

# Music & Politics

## An Introduction

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‘If I could ever stop thinking about music and politics . . .’ (Michael Franti, Disposable Heroes of Hip-Hoprisy)

**J**UST LONELY nostalgia for a revolutionary potential bemoaned by 1960s radicals turned tenured Marxists? Or a resurgent rethinking, reworking and in-yer-face militancy creating lines of flight beyond the voracious cannibalizing capitalist machine? The jury’s still out on youth music culture – has it become another saturated site of hyper-commodification or does it (maybe, ever so secretly, still) embody a subversive capacity generating renewed social critique and offering sonic vehicles for opposition and counter-hegemonic disruption? At a time of effervescent cultural commentary, the signposts for legislative demarcation seem to have shifted and conventional political-musical distinctions appear to have collapsed. What counts as subversive cultural production these days is again up for grabs – particularly as youth forms such as hip-hop, rave or underground dance are much contested and the most popular ‘anti-establishment’ stances seem to take on the tone of parody and nationalism (witness the re-run jingoism of Britpop, or psychedelic rockers Kula Shaker’s Union Jack iconography [Hutnyk, 1999]).

For some, the dividing lines have become porous to the point of paralysis – from musical subcultures constructing ‘communities of resistance’ over against the ravages of mass consumerism to the naff, bland and boring pop culture of the ‘mainstream’, the favoured discriminations have almost everywhere become a question of signification/aesthetics/distinctions/coolness, and a matter of a forever vacillating locatedness and contestable musical authorities. We are no longer able to naïvely ponder the verities of over here and over there, left and right, radical and conservative, traditional and innovative, without taking into account much wider agendas than those

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of musicology, pop journalism and 101 Sociology. It is no longer a matter of asking ‘Which music is political?’, rather ‘What are the particular politics of a music and how is it political?’ (Balliger, 1995). Where does the politics of music fit the socioeconomic, cultural and semiospheric coordinates of our times? Who are the critics best equipped to say so, and which forums are carrying the discussions? There is much to be said for breaking ranks with the judiciary on this particular panel.

We recognize that there is more work to be done in exploring the relationship between music and politics. The array of established methodologies – sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, audience studies, (ethno)musicology and popular journalism – address the object of music from a range of epistemological, or should we say *political* imperatives, which resist any easy amalgamation. The plurality of perspectives and orthodoxies leave the analyst with what could be seen as a bewildering ‘choice’ for the uninitiated. The study of popular music has been replete with oppositional perspectives of production/consumption, commerciality/creativity, incorporation/resistance, meaning/affect which are symptomatic of a real difficulty of analysing a (*non-*) representational signifying practice (cf. Shepard and Wicke, 1997). This is further compounded by many attempts to ascertain the political ‘message’ and effects of music. It is all too easy for the analyst to ‘read off’ the politics of a particular genre of music and create its political constitutencies – as if this process somehow occurs outside the antagonisms of culture and historical contingency.

In this special section of *TCS*, we wish to interrogate specific youth culture formations in ways that seek to challenge the expected categories and protocols of academic recuperation. We are not attempting to shift the already contested theoretical terrain of the study of popular music. There is much to be written on the (in)adequacies of contemporary academic musical writing. Rather, we want to *deepen* the terms of engagement with music as a form of cultural politics. From the beginning we wanted this special section to carry an edge, to energize and refresh. The tired divide between musicology and academic analysis of the ‘rock formation’ on the one hand, and erudite but apolitical and anti-intellectual scene commentary on the other (especially with regard to dance music) had to be transgressed. We could have spent our time in rebuttal and debate with either the camp of academicism or with the glossy lifestyle mags – both music trade papers and trendy pseudo-commentary journals. We did in fact think we would do this. We get a lot out of both angles and openly declare our methodological poaching, and no doubt there are multiple distinctions and gradations to be discerned. Yet we wanted more and less. Unable to ‘cover’ the entire spectrum – and very suspicious of that universalizing desire in any case – we asked our writers for partisan perspectives. But this does not mean that the special section ignores the view that ‘[m]usical meanings are always grounded socially and historically, and they operate on an ideological field of conflicting interests, institutions, and memories’ (Walser, 1993: xiii). In fact, following writers such as Gilroy (1993), Lipsitz (1994), Rose (1994), Taylor

(1997) and Walser (1993) we have tried to situate the study of the texts and practices of music explicitly in a politicized field of cultural struggle over meanings, authorities and values. In this respect we are cautious of any framing and defining of ourselves solely within some of the restrictive disciplinarity operating in the scholastic study of popular music and ‘youth’ culture. Our intention for this section is to offer a set of rampant positions which attempt to push at the boundaries of academic writing, and particularly to do this in terms of exploring the complex and *contingent* relationship of music and politics. This is not to claim that we are able to write outside of the discourses of music/politics/identity, but it is to want to offer other perspectives, alternative modes of writing and (self-) reflection. Many of the contributors eschew approaches that rehearse conventional argumentation and favour a more ‘creative’, contingent (and perhaps riskier) mode of analysis. The ‘phatic and the ineffable’ registers of music (Gilroy, 1993) not only reveal and circumscribe the limits of theoretical analysis, but also provoke the discursive sites of writing about the politics of music.

