Musical News: Popular Music in Political Movements

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Abstract

According to a survey of activists, popular musicians perform a journalistic role in political movements. By serving as an alternative headline service, these musicians continue and update an ancient musical news tradition. From the lyrical poets of ancient Greece to Mexican corridistas, music allowed storytellers to effectively compose, retain, and present news. Although print news replaced lyrical reporting as the central channel of news distribution centuries ago, musicians have not completely abandoned their journalistic tradition. Many young activists first hear about important issues, events, and people through listening to popular music. The survey, part of a larger ethnographic project, revealed additional news-related functions as well. Practical implications for musicians and movements are discussed.

Introduction

On June 7, 2006, Chief Baker sang a song called "Bomb a Civilian" at the Doe Bay Café on Orcas Island, Washington.[i] The satirical cover of Culture Club's 1984 hit, *Karma Chameleon*, received the most enthusiastic applause of the evening from a crowd comprised of alternative tourists, organic farmers, and local kids.

In order to understand the song, Chief Baker's audience had to work back and forth between journalism and music, drawing upon news events in New York, Iraq, and Washington D.C. For the performance to have achieved its intended satirical edge, the audience also needed to have been familiar with the lyrics, topic, and tone of the original song. Phrases like "Shock and Awe" were substituted for "they come and go", "red, white, and blue" for "red, gold, and green", and "bomb a civilian" for "karma chameleon." Lines such as "Every day is like survival"--retained from the original song--took on new meaning. The audience reaction demonstrated that the song not only made sense to them, it meant something. The performance mattered.

What do audiences get from listening to politicized pop? Does it inform them? Is it persuasive? Does it motivate political action? Does it build community? An ongoing ethnographic project is attempting to answer these questions, using participant observation, interviews, quantitative content analysis of musical texts, and a survey of labor, human rights, peace, and environmental activists. The survey has provided invaluable context and is the main focus of this paper.

The expectation was that music would be shown to fulfill a community-building role, but not serve significant informational, persuasive, or motivational functions. Surprisingly, the responses revealed that music performs an informational role as well as a strong community-building function. Although music no longer plays a central role in news delivery, it is

nevertheless an important source of information, particularly for young activists.

History

Music and news share a common ancestry. The lyrical poems of ancient Greece performed informational functions, both in choral form (Ingalls 1999:392) and as monody. However, the topical songs of ancient Greece mainly provided mythical accounts of events long past.

The distance separating audiences and events had collapsed a bit by the Medieval period. Minstrels traveled about singing freshly formed ballads concerning battles, leaders, edicts, and natural disasters, in many ways paralleling contemporary journalism in function, if not form.

As late as the Twentieth Century, Mexican corridistas continued the ancient tradition of musical news. As war ravaged the Mexican countryside, cutting off rural villagers from metropolitan news sources, itinerant guitarists traveled from town to town singing songs about major battles, generals, presidents, and interventions from the North. Even during the post-Revolutionary Period, corridos served as the "newspaper of the folk" for many rural people (Redfield 1930:186). Although they have lost their central news role, corridos continue to provide critical news commentary in contemporary Mexico (Wald 2001).

Why did music serve a central journalistic role in so many different historical and cultural contexts? First, music is an excellent mnemonic device. Rhyming verse is an effective means of remembering, retelling, and recording events in oral cultures. Therefore, balladeers and corridistas were judged in large part by the length of their repertoire. Musical rhyme also helped audiences to remember information being conveyed by the balladeers. Labor organizer and musician Joe Hill explained (Smith 1984:19):

A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is

> learned by heart and repeated over and over; and I maintain that if a person can put a few cold, common sense facts into a song, and dress them up in a cloak of humor to take the dryness off of them, he will succeed in reaching a great number of workers who are too unintelligent or too indifferent to read a pamphlet or an editorial on economic science.

Second, one can project his or her voice much further and for a longer period when singing than when simply shouting. Musical news kept the ancestral news anchor from becoming hoarse.

Third, musical technology can be relatively simple and is universally understood. Neither a printing press nor literacy is required, just a voice and, possibly, lyre, guitar, or drum.

Finally, musical performances attracted larger audiences than would have been possible with spoken word alone. The aesthetic advantages of music were no less important to the balladeers than they are to contemporary TV news broadcasters. The latter still score news stories with any number of musical accompaniments, including temporal and tonal variations of the program's signature song. The modern musical news score is arranged to emphasize the tragic, unsettling, or uplifting nature of a news story, changing with the event and broadcaster's intent.

However, although music still plays a role in news delivery, few would argue that it is a central one. Music is no longer the essential source of news it was in medieval Europe or revolutionary Mexico. Although scholars of contemporary popular music might occasionally mention its informational functions, popular music is more often viewed as an ideological narcotic or, in the case of political pop, a community-building tool. Rarely is the informational content or function of popular music taken very seriously.

The Political Functions of Popular Music

Scholars have downplayed the informational elements of political music, instead emphasizing its community-building potential. Ray Pratt argues that by "affectively empowering emotional changes, music promotes establishment of sustaining relations of community and subculture," conditions "that are fundamental to creation of an alternative public realm" (1990: 14). However, Pratt notes that a politically rich popular culture, such as that in the USA, might be symptomatic of an impoverished political discourse in other domains, rather than evidence of a flourishing democracy (1990:202). Borrowing a metaphor from Bruce Springsteen, Pratt hopes that music can nevertheless provide the "spark" movements need to produce political change and a reinvigorated public sphere (1990:202).

Reebee Garofalo's analysis of musical "mega-events" holds much in common with Pratt's analysis of political pop. Although large benefit concerts are "no substitute for a political movement," Garofalo sees potential in the "contested terrain" of popular music (1992:35). "It is in this fertile arena, with all of its contradictions" argues Garofalo, "that progressive forces must either make their voices heard or risk being relegated to the margins of political struggle" (1992:35). For both Garofalo and Pratt, music can provide a means to mobilize counter publics and, potentially, inspire political change.

