or may not exist. While this kind of closeness may develop between mutuals, they also may barely interact. The defining aspect of mutuals, at least on FolkTok, is a kind of mutual respect, and the designation establishes a kind of peer relationship.

Becoming mutuals on FolkTok can be as simple as posting about traditional music and waiting for TikTok's recommendation algorithm to show it to the right viewers. After all, if two creators post about the same shared interest, there is a reasonable chance that they would want to follow each other. I also find myself more

likely to follow someone if I became familiar with them through seeing them on my For You Page, in comments, and duets or stitches with creators that I already enjoy. Consequently, not posting content may hinder social connections by not appealing to potential followers. As Maura Volante put it, “I’ve got people that follow me and then I go to find out what they're doing and they haven't posted any videos at all! So I think, wow, so they don't even have anything up there so I'm not going to follow them… all I can do is thank them.”

Being mutuals with someone on TikTok enables one to see their ‘friends only’ posts. There are few types of these posts that I have observed on FolkTok, which I will generalize to preserve the assumption of privacy inherent in such posts. These friends only posts are often used to elicit community response. This may include inviting people to collaborate on projects, sharing travel plans in hopes of meeting in person, or other appeals to interaction with mutuals. It is also common to use this feature to ask for advice on topics inappropriate for wider audiences, such as dealing with difficult commenters or help booking gigs. They can also be used to show works in progress, or other material that one might want to share without being subject to wider public criticism. There is also a more traditional social media aspect to friends only posts, as my FolkTok mutuals and I have often used the feature to show elements of personal life, off topic jokes, and other miscellanea that is not applicable or appropriate for our public profiles. The comment sections of friends only posts are similarly distinct from their public counterparts. Since anyone commenting must be mutuals with the person who made the TikTok, these comments allow one to identify other creators’ mutuals, thus giving unusual insight into the relationships that form the community. While it would

be compelling to share examples of these friends-only posts, the most profound ones are the examples least appropriate to publish. On a handful of occasions my mutuals have posted about rather personal topics, opening up to their TikTok friends and seeking comfort or advice. Thus, while less visible than public performances, friends only posts have been among the most socially significant videos on FolkTok

One does not have to have mutuals or post videos to belong to this side of TikTok. TikTok users will often refer to being "on" a side of TikTok when they see a number of videos in a certain topic or community. For example, if you see a lot of videos about woodworking, you could say, "I'm on the woodworking side of TikTok." This language indicates that, with sufficient exposure to a community on TikTok, one is not simply witnessing it but involved to the point of being metaphorically on it. This is especially true through interactions like commenting and following. If someone follows me or leaves a comment, I will often look at their profiles. Some of these people I recognize, either from past comments or having unique profiles. Other times, they are more anonymous, but seeing the characteristics of their profile (username choice, pronouns, bio, etc.) contributes to a sense of who is interacting with this content.

I once had the surreal experience of being recognized by one of my followers at a social event, something surprising given the small size of my TikTok account. We were able to discuss the FolkTok community, as they showed an understanding of both the content and some of the social connections in the community. This interaction indicated to me that viewers may be at least superficially engaged with the community, without being active creators themselves.

FolkTok also extends outside of public activity and into personal relationships, typically facilitated through TikTok's direct messaging feature. In my experience, direct messaging usually starts with (and is sometimes limited to), sending someone a TikTok post they would enjoy. One might also initiate a private conversation based on a discussion that started in a comment section. Usually, if two people are messaging for the first time, they must be mutuals (unless privacy settings are changed). This means that a sense of familiarity is often established by the time a message is sent.

Interpersonal connections made on TikTok can spill out into other platforms, such as Instagram or Discord. TikTok allows one to link an Instagram or YouTube account to a profile, allowing people to quickly find a user's Instagram account if they so choose. This feature is especially useful, as TikTok's fickle algorithm, inconsistent moderation, and threats of restriction in the United States have incentivized many users to connect on other platforms so they do not unintentionally lose contact. Currently, while I am still able to reach most of my FolkTok friends on TikTok itself, Instagram is primarily how these connections are maintained.

I find these social practices build up in stages, from commenting and following, to direct communication, and sometimes meeting in the physical world. This is how I met Mark Weissglass, better known as @RedRoseGreenBriarGuy. "Folk music check!" starts his debut TikTok. He speaks in a run-on sentence, clarity aided by open captions. "Tell me that when you and your lover died, out of their grave grew a red red rose and out of yours grew a green green briar, and they both growed up o'er the old church wall 'till they could not grow any higher, 'till they met and they tied in a true lovers knot red rose around green briar, without telling me that—all that." The video ends with a

screenshot over his head, showing the names of four ballads. The accompanying text reads, “If I had a nickel for every time this exact thing happened I’d have at least four nickels which is a lot considering.” Within seconds, Mark was able to combine a traditional ballad trope with multiple contemporary memes. The opening line, “folk music check,” is reference to a meme, which in this case is based on pointing out things that are associated with a topic or identity. The body of the video is a ‘tell me without telling me’ meme, where one humorously explains one thing by showing another. The description text is also a meme, which references a popular quote from *Phineas and Ferb the Movie: Across the 2nd Dimension* (2011). All these elements come together in the context of the four ballads, each of which employs the trope of a red rose and a green briar growing out of the graves of romantic protagonists. What resulted was a surprising collision of modern internet vernacular culture with the much older folklore genre of traditional anglophone balladry.

I first connected with Mark by stitching one of his early videos. After the initial video described above, he continued to make ‘red rose, green briar’ references, particularly around the ballad Barbara Allen (Roud 54, Child 84). This earned him the nickname of Red Rose Green Briar Guy, which would soon become his username on the app. I was fascinated by this and made sure to stitch one of his videos, pointing out the hybridization of modern and long-standing folk culture. He commented his appreciation and kind words about my own content. Other familiar faces jumped into the conversation as well, chatting in a shared enjoyment of ballads and humor.

As Mark continued to indulge in traditional music, he found himself wanting an accordion. He posted about this, asking his FolkTok connections if we had any advice. It

just so happened that a friend of mine was trying to sell his old accordion, and Mark and I started texting about it. Before I knew it, I was meeting with him in the middle of the Adirondack Mountains, where he had come to pick up the accordion and take a small post-lockdown vacation. We talked about our lives, shared interests, and other FolkTok folks. I have met a few FolkTok mutuals in the physical world now, and the route from seeing someone online to meeting in person has always taken the same trajectory. It builds in layers, from public interaction, to private conversation, to coincidental happenstance allowing us to meet in person.

FolkTok and The Physical World

What we consider traditional music used to be interwoven in people's everyday lives. We see this in work songs, lullabies, and the tunes that used to be mainstream dance music. They were interwoven into the mainstream cultural context. In many cases, traditional folk music still exists in these ways. However, times have changed, as they tend to do. Heavy machinery does not lend itself to shanty singing, and weekend revelers dance to DJs more often than fiddlers. Meanwhile, traditional music is more often experienced in specialized contexts like studio albums and folk festivals. This paradigm shift is in full force on FolkTok.

The relative decline in older folk genres is opposed by revival efforts. In many cases this involves creating cultural settings specifically centered around such music. This is explored in *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined,* a volume edited by Neil Rosenberg (Rosenberg 1993). The articles in this book delve into both wider trends of revival in the mid 20th century, especially in North America, as well as

named-system revivals[17]. Modern traditional music, especially in the forms found on FolkTok, are marked by the festivals, jams, and dances that emerged from these revival efforts. FolkTok exists in this revivalist dynamic. It is not a community where people play music that happens to be in these folk genres. It is a community set apart, framed around the style.

While FolkTok is a specialized phenomenon, music as a part of everyday life proliferates on TikTok. This especially applies to music used as background audio. Once a song becomes sufficiently popular on the app, it becomes integrated in a wide variety of posts, whether they be an influencer's travel montage, a product advertisement, or a fit check. There are no unifying markers on these videos, or elements like genre specific tags. It is simply something that emerges naturally due to TikTok's design, which streamlines adding popular music to posts. TikToks that integrate popular songs are also more likely to succeed by associating it with a trend, motivating users to incorporate the song of the moment in their videos. This weaves these popular songs into the everyday experience of TikTok users.

There are also songs used as parts of trends or memes that specifically interact with the music. A memorable example was a meme surrounding “Come and Get Your Love” by Redbone. The song features the call and response lyric, “Hey (hey), what's the matter with your head.” In this meme, the song would be cut off short and used as dialog, depicting a double take. The result would be a scene like the following:

[17] “Named-systems revivals” refer to revival efforts that, rather than reviving traditions based on things like location or folk music at large, focus on specific styles like Bluegrass music.

Someone is walking down the street. They see someone in the act of breaking into a neighbor's house. Mouthing along to the music, the burglar character says, “hey!” The protagonist greets them back, and then does a double take. “Hey… what!?”

Videos like this that playfully interact with music proliferate on TikTok. There is little predictability to the music in use, ranging from Taylor Swift, to The Police, to Harry Belafonte. The genres of Atlantic traditional music that proliferate on FolkTok also make appearances in these memes and audio games. The Irish folksong, “Rattlin’ Bog” (Roud 129), for instance, had its moment as a meme. The cumulative song features a refrain that gets longer as the song progresses, ending in a long run-on lyric that is bound to twist the tongues of all but the most nimble vocalists. There are a number of videos on TikTok that use this run-on refrain to depict talkative characters. “The Wellerman,” discussed in the introduction, is perhaps the best known example of a traditional folk song becoming a part of the everyday TikTok audio lexicon.

Songs like “Come and Get Your Love” and “Rattlin’ Bog” show that there is a vernacular music culture interwoven with the common culture on TikTok, arising through normal in-app activities, much like work songs and lullabies might naturally emerge as part of everyday life. Meanwhile FolkTok is largely a separate phenomenon. In this context it functions like a folk festival or a session. It serves as an enclave for long standing music traditions, allowing fans and musicians to interact and share music in a specialized environment.

FolkTok, as the folk/trad music side of the app, separates itself from the rest of TikTok through algorithmic categorization, intentional interactions, and aesthetics. Most sides of TikTok emerge as a consequence of the app’s design. By showing people

with similar tastes the same videos, the content recommendation algorithm functionally sweeps people into piles based on interests and identities. From there, people can identify each other and form connections, recognizing other members of the group as being on a particular side of TikTok. Embodied musical performance is also an element of separation. Presenting oneself simply in front of the camera to play traditional music sets a tone that stands out from most other types of content. It indicates that this is a moment to sit and listen. While such performances are found in other intentional music spaces on the app, FolkTok's signature markers complete the sense of separation. These include use of tags, informative text, and specialized music and instruments. Such elements on their own are not guaranteed indicators, but together they indicate that the viewer has found FolkTok, a community and virtual space designated for specific kinds of music.

