This paper analyzes the music of Lam Trường, a performing artist popular in both Vietnam and among the overseas Vietnamese population in the United States, and attempts to understand why Lam Trường has become so popular. Expanding upon and incorporating Yuri Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere, Pnina Werbner’s discussion of having a “multiple sense of self,” and May Joseph’s definition of “new hybrid identities,” the paper introduces a model of how a popular musician attempts to construct a popular piece of music. The musician exists in a specific semiosphere, defined as the location of interaction between all components of a particular cultural space. The musician then interacts with a “sphere of marketability” that exists outside of the musician’s semiosphere. The sphere of marketability is comprised of various models of how one can sell songs in the global marketplace. On a practical level, there is no single model of how to make one’s songs marketable on a global level; therefore, an artist must adapt the models from the sphere of marketability for his/her personal situation. In addition, neither sphere is fixed, since the sphere of marketability continually changes through the interaction with other semiospheres, and a musician’s negotiation with market conditions will augment his/her knowledge of potential musical styles that could be incorporated into future songs.

The remainder of the paper describes Lam Trường’s personal situation, with specific emphasis upon how his “multiple sense of self” and his perception of the many identities of his vast audience inform his musical output. He does not cater each song to a single individual but releases many different types of songs in order to attract the largest possible base of listeners and admirers. He creates an eclectic mix of music that references, for example, tango-influenced rhythms; Hollywood films such as Mission: Impossible and The Matrix; American musical styles, such as early rock n’ roll and the blues; and children’s songs.

As a result of these references, members of the overseas Vietnamese community can exercise their individual or communal memories through interacting with Lam Trường’s music. The artist therefore, does not wish to create music that only he would find potent or memorable, because he wishes to sell his products. His musical knowledge must be augmented by an external entity — in this case, the sphere of marketability — in order to create products that will be purchased by an audience who find them compelling.

Topics: hybridity theory, music and identity, popular studies, ethnomusicology
Broad topic: Hybridity, Identity