

MUSIC IN THE COURSE OF LIFE

Joseph A. Kotarba



“Drawing from four decades of research examining the social worlds of rock and popular music, Joseph Kotarba has truly created his *magnum opus*. Written in a clear and accessible style, he speaks directly to readers and captures their attention like an impressive guitar riff. He masterfully weaves ethnographic details from the field, documenting everyday life interaction with music as it punctuates enduring markers of meaning throughout the life course. A classic in the making, *Music in the Course of Life* provides vital insight into key sociological concepts that explain our evolving dance with music from early childhood through our aging years.”

Dr. Robert Owen Gardner, *Professor of Sociology, Linfield University, U.S.A.* Author of *The Portable Community: Place and Displacement in Bluegrass Festival Life* (2020)

“Sociological studies of music have often emphasized youth subcultures or intense dedicated fans of particular musical genres. But music, Kotarba shows us, is a powerful life-long experience shared by everyone. This book provides a novel symbolic interactionist approach that treats music not as a subcultural phenomenon but as an integral part in the course of life all the way from early childhood through later elders. With sensitivity to the full range of the course of life, Kotarba vividly demonstrates the importance of music to the construction and maintenance of the self, through self-being, self-becoming, and self-remembering. With wide-ranging examples across multiple genres and a lively, accessible writing style, Kotarba invites us to enjoy the sociology of music as much as we enjoy music itself.”

Dr. Wayne H. Brekhus, *Professor of Sociology, University of Missouri, U.S.A.*

“*Music in the Course of Life* is a fitting crescendo to Dr. Kotarba’s lengthy and powerful career as a symbolic interactionist who sees music as a key feature of the everyday life experience of culture. His updating of life course theory is a creative integration of contemporary interactionist thinking on the self-concept. This book is a collection of stories, Dr. Kotarba’s and those of his respondents, that nicely capture the magic of music in all our lives.”

Dr. Norman Denzin, *Professor Emeritus, University of Illinois, U.S.A.*

“This book really sings! Dr. Kotarba demonstrates the magic and meaning of music inherent throughout the entire course of life. Using insights from everyday life sociology, he integrates a wide range of literature on music experience with evocative personal stories gathered from respondents of all ages and from his own engaging stories as a social researcher and a music fan. I was particularly taken with his insight and thoroughness in depicting music as a portal of compassion for the elderly with dementia and those near death. This book will be of tremendous value to all those—researchers and laypeople alike—interested in the reflexive relationship between music and the self.”

Dr. Carolyn Ellis, *Distinguished University Professor Emerita, University of South Florida, U.S.A.*



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This book illustrates how social meanings provided by music are experienced throughout the course of life. To this end, the author examines in depth the concepts of self, identity, socialization, and the life course itself.

Social scientists have traditionally focused on music experiences among different generations, one at a time, with an emphasis on young audiences. This book explores appreciation for and use of music as a dynamic process that does not begin when we enter adolescence, nor end when we become adults. It demonstrates the relationship between the experience of music and the experience of self as a fundamental feature of the more general relationship of the individual to society. Music completes the circle of life. The author bases his analysis on observations made through a variety of qualitative studies and methodologies, as well as his own music autobiography.

Clear and jargon free, this book is a timely application of key concepts from the everyday life sociologies for scholars and students in the sociology of music and culture and other related disciplines such as anthropology and ethnomusicology. It will be of interest for upper-division undergraduate and graduate courses in culture, music, symbolic interaction, social psychology, and qualitative research methods.

Joseph A. Kotarba is Professor of Sociology at Texas State University, U.S.A., where he directs the *Music Across the Life Course* Project. He also serves as Medical Sociologist and Ethnographer for the Institute for Translational Sciences at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston. He received the George Herbert Mead Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction; the Society's Charles Horton Cooley Award for Best Book in the Symbolic Interactionist Tradition for *Baby Boomer Rock 'n' Roll Fans* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013); and the Society's Helena Lopata Award for Excellence in Mentoring. He is currently studying the relationship between science, medicine, and music; the experience of music during the COVID-19 pandemic; and the culture of the translational science movement. He received his doctorate from the University of California, San Diego.