Mark Mattern places even greater emphasis on community than Pratt and Garofalo. Mattern argues that music can serve as either "social cement or social solvent" (1998:144), but ultimately sees music as an essential element for defining communities, both internally and externally. Mattern's main thrust is very much in line with that of Pratt, Garofalo, and other scholars who view community-building as the main function of political music. Mattern argues, "the communities that musicians have helped to form and sustain provide the social basis for political action that would be difficult or impossible among individuals who are not tied together

in this way" (1998:5). Twenty five centuries ago, Plato argued that music plays a central role in both governance and resistance. Mattern posits a similar centrality for music within the political lives of dissenting and marginalized communities.

Whereas the bulk of academic analysis has emphasized the community-building potential of popular music, few scholars have claimed that it informs. However, authors outside the academy have been quick to make such claims. For example, music journalist Pat Gilbert argues that the "Clash may have woken up Midwest teenagers to the terrible things their government was doing in their name in Nicaragua and El Salvador" (2004:364). Similarly, Bob Marley argued, "music is like the news" (McCann 1993:28). In the following section we will investigate that claim.

Survey Method

A simple five-question survey was administered to labor, peace, environmental, and human rights activists. The goal was to better understand the functions of music in political movements. The main intention was to gain qualitative knowledge. However, the results provided some quantitative insights as well, and demonstrated very significant promise for future research. The questions were as follows:

Question: 1. How old are you?

Question: 2. Has a musician or song ever informed you about a political, social, or environmental issue, person, or event that you had not previously heard of? If your answer is yes, please give an example or examples.

Question: 3. Has listening to a musician or song ever caused you to think or feel differently about an issue? If your answer is yes, please give an example or examples.

Question: 4. Has a musician or song ever inspired you to act on an issue or provided extra

inspiration for actions that you were already taking in regard to an issue? If your answer is yes, please give an example or examples.

Question: 5. Has listening to live or recorded music with other activists ever enhanced your sense of community and shared purpose? If your answer is yes, please give an example or examples.

All five questions were delivered at the same time on a single page.

It was decided to ask if music had "ever" fulfilled the specified function, rather than require a higher threshold of influence (e.g., "Does music inform you?)." The latter construct implies continual as opposed to occasional influence. In addition to the fact that constant influence is highly unlikely, it was first important to determine whether music had played any role at all in these activists' political lives.

A website was created for the survey, along with an explanation of the research project and a statement concerning informed consent. Because of the political nature of the survey, no names or identifying demographic information was solicited other than age. As will be seen, this ethical constraint limited the statistical inferences that could be drawn from the resulting survey data.

A request for participation was placed in 30 public online discussion forums. All of the forums are directly oriented toward discussion among activists in labor, peace, environmental, and human rights organizations. Messages were also sent directly to the "contact us" email addresses listed for 86 national (USA) labor, peace, environmental, and human rights organizations. It is not known how many of those solicitations were shared with the organizations' members. In the email, staff members in charge of email correspondence where asked to consider taking the survey and, if he or she deemed it to be appropriate, to share it with other staff and, possibly, the general membership. No subsequent solicitations or reminders were sent to the discussion sites and organizations, to minimize the sense of personal invasion and

coercion.

Pratt notes that the "conception of political action held by nearly 90 percent of the U.S. population in most studies consists of very individualistic acts, for example, voting in presidential elections for the candidates of one of the two pro-capitalist parties" (1990:204). It was hoped that by sending solicitations to organizations actively engaged in political work, the responses would provide a window into the experiences of citizens whose political action goes much further than an occasional vote. I was also interested in developing knowledge that might specifically assist labor, human rights, peace, and environmental organizations in their recruiting and public outreach activities.

Although the list of national organizations was fairly exhaustive, the voluntary and untraceable nature of the responses means that this is not a truly random sampling of "members of labor, peace, environmental, and human rights organizations in the USA." It is, instead, the most exhaustive sampling possible without acquiring complete membership lists, which would be neither possible nor ethical given the subject matter. The responses contain descriptions of political activities, including acts of civil disobedience. It would be unethical to solicit, maintain (however temporarily), or publish any demographic data that could connect these fairly detailed responses to the respondent.

As a result, rather than a truly random sample this is a voluntary sample, limiting the potential for statistical inferences to a larger population. Therefore, no T-tests or other operations of external validity were completed. Instead, the following statistics are mostly descriptive and measures of internal validity.

Results

The survey site was active from April 18 to August 1, 2007. After removing submissions

from respondents under 18 years of age, 139 responses were collected, in the following age categories:

Table 1

Age	Number of Respondents
18-29	33
30-39	22
40-49	21
50-59	31
60-69	21
70-86	11
Total	139

72% of respondents answered yes to the question concerning informational influence, as compared to 54% for Question 3 (persuasion), 67% for Question 4 (motivation), and 72% for Question 5 (community-building). There was a much greater disparity in the number of examples offered. A response was counted as an example if it included the name of a performer, composer, song title, genre, performance context, or a combination thereof. For example, any of the following would be counted as a single example: “Bob Dylan”, “Bob Dylan’s Hurricane”, “Hurricane”, “Bob Dylan concert”, etc. Respondents provided 241 examples for the informational influence question, in comparison to 123 examples of persuasion, 152 examples of musical motivation, and 160 community-building examples.

