

# Musical Identity in Contemporary Creative Works Among Thai Jazz Artists

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## Abstract

This study aims to explore the musical identity of Thai contemporary jazz artists by examining their attitude, musical content, and music creation process. Thirteen informants participated in this qualitative study through in-depth interviews. The results demonstrated that musical identity could be divided into three categories: 1) regional musical identity, 2) individual musical identity and 3) cultural musical identity. The factors associated with the emergence of musical identity include musical movements and phenomena, integration between two musical styles in terms of articulation and contextual elements, and contemporary and hybrid-crossover music approaches in today's world. These factors, along with social interactions both within and outside the jazz community, affect the transformation of musical identity. The findings of this study will help Thai jazz artists and those involved in the jazz industry effectively build their musical identity, create value for their music, and elevate their works to an international level.

**Keywords:** musical identity, jazz artist, creative work, Thai contemporary jazz.

Humans have been interested in the concept of “identity” for a long time, as evidenced by a number of identity-related studies conducted by academics in various fields, starting in the social sciences and growing extensively. Musical identity research has emerged during the previous two decades (Masiri, 2016). This research approach reveals the value and importance of music art to society and humanity, creating social awareness that music is more than just a human product for pleasure; it also helps humans to build their own identity and individuality. Identity created through musical works is linked to society in a variety of ways, such as group integration, affiliation, and

learning how to live together (Frith, 1996). Music has a relationship with human societies, and it can depict social realities through the musical identity of people in each community, province, country, or region. In other words, musical identity can reflect social characteristics on many levels.

Research into the musical identities of different worldwide regions reveals their social identities. A study by John Chernoff (Frith, 1996) found that music in Ghana an African country, is a cultural activity that encourages coexistence, and that the aesthetics of drumming convey Ghana's identity to the outside world. Moreover, Ronstrom's 2006 research on

Swedish folk and national music revealed that people in Sweden, a Nordic country in Northern Europe, originally performed string music in outdoor settings, including singing and dancing. This kind of musical activity has continued and sparked widespread attention, resulting in the establishment of a well-recognized Swedish musical identity. In Southeast Asian countries like Thailand, traditional music practices have a variety of origins. Lanna music, basically performed at traditional events in northern Thailand, incorporates local musical instruments in the Piphat Band and uses various types of drums in the performance (Meepom and Pidokrajt, 2013), creating a distinct sound that has become the identity of local music in northern Thailand until today.

In addition to local music, which is often performed at traditional and cultural events throughout the world, jazz music is another genre that is well-known worldwide and can influence the formation of new musical identities. Jazz has played a role in Thai culture since the end of King Rama VI's (Kuabutr, 2016) reign (1880-1925), and it has continued to evolve, as seen by the establishment of Thailand's first jazz band, Rainbow, in 1934 (Yamprai, 2011). King Rama IX's compositions were also influenced by traditional blues and jazz standards. In 1939, (Amatyakul, 2011) the Suntraporn Band frequently played music in the jazz style and included improvisation (Kuabutr, 2016). Jazz music in Thailand developed much further between 1960 and 1962. The Sangkhitsampan Band, the first generation of Thai bands to merge traditional Thai music with Western instruments, was founded. This band creates new songs by adjusting the musical tuning of Thai musical instruments to be equivalent to Western musical instruments and modifying the rhythm, speed, and vocalization style of the original Thai composition to match international perceptions. From the above evidence, it can be said that jazz music has been evolving consistently in Thailand. It has reflected the value and wisdom of Thai musicians and is associated with constant

musical transformation. As a sociomusicologist, Frith (1996:110) stated that music is an identity that allows people to express how they are different from and similar to one another. The formation of musical identity is therefore interesting, especially in the context of jazz music, which is linked to culture and society and has evolved over time according to the advancement of music science and the creativity of jazz artists.

