



# **The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Music and Culture**

## **Borders**

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Given the number of national and regional borders in the world, not to mention supranational alliances such as the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Arab League, and others, the subject of borders is almost limitless. Some scholars differentiate between borders and frontier zones to distinguish amicable boundaries from those where there is aggression or military action. Moreover, borders take many forms: They may be determined by physical features, such as a river, a mountain range, or a coastline, but in many other instances, a border is settled after lengthy negotiations or even warfare, perhaps physically marked by walls or security fences and a military presence. Many other boundaries are described as porous or permeable boundaries, with little to indicate where one territory ends and another begins. Social scientists have taken an increasing interest in borders since the reunification of Germany, the end of the Cold War, and conflicts in the Middle East, with anthropologists keen to examine the way borders influence communities' and individuals' cultural identities. Ethnomusicologists may draw on the work of social scientists, literary or creative disciplines, or a combination of all these, in their own interrogation of border culture. This entry examines issues of sovereignty, as well as anthropology within the context of borders, the *imagined community*, and borders as a source of creative inspiration.

In the past couple of decades, scholars researching the music of such disparate regions as Latin America, Tajikstan in Central Asia, and Liverpool (in the northwest of England) have used various approaches to investigate different aspects of borders as they occur in national and popular musics. These studies reveal many highly nuanced musical landscapes affected by, for example, Soviet political ideologies as explored by Federico Spinetti, or the blending of different cultural traditions to create genres involving elements of both, as examined by Gerard Behague for Latin-American music and by Alejandro Madrid and colleagues regarding music at the border between the United States and Mexico. Other scholars have addressed borders on the microlevel, such as Sara Cohen's work with amateur hip-hop musicians in Liverpool, using conceptual maps to describe their musical relationship with their own neighborhood. Meanwhile, scholars of global musics attempt to define and delineate borders between primitive ethnic, folk, popular, and art musics. In the world of film music, a very different kind of border forms the focus of Jeff Smith's work focusing on the distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic music.

## Sovereignty and Controversy

Whether or not borders have been war zones, they can remain controversial long after settlement because issues of sovereignty in the nation or state have far-reaching significance. Consider, for example, recent Russian activity to reclaim territory along some of the borders defined after World War II, or moves toward devolution within a long-established union, such as the 2014 Scottish Referendum for independence from the United Kingdom of Great Britain—a debate which prompted widespread public engagement, resulting in a comparatively narrow vote in favor of remaining within the union.

Scholarly writing about borders is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, Plato and Aristotle had their own views about what was a desirable balance between the national security offered by borders and the opportunities they afforded for interaction with the states or regions beyond them. More recently, significant political changes globally have led to an increased interest in borders and boundaries: the demolition of the Berlin Wall and abolition of the East–West German border in 1989 and 1990, respectively; the cessation of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991; the Gulf War from 1990 to 1991; and continuing hostilities in the Middle East, not to mention increased migration, all attract interest from historians and geographers to politicians and economists.

## Anthropology

Anthropologists in particular have embraced border studies in their studies of humankind throughout history

to the present day, and recent global changes make the subject a rich area for research. Communities living in border territories experience influences of many kinds in their daily lives, aware that their culture may be affected, resented, or threatened by the neighboring country or region, and this leads to a particular sense of *border identity*. Where reunification has taken place, as in Berlin, the formerly divided communities may for a long time retain their separate identities. Conversely, where a historic border makes little apparent difference in daily life—a porous border in many senses—the border community may still take pride in, and reap cultural capital from, a romantic history going back half a millennium, as in the Scottish Borders. It is also the case that a regional, geological division (e.g., the Highlands and Lowlands of Scotland) can be profoundly influential upon the cultural sense of identity of those living on either side, while affecting the perceptions of outsiders very little.

## Imagined Community

Benedict Anderson first published his influential monograph, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, in 1983, and this concept of *imagined communities* is very much applicable to border studies, for borders need not necessarily exist as physical divisions at all. This is very apparent in studies of migrant communities such as gypsies (Romanies or in Scotland, *travelers*), economic migrants, or groups of one ethnic community living among another indigenous population. Where two cultures coexist in the same physical space, differing customs or moral codes can cause tensions. Whatever the nature of the border or boundary between two nations or communities, there will be the same perceptions of difference and differing expectations between *us* and *them*, that is, those in one's own community and those on the other side. The interface can be peaceable or problematic depending on the particular circumstances.

## Creative Inspiration

Historically, borders have always been a source of inspiration for writers, poets, musicians, and other artists. As mentioned, the Scottish Borders had a reputation for lawlessness and plundering as early as the 16th century. A triangle of land between the rivers Esk and Sark was called the *debatable lands* until first the Scots' Dyke was built to define the border in 1552, and subsequently, efforts were made to bring harmony to the locality after the 1603 Union of Scotland with England. There is some scholarly debate as to how long the border skirmishes actually continued, but William Wordsworth drew on the theme in his play, *The Borderers* (1796–1797), and Sir Walter Scott relished this wild reputation in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders* (1802–1803), while James Hogg, in *The Ettrick Shepherd*, built his own reputation by writing poetry, song lyrics, and narratives in the border setting that he knew so well.

Communities may cherish their border past, celebrating historic literary or musical collections—for example, a recent concert held by The Society of Antiquaries of *Newcastle upon Tyne* drew upon repertoire from the 19th-century *Northumbrian Minstrelsy* (the county on the English side of the Scottish borders). However, contemporary political events such as the opening up of boundaries between Eastern and Western Europe, or the Scottish referendum, also inspire new songs or the compilation of thematic albums. In traditional music gatherings and in ethnomusicological interviews, performers introduce songs or tunes by referring to events that inspired them, revealing the significance of borders past and present in their own sense of identity.

Although traditional music from regional or national borders may have its own distinctive repertoire, the *lyrics* of the songs are more likely to betray their border origins than are the stylistic features of the tunes. This is because collections of tunes reveal the porosity of boundaries more eloquently than one might imagine. For example, a tune for Northumbrian small pipes in *Northumbrian Minstrelsy* (1882) entitled “I saw my love come passing by me,” is today celebrated by folk musicians as a typical Northumbrian air, whereas a similar tune appeared in the early 17th-century Skene manuscript from the East coast of Scotland near Edinburgh entitled

“Pitt on your shirt on Monday,” and then in the early 1730s as a “Highland lilt” in an Anglo-Scottish collection published in London as *Aria di Camera*, by Daniel Wright. The transmission of tunes generally happens completely regardless of borders or boundaries, demonstrating the popularity of a tune or the taste of the collector as much as, if not more than, any particular national style.

**See also** [Anthropology and Ethnomusicology](#); [Imagined Communities](#); [Sociology of Music](#)

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### Further Readings

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