Table 2

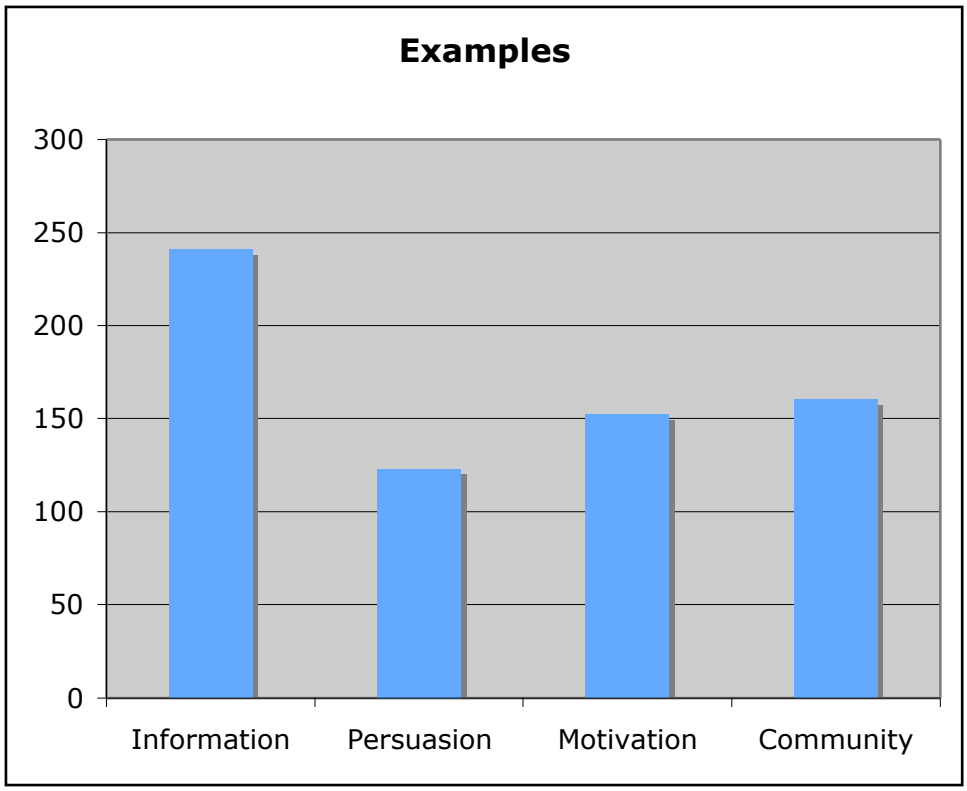
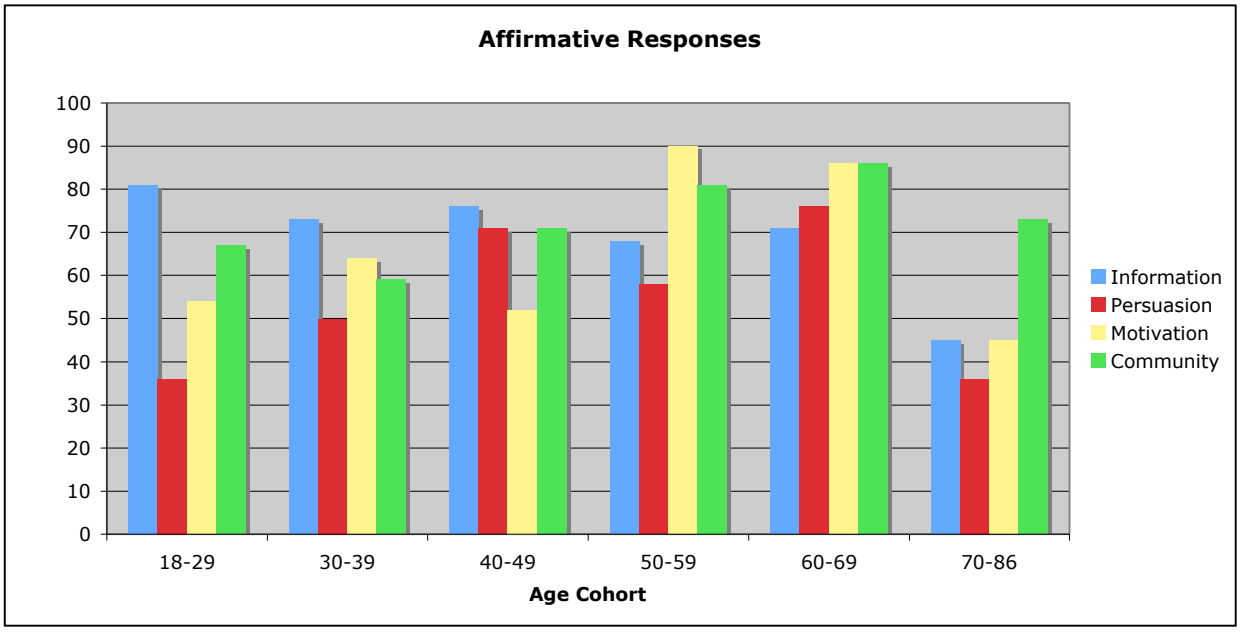

