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News Company asked some Music Industry "Insiders" their thoughts on the current state and future of "Real Music"

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A close friend and I periodically revisit a question people have been revisiting for centuries: "What is art?" I used to fight hard to find a tether I could hang on to in such conversations, but as I've gotten older, I've become more comfortable accepting the way the rope slips through my fingers.

"Let's say a pig rolls around in the mud, and then on a canvas," Lisa might say. "And you like the pattern it makes. Is it art?"

That one stopped me as I considered the Jackson Pollock print on my wall.

"And let's say you don't *know* it was done by a pig," she parries before I have time to thrust. "Does your reaction depend on knowing that?"

Artist. Intent. Skill. Sound criteria, I think. And yet...

The conversation doesn't get any easier with music. I've heard a subway train emit three tones in sequence as it strained away from the platform that, to me, sounded *exactly* like the first three notes of "Bali Ha'i." This happened every morning on the red line out of 72nd Street when I lived in New York. Same trains, same intervals, rhythm, duration. Was it music? Of course not. There was no artist, no intent, no skill.

But then what am I to do about John Cage? Dude *really* was a musician. And yet, I'd rather listen to "Subway South Pacific" than "4:33" any day of the week. Sure there was an artist, but he didn't do anything. There was intent, but the intent was *to not do anything*. And I don't think listening to people squirm and cough is an actual skill.

But - and here comes the bias - you can find artist, intent, and skill in, say, satanic-thrash-math-metal. And nope, nope, nope, it's not "real" music *to me*. I prefer certain kinds of artists, certain kinds of intent, certain kinds of skill.

Gimme a happy hard swinger by Basie, or a tear-besotted torch song by Julie London, a soaring composition by Pat Metheny or a melancholy melody from Melody Gardot.

I suppose that makes me an elitist (mine is good, yours is bad), or a subjectivist (it's ALL good!). I'm not particularly comfortable with either. Somehow, I think the question of whether there's such a thing as "real" music imposes *our* limitations on a limitless art. It reminds me of the silent dialogue I have in my head whenever I read some artist or critic assert that "the role of all art is to provoke and challenge." "Says you," says me in my mind. "Your art is too small then. Sure, art can make me angry or doubtful or incited. But so can the news. What about art that comforts? Teases? Amuses, soothes, or simply beautifies the moment? Is *that* not also art?"

"The problem is not that art needs defining," I continue, encouraged by the silent concession of my non-existent adversary. "The problem is that you're subverting it to your personal agenda. You want to provoke, so you claim art is on your side. But art is bigger than any one agenda. Not everyone has to agree in order for it to be valid, useful or meaningful."

Or as my friend Jim likes to reply, when someone says, "I don't get it," in response to some work of modern art, "Maybe there's no 'it' to 'get'."

In the end, I do think there's such a thing as "real" music, but I'm a lot less inclined to try to convince you that *mine* is *it*. For me, real music, like beauty in any form, is where you find it. And when I find it, I don't see the point in questioning it. I prefer to simply enjoy it. Even if it was made by a pig.

– John Armato, Creative Strategist and Musician
whose Debut Album *The Drummer Loves Ballads* is set for release in 2021.