Curiously, dancing is largely absent on FolkTok. While content on the platform has certainly diversified in recent years, TikTok has long been associated with dance, given the ability to record oneself moving in sync to prerecorded audio. FolkTok heavily features dance tunes like jigs and reels, which could invite dancers. However, FolkTok is almost exclusively musical performance. While my focus in this thesis is on musical community, I can suggest possible explanations for the limited amount of dance. Folk dancing is often a social experience, requiring physical interaction. Furthermore, one has to stay within the bounds of the camera, which is typically a phone held up in place. These factors preclude much of traditional dance.

There are of course exceptions to the lack of dance. For example, the Irish dance group Cairde (@_cairde) has gained over three million followers dancing to popular

songs. On FolkTok itself, dances have emerged on the rare occasion as well. A couple of times, others have duetted my posts, dancing along to the music. While it is always a pleasure when someone duets one of my videos, the ones of people dancing are among my favorite. The jigs and reels are inherently dance music, and I find a sense of joyful completion when listeners start moving. As Colin Quigley points out in "Locating the Choreomusical: The Case of European and American Dance Fiddling," this music is inherently interconnected with dance, and the sound and motion are well to be regarded together (Quigley 2016).

Sessions make for a compelling comparison to FolkTok. Sessions are a cornerstone of trad music for many players and listeners. It makes sense that, given that sessions are fundamentally a gathering of musicians to play trad music and socialize, they serve as a common analogy to FolkTok, as evidenced by interviews and personal conversations with its denizens. It is not a direct comparison, lacking key elements like a physical environment, session leader, and true temporal coexistence. Yet it maintains familiar elements. There is a cohesive social community, that values offerings in the form of musical contribution. Conversations in comment sections often mirror those around a session table, with individual performances often spurring discussions around the tune itself, or tune-playing at large. These familiar strokes, set amidst fundamental differences between FolkTok and sessions, demonstrates FolkTok's status as a phenomenon that is both unique and a digital extension of modern traditional music culture.

FolkTok is in many ways unique when compared to traditional music in the physical world. There are dramatic differences inherent to an experience mediated by

digital technology. Concepts like duets and mutuals are specific to the digital realm. While the experience is different, the fundamentals are the same. Musicians on FolkTok are able to perform, collaborate, and connect. Values of community building and sharing culture are intact. Much like its meatspace counterparts, FolkTok is a community of people participating in traditional music, engaging in discussions, and bonding over a shared passion.

Digital communities do not exist in isolation. While FolkTok is distinct, its members are also connected through other apps and physical community. This has become increasingly clear to me as I continue to connect with the Canadian folk music community. Saskia Tomkins' band Medusa was nominated for the Canadian Folk Music Awards, which was being held in my city. I was able to meet Saskia and her bandmates. We talked, listened to live music, and played tunes together. We discovered that we know a number of the same people, both online and off. While we initially got to know each other as TikTok mutuals, here we were participating in the tangible world of Canadian folk music. Nor is this unique, as a number of FolkTok regulars over time have brought their on-app relationships into other communities, or inspired friends to start posting tunes on

Figure 2.5. Saskia Tomkins and the author at the Canadian Folk Music Awards.

TikTok. Though FolkTok is a modern, virtual phenomenon, it is woven into the fabric of long standing traditional folk music communities.

Chapter Two: FolkTok and Social Media

FolkTok is neither the first nor the only manifestation of traditional folk community on social media. Internet socialization around this music goes at least as far back as 1992, with the online discussion group IR-TRAD (Kaul 2006, 55). The musicians I met during my research had already been using various social platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Discord, and Zoom. This invites a question: what is distinctive about TikTok to folkies?

Career Folkies

One major difference between TikTok and other platforms that emerged during this research was the relationship between social media and professionalism. Memphis Gerald, for instance, mostly used other social media to promote gigs or his YouTube videos. Abigail Pryde had a similar experience. She also pointed out that there was additional pressure on posting videos to YouTube, which she found demanded a higher level of professionalism. In early 2021 TikTok, by comparison, was seen by FolkTok denizens simply as a place to have fun. As Abigail put it,

> I think the difference is with, you know, putting that on Instagram and Facebook to putting it on TikTok [is] no one really cares about the professionalism, I think, on TikTok. I think it's partly the point that you're just doing it for fun and you're just there for people to enjoy it *just because*. It's not because you're trying to be the best or sell yourself—if you sell yourself at the same time, sell a CD, great—but I know I'm definitely doing it just to join and have fun.

This quote introduces the caveat that, while minimal, career promotion was present even at this time. Many musicians in the community were open about their professional status. Even unintentionally, FolkTok has enhanced many musician's careers by

enlarging their audiences and giving them unique perspectives. Anna Seda told me, “In my head, it's still this very arbitrary thing that I do online. But there are ways that it really does impact my career and my career advancement. I'm able to do social media for other artists and help other people with these questions that are very foreign to what we're trained to do in music.” As for myself, FolkTok has become an important part of my academic career through this research. Yet, at least during my fieldwork in 2021, any professional success seems to have been more of a welcome side effect rather than a goal for the community. “Maybe down the line, it will be monetized,” said Memphis Gerald, “it might just be filled with corporate ads and posts and things[18]. But to me anyway… TikTok [currently] looks like a quite organic place.” It seems that, based on these conversations, other platforms at the time motivated gigging musicians to carry themselves in a professional way, while FolkTok was instead driven by personal interest. Perhaps this is why it attracted musicians across the full spectrum of experience, including veteran professionals, new learners, and everyone in between.

Paul Matthis also expressed frustration with using YouTube as a musician.

> I was an artist who was on YouTube for a few years, and I was doing live looping covers…. I never look at it anymore, but it has like a hundred, something thousand views and all that, not that many videos. But what ended up happening, was… YouTube kind of changed things because it favored longer videos; they wanted more of like TV style stuff… which was very unmusical, obviously. And then the second thing… was they started doing these copyright strikes. And so if you're posting even completely unique instrumentation covers, they would still copyright strike you…. And so [musicians] started getting copyright strike trolls and it was this horrible situation.

YouTube, it seems, became simply too impractical and frustrating of a platform for many musicians. TikTok was more friendly to musicians, as it was designed in a way

[18] Judging by my current TikTok feed and those of my friends, this was an accurate prediction.

that was more conducive to engaging with copyrighted material, as discussed later in this chapter. TikTok was not necessarily more viable as a source of income, howerver. The TikTok creator fund had started by the time I was conducting interviews, but the eligibility requirements and limited available funds ($200 million split between all applicable users based on number of views) meant that TikTok itself was only a viable source of income for the biggest influencers. Of course many people used the attention from their TikTok accounts to make money, but as Paul Matthis pointed out, these inevitably involved directing viewers off the app to stream content or buy products. “The basic lack of monetization makes it all much less threatening,” he told me. At this time, most musicians that joined TikTok used it as a place to focus on art and community, and not for direct profit.

Alive, or an Archive?

Is posting video of expressive culture online a social act, or an archival one? This is something addressed by folklorist John McDowell in “Surfing the Tube for Latin American Song: The Blessings (and Curses) of YouTube.” Discussing YouTube and cultural media, McDowell puts forward three modalities to describe different relationships between media, culture, and YouTube (McDowell 2015, 261). In modality A, the archival modality, a video is posted to YouTube to document an event. Modality B is the interdependent modality. More than simply archiving a recording, such videos are posted specifically as social media entertainment, while still capturing a piece of offline culture. McDowell uses the example of a professionally videographed live performance, available online, but originally intended to be experienced in person. Modality C,

meanwhile, is described as YouTube-native. These videos, like tutorials or vlogs, are created exclusively for YouTube without being directly linked to the wider world. These three modalities describe different ways videos can relate to the physical world and a web platform. While McDowell focused his research on YouTube, I apply it here to TikTok and the web at large.

Based on interviews of FolkTok musicians, it seems that most social media centered on traditional music falls under modality B. This includes things like music videos, recordings of live performances, and promoting gigs. This is all media that is formatted for these web-based contexts, but has clear and direct connections to expressive culture in the wider world.

Most FolkTok videos are created specifically for their web-based context, and therefore fall under modality C. They are standalone videos, intended to exist primarily as TikTok posts. They may be in dialog with wider music culture, but the full value of a given video usually does not depend on anything beyond what is presented in-app. As Memphis Gerald put it, “It's the first time social media has actually been a process in and of itself for me. You know, I don't go and make a YouTube video, then promote it on TikTok. I go and make a TikTok. And if it does well, then then I'll go and make the YouTube video because people want it.”

This indicates that modality C, where content is made specifically for a web-based context, is one of FolkTok’s distinctive traits. This is not a hard and fast rule. Traditional folk music is produced for other platforms as well, and FolkTok users will occasionally post a clip of a past gig or rehearsal to TikTok. Yet it is clear that one of FolkTok’s particular strengths is that it serves not simply as a conduit, but as a destination.

Social media is a quickly changing landscape, and it seems that many of FolkTok's traits that I discuss have changed since conducting fieldwork. This includes duets declining in popularity, and various alternative creative outlets becoming available with the lifting of COVID restrictions. The pressures to be professional, that once were negligible on TikTok, also appear to be creeping in. The algorithm seems to have changed as well, as FolkTok-style videos are now occasional treats in what is largely a long stream of generic mass-produced social media content, memes, and product marketing. This shift in tone is a common complaint I find when discussing TikTok with anyone who has used the app for any significant length of time. Yet many of us persist against this change and continue posting tunes and enjoying each others' contributions.

Performance

The videos that musicians post to TikTok serve not only as captured media, but are themselves performances. To many this may seem counter-intuitive. After all, a recording of a performance is, by definition, not the performance itself. Yet, unlike watching a YouTube upload of Jimi Hendrix playing The Star Spangled Banner at Woodstock, viewing a typical FolkTok post is seeing it in the intended state. Existing in modality C (see previous section), a typical FolkTok post is not something captured after the fact. It is the intended experience.