Examples
300
250
200
150
100
50
0
Information
Persuasion
Motivation
Community

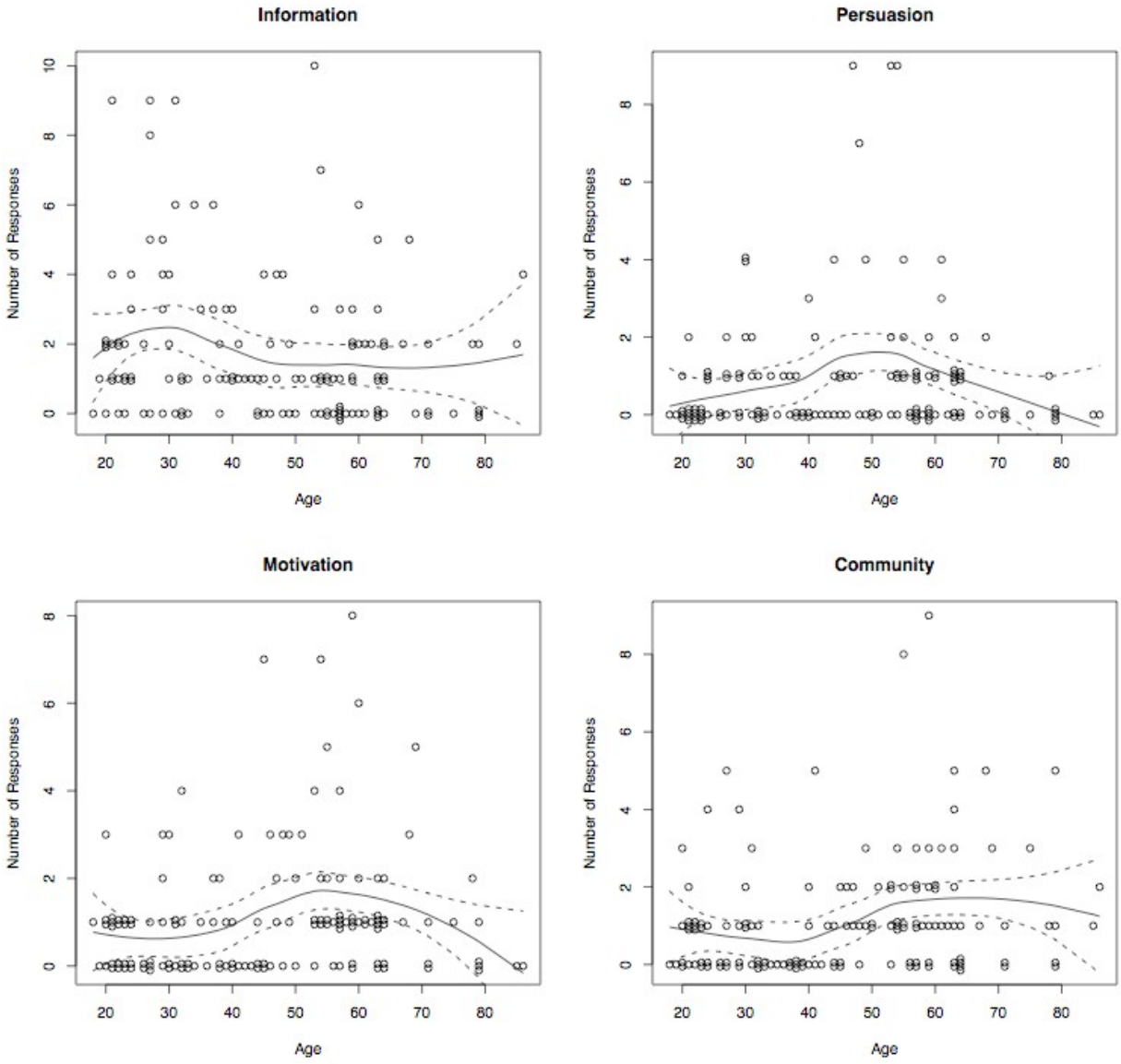
Table 3 presents the percentage of respondents who answered in the affirmative to each question, broken down by age cohort. This and the qualitative data would indicate that the informational function of music might be relatively more important to the respondents during their youth than in the later years.

Table 3



The nonparametric linear regressions illustrated in Table 4 support the same conclusion.[ii] The curved line in each chart represents the mean number of examples. The dotted lines represent confidence bounds. Note the "hump" in the information table for the youngest cohort. Conversely the youngest cohort is at the low end of the other three response categories.

Table 4



It would appear that in this sample of activists, the informational role of music is more important for younger respondents. In fact, even the examples offered by older respondents seem to support that conclusion. Most examples offered in response to the information question appear to be drawn from memories of youth rather than recent experience. A few of the answers to Question 2:

Age 35: “yes, but mostly when I was really young”

Age 41: “Neil Young, Ohio. Was young and had not heard of Kent State until then”

Age 56: “When I was about 13 years old I heard a rendition of Bob Dylan's song, With God on Our Side, and it helped make me aware of the role religion can play in tribalizing people. I am now an atheist.”

Age 71: “Yes, in late childhood or early teens. The Weavers, Pete Seeger, others...maltreatment and deportation of migrant workers, aspects of the labor movement, etc.”

In other words, an inordinate number of the examples in the 30-86 year-old cohorts represent musical experiences as adolescents or young adults. Most of the examples given were first released and, most likely, first experienced when the respondent was a teenager or young adult.

Several respondents explained that hearing about a topic, event, person, or issue in music led them to further exploration:

Age 22, in answer to Question 2: “Yes. The first time this happened, I looked up all the books on the CD jacket to Rage Against The Machine's CD, and found that my public library didn't carry any of them!”

Age 21 (in response to Question 3): “Dave’s [Matthew’s] music inspired me to actually read news about other countries and investigate issues on a deeper level. Their music awakened in me the passion to learn about the world and framed global issues in ways that I could really understand and identify with.”

The above respondent also credits Matthews for motivating his or her choice of college majors and careers.

Although Question 2 is the most directly relevant to the subject of musical news and information, many responses to question 3, and especially 4 and 5, remain relevant. Questions 3, 4, and 5 take us away from matters of news delivery and consumption (i.e., communicating

information) into the realm of production (i.e., motivating action that could potentially result in news events and stories).

There were less "yes" responses and examples listed for Question 3 (persuasion), than for any other. Among the affirmative examples:

Age 29: "Hurricane (Bob Dylan) made me re-evaluate my stance on the police. That was back in my more GOP obedient days and the thought that such purposeful misjustice [takes place] led me to at least question the side of authority."

Age 45: "In my struggles to come to terms with the Israel/palestinian conflict, the songs of David Rovic HAVE helped me get past my bias for israel to see that there are TWO PEOPLES fates at stake. This issue has been the hardest for me to come to terms with, VERY painful. Rovics songs made Palestinians AS REAL to me Jews had always been. [caps by respondent]

Age 86: From an early age I liked military band music and marches made me feel patriotic. Especially "The Stars and Stripes Forever" and "The National Emblem". The Viet Nam era anti-war song "Where have all the Flowers Gone?" helped change my opinion of the infallibility of our leaders. "Blowing in the Wind" made me more aware of human dignity and interdependence.

Many of those who answered "no" to the persuasion question qualified their responses by explaining that musicians and their songs do not persuade them, but instead reinforce their pre-existing opinions and political outlooks. As one respondent explained, "They don't change my opinions, but they confirm and intensify them."

The same holds true for motivation. As was true of the persuasion category, there were fewer "yes" answers in response to the motivation question than in response to the information or community-building questions. Nevertheless, the affirmative responses and examples indicate music can motivate political action. Two examples:

Age 56: Phil Ochs inspired me to join the Vietnam War protests when I was in college in the late

'60s.