The special section takes up musics which are marked by their social and political ‘function’ in that they articulate social collectivities; and their sonic-scapes seek to deterritorialize existing subjectivities to new political spaces/places.<sup>1</sup> Of course, this is just one possible way of thinking about and exploring how ‘minority’ groups in the cities of Europe are creating, re-appropriating, transforming and mutating those musical genres, faithfully or unfaithfully correlated with political dissent and subversion. The point is that perhaps any assessment is good if it is one which carries us further into situating music within everyday struggles of cultural survival and as a crucial site of contemporary cultural politics – more than audience studies, ethnomusicology or cultural anthropology ever would dare.

We like to listen, like to dance – politics is more than theory. In writing about music for this section, the intention has been to breakdown the divisions between aesthetics, politics and ethics, and to engage with ‘the political’ from multiple perspectives. If there is a unifying rhythm which organizes the articles in this section it is that they seek to rethink and rework relationships across the line of music and politics from a vista of methodological engagement, strategic theorizing and political commitment. However, it is evident that all the articles engage with a post-subcultures agenda (cf. Thornton, 1995 and Redhead, 1997, for example). Issues of taste, distinctions and subcultural value are central to the politics of contemporary youth cultures. Their highly mediated formations and intimate relationship with consumer capitalism make any easy claims for youth cultures as an oppositional political force problematic. Moreover, the Gramscian-inspired analysis of the popular as a contradictory multiple formation is conceived as a ‘site of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideological production depending on the context of reception or production’ (Best, 1997: 19). Nevertheless, it does not follow that (musical) youth cultures possess an indeterminate politics, or a politics of only taste and distinction as implied by some of the post-subcultures work. But neither does it mean that we are

left only with making political judgements about youth cultures in terms of the degree of oppositionality or 'incorporation' into the (capitalist) mainstream and hegemonic culture. Rather, as Gilbert and Pearson (1999) suggest, it is no longer a question of 'winning' or 'losing', being 'for' or 'against' hegemonic culture. This entails a rethinking of politics as cultural politics in relation to the multiplicity of the popular. We would argue that it is precisely the embattled arena of popular youth culture which is at the forefront of this process of demanding this rethinking. The articles in this special section seek to interrogate how far musical youth cultures are able to negotiate and open up new polyvocal and radical multicultural spaces, and whether existing configurations of power are challenged and disrupted.

We do not single out any one particular genre, and do not worry too much where genres of music merge and intersect (that operation can be left for the musicological police who will 'ensure that our papers are in order' [Foucault, 1972: 17]). No geographical specificity either, as while the focus in each case is upon a European context, even the confines of this emerging supra-nation-state cannot contain musics whose very 'origins' lie in their transnational standing. Here, we would emphasize the need to move beyond the limits of thinking about music as an aesthetic expression or commodity form of the music industry, situated within the confines of the nation-state. The 'affective alliances' (Grossberg, 1992) and transnational border dialogues (Gilroy, 1993) that music engenders should not be ignored or underestimated, even within the context of the intensification of the globalization of capital. The lack of serious attention to the cross-border affiliations, alliances and 'communities of interest' that music provokes (Negus, 1996), can only point to an ethnocentricity in the study of popular music which is no longer tolerable. Moreover, we would also stress that in relation to race/cultural identity and racialized politics, writings about music have either ignored these issues or have on occasions romanticized music for performing a politics predicated on some kind of (expected) racial authenticity. This act of desiring or recovering a politics for the (racialized) Other in music writing needs greater attention, and, in different ways, this is the key area our articles address.