In musicology, identity is described as an expression of the ideas and attitudes of the groups of people that produce music, Beard and Gloag (2016) and understanding musical identity helps people better comprehend the value of each type of music. In the past, research on musical identity often adopted research approaches consistent with Frith's concept (1996), which assumes that groups of people under the same social conditions will produce musical works with similar identities. Ulanov (1979) investigated how the identity of jazz music reflects human identity by studying the works of leading jazz artists, such as Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, and Lennie Tristano. The results revealed a collective identity among this group of jazz artists that is reflected in their signature sounds and specific techniques. A study by Peter Hollerbach (2004) also indicated that jazz musicians remarkably express their identity through an artistic process, covering self-processes and self-identification. Furthermore, David Liebman (1996), a musician and jazz educator, stated that the production of musical works is the process of learning in art and music based on the imitation-style-innovation concept (Liebman, 1996). In Thailand, most music studies have focused on music performance, composition, theory, and music education, with very few examining the relationship between music and anthropology. There have been no studies that explore musical identity in the context of Thai contemporary jazz so far. Thus, it is interesting to analyze the musical identity of jazz music in Thailand and investigate how the dynamics of social change are presented in the

musical works of Thai jazz artists and how jazz music reflects the identity of composers. The findings of this research will contribute to the development of jazz music in Thailand, both artistically and academically, and will benefit all related parties concerning future studies of jazz music in Thailand and international settings. The objective of this study was to analyze and synthesize Thai jazz artists' creative works and explore the relationship between their creative works and social contexts in order to better comprehend and categorize the musical identities of Thai jazz artists.

## Research methodology

### 2.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design, using interviews to collect data from Thai jazz artists. An analysis of their contemporary jazz music was conducted to synthesize and classify musical identities.

### 2.2 Population

The population of this study was a group of people involved in jazz music performances. Purposive sampling and snowballing techniques were applied to select the key informants. Selection criteria were identified as follows: 1) owner of music works with Thai nationality; 2) career and status: in general, the informants may have multiple careers and statuses for example, musician and artist, lecturer and artist, or student and musician and, 3) creative works: all of the key informants were required to have at least one piece of creative work in the style of jazz music, either an original composition or reinterpretation. At the final stage, the study obtained 13 key individual jazz artist informants to be involved in the study.

### 2.3 Data collection and analysis

The interview method was adopted to obtain data from the key informants, including both structured questions related to the research questions and unstructured questions about inspirations, motivations, and goals in creating jazz music. Moreover, the key informants'

creative musical works collected through music websites, online streaming platforms, and physical music albums were examined. The interview data were analyzed using content analysis techniques. The analysis results were verified by the key informants to ensure data accuracy.

### 2.4 Theoretical framework

The present study applied the theoretical concepts of Frith (1996) and Hargreaves (2002), specifying that social dimensions affect the production of musical works, resulting in the formation of musical identity and reflecting the association between music and social and cultural participation. The theory of Liebman (1996) was also adopted to analyze Thai jazz artists' musical works and the process of creating music, both regarding reinterpretation and original composition. Based on the literature review, the research framework was developed, as illustrated below.

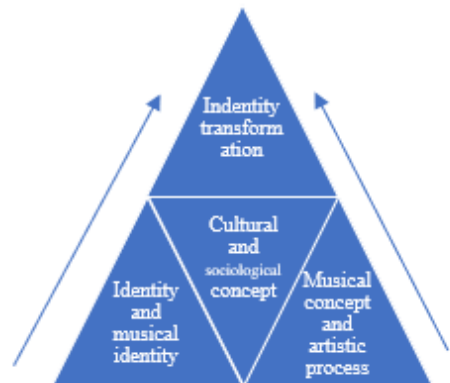


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

## Research findings and discussion

According to the results obtained from 13 Thai jazz artists, all key informants were in the age range of 27-52 years and graduated from music programs, mainly in the field of jazz studies. Although their careers and statuses varied, they were all involved in the professional music industry. Additional careers and roles

included instructor (both full-time and guest), composer, arranger, backup musician, and private business. They had extensive musical experience as professional musicians, arrangers, composers, and nationally known jazz creators. In addition, more than half of the key informants had shared musical experiences, such as jointly performing at jazz festivals and attending concerts or workshops together. The results gained from the interviews and the analysis of creative jazz works are presented in two parts: 1) the development of musical identity; and 2) the types of musical identity of Thai jazz artists.