The matter of temporality is a recurring theme in performance theory scholarship. Peggy Phelan, for instance, argues that performance is inherently a thing of the present, and that any recording or reproduction is antithetical to the nature of performance (Phelan 1996, 146). Phelan's argument does not go unchallenged. Diana

Taylor for instance counters Phelan's specific argument in her overview of performance by pointing out its repetitive nature, which opposes the idea of performance happening once at a specific moment (Taylor 2016, 10).

Online phenomena are often temporally bounded. Many netizens take a "you had to be there" approach when discussing internet happenings. One such example is the Mishapocalypse (Know Your Meme 2013). The Mishapocalypse started as an April Fools joke in 2013, where various Tumblr users changed their profile pictures to a specific photo of actor Misha Collins. This snowballed until, for a short while, certain areas of the internet were inundated with this photo, making users' screens awash with Misha Collins' face. While this seems like something simple and silly, it was apparently a highly chaotic and confusing few days for those involved in the Mishapocalypse. To this day, it is discussed as a "you had to be there" phenomenon, that can not be properly experienced through descriptions and screenshots. Time exists in cyberspace, and web-based events are not temporally static.

What does the concept of "the present" mean to FolkTok? The Mishapocalypse lasted for a couple of days in 2013, but what is the shelf life for experiencing a video on TikTok? TikToks are not static recordings, designed to remain unchanging for as long as possible, but are constantly in flux. Return to a TikTok at a later date and you may find new comments left on the video. Simply opening a TikTok changes its metadata, increasing the view count and influencing who the algorithm shows it to next. Even the existence of the video is volatile. The TikTok, and/or its associated audio, may be removed or hidden for a variety of reasons, either by the creator or by TikTok itself. Compare this to Vine, which was also a video based social media platform. Now defunct,

Vine content now exists through re-uploads. Many Vines[19] remain well-remembered and are still referenced. However, "Road Work Ahead" and "Two Bros Chillin' in the Hot Tub" are no longer active. They're part of a closed canon, existing in reminiscence and Vine compilation videos on YouTube. Their natural habitat was destroyed, and they now exist as preserved artifacts rather than in their original, active state. As long as a TikTok is accessible within the app, however, it remains active and in motion.

FolkTok video typically retains classic hallmarks of performance. There is a performer who does something, and an audience that engages with it. It happens at a specific (if virtual) place, and debatably at a specific moment in time. In fairness, it is a mediated experience, transmitted by phone rather than in the presence of the audience. However, one can consider all performances as mediated, if just through the human body. To quote Diana Taylor, "Performance, even when understood strictly as live art, is always mediated. Works function within systems of representation, and the body is one more media that transmits information and participates in the circulation of gestures and images" (Taylor 2016, 60).

Perhaps a more relevant question is, when is a post on FolkTok *not* a performance? The default type of video on FolkTok has always been performance of traditional folk music. There are exceptions to this, however, such as video recordings of previous performances that are uploaded to the platform. The key difference in this case, is that these are live performances that happened in physical space, not primarily intended for TikTok, but posted there after the fact. While such videos share traits with standard FolkTok performances, they are typically presented as a way to experience

[19] Much like a video on TikTok is also called a TikTok, a video that was posted to Vine is called a Vine.

something that happened in the past. It would be more apt to explore such videos *as* performance, rather than *being* performance, invoking Schechner's separation of the notions (Schechner 2002, 32). Exploring these non-performance videos as performance may be useful, even if they are not performances themselves.

The hesitance some people express when presented with the notion of FolkTok as a self-standing folk music community perhaps lies, at least in part, with the audience's contribution to the conception of performance. Bauman discusses this issue in his book *Verbal Art as Performance*. In the context of spoken performance, he states that a performer is responsible for communicating in a way acceptable to the audience in order to set the performance frame. "Performance," he writes, "involves on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out" (Bauman 1977, 11). This is to say that the actions of the performer must be accepted as performance by the audience to be perceived as such.

Philip Auslander, in the 2012 article "Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective," applies a similar argument to the idea of liveness. Inspired by philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, Auslander argues that digitally mediated live experiences make a 'claim' of liveness, which may then be either accepted or rejected by the onlooker (Auslander 2012). This notion, discussed further in the chapter, is essentially that a performance may claim to be live, whether or not it is perceived as such. Think, for instance, of a pop star lip-syncing to pre-recorded music. Does that count as a live performance? Regardless of the answer, it at least claims to be live. Videos of musicians playing music on FolkTok make claims of musical performance. For reasons outlined above, I find these claims to be successful. They certainly seem to be treated as such, as

the conversations surrounding them are much the same as those around in-person performances. Yet it remains that the performance aspect of these videos lies, at least in part, in the perception of the viewer. There is a sense in which performance is in the eye of the beholder.

It is important to recognize that performances on TikTok are a fundamentally different experience than traditional performances in the physical realm. “It’s just not working for me,” said Maura Volante, when discussing performances mediated through screens and speakers. “I've always loved going to shows, mostly small shows in clubs and bars and, you know, folk clubs. For me, it's the immediacy, but it's also that chance to sing along… I get frustrated even [at in-person] shows, if it's not something I can sing along [to].” For her, the ideal experience is to be in a physical place, with other people, as an active member of the experience. I emphasize the validity of FolkTok as a site of traditional folk music community and performance as a supplement, or sometimes an alternative, to its physical world counterparts, not as a replacement.

Liveness

Liveness on FolkTok troubles the legitimate/imitative dichotomy implied by comparing the virtual and the physical. Watching a video on TikTok may be a different experience than musicians and an audience sharing the same physical time and place. Yet liveness is not a rigid concept, and there are certain meaningful ways in which FolkTok is, in fact, a live setting.

Liveness is a concept inherently related to media technology. From televised speeches to rock bands that incorporate prerecorded tracks in their shows, various

forms of technologically mediated performances invite different understandings of liveness. There are relatively few forms of musical performance that are fully free of mediation, with technology like amplification and backing tracks becoming common even in low-tech contexts like street corners, coffeeshops, and small churches. On the other extreme, there are examples like vtubers, which are animated characters that are performed live through motion capture technology for online audiences. As musicologist Philip Auslander has stated, “It may be that we are now at a point in history at which liveness can no longer be defined in terms of either the presence of living human beings before each other or physical and temporal relationships” (Auslander 2012, 5). Even in fully acoustic contexts, a variety of accessories and instrument design choices lead to an experience that is at least partially manufactured.

Forming an useful and encompassing understanding of liveness can be challenging, as the spectrum of things called ‘live’ is highly diverse. Two scholarly perspectives on the issue have proven to be particularly useful in this context. One is Philip Auslander’s aforementioned suggestion that performances may make “claims” to liveness. “Liveness,” he writes, “is an interaction produced through our engagement with the object and our willingness to accept its claim” (Auslander 2012, 9). From this perspective, liveness is not solely constructed by the object or the witness, but rather a product of how they relate to each other.

A second perspective on this matter of liveness comes from musicologist Paul Sanden. Rather than try to create a systematic technical understanding of the topic, Sanden instead proposes a number of different forms of liveness, as a non-exhaustive framework for understanding how people perceive liveness (Sanden 2012). These are:

temporal liveness, spacial liveness, liveness of fidelity, liveness of spontaneity, corporeal liveness, interactive liveness, and virtual liveness. This allows for the commonplace understanding of liveness as existence in the same physical place and time as the onlooker, to cooperate with other nuanced understandings of the concept.

In the normative sense of time and space, FolkTok is not a live phenomenon. Posts are prerecorded[20], and viewed in a myriad of different locations. As Sanden points out, the typical understanding of liveness is spatial and temporal, and in this sense FolkTok is a non-live experience. Virtual phenomenon like TikTok do challenge normative ideas of space and time, as I argue at various points in this thesis. However, it is worth recognizing that digital experiences are not replacements for being physically present with others. Liveness on TikTok is of a different sort.

Liveness of spontaneity and corporeal liveness have a more ambivalent relationship to FolkTok. Corporeal liveness in musical performance is grounded in the well-established idea that making music is an inherently embodied phenomenon (Sanden 2012, 38-40). FolkTok is not a physical realm. A performance in pixels is not a corporeally embodied event. However, the initial creation of the video, where a musician physically plays music in front of a camera, is an essential a part of the FolkTok experience. The viewer then watches the video and experiences the mediated version of this once-corporeal event. A similar argument applies to liveness of spontaneity. The audio-visual aspects of a TikTok do not change after it is posted. There is no uniqueness to the video itself when played back at different times. However, spontaneity emerges

[20] The obvious exception here is TikTok's livestreaming feature. However, given its minimal use in the community, it is not exemplary of FolkTok and thus not the focus of this discussion.

when viewing a musician's overall TikTok presence as the central object. Between leaving comments, posting videos, and using collaborative features, a musician on TikTok is able to inject a sense of spontaneity and dynamism into their work. Thus, while individual recordings may be static, they are accompanied by social spontaneity.

Interactivity in FolkTok is a useful aspect to explore when understanding its relationship to live performance. This is due in part with interaction as a concept and its relationship to performance itself. For a performance to exist, there has to be an audience. Performance, as Deborah Kapchan put it, "relies on its audience.... [It] is always an exchange—of words, energy, emotion, and material" (Kapchan 2003, 133). An interactively live setting is one that enables such an exchange (Sanden 2012, 41). This is something that is seen frequently on TikTok. Comments, stitches, duets, comment replies, and tagging others on a post are all ways in which players and viewers can connect and exchange thoughts and feelings. The theory here also describes my own personal experience with the concept. Once in a while I post a video that does not get much attention, perhaps only garnering a small number of likes. When this happens, it evokes the same feeling as creating something for fun in private. However, when a video gains traction and people interact with it in a noticeable way, it is a different experience. People send their feelings, thoughts, and personal anecdotes, even making song requests from time to time. As the notifications appear in real time, my experience becomes more analogous to performing at a reasonably attended open mic night, or similar musical event.

Particularly descriptive of FolkTok is virtual liveness. This is where virtual and concrete elements cooperate towards a unified perception of liveness. "Whatever we

perceive is, for all intents and purposes, true, at least with respect to liveness," Sanden explains (Sanden 2012, 42). He proceeds to give the example of an electronic drum, which the audience may interpret as an acoustic sound. If the audience is convinced that the artificial sound is an acoustic drum, then what is the functional difference between the two? Therefore, from this perspective, human performance and technological mediation are not at odds, but collaborate towards the perceived liveness. On FolkTok, the technology is ever-present. Certainly it is immersive, but elements like onscreen text and the physicality of the smartphone in one's hand make no effort to hide their manufactured nature. Yet, these things are part of the experience, conveying the performance and laying a claim to liveness.