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Cover image: © Shutterstock

First published 2023

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kotarba, Joseph A., author.

Title: Music in the course of life / Joseph A. Kotarba.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2023. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022024029 (print) | LCCN 2022024030 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781032018515 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032018454 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781003180357 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Music—Social aspects. | Life cycle, Human—Social aspects. |

Music—Psychological aspects. | Life cycle, Human—Psychological aspects.

Classification: LCC ML3916 .K69 2022 (print) | LCC ML3916 (ebook) |

DDC 306.4/842—dc23/eng/20220525

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022024029>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022024030>

ISBN: 978-1-032-01851-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-01845-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-18035-7 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003180357

Typeset in Bembo

by Newgen Publishing UK

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All figures are the author's own, unless otherwise stated.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A common cliché in writing is for an author to claim that there are simply too many people to acknowledge for supporting their work. In my case, that claim is not a cliché but simply the truth. This book represents forty-plus years experiencing and analyzing music sociologically. The viewpoints, ideas, and visions in this book were also nurtured by seventy-five years of friends, family members, co-workers, neighbors, and others with whom our relationships always more or less involved music. I thank them all, but I want to acknowledge several who were especially helpful in recent years as the themes in this book were evolving.

The officers and members of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction have provided me an intellectual and familial home. The group has always appreciated and encouraged my work, including the existential amendment to symbolic interaction's understanding of the self. The SSSI also put me in touch with European interactionists who taught me new things about music I thought I already mastered: Vessela Misheva in Sweden and Krzysztof Konecki in Poland on the Beatles, Thaddeus Muller in England on Jim Morrison and the Doors, and Andrea Salvini in Italy on Catholic church music, among many others.

An award from the Fulbright Specialist Program allowed me to study and lecture on music in the land of ABBA at Uppsala University in Sweden. My colleagues at the NIH-supported Institute for Translational Sciences at the University of Texas Medical Branch-Galveston have allowed me to peer into the music-self of the contemporary scientist while I help design and evaluate the social organization of cutting-edge biomedical research.

Wimberley Valley in the Hill Country of Texas, and my town of Woodcreek in particular, are a hotbed of Americana music, as I will analyze specifically in the music-self of the early elder. I will always be grateful for the opportunity to work with the folks who operate Susanna's Kitchen at the Wimberley United Methodist Church, not only to get a first-hand view of Americana music but to be part of a

welcoming music community where someone with zilch music talent (like me) can still contribute (selling tickets, publicity, welcoming, etc.). I'd like to thank Perry Raybuck, Program Director, in particular for his openness to sociological takes on community-based music programs and performances.

Amanda Couve has been a wonderful co-researcher on our studies of elders and people living with dementia. She is a graduate of our master's program in dementia and aging studies at Texas State University and has quickly ascended to management for a growing hospice services company in San Antonio. Her access to aging and dementia residences and clients and her insights into the everyday life of her clients have been great resources for our studies on the aging music-self.

I want to acknowledge my co-authors, mentors, and friends in the existential sociology journey: David Altheide, Andy Fontana, John Johnson, and Jack Douglas. Always there. I also want to thank Norm Denzin and Caroline Ellis for easily convincing me that it is OK to write stories about our research friends while honoring the brilliance and insight of their stories.

My most recent partner in crime is Andrii Melnikov, associate professor, Faculty of Sociology at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine. He has brought a distinctively European take to the existential sociology journey: historical, literary, and philosophical to balance out our North American somewhat pragmatist approach to everyday life.

Finally, I want to thank and give praise to my students at Texas State University. When I lapse and want to think of them as mere pop music fans, full of earbuds and not ideas, they surprise me with appreciation for the sociological takes on music topics I propose in class and in my writing. I talk myself and them down a bit, however, when I ask them rhetorically: although they are the experts on contemporary popular music and they claim my mastery of the genre ended in 1984 with Van Halen's "Jump," who is grading whom...?