### 3.1 Development of musical identity

#### 1) Musical creation concept: creative works

The interview results showed that each key informant had their own creative jazz works and recordings and was aware of their roles and responsibilities as professional musicians and artists. Key Informant 1 explained that life background and musical experience, including music listening tastes and favorite artists, are vital to music creation. He tried to use his creative works to reflect the simplicity and present the original characteristics of Thai northern music. He used various composition methods to express his ideas and applied jazz techniques to enliven his works. The reharmonization technique was also used for harmonic organization. His ideas and inspirations are in line with Key Informant 2, who created music based on simplicity and aesthetics. When composing the song “Evening in Ayutthaya,” Key Informant 2 intended to narrate the story of a river and the lives of rural people. The mood and tone of the song are conveyed through the simple sound of *Khlu*, the Thai flute, and beautiful harmonies that go well with the melody, which are expected to attract all groups of audiences. This is consistent with Key Informant 3, who used jazz’s distinctive characteristics in terms of harmonic arrangement, instrumental techniques, and improvisation to captivate both jazz lovers and general audiences.

In addition, it was found that all key informants applied the reharmonization technique to develop their creative works. Key Informant 4 described that, as reharmonization is a major feature of jazz, it is the main basis for both reinterpretation and original composition. Key Informant 4 also added that this technique can be used to generate new harmonies that reveal individual characteristics of sound and to develop composition structure and extra-musical sounds such as effects and synthesizers.

The Thai jazz artists in this study were influenced and inspired by various world-class musicians, such as Herbie Hancock (modern and contemporary jazz), Pat Metheny (jazz and world music), Kurt Rosenwinkle (modern jazz), and Keith Jarrett (free improvisation and modern jazz). They created modern music in accordance with the current state of music creation at the international level. Thus, the key informants’ preferences for favorite artists and their own musical experience seemed to affect their creative works as well.

#### 2) Factors associated with the emergence of musical identity

Hargreaves’s ideas were adopted to explain the factors involved in the formation of musical identity (Hargreaves et al, 2002). The details can be summarized below.

First, concerning culture and social development, musical works used in cultural activities appear to incorporate some original Thai musical styles, such as traditional articulation, melodies, instruments, and vocals. These components are all musical raw materials in Thailand, which may have different details depending on the area or characteristics of music in each region of the country, both in the past and present.

Second, the data gained from the key informants showed there is an integration between Thai and jazz music, which is abstract and subjective and associated with personal musical experience, skills, techniques, and preferences of creators. Key Informant 5 described that he created music by mixing the

original Thai musical sound with modern international sounds. Similarly, Key Informant 6 applied the concept of contemporary jazz to develop his own creative work, “Noi Chaiya and Selemao,” in the Lanna or Thai northern style, using the reinterpretation technique. It can be seen that the music creation process of Key Informants 5 and 6 is in line with David Liebman’s imitation-style-innovation concept (Liebman, 1996).

3) Jazz community: the interaction of social factors

Music in the current world is like a melting pot of sounds from different cultures. Thai jazz is a mix of American jazz and Thai musical characteristics. Thai jazz, like Thai food with its diverse flavors, Thai language with its diverse accents, and Thai people with various backgrounds, integrates local musical components with international musical styles in a variety of ways. The album “Laklan,” released in 2019, is one example of young Thai jazz artists’ creative work. All songs in this album combine musical materials from Thai culture, including traditional melodic lines, with the interpretation of common jazz methods related to the concept of self-expression (Kengchakaj, 2019). Moreover, the interaction of people also affects the development of music. According to Key Informants 7 and 8, they both used social media, websites, and other online streaming platforms to communicate with audiences and solicit feedback for future improvements.