Age 57: Ohio by Crosby, tills Nash and Young inspired me to protest at the Burlington IA. munitions factory after the Kent state riots.

Similarly, a 49 year-old respondent described how seeing Bruce Springsteen in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina helped strengthen his or her resolve to assist in rebuilding the city.

In Question 5 activists were asked if music had played a community-building role in their lives. A 22 year-old respondent explained that music adds to a group's "sense of shared purpose." Some respondents enthusiastically described their collective musical experiences:

Age 31: "Hell yeah. It's like being in church, in a way. When you hear truth to power being spoken, it is an incredibly moving, powerful experience and it helps to be surrounded by others who are feeling it too."

Age 32: "Maintaining non-violence in a world so violent is a real challenge, and music helps to create a positive channel for the high emotions that people are feeling as a result of the horrible actions being carried out by factions within the societies of the world."

Others provided more specific examples:

Age 57: "Singing songs of peace together during the protest after Kent State here at the University of Florida was very powerful. To my mind, music is the strongest tool there is for creating community."

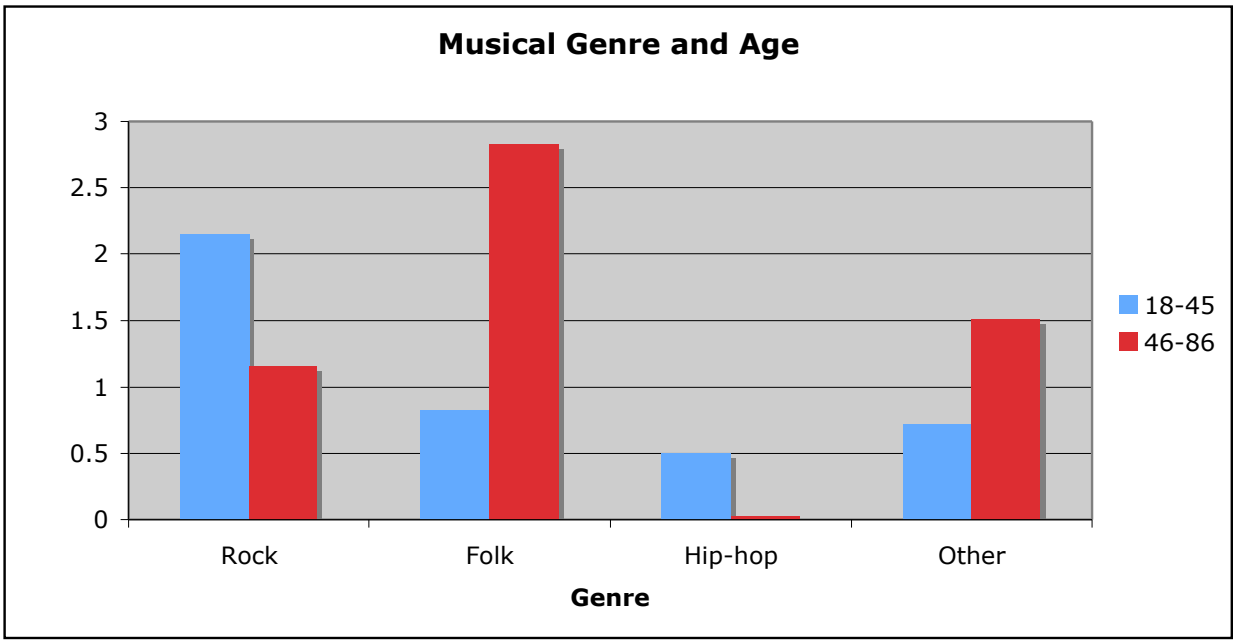
One respondent offered critical insight into the difficulties as well as ultimate goal of musical community-building:

Age 20: "I have had conflicting experiences with live music and a sense of community. At some points I do feel like everyone is living in the moment and having fun with 'strangers' but at other times people are so miserably self conscious that they cannot break out of their own mind and be in a community."

The above response indicates that the central goal of community music-making, like all rituals, is to form a collective body. In turn, the act of forming a collective body makes it possible to attain shared goals. As explained earlier, the community thesis dominates the scholarly popular music literature.

There were several interesting trends in terms of musical genre, especially in relation to age. Not surprisingly, rock was the dominant genre for young activists. Folk was the most cited genre for older activists. Table 5 presents the number of examples presented in each genre category, bifurcating the sample by age. 46 was chosen as the dividing point because it is the median age for the sample as a whole.

Table 5



Surprisingly, of the 676 examples given across all four categories combined, only 12 involved classical composers or performers. A single respondent, a 55 year-old, presented all 12. Although significant academic attention has been paid to the political analysis of classical music, especially in Cultural Studies, classical music in the European tradition would seem to have little relevance to the political lives of these labor, human rights, peace, and environmental activists.

The final set of results relevant to the news question concern performance context and the cited musicians' geographic reach. Whereas musical news was once anonymously penned and sung by relatively unknown local performers in face-to-face contexts, it is now mainly experienced via copyrighted recordings of well-known musicians. Of the 676 examples offered, only 48 referenced local musicians and music-making. Of those 48 examples, most were fairly generic descriptions of participatory events, ranging from impromptu drumming in the street to organized bands and choral groups. Only a handful actually named a local performer. However, it is in some cases difficult to determine if a soloist or band should be considered "local" or an

"indy" act with greater geographic reach. Therefore, the entire list is presented below so that readers can make their own determinations of scale. All 380 examples citing musicians by name are presented in Table 6, along with the number of respondents who cited them (the count does not include names inferred from song titles; the musician must be mentioned by name in order to avoid cases where there are multiple versions of the same song). To repeat, these counts are per respondent, meaning that no matter how many times a single respondent cites a musician, he or she is only counted once for that respondent. For example, Bob Dylan was listed explicitly, by name, by 29 different respondents, although several of those 29 respondents mentioned his name multiple times.