While much of this discussion around liveness can apply to other social media platforms with video features, what stands out on TikTok is its similarity to broadcast media. TikTok gives users relatively little control over what they watch, especially in comparison with the state of social media before it rose to prominence[21]. Algorithmic content recommendation was certainly popular, but platforms like YouTube or Instagram were designed to curate the home feed by browsing through various recommended media. TikTok, meanwhile, put its emphasis on the For You Page, delivering a stream of fullscreen video content that selects content for the viewer. In this way, it is like watching television. You turn it on, kick back, and watch the curated programming, one show or TikTok after another.

In a significant work on the topic, Jane Feuer explores the relationship between technology and liveness, specifically applying the discussion to broadcast television.

[21] YouTube and Instagram since released integrated video platforms that match TikTok's format fairly closely.

"Television is constituted by a dialectic of segmentation and flow," she writes, as the individuality of different sequences contrast with the continuous, look-away-and-you-miss-it nature of the medium (Feuer 1983, 15). Similarly, the continuous stream of content on the For You Page is perceived as a similar form of liveness. Both cases involve separate segments, that are curated and experienced in sequence, flowing forward through time. Admittedly, TikToks can be paused, rewatched, or skipped. However, after leaving a video, it can be difficult to find again, as watch history is not included in the user interface. Because of this, I often find myself waiting to finish a video before closing the app for fear I may not be able to recover that piece of media, much like one may push oneself to linger at a television set until the end of the segment. However, while TikTok may maintain this sense of liveness that emerges from the stream of programming, it also maintains the segmented nature of broadcast television. Content on TikTok is not truly a solid flow, but rather comprised of disparate videos strung together. There is an extent to which perception of liveness depends on if these videos are seen as a part of a constantly updated stream of programming, or as disparate units of media.

FolkTok has a unique relationship with liveness, due to traditional music's relationship with the troubled concept of authenticity. During his fieldwork in Doolin, Ireland, Adam Kaul had many conversations with tourists who would go into pubs to listen to the local sessions. These tourists were often interested in whether the sessions were authentic to the local culture, and were frequently disappointed if they learned that the session leaders were paid to be there (Kaul 2007, 711). The listeners of this music tended to value this image of what they considered an authentic performance, to the

point that a whiff of external motivation from the musicians was a letdown. These tourists valued their image of a "real" musical tradition unsullied by modern economics.

FolkTok maintains relatively high levels of perceived authenticity. Most people on FolkTok, especially at the time of research, joined the app purely for fun. Even those with music careers would typically post for personal satisfaction, not directly receiving revenue and only minimally using it to promote themselves. FolkTok performances are typically simple, generally featuring a solo acoustic performance of traditional repertoire, unburdened by modern techniques or ensemble arrangements. This simplicity extends to the visuals of these videos as well. Domestic settings and household lighting communicate to the viewer a sense of digital, homespun folksiness, in the aesthetic tradition of old internet videos and casual documentation. The relative lack of financial motivation, aesthetic simplicity and rawness, and traditional repertoire performed on acoustic instruments, combine to fulfill stereotypes of authenticity.

Authenticity is also a value associated with liveness. Sanden describes how human expression is valued over, and set in binary opposition against, media technology. When discussing liveness of fidelity, he states, "these ideologies often lead to implications that what is produced by people is 'real' or 'authentic,' whereas the products of (or reproductions) of machines are somehow corrupted by mechanical or electric source" (Sanden 2012, 35). Enhanced media fidelity correspondingly increases sense of liveness by more accurately replicating acoustic sounds while minimizing telltale technological imperfections, or so Sanden suggests. While this may frequently be true, I argue lower fidelity media may sometimes feel more real. In the case of musical performance on TikTok, for example, a performance recorded on someone's phone in

their living room is plausibly created on whim by the musician. In comparison, a high fidelity video with professional lighting and multiple camera angles typically requires several people working together with budgets and on a schedules, putting more steps between performer and viewer. In other words, lower fidelity TikToks are commonly made in a vernacular style, and may thus be more likely understood as earnest community products. If perceived authenticity contributes to conception of liveness, then it stands to reason that the implied authenticity of video and performance styles on FolkTok makes it feel more live.

Exploring FolkTok's relationship to liveness is useful in a number of ways. It allows us to better understand how it relates to other contexts for traditional music. This line of inquiry also helps reveal that while FolkTok is not the same as physically present music events, it provides a similar type of experience for many people. It is not a replacement for corporeal community, but serves as a kind of alternative that was especially meaningful during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Being live and collaborative was a boon during this time to musicians who put importance on the interpersonal elements of music and performance.

FolkTok and User Experience

A running theme in this chapter is how TikTok's app design and user experience (UX) influences the social behaviors at play. For instance, the TikTok's For You Page does not show how many followers a creator has, or when the video was originally posted. While this information is available elsewhere, this type of decision influences how one experiences the app. In this case, withholding metadata encourages the viewer

to engage in terms of the content itself, fostering a more direct and personal experience. Many of FolkTok's distinctive traits are because of such design decisions. There are clear cut examples of this, such as duets and messaging features enabling collaboration and relationship building, but there are also subtle ways in which design impacts the character of FolkTok.

A central feature of TikTok's UX is its simplicity. It is designed in such a way that one can enjoy it by simply opening the app and watching whatever starts playing. This extends to the process of creating and posting videos. Posting a video is a straightforward process that can be accomplished with only a few taps on the screen. For those more comfortable exploring the full range of features, there are more advanced options, allowing for simple edits, filters, and rudimentary audio mixing. Whether making duets and stitches or posting standalone videos, TikTok's design makes creating content relatively comfortable to a wide range of people.

This simplicity was important to the emergence of FolkTok. Creating collaborative videos by other means requires certain technical skills and preparatory logistics. The ease of duets, in comparison, allows for spontaneity and requires little in the way of technical skill. While some people on FolkTok are comfortable with video production, there are many who are less interested in such matters. The convenience of TikTok allows for the technology to slip somewhat into the background, allowing for a wide range of people to gather around a shared interest regardless of their skill sets.

The one-minute time limit on videos that was in effect in FolkTok's early days was especially influential. It informed much of FolkTok's style, demanding efficiency and limiting the repertoire to short or edited songs and tunes. TikTok's time limit has

increased over the years, the challenge of fitting a tune into one minute was a core part of the experience at the time.

The mechanics of the recommendation algorithm heavily influence culture and behavior on the app. TikTok's algorithm shows users content based on their interests, leading to the organic creation of interest-based communities like FolkTok. This algorithm can also reduce performance pressure when posting. If one makes a bad post, not as many people will interact with it, and it will be less likely that the algorithm will spread it very far. This in turn lowers the risk of embarrassment, encouraging more casual posting.

Paul Matthis noted a relative demise of duet chains when TikTok tweaked its algorithm. Duet chains were the bread and butter of ShantyTok, with shanty singers making duets, and duetting those duets, and so forth until achieving the vibrant sound of enthusiastic maritime polyphony that is often associated with the genre. Paul pointed out that this was inconvenient for TikTok, because of how the app tracks video performance. Each duet is a different unit to analyze, and having diverging trains of duets makes it difficult to process.

> "They don't want a chain. They want an original video that they know is doing well, and they don't want to have to guess. It's like, okay, well now a million people have duetted [an] original video and then any one of those might take off. And then like a hundred thousand people now do it to that new video… and one of those might take off, and it just breaks their whole system."

TikTok had recently updated their algorithm at the time of this interview, deprioritizing duet chains, and showing them to fewer people. Duet chains as a format were dwindling, and the heyday of group singing on the app was over.

Paul Matthis was a particularly useful contact when discussing the relationship between FolkTok and tech, as he has experience both in the tech industry and as a musician. He found YouTube had developed into a less ideal place for independent musicians. This is in part because it started emphasizing longer form, television-adjacent content, and in part because of copyright issues. Over the years it became difficult to cover songs on YouTube without getting a copyright strike, even when using completely unique arrangements. “We all just left,” he said, “most musicians I knew just couldn’t take it anymore.” This is much less common on TikTok. One reason for this is how short TikTok videos are, and especially were at the time of this interview. Paul pointed out, “The shorter the clip is, the harder it is to argue that it’s not transformative,” and therefore less likely to be targeted as stolen content. The choice to make TikTok a short form platform seems to have fundamentally shaped who uses the app, and how they use it.

Other design choices important to FolkTok are those that shape how it is understood as a place. This includes aspects of TikTok’s algorithm, which takes language and location into account when recommending content. This increases the likelihood that creators will be from one’s own region and culture, and contributes to FolkTok’s relationship with offline geography–something further discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Digital Geography and The Folk Side of TikTok

Who is on FolkTok?

When I conducted my research, I found most people on FolkTok represented North Atlantic cultures, being mostly from the eastern portion of the US and Canada, and Northwestern Europe. This is to be expected, as TikTok's recommendation algorithm utilizes user interests and location, thus fostering connections between people in related cultural and geographical groups. This spread also reflects physical world trends. Through immigration, cultural interchange, and colonization, there are musical and social ties between music traditions on either side of the North Atlantic.

In conducting my research, I found a number of cultures and nations were represented, with contributions from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Openness and an interest in connecting with people of different experiences were recurring themes in interviews. In spite of this, I found a heavy trend towards white musicians. One likely reason for this is associations between whiteness and the dominant genres in the community, notably Irish traditional music[22]. Tes Slominski has written extensively about the relationship between Irish music, nationalism, and difficulties musicians experience in the scene based on the gender, sexuality, or color of their skin. "No matter how successful a nonwhite person's performance of Irish mannerisms and musical style is, visual difference will be a barrier as long as Irishness and whiteness are inextricably

[22] Irish traditional music is but one part of FolkTok. I focus on it here due to its prevalence, but it is worth recognizing that it is but one example, albeit a significant one.

linked," she writes (Slominski 2020, 161). This association with Irish identity and whiteness can be traced back over centuries, when Irish populations fought against discrimination to be considered acceptable in white hegemony (Slominski 2020, 162). With Irish traditional music being seen as white, musicians of color often have to push past lack of representation, microaggressions, and other environmental factors to get involved with the community.