Interactions between people of different statuses in the same jazz community could significantly advance the development of music. Jazz artists, musical professors, amateur musicians, and musical students jointly participating in musical activities, such as jam sessions, band rehearsals, music festivals, competitions, and musical projects, could result in the integration of musical methods and ideas and the emergence of common practices, as Frith specified. (Frith, 1996).

3.2 Types of musical identity of Thai jazz artists

After analyzing and synthesizing Thai jazz artists’ creative works, both original compositions and reinterpretations, the following three categories of musical identity were proposed: 1) regional musical identity; 2) individual musical identity; and 3) cultural musical identity.

1) Regional musical identity

As the musical styles of Thailand’s northern, central, northeastern, and southern regions differ in terms of articulation, instruments, singing, and other related characteristics, the researcher could synthesize the pattern of musical identity from the transformation of creative works as follows.

1.1) Northern region

“Noi Chaiya and Selemao” is a song reinterpreted by Krit Buranavitayawut and his band, the Pomelo Town, blending Thai northern musical elements with jazz content through creative processes. Krit stated that this song represents the Lanna music, which was developed into a form of medley reinterpretation. It is inspired by his remembrance of northern music culture from childhood and the desire to produce jazz music in the form of a modal jazz ensemble arrangement.

This song is based on an original Jaran Manophet version of Thai northern vocal music known as “Folksong Kham Muang,” featuring both male and female vocalists. Krit and the Pomelo Town produced this song in an instrumental version according to their interpretation. They imitated the Lanna melodic lines and lyrics in the form of short poems. They also developed artistic processes for creating music, including melodic embellishment, vocal-to-instrumental conversion, and imitation of local drumming to match the jazz quartet ensemble style (Buranavitayawut, 2018).



Figure 4: Selemao A Section

### 1.2) Central region

Pirach Lukchan's "Evening in Ayutthaya" (original composition) is a creative jazz piece that exemplifies the musical identity of the central region. The artistic process was developed through the interpretation and reflection of locality and native people in the countryside. This song focuses on soft and gentle melodies with a steady rhythm and a relaxed mood. The central region's musical practice was applied, using the sound of Khlui to imitate Thai traditional singing and a grace note that often arises at the end of each melodic phrasing.

The instrumental technique of this song is imitation-based. The piano imitates the sounds of Gongwong and Ranard. The drums imitate the traditional rhythmic pattern of Gongkak and Tapon, called Nartap. The acoustic bass complements the drums, creating a sound similar to Glongthad.



Figure 5: Evening in Ayutthaya A1 Section

### 1.3) Northeastern region

"Lom Hua Kood," an original composition by Titiwat Tripob, is a creative work that reflects the contemporary artistic process of young jazz creators. This song incorporates the concepts and general musical practice of Isan music, such as rhythm, articulation, and melodic phrasing, into

contemporary jazz. The musical elements of Mo Lam Zing, a typical local northeast Thai band, are integrated with contemporary jazz practice. The keyboard functions as a local wind instrument, while the drumming imitates the Clave rhythmic pattern of Isan articulation and some of the standard rhythmic patterns of South-American and African music. The guitar also imitates the sound of Pin, a northeast Thai string instrument.

This song follows a standard ABAB form. Its primary melody is presented through a Thai minor pentatonic scale sound in D minor, with the interpretation of the rhythms of Isan music and the application of the ornamentation technique. The harmonic chord progression is non-functional but employs modern jazz reharmonization methods to develop the main melody and harmony.



Figure 6: Lom Hua Kood A1 Section

### 1.4) Southern region

"Veegoh Elaarkamor Chayohbeetae Dalaelaoh" is an original composition by Passakorn Morasilpin that blends the southern region's religious chants in Jawi with a new melody and harmonic chord progression. Thai musical instruments are used, such as Glongkak (male and female) and Glongthad. The main melody is played by the tenor saxophone and other instruments using the unison technique. This song features various modern musical techniques, such as cannon, unison, and percussion polyrhythms. The major musical characteristics of this song are aggressive emotions and the dynamics and density of the melodic lines derived from the sixteenth note. The rhythmic section focuses on the rhythmic complexity between the Western drum set and

local Thai drums, including Glongkak and Glongthad, according to a polyrhythmic concept.