I dedicate this book to my favorite nonet: Chris, Tia, Melody, Jessie, Stan, Brandon, Isla, Andrew... and Polly—still my firework. We have all shared music like we have shared love for each other. In so many cases over the years, these tasks have been one and the same.

INTRODUCTION

About three years ago my daughter Jessie, her husband Stan, and their eighteen-month-old son Brandon flew out from their home in Reston, Virginia to visit my wife Polly and me at our home in Woodcreek, Texas. It was a typical hot and dry Central Texas day in August, roughly two months after I had knee replacement surgery. (Unlike many of my accumulating ills of aging, such as my poor hearing, I cannot attribute my bad knees to my long career as a music fan who listened to too much loud and fast rock 'n' roll in my youth and, I confess, in my adulthood.) I much appreciated their efforts to cheer me up, but the highlight of that trip—like our many trips to Reston—was just hanging out with my grandson, Brandon.

We were playing with puzzles and balls when Brandon got all excited and pointed to a book displayed on our entertainment center. The book in question was my recently published text, *Understanding Society through Popular Music*. At first, I said to myself, “Now there’s a smart kid, appreciating his grandpa’s good scholarship.” I quickly reformed my thinking and said to myself, “Come on, you egotistical grandpa, he’s only eighteen months old!” I could not make out what he was trying to say, but I could see that his finger was pointed to a picture on the cover borrowed from PBS’ *Sesame Street* of Katy Perry and her infamous musical game-of-tag with Elmo. As I moved closer, I could hear Brandon saying “Elmo, Elmo,” as he rudely ignored one of my favorite pop singers (Figure 0.1). I cannot tell you how often Brandon has climbed up on my lap to have me link up with Elmo videos on my iPad filled with fun songs about Elmo and sometimes sung by Elmo and his friends. Perhaps coincidentally, my technologically hip son-in-law assembled a state-of-the-art audio and visual communications system in Brandon’s room through which he would play Katy Perry’s “Chained to the Rhythm” that lulled Brandon to sleep.

Let’s glance at the other end of the age spectrum for a moment. In spring 2019, I worked with a group of graduate students on a study to discover what

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FIGURE 0.1 Brandon and Elmo

everyday life music experiences are among older people stricken with dementia. My co-researcher, Amanda Couve, and I visited a weekly caretaker respite program at the Wimberley Texas Community Center in order to converse with clients about their music. Needless to say, these conversations were not very productive, since the clients often had difficulty remembering and talking about music. The clearest statement about music was the insistence that church music is their favorite, as voiced by several of the women present.

While Amanda and I were conversing with the lead volunteer workers, the fifteen clients were sitting around a large square table, playing games, working puzzles, and just enjoying the company of the other volunteers. Two elderly gentlemen were sitting across from each other. Amanda and I had talked with both of them earlier, but they were not able to say much to us. We did learn that they were both military veterans, most likely from the Vietnam generation. As an experienced ethnographer, I knew to look around the table to observe the simple and common activities we often ignore and take for granted in everyday life. The first gentleman started tapping his fingers on the table while smiling and looking at the other. The other gentleman took his turn to tap his fingers while smiling at his friend. The finger tapping was clearly a song, and my best guess is that the song in question might have been the intro to the Allman Brothers' anti-war classic, "Ain't Wastin' Time No More" from their 1972 album, *Eat a Peach*. Gregg Allman wrote this song soon after his brother, Duane, was killed in a motorcycle accident in Macon, Georgia. To me, the fourth verse in the song is telling:

Well, by and by, way after many years have gone
 And all the war freaks die off, leavin' us alone
 We'll raise our children, in the peaceful way we can
 It's up to you and me brother to try and try again

I consulted several friends who were veterans of the war in Vietnam about this event. They told me that the message may have been a *tap code*, conceived by American prisoners-of-war imprisoned by the North Vietnamese. The tap code allowed prisoners to communicate with each other when normal communication channels were forbidden by their captors. In the current situation, the music tap code provided a method of communicating when normal speech was precluded by late-stage dementia.