Table 6

Musician(s)	Citations
2 Live Crew	1
Abilities	1
Aceyalone	1
Against All Authority	2
Against Me	1
Ani Difranco	2
Anne Feeney	1
Anti-Flag	1
Arlo Guthrie	2
Aztlan Nation	1
Bach	1
Bad Religion	1
Bahamadia	1
Barry McGuire	1
BB King	1
Beastie Boys	1
Beatles	5
Beethoven	1
Ben Harper	2
Biggie	1
Billie Holiday	1
Billy Bragg	1
Billy Joel	2
Bob Dylan	29
Bob Marley	9
Bobby Darin	1
Body Count	1
Born Against	1
Bright Eyes	1
Bruce Cockburn	1
Bruce Hornsby and the Range	1
Bruce Springsteen	2
Buffalo Springfield	1
Buffy St. Marie	1
Burning Spear	1
Café Tacuba	1
Cat Stevens	1
Charlie King	2
Charlie Murphy	1
Choking Victim	1
Chris Calloway	1
Chris Rice	1
Cisco Houston	1
Clampdown	1
Clan Dyken	1
Collen Kattau	1
Country Joe and the Fish	4

Cranberries	1
CSNY	6
Dana Lyons	1
Danny	1
Dave Matthews	1
David Bowie	1
David Rovic	4
Dead Kennedys	2
Dead Prez	1
Dixie Chicks	5
Doors	1
Earth Crisis	1
Ed McCurdy	1
Eliza Gylikson	1
Everlast	1
Eyedea	1
Fela	1
Five Iron Frenzy	1
Florence Reese	1
Fred Small	1
Fugazi	1
George Harrison	1
Gil Scott-Heron	2
Granary Girls	1
Grateful Dead	2
Green Day	4
Groundation	1
Guardabarranco	1
Holly Near	2
Iggy Pop	1
Immortal Technique	1
IMO	1
Indigo Girls	2
Inti-Illimani	1
Jackson Browne	1
James Brown	1
JayLive	1
Jay-Z	1
Jefferson Airplane	1
Jimi Hendrix	1
Joan Baez	8
JoAnna James	1
Joe Hill	4
John Denver	3
John Lennon	13
John McCutcheon	1
John Seed	1
John Trudell	1
John Fogarty	1
Jonathan Edwards	1
Joni Mitchell	2
Judy Collins	3
Kalib Kweli	1
Kelly Clarkson	1
Kim and Reggie Harris	1
KRS-One	2
Ladysmith Black Mumbazo	1
Larry Long	2
Leftover Crack	1
Leonard Cohen	1
Lynyrd Skynyrd	1
Manu Chao	2
Marilyn Manson	1
Marvin Gaye	1
Masta Killa of Wu Tang	1
Matt Redman	1
Melissa Ethridge	2
Michael Cooney	1
Michael Franti	2
Michael Jackson	1
Michael Joncas	1
Midnight Oil	3
Mimi Fariña	1
Minor Threat	1
Mos Def	1
Natalie Merchant	1
Neil Young	9
Neville Brothers	1
Nickleback	1
Nine Inch Nails	1
NOFX	2
NWA	1
Paris	2
Paul Anka	1
Paul Schwartz	1
Paul Simon	2

Peete Seeger	14	Stiff Little Fingers	1
Pennywise	1	Sting	2
Peter Gabriel	3	Sublime	1
Peter, Paul, and Mary	6	Sweet Honey in the Rock	2
Phil Ochs	12	Syracuse Community Choir	4
Phillips, Craig, and Dean	1	System of a Down	1
Pink	2	The Clash	2
Propagandhi	3	The Coup	1
Public Enemy	2	The Freedom Singers	1
Quilapayun	1	The Men They Couldn't Hang	1
Radiohead	1	The Oysterband	1
Rage Against the Machine	14	The Weavers	2
REM	1	Toad the Wet Sprocket	1
Ricky Skaggs	1	Tom Leher	3
Romanovsky and Phillips	1	Tom Paxton	2
Sarah Jones	1	Tom Waits	2
Saul Williams	1	Tracy Chapman	2
Simon and Garfunkel	1	Tupac Shakur	1
Slackers	1	U2	7
Slayer	1	Utah Phillips	4
Steel Pulse	1	Victor Jara	3
Steve Agrisano	1	Whitney Houston	1
Steve Earle	2	Willie Nelson	1
Steve Goodman	1	Woody Guthrie	11
Stevie Ray Vaughn	1		
Stevie Wonder	1		

It is clear from the above list that activists almost exclusively cited acts with national and global reach. In other words, the musical news discourse travels in the same way as other informational discourses, via electronic mass media. Famous acts--those experienced via recordings and large concerts--were important in all four question categories, including community building. Conversely, local acts and participatory forms were restricted almost exclusively to the community-building responses, and local acts are barely represented, even in the community-building examples.

Discussion

The results show that music has functioned as a source of information for many of the activists surveyed. The informational function of music is particularly important for young people. Perhaps this is because youth are less exposed to news and other sources of information, particularly alternatives to the mainstream. Therefore, they are more likely to gain first contact with an event, issue, or person through music. Conversely, older activists, having already added alternative information sources to their repertoire, are less likely to hear about an issue from music first. Older activists are already exposed to news sources that provide alternative information and know to actively seek such knowledge.

As several researchers have demonstrated, "activist groups and organizations do not fare well as sources for news production" (de Jong et al 2005:6). That might be another reason why artists and audiences alike turn to popular music for political expression and discourse.

For young activists, in particular, music may be a gateway into political activism. For them, popular music might play a role in sparking political curiosity and serve as an interlocutor into dissident discourse. To more fully explore that question, however, would require a survey of both activist and non-activist populations to determine if musical consumption patterns among youth are related to their levels and types of political action.

Having established that popular music plays an informational role for these activists, is it warranted to claim that it serves a "journalistic" function in their lives and work? Is topical music a form of journalism? Admittedly, modern pop songs are fairly shallow in terms of informational content, no matter how rich they might be in emotional context and critical commentary. The audience for Peter Gabriel's Biko, for example, learns little beyond the basic facts: a man named "Biko" died "in police room 619" some day during the month of "September, 1977" in the town of "Port Elizabeth"? The journalists' essential "who, what, where, and when" are there, along

with some contextual commentary as to "why", as well as a brooding sense that there was a gross miscarriage of justice. However, the typical news story contains more facts and information than even the most detailed topical pop.