This pressure on nonwhite musicians came up in conversation with Saskia Tomkins and Steáfán Hannigan. "I had all sorts of problems," Saskia told me. "I'm a brown person and I had all sorts of problems in England playing Irish music… people couldn't quite get their heads around it. It's just, it's stupid." Steáfán, himself an Irish musician, voiced similar concerns with, "this bizarre definition that Irish music has to be played by Irish-speaking, leprechaun-y, Irish people, you know, playing leprechaun-y Irish music," contrasting this mindset with the quality and enthusiasm of Irish trad scenes in places like Japan. Their complaints echo Slominski's nonwhite interviewees, who have all been confronted with disbelief at their participation in the music and culture, ranging from benign surprise to outright discrimination (Slominski 2020). While Slominski clarifies that these incidents are typically outweighed by the positive relationships and experiences these musicians have had with Irish traditional music, one can not ignore the social pressures that can make participation harder for nonwhite musicians.

Part of the racial character of FolkTok may have to do with the risks that come with presenting oneself on the internet and being a potential target of bigotry. When I

asked about her experience on TikTok as a native[23] person, Rachelle Landry made a point to emphasize that racism online can shape the way one interacts with social media and ethnic identity. As she put it,

> Online there's a lot of racism. Like… for black people… [racists] in the gaming chats [are] throwing around slurs all the time. I wanna say for native people it's definitely in comments and videos and stuff…. They're just really racist.

Exposure to this kind of abuse discourages a lot of people from posting in any identifiable way, making it harder to interact with cultural media. Colorism, being discrimination specifically based on skin tone, is a factor here as well. Rachelle explained that while having lighter skin as a native person does not make one exempt from prejudice, having darker skin intensifies these issues.

> A lot of people… they're not always going to post their face or how they look on TikTok…. Even the hashtag #NativeTikTok viral videos, like, there's not a lot of people who have dark brown skin or really dark skin…. TikTok is more of a passive thing, they want to go through it to laugh at stuff and make jokes. Even if you're light skin, even then you see stuff like people like saying we're 'just a bunch of protesters, why are they protesting the oil pipeline, it's stupid.' Throwing around slurs and stuff. That happens a lot.

Perhaps, if more people were able to comfortably use and enjoy the internet without fear of harassment, there would be more diversity in internet communities.

Through our conversation, I was struck by Rachelle's sense of responsibility that comes with being native online. She made a point to recognize the privilege that came with her light complexion, and was intentional about positively promoting her Métis culture through fiddle music and finger weaving. She gave the example of her video, "how to wear a Métis sash," and excitedly pulled it up on her phone to show it to me. "Which is like, I don't know, it's such a basic thing. I was taught this by a random dude

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[23]Here I use language that Rachelle used in our conversation, with recognition that indigenous identity is a nuanced topic with various preferences regarding terminology.

at a festival. But [some] people from your own [Métis] culture don't even know…. You need people for [the culture] to come back." She has been able to connect with other indigenous people, Métis or otherwise, on the side of the app she calls NativeTok. For Rachelle, TikTok has been a way to participate in her specific cultural identity in an open and communal way.

NativeTok points to another reason FolkTok is fairly limited in cultural diversity, which is the presence of other cultural communities on the app. Inuk throat singer Shina Nova (@shinanova), for example, has a successful presence on TikTok. While the tradition she represents would likely be welcome in FolkTok as a generalized space for musical tradition, her content is anchored in Inuit and more broadly indigenous identity. Examples like this suggest that, as Métis fiddle music is closely related to non-indigenous American fiddle music, Rachelle Landry is an exception in her crossover NativeTok/FolkTok status, with most practitioners of various music traditions forming their own respective niches on the app.

While we have seen ways in which access to FolkTok can be complicated by race or ethnicity, there are also ways in which it can be more accessible than other spaces. I found FolkTok to be a diverse place in terms of gender and sexuality. As a transfeminine person, I have had my share of experiences navigating gender dynamics in traditional music spaces. I have been active as a musician on TikTok while presenting masculine, through the early stages of transitioning, and continue to do so now that I present feminine full-time. I am grateful that I have been able to experience each of these stages without any noticeable issues from FolkTok. This community specific response is in contrast with TikTok as an overall social environment. Many queer and activist accounts

find their content erroneously mass reported by opponents and removed from the app. Furthermore, TikTok itself has been known to suppress content by people of certain identities (Köver 2019). Yet, for those willing to push past these frictions, FolkTok offered a friendly space to people who may not be as comfortable in corresponding physical world environments.

Physical locations can be particularly complicated in terms of access. This is also noted by Slominski, who highlights difficulties of both safe travel and navigating the power dynamics within spaces (Slominski 2020, 166). As a misogyny affected trans person who regularly attends trad sessions and shows, I can speak to this being a regular concern based on gender discrimination. The pubs where these events typically happen[24] can be a minefield of unnerving encounters and micro aggressions, especially given the inebriation and festive spirits that embolden patrons. Restrooms have been a particular stressor for me. For a long time I avoided using the facilities altogether when attending sessions for fear of causing unwanted controversy. Other feminine presenting people coming to these sessions also have had difficulties. These range from simple awkwardness at being the only woman at a session, to trying to safely travel to and from the venue. Fortunately, for those involved, the benefits typically outweigh such difficulties. Yet, even though involvement in this scene and music is often worth the trouble, it is important to note that these difficulties exist.

Travel is another downside to physical world spaces. Safety concerns can make walking to and from events worrisome, especially in the evenings and while carrying expensive musical instruments. Limited public transportation and parking can make it

[24] This varies depending on the venue and community.

hard to use vehicular transport. Hills, steps, and crowded venues can limit disability access. These issues disproportionately affect the vulnerable, but impact everyone.

Complications that come with physical locations are admittedly not unsurmountable, especially with community support. Nights often end with negotiating rides, with the group of musicians ensuring everyone has a safe way home. Pub staff and session leaders have, in my experience, been friendly and helpful. Much like the musicians Slominski spoke to, I find that my engagement with trad music community has been a very positive experience on the whole. People of all kinds enjoy trad music and community around it. This does not, however excuse these issues, and they may cause otherwise participatory musicians to stay home.

FolkTok, meanwhile, removes typical physical barriers to traditional folk music community. There is no need for walking buddies or bathrooms in cyberspace. This leads to real world geography becoming less of a limiting factor, allowing people from many regions and countries to connect regardless of physical access.

This heightened accessibility of FolkTok when compared to physical spaces was a key factor during the COVID-19 pandemic. Music as a form of connection and expression became uncommon in the physical world as people were unable to materially gather. “In the pandemic, I saw my career opportunities just fall,” Anna Seda told me during an emotional chapter of our interview. “There were a lot of very dark times for performing artists. I went from a full time freelancer to having all of my work just disappear overnight…. Yeah, it was definitely dark for everybody.” Anna found that TikTok provided not just something to do, but a crucial outlet to the social side of music.

This was a trend in my conversations, as the musicians I spoke to tended to highly value interpersonal musical connections.

TikTok did not replace physical environments for musical socialization, but it provided a compelling alternative, especially when comparing it to other digital tools. Lukas Simpson told me, “my real passion with playing music is sharing with others and playing with others. And, you know, [TikTok’s] not exactly the same, but it's something, and it was pretty fun.” Here Lukas brings up a recurring ambivalence to FolkTok—it did not provide the same level of human connection as concerts and social gatherings, but it does offer a modicum of human connection that seems to be lacking in other COVID-era alternatives like livestreams and video calls. Matthew Bram experienced this when his local shanty sing went online. “COVID blew it all to pieces… They still do it once a month on Zoom. And I find it terribly depressing. Because you can only hear one voice at a time. You can't sing along.” The internet folkies I spoke to highly valued interactivity that livestreams and video calls could not provide, but TikTok could approximate.

Virtualized Regionality

The word ‘Celtic’ was often used in interviews when asking about musical style on FolkTok. While musicians may debate the specificity and usefulness of the word as a genre label, it sets TikTok in the dynamic between regional Celtic cultures and a more generalized, global construct of Celtic identity. In "Tradition and Imaginary: Irish Traditional Music and the Celtic Phenomenon,” Scott Reiss explores how ‘Celtic music’ is a cultural imaginary that both crosses into Irish traditional music, and exists as a separate phenomenon (Reiss 2003). Irish music tradition is largely defined by regional,

communal identity. It is what happens between community members as they play their music, in their ways, and in their spaces. Reiss describes Celtic music, however, as a phenomenon based in modern media and aestheticized interpretations of Irish[25] identity.

Coming out of the popularity of World Music in the 1980s, Celtic music of the 1990s took aesthetic markers such as Gaelic lyrics and bagpipes, and paired them with modern production techniques to create a mysterious ambience, fueling a mystical New Age imaginary (Reiss 2003, 160-163). This relationship with World Music is visible in the use of instruments like didgeridoo and djembe on such recordings—instruments that historically have little to do with Ireland itself[26]. This synthesizes an imagined Celtic-ness that relates more directly to cultural and economic global flows, than to localized tradition in the disparate Celtic nations (Appadurai 1993; Reiss 2003, 161). This is not to discredit the validity of Celtic music. Reiss points out the significant overlap in repertoire, techniques, and musical figures between the Irish tradition and Celtic music communities. This is exemplary of a process of virtualization wherein a regional culture can exist while also extending into a less concrete and more international imaginary.

A virtualized sense of identity can also apply to geography and digital culture, as seen in "Anthropological Places, Digital Spaces, and Imaginary Scapes: Packaging a

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[25] While one might apply this work to other Celtic cultures, Reiss focuses specifically on Ireland.

[26] This isn't to say that introducing foreign instruments into a regional music tradition is unprecedented. However, in spite of their appearances on these Celtic records, instruments like the djembe or didgeridoo have not been integrated into trad music. This follows Reiss' argument that the Celtic and Irish traditional music genres may be distinct, while still having plenty of overlap and blurred lines.