For conventional accounts of music, identity and politics, it has been too easy to stop at subculture and style. Sure, since the 1960s, what counts as the mainstream music in the West (usually white-boy rock) appears to have totally lost its subversive appeal. However much even ol' man Bruce Springsteen is valorized, it has been the music of post-subcultures, of anarchist punks, grungy metal and indie heads, riot girrrls, pill-popping ravers, and hip-hop b-boyz and fly-girls that have been celebrated most intensely for some intoxicating 'alternative' potential (see the important collection in Ross and Rose, 1994) – we now can add the 'Asian underground' to this list. All these forms have at one time traded on their subterranean appeal: joining together a selected few into an imagined community desiring – if only temporarily, and in egoistic delusion – to stand outside the practices of disciplinary power. It has become commonplace to point out how the

‘underground’ relies upon setting up an opposition as opposition (for example, Thornton, 1995). And one which demarcates the coordinates of struggle as the need to maintain itself against the seeping penetration of the detritus of mass culture. What was cool before is so ‘five minutes ago’ now. This cannibalizing reflection may be even further intensified in musical movements which are expressive of subordinated and racialized (diasporic) social collectivities.

We now know that popular youth culture has an adroitness for feeding upon/obliterating difference. And that difference – especially ethnic difference – sells in late-consumer capitalism. The opening articles of this section focus on diasporic musical productions but read culture, language and film as sites of a contested difference. Involving a critique of the ways scholarship and commentary participate in the recuperation, we note the commercialization of culture covers over still indigestible components of ‘difference’. In Koushik Banerjea’s work the racial violence that is meted out to black peoples in Britain is ‘underground’ in a quite different way than clubbers at the Blue Note may utilize the term. Via a critique of celebratory cultural hybridity as the *lingua franca* of contemporary multiculturalism, he shows how there is perhaps currently no better illustration of how ethnicity as a marker of (exotic) otherness has entered into the realms of a European popular musical culture than the example of the ‘New Asian Dance Music’ (Sharma et al., 1996). In Britain the album *Soundz of the Asian Underground* was so rapidly sucked up into the mainstream, while so much more ‘difficult’ matter was left aside, that we are left wondering what spaces remain for a subaltern cultural creativity and production to flourish and ‘succeed’ without becoming instant vacant fodder for the style magazines? In this context, Virinder Kalra, in the second contribution, questions the racialized discourse operating in the accounts of Asian youth musical productions and identity formation. By examining the textuality of Bhangra lyrical performance, he points to the political limits of cultural translation in the act of encountering musics that not only have been marginalized and exoticized, but also are yet further ‘othered’ even as they enter the centre. The translation exercise of ethnographic musicology is shown to be a selective and imperious project, calibrated with the wider socioeconomic priorities of 20th-century exploitation. The intention is not simply to perform a corrective so as to make visible an emerging Asian presence in popular and youth cultures in Europe, nor is it to only valorize subaltern musical discourses for the sake of disrupting the Euro-American centrism present in much critical music-writing output (a task in itself long overdue). Rather the task is also to question the very limits of a European project which seeks increasingly to silence, appropriate, exclude and annihilate the discrepant sounds arising from the heart of a multi-racial and multi-racist Europe at the very same time as it thrives from their overly regulated presence.

In the article by Sanjay Sharma and Ashwani Sharma, a French take on this situation is explored in an examination of the critically acclaimed film *La Haine*, arguably one of the most significant youth films of the 1990s.

This text is interrogated for its aestheticized account of 'ghetto life'. Here, its complex cultural politics of representation – and especially its cogent deployment of music – can be problematized through its production of a self-reflexive 'postmodern' authenticity. This is not a unique case with relevance only to France, or only to Europe: on the one hand there are those who would valorize international hip-hop culture and rap music as the main contender offering the most in a project of social transformation, on the other hand there are those who would point out that, as such, hip-hop has delivered very little (as Greg Tate noted in the first issue of *The Vibe* in 1992, and which is still true). *La Haine's* mode of delivery is complex in both categories. While rap has been an intimate social register for expressing the socioeconomic and cultural conditions of Black and Latino North America, at the same time its entrepreneurial side has spawned a multi-million dollar global industry (which has dislocated rap from its social conditions of production and underground modalities of address, see Basu, 1998). Astute commentators seek to return to the source, reclaiming a lost authenticity in recovering a 'true' rap politics. But once we insert other minority rap practitioners – black/Asian Britons, Turkish groups in Germany or Algerian hip-hop artists in France and so on – the 'story of rap' (MTV special, 26 July 1997) needs to be told from a different time and place. For our project, reference to the international nature of hip-hop would include the specificities of a 1990s European cultural mix, appropriations and reappropriations possible in that mix, and the importance of less often considered cultural priorities and critical politics (especially those of so-called diaspora communities, post-manufacturing decline dislocation, and the racist and exclusionary anti-immigration politics of the Fortress peninsula). Although it is difficult to ignore the potential for rap – alongside other popular musical forms – to reproduce and circulate masculinist and misogynist discourses, Gilroy's (1993) warning not to evacuate issues of ethical address and cultural value in relation to such popular racialized musical forms is still as relevant as ever. At stake is the difficult desire not to dismiss those elements of rap for their disturbing misogyny. It is necessary to explore the contradictory political discourses rap engenders as well as exists in, and the multiple registers of re-address in terms of gendered responses and the politics of sexuality in (black) popular culture (see Dent, 1992, and Rose, 1994).