Yet, how much news information do audiences really consume and retain? According to Machill, Köhler, and Waldhauser, news consumers retain little from a story beyond its most basic facts (2007). Based on experimental evidence, they argue that a rich narrative structure helps news audiences better retain information. Songs are rich narrative structures, meaning that perhaps, although they contain less information, the basic facts might be retained comparatively well. Music might, on occasion, function as an effective headline service.

For many people, news is little more than a headline service. In fact, it could be argued that consumer of a typical news organ in the United States must look elsewhere to get meaningful context and information anyway. Most newspapers and television news programs tend to present fairly brief stories oriented to the basic facts of a story rather than deeper context. While musical journalism is sporadic and highly uneven in its news "coverage", it appears that music occasionally provides seminal information concerning people, places, events, and issues, at least to these activists.

Take the case of Steve Van Zandt. Van Zandt first heard about Steve Biko's death from Gabriel's song, "Biko". That resulted in Van Zandt's powerful "Ain't Gonna Play Sun City" Project (Drewett 2007:44-45). News concerning South African Apartheid was spread via music and a network of performers, audiences, and activists throughout the world. While music is not news per se, popular musicians sometimes perform a journalistic role, one that is more akin to ancient musical news practices and modern newsmaking traditions than commonly acknowledged.

At the same time, the type of musician who provides musical news has changed greatly since the days of the itinerant balladeer or corridista. Local musicians are largely missing from the survey responses, replaced by performers with much greater geographic reach. The following responses imply that it is partly a matter of memory and name recognition:

Age 53: "A folk singer named Danny motivated me about a year ago to work harder for forest protection, after a night of listening to him play songs he had written."

Similarly, a 57 year-old activist mentioned enjoying the music of "some young guys" at a political event.

Nor could I remember Chief Baker's name when writing the vignette leading off this paper. It was necessary to email the venue to retrieve that information. While the event was quite memorable, and the music remained with me, the performer's name was lost. I only encountered Chief Baker's name and music once, whereas I have repeatedly listened to the music of national and global recording acts.

In other words, it might be a matter of brand name recall. Marketing students are told that a consumer will need to hear a product name at least seven times before he or she will recall it. Local musicians do not receive the constant brand reinforcement that well known acts do. Therefore, respondents might not be able to recall the name of an act they have only experienced once, even if the information, persuasion, motivation, or sense of community remains. Conversely, if they hear something from a performer they listen to repeatedly, both the information and source might stick with them. That is merely conjecture, however. Based on the survey, there is little evidence local musicians play a significant role in activists' lives, and almost no evidence that they serve an informational function.

The community-building responses raise additional questions concerning how music

functions within political movements. The answers demonstrate two types of community-building, (1) participatory, localized, face-to-face forms, such as those illustrated by Mattern (1998), and (2) the types of large scale, mass mediated networks and events discussed by Pratt (1990) and Garofalo (1992). While face-to-face music-making and community-building continues to exist, mass-mediated forms of community participation appear to be more common among these activists. The political communities, or perhaps "networks", formed by recorded and broadcast music across great distances of time and space may be as, or even more, important than face-to-face music making.

In fact, the two forms of musical experience are often mixed in the responses. Many of the moments described in the community-building responses involved social interactions around recorded music. For example:

Age 37: "I often share CD compilations of political and revolutionary music with my fellow activists. It does build a sense of community, which is really important to sustaining activism. It is hard work done after working paid jobs so it's important to have that emotional release that music provides."

Age 50: "Sure. Steve Earle fans frequently discuss among ourselves his politics. Even with those who disagree with his politics, they often respond to his issues with thoughtful responses."

Age 60: "Dylan--listened to coming from the awful Democratic convention in 68 Chicago. My colleague and I felt renewed and restored in the face of danger."

Age 64: "Having even recorded music definitely improves the environment and helps to bring us together, as long as it's not too loud and intrusive to the proceedings or conversation."

Some of the activists view their communitarian musical practices in contradistinction to mainstream musical consumption. One 30 year-old was particularly articulate on the topic:

I'd like to point out that the way most Americans experience music is vastly

> different than a 100 years ago. When we first hear of a band, it's usually been heavily marketed by some corporate media conglomerate through promotional crap (I used to work for a public radio station), and more importantly, it's recorded. The idea that real music, live, and unmediated can exist out on the streets, in public places has all but been destroyed by the corporate monolith. Mainly because Americans lead private existences rather than public ones. Most folks who attend concerts have already heard the said band a few times, most likely have their albums, and know what to expect - This was not true at the turn of the last century. To that end, there are still a few good musicians out there that eschew t-shirts, bumper stickers, and other promotional advertising in favor of live unamplified sound. The best example of this I can give you is of an anarchist jug punk band that embrace the format heard in most folk songs - sing-a-longs. there are no lead singers, everyone knows the lyrics, and they chant them like drunken pirates. They break the barrier between spectator and performer - Indeed they transcend the entire concept of identity through the consumption of rebellious music.

As the above respondent indicates, participatory music is the ideal among activists, but not necessarily the norm.

Other responses demonstrate that the simple dichotomy of mass mediated music experienced individually (privately) vs. live music shared communally (public) overly simplifies the complicated relationship between musical production, consumption, and technology. For example:

Q 27: “It is the duty of any citizen in the know to throw some Rage Against the Machine, Bad Religion, Slayer -whatever - on the good ol' iPod and take to Washington.”

In line with Pratt's analysis, responses like the one above show that activists, like many other audiences, create "a kind of cultural free space made of materials taken from thousands of composers and musicians who contribute the essential elements of what is propagated by the culture industries" (1990:14). This can happen both directly, when pop artists compose and perform overtly political music, or via appropriation of ostensibly apolitical content. Just as Chief Baker recycled the apolitical "Karma Chameleon" into a satirical critique of the Iraq War, respondents like 27 year old quoted above find Slayer-on-ipod as effective as djembe-in-circle. There is no intrinsic link between message and medium. The mainstream products of the culture industries form a large part of the symbolic stock that political communities, both Right and Left, use to further their goals.

