Mixed People, Mixed Music:
Hybrid Contemporary Commercial Music Genres and the Multiethnic Artists Who Create Them

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative, multi-case study critically examined the interplay between race and music in the experience and contributions of multiethnic artists working in contemporary commercial music (CCM). Extensive interviews of 14 music professionals and analysis of their artistic work and publicity documents revealed varied identity formation and commonalities of expression and artistic legacy. Central findings contrasted participants' mentored artistic identity development with their maverick racialization process. Specifically, multiracial participants with racially ambiguous appearances experienced haphazard, unpredictable, and unsupported racial development, which forced them to acquire skills and abilities that served them well later on as adults. Whether participants claimed a multiracial or monoracial identity, they consistently displayed multiple cultural competencies and a chameleon-like ability to blend into diverse social contexts. With flexible, layered identities, participants intentionally crossed racial and musical borders and created experimental music unfettered by genre. Many participants cultivated independent, internet-based careers, effectively freeing themselves from the racial capitalism (Morrison, 2019; Robinson, 1983/2000) of the commercial music industry. As cultural authorities, participants simultaneously gave voice to their individual experiences, represented their respective communities, and acted as the catalyst for cultural change. Critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), extended with concepts from critical mixed race studies (Daniel et al., 2014) and MultiCrit (Harris, 2016); Turino's cultural cohorts and cultural formations framework (2008); and Morrison's Blacksound (2019) illuminated participants' racial, ethnic, and artistic identities, cultural contributions, and legacies. The research offers implications for artists-in-training, music educators, and scholars of music, music education, and critical mixed race studies.