Digital Samiland," by Copélle Cocq. Cocq explores how the Sámi people, an indigenous people from Fenno-Scandinavia, construct a sense of geography in their cultural web presence (Cocq 2013). Geographic sense of place is important to Sámi people, and this is reflected in the websites that comprise their cultural presence online. These sites use aesthetics invoking land, wildlife, and Sámi culture. Similar to Reiss' discussion of Irish and Celtic music, the result is a virtualized sense of regional and ethnic identity that, while an inexact representation of a tangible existence, is an extension of that reality. As Cocq puts it, "symbols and principals of form that… echo a geographical, physical landscape. This imagined place is produced through perception, conception, and experience. A digital environment is not a simulation—it refers to a real place and its materiality" (Cocq 2013, 11). Cocq's insight shows how tangible place, intangible conceptions of culture, and digital environments can interact as both disparate entities and parts of a holistic human experience.

Further complicating conception of regional identity is work by Mary Hufford. In "Knowing Ginseng: The Social Life of an Appalachian Root," Hufford delves in the relationship between collectors of wild ginseng (known as "ginsengers") and their cultural bond to their home in Appalachia (Hufford 2003). There is a particular knowledge base around ginseng. This involves ideas like where to find it, the tools and techniques for collecting it, and what to do with the ginseng after digging it up. This practice also has a role in the wider landscape of Appalachian existence, as it has been affected by the economic and environmental realities of living in these mountains. Hufford also explores the connections between ginseng, storytelling, and sense of regionality. She argues that through the associations and knowledge ways around this

root, the geography ceases to be merely a physical phenomenon. “We think of the environment as a solid object completely detachable from its social and cultural content. Through processes of habitation, the environment becomes a medium for sociality… [and] embodies a collective being harboring cues to memory and action” (Hufford 2003, 270). The collective nature of regionality is significant here. She writes that, “even when one is digging ginseng alone, there is a sense of participation in the collective” (Hufford 2003, 270). Regional, culturally specific identities are not established alone, but emerge out of a group of people who share a regional bond. These two arguments—that physical locations and their corresponding cultures are separable entities, and that the cultural aspect of a region is a collectively formed phenomenon—map well to the examples presented by Reiss and Cocq. In each of these cases there is a sense of region that is a virtualized cultural phenomenon, developed communally and untethered from the physical realm.

If a region as it pertains to culture is not wholly bound to a physical space, how do we define it? For the purposes of this work I use the following criteria, based on the above cited research: a community, an environment, intangible culture, and experiential signals.

The experiential signals of regional culture are tangible elements that stimulate the senses, such as skylines, food, or objects. This extends into the virtual realm, through things like digital photographs and audio recordings. These experiential signals may be used as invocations, manifesting a nonphysical sense of place. We see this in the examples put forward by Reiss and Cocq, where a curated musical sound or an image of a reindeer would help to create a sense of The Emerald Isle or Sámiland, respectively.

This applies in physical spaces as well. I grew up on the edge of the Adirondack Mountains, where locality was sometimes established through a decor style teasingly called 'Adiron-tack[27].' An over-exaggerated use of regional material culture, it features elements like exposed wood, live edge furniture, and antique outdoors gear. It is a staple of tourist-friendly spaces like hotels, restaurants, and museums, where it invokes a nostalgic Adirondack regionality that is both separate from local life and rooted therein. While a sense of regional cultural identity does not require physicality of landscape, it does need some way to interact with tangible geography in some incarnate way, thus needing these experiential signals to bring it to the surface.

The experiential elements of regional culture require sensory perception, not physical existence. While Celtic music certainly exists in Celtic cultural regions, Reiss particularly emphasizes its existence as a recorded music phenomenon, where a listener can experience this Celtic-ness at any time or place through their headphones. This is supported by digital folklore scholar Trevor Blank, who argues for a hybrid approach to digital folklore that recognizes the artificial aspect of digital cultures while also acknowledging their substance (Blank 2013). In "Hybridizing Folk Culture: Toward a Theory of New Media and Vernacular Discourse," he points out that, while digital devices simply produce lights and sounds, we respond to them as if they were corporeal. The way we talk and think about these interactions is directly experiential rather than mediated (Blank 2013, 118-119). In other words, "This is not 'virtual reality'…it is *actual* reality for engaged users" (Blank 2013, 118). A video call with a loved one still makes one

[27] This is a portmanteau of 'Adirondack' and 'tacky.' The judgmental nature of the term is perhaps impolite, but points to the region's ambivalent relationship with the tourist spaces that make heavy use of the style.

laugh and smile, and an action-packed video game can still make one's heart race in real life. Tangible geography is secondary when reality is in the mind of the beholder.

A similar argument can be made for narratives. Hufford discusses the role of storytelling and conversation around ginseng in the Appalachian ginseng region. "In conversational genres that conjure the mountains," Hufford writes, "ginseng often [evokes] mountain society as a particular time-space" (Hufford 2003, 276). Hyperbolic stories about hunting ginseng create a larger than life version of the region that, while based on firsthand encounters, is experienced through conversation rather than in the physical space. This suggests that these symbolic markers that I describe as experiential signals function on a cognitive level, and do not have to tangibly exist in the immediate physical space. They simply have to be experienced by the receiver.

Intangible culture is another core element present in each example of non-physical regionality. Elements like the ideals, language, and practices present in each of regions discussed. I found these in my fieldwork as well, ranging from how to make a good duet to social attitudes of FolkTok denizens. Looking deeper, there are also social ideals commonly held on FolkTok, with values like friendly participation and cultural interchange being important to the community.

While there is precedent for social media being treated similarly to a physical site, TikTok achieves a further level of place-ness, inviting a posthumanist cyborg perspective. Posthumanism is a philosophical perspective that decenters humanity as we know it, examining such entities as animals and technology with the same methods and respect as we examine ourselves. Feminist scholar Donna Haraway, an influential figure in posthuman perspectives, wrote about the integration of technology in society

in, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s. As previously noted, she describes a cyborg as, “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 2004, 7). Machines and computers are a part of us in many ways, being key aspects to such sectors as socialization, economics, and healthcare. Haraway takes the stance that technology is so closely interwoven in modern life that we are essentially cyborgs, and that any cultural analysis would do well to take this into account.

Tok Thompson, a prominent proponent of posthumanism in folklore, expands on this conception of cyborg existence in his 2019 book, *Posthuman Folklore*. He gives examples of song mashups and beatboxing as cyborg music practices, as they are shaped and mediated by technology, which would not exist as we know them in a purely offline world. “New technology,” writes Thompson, “has created new opportunities for artistic expressions, dealing with global identity concerns. The ‘place’ of this music is the World Wide Web; the ‘roots' are virtual roots” (Thompson 2019, 85). This is to say that web-based experiences are not simply something mediated or simulated by technology, but are the *thing* itself. It is conceptually analogous to stories like *The Matrix* (1999), where the action largely takes place in an artificially generated world. Even though the characters’ bodies are in the physical world, we understand the events they experience in the artificial world as actually happening. Similarly, a posthuman, cyborg perspective views the Internet as not simply a way to transmit folklore, but a place where the folklore happens.

When exploring how TikTok can be a cyborg environment, it is useful to compare it to a virtual world like *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life*. Defining traits of virtual

worlds are put forward in *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Boellstorff, et al. 2012). They have a "sense of worldness," being navigable and "object-rich" simulated spaces. These environments are social, having multiple people engaging in the space in real time. Virtual worlds are persistent, existing regardless of whether an individual user is logged in. They also provide a playable avatar, giving the user a way to have an embodied presence in the virtual space (Boellstorff, et al. 2012, 7).

TikTok does not have a navigable space in the genuine environmental sense found in virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* or *Minecraft* servers, but it does have a spatial aspect to how users conceptualize and interact with the app. While many apps are based on tapping, apps like TikTok are more gestural in its heavy use of swiping motions to interact with it. Swiping up and down allows one to explore content, swiping sideways can switch between "Following" and "For You" feeds or open a user's profile. More meaningful is the use of the word 'side' to describe different communities on the app. One might describe themselves as being, 'on the carpentry side of TikTok' if the app recommends a lot of carpentry related videos, for instance. At the time of my research, there were jokes about the different sides of TikTok, giving instructions like to 'turn left' at one side of the app and to 'keep going' past another. This indicates that while FolkTok is not in a concrete space like the physical realm or a virtual world, it could be understood in a geographical sense, as to have sides implies a perceived environment.

Virtual worlds being object-rich applies to TikTok in a similarly ambivalent sense. In a virtual world, one might be able to kick a simulated beachball or don a hat. Objects do not exist on TikTok in this sense. There are, however, objects that are primarily experienced through the app. A costume or prop used specifically for a TikTok

video is primarily experienced on the app, both by intent and in practice. There is also the matter of the famous TikTok pasta. This pasta dish went viral and, while it cannot be consumed through the app[28], it is commonly called 'TikTok' pasta", identifying it as being *from* the app (John 2021). A solely in-app example is dabloons, an in-app currency that went viral in late 2022 (Know Your Meme 2023). Dabloons were gained and lost through choose-your-own-adventure style roleplay encounters with animal characters, most famously the 'four dabloons cat.' The concept of dabloons is not a TikTok feature, and exists purely in the hearts and minds of people involved with the meme, yet it does complicate the idea of what we consider objects in a virtual environment.

I visited Anna Seda in the spring of 2023. I was staying in Massachusetts, and had the opportunity to take the train in to Boston to visit Anna, interview her about FolkTok, and play a few tunes. Walking up to the door, I knew I must be in the right place when I saw the van parked outside. The work van had been converted to a camper for tours and overnight gigs, which was a process Anna shared on TikTok. She met me at the door with her cats, whom I also recognized from cyberspace. It was surreal at first, to see her home and instruments. All these things have been featured in videos, and I suddenly remembered stories from Anna's videos, like her practicing on the collapsible cello during her travels, or the centuries-old criminal background of the luthier who built her main instrument. The van and cellos are everyday elements of Anna Seda's lived reality, but to her over sixty-thousand TikTok followers they are internet objects.

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[28] ...for now.

Another tentative point of comparison between TikTok and virtual worlds is the idea of having a playable avatar to represent oneself in virtual space. In a virtual world this is typically an animated, three-dimensional person that can move about in imitation of people in the physical world. TikTok offers no such feature. Yet there are similarities. When I post online, it is not my actual self that is seen onscreen but a representation of myself made up of pixels. People who know me through TikTok sometimes mention my height when meeting me in person, showing that the version of me that lives in their phones is perceived as different than my physical nature. Furthermore, TikTok is known for its appearance altering features, from things simple like color filters that influence skin tone, to advanced image manipulation that alters facial structure. This means that the people one sees on the app are not just images of TikTok users, but are clever facsimiles that represent them in virtual space.