These two music experiences illustrate the magic of music: it serves as a major portal to everyday life through which culture beams the meanings that we need to make sense of ourselves and our everyday lives. Music-as-culture points to tiny things we often take for granted as well as large and dramatic things that force our attention (Fine 2012). Music can make these things meaningful, colorful, pleasant, and sometimes painful. These ethnographic experiences quickly reminded me of Tia Denora's (1999: 54) famous sociological principle, that music serves as a *technology of the self*:

I have tried to show how actors engage in aesthetic reflexive activities of music consumption so as to produce themselves as types of actors imbued with specific feeling forms, attributes and identity characteristics, and as objects of knowledge to themselves and to others. In relation to the self, music provides a rich array of cultural resources for self-constitution and reconstitution over time.

Music is reflexive to the degree it provides meaning for who we are, but also who the other person is. Brandon may have been too young to use music to help define who he is, following the symbolic interactionist model of the self (Mead 1934), but the music served to help his grandpa make sense of himself, his grandson, and their special relationship. Numerous critics (e.g., Paul 2014) have argued that composing and performing "Ain't Wastin' Time No More" helped Gregg Allman make sense of his lost brother and himself as a grieving survivor, but the song also helped listeners like myself make sense of death, war, and being individuals at risk of military conscription for a war in Vietnam we detested.

I wrote this book to help us understand the social meanings of music at the beginning and the end of life, but also to examine the importance of music throughout what sociologists and gerontologists call the *life course*. Sociologists who have studied music as a social phenomenon have generally focused on particular stages of life, for example, adolescence and adulthood, as I have also covered in my work (e.g., Kotarba 1994a and 2013a). I designed this book to explore the breadth of music experiences by taking advantage of the power and promise of the

self-concept in the social science discipline of symbolic interaction. In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I will discuss the key sociological concept of *socialization* and the process by which our sense of self evolves over time. I will then discuss the concept of the *life course*, not in terms of a theory per se, but as a sensitizing concept that illustrates the reflexive relationship between self and music that extends throughout the course of life in all societies.

The Self, and the Life Course

The notion of *life course* is important to a particularly sociological perspective on people and their behavior. In general, sociologists argue that people are only partially shaped by their biological and genetic capacities. Instead, our self—who we feel and perceive ourselves to be—and how we approach social life are constantly shaped by events and experiences that happen all the way through life. We change constantly and on occasion dramatically. The concept of *life course* holds that socialization is a life-long process (Furstenberg 2004). Accordingly, our appreciation for and use of music is a dynamic process that does not begin when we enter adolescence, nor end when we become adults.

Social scientists have traditionally focused on music experiences among young audiences. The focus has been on pop music specifically as a feature of adolescent culture and, therefore, of teenagers' everyday life experiences. As Simon Frith (1981) noted in his famous sociological text, *Sound Effects*, rock music has been fundamental to the experience of growing up ever since the end of World War II. Similarly, sociologists have demonstrated increasing interest over the years in rock and pop music as indicators of dramatic changes occurring in the social and cultural worlds of teenagers. We can trace this interest at least as far back as David Riesman's (1950) classic examination of the emergence of the *other-directed* personality in post-World War II American society. The new middle class was marked by a weakening of parental control, a preoccupation with consumption, and a shift in the meaning of leisure, resulting in the masses—the lonely crowd—desperately trying to have fun. The time was ripe for the emergence of a youth culture defined by what have come to be known as pop and rock—and increasingly hip hop—music.

The popular music industry continues to expand dramatically—beyond multi-billion-dollar annual sales, globalization, CDs, iPhones, Spotify, iTunes, YouTube, Apple Beats, AirPods, TikTok, and other technological and media advances, and even the resurgence of old-fashioned vinyl records. Yet lay and scholarly observers have generally ignored or underplayed an important element of social and cultural change: popular music is no longer limited to, nor solely the possession of, teenagers and young adults. The original generation of rock 'n' roll fans—the baby boomers—are now parents and, increasingly, grandparents. The rock 'n' roll music and music culture they grew up with has stayed with them, becoming the soundtrack of North American and European cultures—and increasingly of the rest of the world, as witnessed by the success of Korean K-Pop (Williams and Ho 2016).