

eastern europe

TURBO-FOLK: IDENTITY AND RHYTHM

The idea of using music to express [identity](#) is as old as music itself. Music has the ability to express mentality, taste, social behavior, [cultural](#) heritage, and political affiliation. A song can convey pride in one's country or outrage and revolution. It establishes a place in time, a link to a common memory, a communal rhythm for individual expression.

A perfect example of mainstream music conveying a [nationalist](#) sentiment is the popular Eastern European genre known as "turbo-folk." Originating in the Balkans, turbo-folk was established in the early 1990s during the tumultuous partitioning of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The SFR [Yugoslavia](#) was a conglomeration of six regional republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia) and two autonomous provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina). These republics and provinces were roughly divided on [ethnic](#) lines and, during their separation in the 1990s, the location of violent war and [genocide](#). The 1990s weren't just about war; however. They were also a time when each of these newly established countries was seeking a self-identification separate from their neighbors.

In 1993 turbo-folk's popularity reached its height. That was a particularly difficult year in the Balkans, beset with severe economic hardship, violent conflict, and international rebuke through severe trade embargoes. It was at this time that turbo-folk became associated with Serbia's involvement in the Bosnian and Croatian conflicts, and for many the music became representative of nationalist [xenophobia](#) and violence.

The term turbo-folk refers to the two contradictory concepts of the late 20th century Balkan psyche – "turbo" a

modern means of injecting fuel into an engine, and "folk," a symbol of tradition and rural conservatism. Turbo-folk's energetic house beats and nationalistically imbued lyrics are known for their sexual hedonism and defiant "eff you" attitude. The [music genre](#) evokes escapism and combines commercially marketed folk elements with club dance.



The countries of Southeast Europe.

Some of the most popular songs, like "Ne može nam niko ništa" ("No one can touch us") by Mitar Mirić, convey a sentiment about surviving against all odds. Other popular albums and songs, like Ceca's "Sta je to u tvojim venama/ Kukavica" ("What is flowing in your veins/ Coward") appeals to a general sentiment about a love of one's ethnic identity, a hatred towards the ethnic identity of others, and a defiance against international judgment and criticism.

Critics of the genre claim turbo-folk glorifies [materialism](#), crime, moral corruption, and war profiteering. It is often called vulgar and one theorist,

British scholar Alexei Monroe, coined the term "porno-nationalism" in reference to it.

Some argue that the popularity of the music among urban youth throughout Eastern Europe prevailed due to its consumer-driven promotion on popular TV music video channels. A commonly referenced example of turbo-folk's popularity often quoted:

When a Bosnian market seller in Sarajevo was asked why he was selling music that advocated the destruction of his own city and people, he retorted: "Art knows no borders!" (www.search.com/reference/Turbo_Folk).

In the 2000s, turbo-folk remained somewhat popular, but not as controversial as in its heyday in the 1990s. Some say that its association with ethnic violence and genocide under Serbia's Milosevic regime became an unwelcome reminder of a turbulent time and era most in the Balkans would prefer to forget.

Today's turbo-folk artists tend to incorporate more Western pop influences, making their music less nationalistically based and thus appealing to a wider audience. Instead of known as turbo-folk performers, they are often referred to as pop-folk artists. Love it or hate it, you will still hear it played any given dance night in [Southeast Europe](#).

Sources and Information

TURBO-FOLK

http://www.search.com/reference/Turbo_Folk
<http://www.ce-review.org/00/24/monroe24.html>

SOUTHEAST EUROPE

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breakup_of_Yugoslavia
<http://westernbalkans.net/>
<http://geography.about.com/library/misc/ucbalkans.htm>
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2165494>

lesson plan

identity and music

WHAT ARE YOU LISTENING TO?

Created by: Adrienne Landry, CREES Outreach Coordinator

Subject: Music Appreciation, Geography, Social Studies, World History, US History

Grade: 9th - 12th

Objective:

Student will be able to identify geography of Eastern Europe, answer questions about music culture of Southeast Europe, and think critically about American current events or history, culture and music.

Time Required:

Dependent on teacher. Originally intended to be a research project for secondary school students, but could be adapted to a 45 min lesson for younger students.

Materials and Supplies:

Computer, internet access

Primary Source Bibliography:

"Turbo-Folk: Identity and Rhythm." *CREES Crossroads*, Fall 2011.

Other Resources Used:

www.youtube.com

Procedure:

Based on the article "Turbo-Folk: Identity and Rhythm," give a brief tutorial about how music can be used to express a positive or negative cultural or national identity. Show where the Balkans are and briefly contextualize the era of ethnic conflict. Describe the basics of the Eastern European genre "turbo-folk" and show the suggested video clip of "No One Can Touch Us" as an example.

Lead a class discussion about the criticism of turbo-folk: xenophobia, market [consumerism](#), violence. Ask students to name other popular genres of music that face similar criticism (for example: rap, punk, etc). Ask why such music is popular even to those it supposedly offends. Ask students if they can think of any popular American songs that represent a cultural or national sentiment, either good or bad.



[No One Can Touch Us](#)
by Mitar Mirić

Music Share Research Project:

Ask each student to pick a song from his or her own music library that they feel represents an American cultural or national sentiment, either positive or negative. Insist the song must be appropriate for class and have a non-explicit version. Have students present the song to the class by playing a short video or sound clip, then have them recite specific lyrics from their song that conveys a nationalist or cultural mentality or psyche. In the course of their research, have them provide answers to the critical thinking questions on page 8.

Note suggested songs for those students having difficulty selecting from their music library. Some are positive and some are negative, but all convey a cultural or national sentiment. Some songs are more appropriate for different age groups than others – and some are downright controversial.

Before suggesting a song to a student, it is recommended that teachers follow the links to watch youtube videos of each song. Selecting which songs to suggest to students is entirely at the discretion of the teacher.

Vocabulary:

[Identity](#)
[Music Genre](#)
[Culture](#)
[Folk](#)
[Southeast Europe](#)
[Yugoslavia](#)
[Nationalist](#)
[Ethnic](#)
[Xenophobia](#)
[Genocide](#)
[Consumerism](#)
[Materialism](#)

Suggested Songs:

[Empire State](#)
by Jay Z
[Makeshift Patriot](#)
by Sage Francis
[Handlebars](#)
by Flobots
[A Country Boy Can Survive](#)
by Hank Williams Jr
[Fortunate Son](#)
by Credence Clearwater Revival
[Born In the USA](#)
by Bruce Springsteen
[Pink Houses](#)
by John Mellencamp
[Welcome to the Future](#)
by Brad Paisley
[Backlash Blues](#)
by Nina Simone
[Party in the U.S.A.](#)
by Miley Cyrus
[God Bless the USA \(cover\)](#)
by Beyonce

identity and music

WHAT ARE YOU LISTENING TO?

critical
thinking
questions

1. What genre of music is your song and what year was the song released?
2. What was happening in America at the time this song was released? Can you describe the mood of the country?
3. What is the main message of the song and who is the intended audience? What values does this song support or criticize?
4. Is there anything about this song that could be perceived as offensive?
5. Are there any aspects of the song that seem consumer driven?
6. What do critics say about this artist, song, or genre of music?
7. Do you agree with the critics? Why or why not?
8. What is it about this song that you like or dislike?