Virtual worlds are as close to a synthesized recreation of physical reality as the average person can currently experience. TikTok is not that. However, one can see that it shares a number of traits with virtual worlds, and achieves similar goals and characteristics through different means. This points towards TikTok as being a world of a kind. It is not built of the same kind of space, time, or physics as either physical reality or virtual worlds, but it an environment nonetheless.

TikTok's worldish nature sets it apart from similar platforms like YouTube. Both are based on sharing video content, following creators, and leaving comments. They each have strong communities of viewers and content creators. Yet YouTube is harder to describe as spatial. On YouTube, one must find and click/tap on a video in order to watch something, but on TikTok video immediately starts playing. This gives a sense of

immediacy to the experience. It feels more like a site of active performance, whereas YouTube tends to feel more archival. On TikTok's mobile app, video takes up the entire screen with additional content like content description and interactive buttons displayed on top. This is more immersive than the standard YouTube layout[29], which puts most features in separate panels to the video. While they have very similar features, the implementation of these features makes TikTok feel more like a dynamic and experiential environment than YouTube.

Using virtual worlds as a standard for cyborg reality also elucidates fundamental differences between TikTok, and real time experiences like video calls and livestreams[30]. These phenomena are both based in live video feeds, and as such were an obvious pandemic-era placeholder for events like concerts, religious gatherings, and classrooms. Yet I found through conversations and personal experience that these live events were often unsatisfactory, perhaps since they lack a feeling of place. When compared to a virtual world, the only major feature they share is simultaneous, multi-user interaction, facilitated here by video streams and text chats. This can be augmented by other features, as livestreams are incorporated in other platforms like TikTok itself, even though I did not find the feature to be notably popular on FolkTok. On their own, however, live video is a thing of communication, not co-population.

FolkTok exists in relation to the physical world. On FolkTok I found people using the platform to share and participate in culture that they experience in their offline lives.

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[29] Following TikTok's popularity, YouTube introduced Shorts, which functions more like TikTok.

[30] With the exception of TikTok's live stream feature, which is quite similar to other live platforms.

At a glance, this might indicate that FolkTok is a communication tool used by musicians of various separate (though related) regions. A closer inspection, however, shows that regionally specific aspects of FolkTok are not broadcast outwards by musicians, but rather the musicians themselves go to FolkTok as a location, bringing their regionalized experiences with them.

FolkTok is not solely an extension of physical world culture, nor is it wholly removed from it, but rather contains dynamic interactions between the two. This relates to scholarship on interacting cultural groups. Richard Bauman, writing on differential identity and performance, argues that, "folklore performance does not require that the lore be a collective representation of the participants, pertaining and belonging equally to all of them" (Bauman 1971, 38). This is to say that a group can be cohesive without each member having the same cultural backgrounds or experiences. According to Bauman, performance is used to navigate and express identity that is shared between members of a group, as well as identity that differs. We see this play out on FolkTok, where people exist in relation to and against each other, and express these identity dynamics through performance.

FolkTok is a self standing cultural region. Sense of coherent region may be constructed through social factors rather than simply by geography, even in physical spaces such as Appalachia (Hufford 2003). Furthermore, we have seen how regional culture may be virtualized, existing at least in part as media-based construct in a way that is separate from, yet interwoven with, localized identity (Reiss 2003; Cocq 2013). Applying this to the discussion of virtual worlds and social media, it becomes evident that FolkTok is a coherent cultural region. Being different, yet not fully separable, from

corresponding physical world environments, it serves as posthuman geography. At a time when virtual and augmented reality technology is seen by many as the way forward in creating richer synthesized environments, platforms like TikTok are already mastering the art of hybridized cyborg landscapes.

Cyberspace Folkies[31]

The significance of these dynamics surrounding identity and regionality lies in their impact on these folkies in cyberspace. These phenomena—an ambivalence between global and regional, interactions of race and ethnicity, and a cyborg setting—shape the FolkTok experience in visible ways. To that end, I offer here some case studies of people I spoke to in my research. These augment the other examples given in this chapter to shed light on a number of experiences with FolkTok, locality, and identity.

Abigail Pryde is a singer-songwriter and fiddler from the west coast of Scotland. During a pandemic lockdown, she took to TikTok, performing tunes and sharing Scottish culture. In spite of TikTok being an international context, she found herself giving increased attention to her local culture. "As a west coast person, our tunes are seen as quite cheesy," she said, when talking about her experience at trad sessions in Glasgow. "They're not the 'cool' tunes.... So as a west coast person I feel like I don't want to join in. Whereas on TikTok I'm like, 'listen to this tune that I learned when I was eight —it's great!'" Abigail also recognized that the processes of folklore exist on TikTok, including variations that emerge through transmission. She told me about a tune that she performed with a small mistake. This mistake got picked up by other TikTok users,

[31] This section draws from a presentation I gave at the Nordic Ethnology and Folklore conference in 2022 (Brown 2022).

who learned that version in order to duet her, thus accidentally birthing a new variation. Abigail's main emphasis, however, was on participation. She would intentionally post session tunes and songs with easy refrains so that others could easily make duets, seeing TikTok as fundamentally about interaction and collaboration. "It's not just learning a tune from YouTube—you feel like you're there," she says. Traditional music, to Abigail, is inherently participatory, and TikTok serves as a place where anyone can join in.

Ester Magnusson is a Swedish textile historian from Gothenburg with a particular affinity for traditional arts. She posts videos about traditional Swedish culture, including folksongs and balladry. When sharing songs and stories, she makes sure to share where they come from. Sharing song origin is a common practice, "not just on the internet but in real life too, at least in Swedish folk music," she told me, "which I think is really good… if you have knowledge share it so people can be like, 'I learned this on TikTok but its not originated from there, I know where its originated… I can pass it on.'" She also typically avoids performing songs from the traditions of others, not feeling that she can do justice to the music of places like Ireland or Denmark. Yet, Ester emphasized, she does not mind people performing music from other cultures as long as it's respectful. "Songs are meant to be shared. Like, sea shanties traveled over the Nordic Sea… across the whole Atlantic… the east coast of the US," she pointed out. This approach culminates in a conscious balance between homogenization and regionality.

While the FolkTok musicians I highlight here have a strong sense of cultural or regional identity, this is not the case for many other creators, including myself. I grew up without a conscious sense of having a culture. As an adult I realized this was incorrect, and grew to appreciate the culture around me with intentionality. Yet as a

European American who did not grow up in a place with familial roots, I do experience a bit of a cultural waywardness. Many others in my situation experience the same phenomenon, if not more so. I frequently hear people, in person or online, bemoaning that they "don't have a culture," often blaming colonization for removing them from European roots. While I personally never claimed to be culture-less as an adult, this perceived separation from cultural legacy was something I was navigating for myself at the time of my research.

The traditional music I played and posted during this research often related to intentional construction of regional and familial cultural identity. I have a particular interest in Norwegian folk music, which I discovered late in my college years when, through a mundane series of occurrences, I began to earnestly explore European music traditions for the first time. I particularly took to Norwegian music tradition, in part because I enjoyed it, but also because of my Norwegian heritage. I do not recall intentionally seeking some kind of cultural reconciliation. Instead, bewildered by a literal continent of beautiful musical options, I figured I would focus on a tradition with which I had a connection. I then made personal connections with Scandinavian musicians through TikTok, and occasionally posting Nordic tunes became my small way of contributing to that cultural sphere. While I was doing this for fun, I soon realized that I was also exploring what associations I might have with Norwegian tradition and assuaging some of my classically American angst.

Another of my musical areas of interest is traditional music of the North Country, my home region in New York State. I developed this interest during the pandemic and thus do not have any 'real world' experience with this tradition, instead finding

information and recordings on the internet. I am especially grateful to resources posted by TAUNY (Traditional Arts in Upstate New York). I shared some of my findings on TikTok and was excited to see people from the North Country getting engaged. This region has a distinct identity, typically tied to the Adirondack Mountains. Yet while Americana genres like bluegrass and country are popular in the North Country, uniquely local music tradition is not well known in the area, and the music I was posting about seemed to strike a chord with my neighbors.

In early 2021, I discovered the 1976 album *Ted Ashlaw – Adirondack Woods Singer,* a record resulting from Robert Bethke's fieldwork with a North Country vocalist. Ted Ashlaw, one of the last of the lumberman-singers of the Adirondacks, was already in his 70s at the time of recording. Some tracks on this album had made it into the digital realm, including a segment from "Willy Was as Fine a Sailor," which was featured in the 1996 CD-ROM game *Where in the USA is Carmen Sandiego*, and subsequently posted on YouTube. This YouTube clip tells a story of its own cyborg identity, bearing the warm distortions of tape recording, background crackle of a vinyl record, digital artifacts from compression to CD-ROM, and the blotchy artwork of a low-quality YouTube upload. I was unable to find the whole album on a digital format, and so was delighted to be gifted a used copy of the discontinued vinyl. When I got this album, I posted about it on TikTok, using tags that would help local people discover it.

Shortly after posting about Ted Ashlaw and Adirondack folksong, I got a message on Instagram from a marketing agency. They were working with a pharmacy in northern New York, and wanted to sponsor me to help promote their Covid-19 vaccination campaign. They must have reached out to me, not because of the size of my following

(which was even more minimal than it is currently), but because I was based in the North Country. I suppose they saw people their target region interacting with my recent content about Ashlaw. In any event, in a lucky twist of regional physical-digital hybrid culture, I found myself using folk music to advertise Coronavirus prevention through my local pharmacy. FolkTok, though a virtual entity, was nontheless able to engage in the health, economy, and expressive culture of a physical geographic region.

FolkTok is cyborg realm, wholly virtual but with dynamic connections to reality. It is a place where people can co-exist and play music together, geography be damned. To quote Thompson, "cultures and cultural groups can exist in a hybrid of place and cyberspace…. Thus to track culture… necessitates understanding of information flow via the digital realm" (Thompson 2019, 92). While it might be tempting to interpret a kind of postmodern death of landscape, FolkTok is a space where we can engage both in cyberspace and traditional regionality.

Conclusion

I find myself considering, as one is bound to with a project spanning the better part of four years, why I am writing about FolkTok. When FolkTok first emerged, it immediately felt like something special. I suppose I wanted to know why. I think part of it was the personal impact it had for me. It was a beautiful thing, during this pandemic, to have an active community of like-minded people, enjoying a shared passion. This was the case for many of us, and perhaps this shared experience lead to some of the meaningfulness of the community.