Some may argue that the loss is that much rap has been divorced from the wider underground political sensibilities of original hip-hop culture, which – we are continually reminded – arose out of a particular sharp set of circumstances in 1970s and 1980s AmeriKKKa. Yet we would re-assert, that the new 'underground' rap practitioners of 1990s Europe can sometimes be no less 'authentic' or politically committed than their USA counterparts. In this context, the multicultural character of hip-hop is a question of political alliances and solidarities within and across the communities, rather than the empty public relations promo-speak of the 'multi-culti' commissars. We would see telling stories about hip-hop, like rap itself, to be a part of such alliancing, and in contest with other geo-morphing appropriations of the forms.

With such alliances in mind, the contribution by Steve Wright offers a unique account of the autonomist hip-hop scene in Italy. In asking the question ‘Can Marxists Rap?’, he avoids the reduction of popular musical culture to an organizing tool for politics or to something all too readily appropriated by the market forces of commercial culture. Instead the contextual sites for these musical productions are highlighted, and the vexatious relationship of militant rap artists to the networks of grassroots political movements from which they arise is scrutinized. Following on from Wright’s telling of the story of Assalti Frontali, the question remains: given that rap has established itself as a ‘global protest music’ (Lusane, 1993), why has it not engendered more united transnational communities of resistance and how far does it play into the transglobal time-slot and niche segments of the CNN/Murdoch/MTV styles? In this regard it might be interesting to ask about the international solidarity work opened by the internationalization of music performance styles, for example, the positive experience of South African band Prophets of the City in collaboration with England’s Fun<sup>^</sup>Da<sup>^</sup>Mental, or the experience of the Kaleef in New York, or of junglist-punksters Asian Dub Foundation (ADF) in Germany, France, Italy and Japan. The next article, by John Hutnyk, takes up this theme in relation to the explicit, though somewhat distorted, ‘Maoist’ activism of ADF. Their work in Europe is fuelled by an anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics that draws both upon the very local context of the East End of London, just as it does – though this may surprise some fans – on the peasant insurgency ideologies of 1960s–1970s rural West Bengal. That such ideas are percolating through wider celebrated ‘cultural’ (and exotic) formations in the West, but cannot themselves be unproblematically valorized since they too trade on alterity (the example here is Arundhati Roy’s Booker Prize-winning novel), is a useful counter to the foreshortened ‘translations’ of cultural exoticas of so much contemporary social science.

The final article by Kaur and Banerjea takes us back to questions of transnationality, diaspora and genre, this time with a jazz feel. The article both sums up many of the arguments about music and politics made throughout this section, but throws us also into new rethinkings of rhythm and race that demands we take note again. The unsettling consequence is that a ‘solution’ cannot be improvised so readily here, but the opening bars at least demand to be heard. As variously analysed in all of these articles, from Kalra on Bhangra, Banerjea on the Underground, Sharma and Sharma on racialized representations, Wright and Hutnyk on musical Marxisms, and Kaur and Banerjea on jazz and fascism, the political charge of music can be neither explained away, nor taken for granted.

In this collection we cannot ever be expected, or expect, to rehearse some finished, totalizing or formulaic tone, with all the programmatic answers programmed into the mix. Our aim has rather been to make *some* politico-musical connections across different social and cultural formations in certain cities of Europe and beyond, and to point toward ways these might be extended with more adequate commentary than hitherto conventional

academic routines might allow. The articles explore diverse contestations of appropriation and creativity. They emphasize how particular forms of ‘underground musics’ in different locations have been expressive of specific political subjectivities within conditions of racial subordination and exploitation, and are capable of articulating political and cultural practices and alliances which can disrupt, and threaten to dislodge, the oppressive securities of the Fortress hegemony.

With brash and noisy clamour then, sometimes discordant, sometimes (we hope) with lyrical play, we offer these takes on a much wider scene. None of us will make any apology for continuing to think about *music* and *politics*, music *and* politics.

#### Notes

1. On deterritorialization see Deleuze and Guattari’s major works, the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972/1984 and 1980/1987) and the special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* devoted to Deleuze in 1997, volume 14(2). For an attempt to graft their ideas on to music, see Back (1996).

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