Figure 7: Veegoh Elaarkamor Chayohbeetae Dalaelaoh “A” Section Main Theme

## 2) Individual musical identity

Individual musical identity is characterized by signature sound and uniqueness, linked to personal identity and self-musical development. Most key informants stated that their creative works emphasized both originality and modernity. They built on the original version based on their desire to create their unique works. As a result, their creative works are associated with self-expectation and have specific characteristics that reflect the creators’ identity. According to Liebman’s concept (1996), jazz music creation in Thailand at the individual level can be categorized into two approaches.

2.1) Thai jazz artists create creative works by blending the concepts of Western music with Eastern music philosophy. Particularly, reharmonization methods are used to combine Eastern music melodies, such as traditional Thai melodies, with Western and modern harmonies.

2.2) Thai jazz artists use musical materials derived from their cultural experiences, such as Jawi chants and Lanna vocal styles, to produce creative works. Moreover, local Thai musical instruments, including Glongkak, Glongthad, and Ching, are often used to control and complement the rhythm. The imitation method is commonly used to create new musical works.

## 3) Cultural musical identity

According to the analysis results, the characteristics of the key informants’ creative works are associated with their cultural background and influenced by social interaction

and common musical experience, causing the formation of a hybrid identity. Phosriwunghchai (2021) suggested that people’s cultural practices, together with globalization and changes in communication technology, have led to the hybridity of musical identities. In Thailand’s jazz community, there is a wide variety of musical exchanges involved with social activities, modern knowledge, musical practice, and the sharing of musical ideas, preferences, and techniques, resulting in the emergence of a cultural group identity that reflects the hybrid and transformed nature of this society.

Some key informants stated that their musical ideas came from personal musical experience, composition style, performing technique, and improvisation. They sometimes combine social interaction experiences with their own cultural beliefs. This is connected to the process of cultural assimilation, which integrates foreign music technology and practice with local and traditional music, as exemplified in the creative works of Titiwat Tripob and Krit Buranavitayawut. The transformation of jazz music in Thailand is thus a cultural melting pot linked to beliefs, ideas, and practices, causing a cultural musical identity to emerge.

These findings demonstrate that creative jazz compositions reflect musical identity on individual, regional, and socio-cultural levels, consistent with the theories of Frith (1996) and Hargreaves (2002), as well as the findings of Macdonald and Wilson (2005). These results emphasize the importance of understanding musical identity in relation to its social and cultural context. Furthermore, regarding the artistic process, results from this study align with the theory of imitation-style-innovation by David Liebman (1996) and Peter Hollerbach’s study (2004), which suggest that jazz musicians distinctly express their identity through the artistic process, thereby creating new forms of contemporary music and further strengthen significantly in their musical identity.

## Conclusion

This study aims to explore the musical identity of Thai contemporary jazz artists by examining their attitude, musical content, and music creation process. The factors associated with the emergence of musical identity include musical movements and phenomena, integration between two musical styles in terms of articulation and contextual elements, and contemporary and hybrid-crossover music approaches in today's world. These factors, along with social interactions both within and outside the jazz community, affect the transformation of musical identity. According to the research results, there are three types of musical identity as follows: 1) Regional musical identity emerges when the traditional musical styles of the northern, central, northeastern, and

southern regions are used as local inspiration to achieve universal expression through artistic processes. 2) Individual musical identity is concerned with musical knowledge and practical experience, expertise in creating jazz music, signature sound, musical techniques, and uniqueness that reflects the individuality of each artist. 3) Cultural musical identity is involved with cultural assimilation through common musical practices, interactions, exchanges, and social participation in creating collective musical experiences. From the aforementioned, it is clear that Thai jazz music has evolved alongside changes in social contexts, with flexible and creative dynamics. The findings of this study will help Thai jazz artists and those involved in the jazz industry effectively build their musical identity, create value for their music, and elevate their works to an international level.

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