There is also an intrigue to something robust and longstanding like traditional music finding a niche on an app that is (and especially was at the beginning of 2021) considered so modern and trivial. It is both an irony, and a rebuttal to the alleged contradiction. The music traditions at play are old, it is true. Yet they are hardly a thing of the past. Such folk music is not about historical reconstruction. It is an active part of people's lives and experiences. New tunes are continually written, young players constantly join the ranks, and many musicians experiment with new ways to play with the tradition. TikTok, meanwhile, is more than just a silly app where teens dance and kids watch slime videos. I do not mean to say it is the best app ever, and have my own mixed feelings about its value. Yet it remains a place where people of all kinds express and communicate, proving itself to be one of the modern era's most influential entities. FolkTok demonstrates both that traditional folk music is an active part of modern culture, and that TikTok is more meaningful than many think.

Areas For Further Research

While this research is primarily focused on pandemic-era FolkTok, it would be interesting to revisit folk music on TikTok as it stands now. Serious collection took place in 2021, largely during the first part of the year. This gave the community a particular character. There were of course the widespread COVID-19 restrictions, leading to many people with an excess of time and a lack of social environments—both issues that FolkTok was able to ease. This timeframe is also significant in that TikTok was only just becoming a mainstream app for adults. These two factors meant that FolkTok denizens were motivated to engage, had the time to do so, and were limited enough in numbers that we could keep track of each other. The reputation TikTok had as a kids' app, and limited professional uses of the app at the time, also contributed to forming a community that was relaxed, friendly, and there simply for the fun of it.

I have remained in the FolkTok scene over the years, and while have not been collecting data in earnest, I have made some observations. From one point of view, FolkTok as described in this thesis is gone. Many once-familiar faces rarely, if ever, post on TikTok now. Others pivoted away from music content. Meanwhile, many other traditional folk musicians have begun using the app. Perhaps too many for a discrete community like FolkTok to exist. In 2021 it felt like I was familiar with most of the folkies on the app, and connected to all of them by no more than one degree of separation. These days it is not uncommon to run across a new individual or band that I have no connection with. I suspect this is partly due to generalized growth on the app as well as TikTok becoming increasingly viable as a professional tool. While career growth used to be considered an occasional positive side effect by those on FolkTok, it is now

quite common to see traditional folk musicians using TikTok primarily to promote their bands or solo careers. These changes have not eliminated community among folk musicians on the app, but it does make the whole experience different. To me it feels more individualized, and less focused. It is like the community still exists, but is scattered in the wind.

While FolkTok has changed, it is not gone. Some players still post consistently. Many others, like myself, post intermittently while consistently engaging by watching and commenting on others' posts. For me, the community has shrunk in size but grown in depth. I have connected with quite a few of my FolkTok mutuals on other platforms, a number of whom are not simply social media connections, but people I consider friends. There are also a number of cases where the FolkTok community overlaps with the wider traditional folk music community in the physical world. A example of this is Saskia Tomkins, who I was able to meet in person when her band, Medusa, came to town for the Canadian Folk Music Awards. We found ourselves connecting not just as members of the TikTok trad music community, but as a part of the world of Canadian folk music.

It is also worth noting that FolkTok is far from the only community on TikTok of folkloric interest. As a popular social media platform, it is a notable part of vernacular culture for significant portion of internet users. In spite of this, folklorists have published relatively little on the topic. Should further motivation to look to TikTok as a field site be needed, I would also point out the app's particular emphasis on transmission and variation. To be fair, this is something held in common with many other social media. That being said, TikTok is uniquely focused on these concepts. The way it allows one to easily incorporate other's video and audio into new materials has

lead to memes and trends based on folkloric variation of other's audio and video to an extent that has previously been limited to photo and text posts.

I would especially be curious to see research into dance on TikTok. Many genres of TikTok are centered around moving to sound. This includes lip-sync videos, where people move their mouths to songs or bits of speech, recontextualizing them with their own actions. Dancing is significant among these genres, and has been since the early days of the app. Dancing is outside the scope of both this research and my expertise, but as a musician who plays a lot of dance tunes, it is something I think about often, and I would like to put my encouragement out to those who do study it.

Oral storytelling on TikTok would also be a rich area of study. While music, memes, and dance are all popular on TikTok these days, perhaps the most significant type of expression on the app is storytelling. A typical scroll through TikTok will show a wide range of videos of people speaking simply into the camera, sharing their experiences. If I were not a musician, and were still to study TikTok, I am certain this thesis would be in some way about oral storytelling on the app.

A Summarization

FolkTok is the closest thing to an official term for the traditional folk music community on TikTok that formed in the wake of sea shanties becoming popular on the app. Sea shanties had become incredibly popular on TikTok during the pandemic, especially in the form of duet videos where people would use the app's collaborative tools to sing together. Thus the social potential of music on TikTok was proven at a time

when musical socialization was sorely missed, accompanied by the publicity to expose a new audience to the app. Thus, FolkTok was born.

I found FolkTok to largely consist of musicians from communities on either side of the North Atlantic who participate in musical folk traditions, be it Old Time, Scandinavian Balladry, or especially Irish Trad. This music largely reflected the music FolkTok denizens also played offline. Distinctive to FolkTok, however, was a time-limit enforced sense of brevity, with tunes and songs either selected for their length or streamlined to fit the setting.

While by numbers FolkTok videos are largely solo performances, great value was put on TikTok's collaborative tools, especially the ability to duet other musicians. This made it possible to, without serious media production experience, quickly contribute one's own music to an existing performance, putting collective music into the world. The other social features also loomed large, fostering social connections between musicians that in many cases developed into friendships.

One of the key aspects of FolkTok is its relationship to live performance. After all, when people gather around folk music in the physical realm, the main event is always some kind of live performance. A video of someone playing music is not a performance in the typical sense. Yet, as explained further in chapter two, there are more nuances to what a performance is. While undeniably a different experience to someone playing music in the same physical place and time as the listener, the types of videos typically posted on FolkTok can be understood as performance in a virtualized sense.

Accompanying the concept of performance, is the concept of liveness. Typically one thinks of performance as live, happening at the same moment in time that the

viewer is experiencing. Yet, what does it mean for something to be live? Videos on TikTok typically make a claim of liveness (Auslander 2012). TikToks are not static objects. Any time one is viewed, it effects the video's metadata. Comments are continually added, and views continually go up. The experience of watching a video the moment it is posted is different than viewing it when the comments are rife with debate, for example. TikToks also are picked out by an algorithm, and are viewed one after another. There's no browsing on the For You Page. Each time one scrolls the app, it is a different experience, much like live television. Granted, this is a rather different form of liveness than one usually anticipates. Yet, for the reasons mentioned here and in chapter three, FolkTok evokes the experience of live performance.

TikTok both reflects physical world geography and exists as its own virtualized region. The musicians on FolkTok bring their own experiences, coming from their own places. They are also unified by language, given that it is largely an anglophone community. It can be seen as an extension of the wider traditional music community of the North Atlantic countries, except connected through the internet. Yet it also exists as a separate region, in a virtualized sense. A number of scholars have discussed the nonphysical aspects of regionality (Cocq 2013; Hufford 2003; Reiss 2003). Much like physical places may have a sense of regionality that is independent of their physicality, FolkTok is a virtualized cultural region independent of any physical world location.

This research indicates that FolkTok it is an active place where folkloric musical activity happens. It is not simply a place where culture is discussed or archived. It is a community and environment where these practices actively happen. This is the source of the posthuman perspective that runs through this thesis. Posthumanism decenters

the biological human experience, looking at such things as landscape, animal, and machine as equally valid. Taking this view allows one to see phenomena like FolkTok not merely as a communication tool, but as a genuine site of cultural activity in itself. As Memphis Gerald, who touched on this in one of our conversations, said "TikTok is the medium. I don't know how to say it any better than that."

The Big Why

Sometimes, when engaging in academic work, I find it worth stepping back and asking: what's the point? Knowledge for knowledge's sake may have merit, but what might the more tangible impacts of such work be? This work may be useful for those trying to create meaningful communities or social events in digital environments. Take the example of singing events on TikTok as compared to video conferencing platforms like Zoom. People I talked to, both as part of this research and in my personal life, have all reported that singing events in a video call setting were typically poor imitations of in-person events, leaving people frustrated. TikTok, meanwhile, does not attempt to be the same thing. Instead it takes major thematic elements of social singing–community interaction and collaborative music making–and applies them in a new context. It does not have some of the elements that make physical world music events valuable. The musicians are not truly in the same place at the same time, which is one of the main aspects of such gatherings. Instead, it plays to the strengths of the medium, making this collaborative singing accessible to more people in varied times and locations. In this way, the toolset and environment provided by TikTok struck a chord with traditional

folk musicians. Virtual social environments seem to work best when human behavior and technology work with each other, rather than trying to bend one to match the other.

While such pragmatic matters are certainly worthwhile, I personally find the ephemeral concerns to be more significant. FolkTok is especially emblematic of widespread anxieties around belonging and social life in the modern age. Digital technology has not been an integrated part of human society for very long, especially considering smartphones have only been common for about fifteen years. Meanwhile, traditional music communities are rife with questions exploring regionality and belonging. Is regional music dying out and needs to be preserved? What does it mean when someone from one community plays music associated with another? What does it mean to play music associated with one's own community? Some people are very concerned with who, when, where, why, and with whom certain styles of music are played. Others are not concerned at all, and most seem to land somewhere in the middle. These are questions escalated by modern technology, which radically changed our access to distant lands, and introduced new ways of playing music and connecting with others. Even for those to whom such matters are of little concern, the nature of music tradition is such that these questions are a common part of the folk music experience.

I cannot claim to be original in identifying or addressing these existential questions of traditional music and the modern age, as a stunning amount of ink has been spilled in addressing these issues. FolkTok does seem to be a unique case, however, existing at the crossroads of digital and traditional music cultures. What's more is that FolkTok is something that could not have come into existence any sooner than it did, as

the social and technological environment that brought it about is emblematic of the early 2020's. Therefore, while the questions raised may be old, the way they are asked may have a new character. FolkTok is a joyous example of how people may continue to interact with traditional music in ways that are both as old as the hills and as new as next-year's microchips. I hope that understanding FolkTok will help people to better understand where they fit in our world, physically, digitally, and musically.

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