



Sampled Identity: Smartphone as a (Re)source

SHORT
ESSAY

by [Mattia Zanotti](#)

Music is certainly a way to express or reinforce our identity, but is it possible to represent and recreate an identity through the process of sampling? Our author says yes and mentions *Stregoni*, an Italian refugee project. *Stregoni* offers an experimental space for music production to its participants. The smartphones of the refugees are used as sample libraries for the following process of improvisation. *Stregoni* creates, our author argues, both subjective and collective identity, even if transitory.

Music is a vital element in the construction of identity; it is a tool to show a representation of values as well as social and life orientations (Ruud 1995; Turino 2008). The music one decides to listen to is a significant part of determining and declaring who you are (Cook 1998). Israeli music therapist Amir Dorit even asserts that «the decision of what music to present is a declaration of who the presenter is» (Amir 2012, 178). Hence, it can be said that the process of sharing music allows us to share identity. Furthermore,

the practice of sampling can transform the meaning of the chosen source material by imbuing it with the person's uniqueness and own declaration of identity.

The project *Stregoni* (Sorcerers), was conceived in 2016 by the two Italian musicians Johnny Mox and Above the Tree. Usually, the project starts with both arriving in the migrant reception center (ASGI 2018), bringing some instruments along. There they hold a workshop in which the participants are free to express themselves by playing. The musicians borrow a mobile phone from one of the center's guests, and they ask him or her to choose a song for everyone to listen to (something engaging and rhythmic in order to facilitate the following improvisational moment). After plugging the mobile phone into a loop station, the project leaders loop a fragment of the song and urge all the people to take an instrument and improvise, sing, or dance (Stefanini 2017). In the evening, the musical compositions are presented to an audience, in an attempt to express the sensitivity of the collaborating people on stage (Mox 2019).

The Political Meaning of Smartphones

The *Stregoni* project is a political project. First of all because it brings together perspectives from native Italians and refugees while all these people live, at least temporarily, at the same place. Secondly, the project's central working equipment, the mobile phone and what it contains, is political as such. The ownership of an expensive smartphone by refugees has become one of the symbols that are most frequently mentioned with grievance by those who line up against immigration, accusing refugees of showing off their wealth with ostentation (Martinello 2019). *Stregoni* challenges this paradigm: here, the mobile phone is understood as an essential tool in order to reach Europe; it is the only means of contact with family and homeland. Moreover, the mobile phone and the memory contained in it become a strongbox that preserves identity.

Sampling and Improvisation: Encountering Identities

The sample, which is part of the improvisational activity, becomes a sample of the participant's identity. The fragment of this identity is shared and immediately appropriated by the collaborating participants. The materialization – made through the sampling process – and the sample's evolution through the improvisational practice create a shared heritage among all performers. At this point, we could investigate the political use of sampling, as cultural theorist Giorgia Born says: «music conjures up and animates imagined communities, aggregating its listeners into virtual collectivities and publics based on musical and other identifications» (Born 2011, 378).

It is crucial that the songs, from which the samples are taken, are chosen by the participants. The sampled tracks are not the ones that an average listener might expect, based on what the market offers us or what we might imagine that refugees listen to in their homelands. However, these tracks are the ones that represent the person who presents them. The improvisational practice that follows the act of sampling, furthermore, highlights the idea of identities in mutual encounter. Here we can see what philosopher Alfred Schütz would call «the experience of the «Us»»: a pre-communicative social relationship based on «the mutual tuning-in relationship, (...) which is at the foundation of all possible communication» that allows the participants to be connected to each other through «sharing of the other's flux of experiences in inner time, by living through a vivid present in common» (Schütz 1951, 96).



A New Musical Object for a New Identity

Stregoni creates political-musical objects since improvisation creates the procedural basis through which the musical objects can be re-functionalized. The new musical objects are not a mere sum of the two previous ones, but rather a mosaic where the pieces that make the performance, amalgamated but still very distinct, create something new. This is the fundamental political imprint of the *Stregoni* project: the creation of an identity – although temporary – that is both subjective and collective. This idea fully reflects the one expressed by the social scientist Monica Sassatelli (2015) on the concept of Europe.

In my opinion, *Stregoni* allows for actions that helps to re-elaborate and symbolize the passage between homeland and Europe, making possible the encounter among identities. Through the process of sampling and the medium of sampling it is possible to create an attitude of community. The smartphone becomes a resource that allows for the crossing of both borders and identities. Sampling becomes a means through which, even if transitory, a music's community, which reconfigures the boundaries between pervasive social categories, is created. The above described elements create a new musical composition that represents a new identity.

→ list of references

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