Such recycling has been going on for a long time. For example, musician and labor organizer Joe Hill (1879-1915) used sacred hymns to deliver his biting political, and secular, lyrics. Subsequent musicians drew on Joe Hill's name and music, folding it into new popular contexts. For example, Alfred Hayes 1930 song, "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night", has been performed and recorded by Paul Robeson, Joan Baez, Ani Difranco and Utah Phillips, Billy Bragg, and countless others. In other words, political communities are connected across time and space by recordings and face-to-face performances alike.

Such communities are local, national, global, mass mediated, recorded, and live. As demonstrated in the survey responses, musically-mediated communities are experienced in geographic and temporal isolation--via ipods, radios, and televisions—and face-to-face, in large groups. However, even the more individuated forms of consumption can be highly social. Although there are temporal and spatial distances between users, individual listeners are often conscious that they share musical, emotional, and political interests with those who listen to the same music. They are consciously networked into a community of interest. Based on the survey

it would appear that, even among activists, musical community is often electronically mediated rather than simply face-to-face. Despite a few comments that lament the rise of electronic mediation as a debilitating loss of community, most appear to find these forms of community equal to the task, and complimentary to face-to-face engagements. Of course, the survey was conducted on line, meaning that this sample might be inordinately oriented towards electronically-mediated forms of communication.

Although Question 2, regarding information, is the most directly connected to journalism, the community-building aspect of music-making referred to in Question 5 is not without its journalistic elements. Musical communities form networks through which political information is shared. In other words, music provides not only information (content), but is also part of the cultural mechanics through which communication is made possible (structure).

Not only are musical communities structural conduits for news, they occasionally produce news as well. The ostensible goal of activist communities is to influence the political behavior of other citizens by forming democratic majorities. While that work takes place via direct contact with other citizens, nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations must also find ways to get messages into mainstream mass media in order to achieve success. That is what makes the "movement-media dance", as Todd Gitlin first described it, so important (1980:17). As Gitlin cautions, the overwhelming importance of mainstream mass media, and the need to "dance" with it, also threatens to diminish a movement's cohesion, integrity, identity, and efficacy. More recently, using a marketing metaphor, Clifford Bob discussed how the need for local activist organizations to engage in a "global popularity contest", mediated by global nongovernmental organizations, can have equally negative outcomes (2005).

Grabbing the attention of news media requires more than analytical argumentation.

Because the Left tends to be either ignored or denigrated by corporate media, it is not easy for labor, human rights, peace, or environmental advocacy organizations to have a positive impact. For such groups to grab the headlines requires creativity and hard work, including that which is required to produce the sorts of spectacular mass rituals that, for mainstream journalists, constitute "newsworthy" events. "For better or for worse," notes Garofalo, "we inhabit the society of the spectacle" (1992:55). Music plays an essential role in political spectacle, from the most localized land preservation protest to national presidential conventions. Music not only informs potential activists, thus being a form of news in and of itself, it also mobilizes groups, thus serving as a tool for activists interested in influencing mainstream news.

Recommendations and Applications

A few suggestions for practical application have arisen out of the survey, although further research is needed to form more solid conclusions and recommendations. The first is aimed at movement organizers. The power of popular music should not be underestimated as a potential tool, especially in reaching younger audiences and potential activists. While it is rarely possible to enlist the assistance of pop stars for local events, it is apparent that their music has great currency and can be productively integrated into organizing activities, even in recorded forms.

The survey reminds us that popular music has a strong age-related bias. Its application within movements should reflect audience tastes in that and other regards. Perhaps the two most common mistakes at political events are: (1) musical acts and genres that do not appeal to the potential audience, especially potential new activists, and perhaps (2) a tendency to over-emphasize local acts, such as singer-songwriters. Perhaps it is better to ask the local progressive DJ to spin tunes that will really interest activists, rather than have the music chosen by political organizers. While many of us retain the romantic notion of local performers stirring the masses

to action, it does not appear to represent the music activists actually listen to, or how they want to listen to it.

As for integrating local music into events, the more participatory the better. Participatory ensembles like those represented in the Honk festival are ideal in this regard.[iii] They take on all comers, regardless of musical talent, and break the barrier between performer and audience. They are an excellent recruiting tool and a means for forming meaningful political communities oriented around music. In addition to big name acts, participatory performances and ensembles seem to truly excite respondents.

Like most people, activists seem to want choice above all things. They are accustomed to choosing music from millions of recordings available at their fingertips, and tend to select brand-name acts when doing so. A smaller number choose to join musical ensembles and contexts within which they can express themselves. Only a very few seem to choose, or at least remember, local performers for whom they serve as audience, in the traditional sense. The day when local musicians could inspire activist audiences directly may have passed. While the concert format still clearly works for political mega-events oriented around big-name recording acts, there might no longer be a place for the performer-and-audience division at local protests, rallies, and similar political functions. The relatively passive position the concert format places activists into, as audience, might be the least effective and desirable of the various options. It is perhaps one of the reasons so many activists simply leave when the program turns to the less participatory, somewhat perfunctory, speech-and-music ritual.

The second suggestion is for organizers to look beyond event-based politics. It is important to recognize that, with or without organizational involvement, political communication is taking place through widely distributed communication channels and networks. This is as true for music as it is for other forms of political communication. From the individual ipod-wearing

activist, to groups of friends discussing the latest Steve Earle CD, clearly much of the political life of activists is taking place electronically and in electronically-mediated environments (de Donk et al 2004, de Jong et al 2005). Face-to-face organizing and live spectacle are complemented, and in some cases even replaced, by asynchronous forms of organization and action. Organizers would do well to find ways to integrate music into electronically-mediate environments as intentionally and successfully as they have done so with live spectacles, such as traditional marches, demonstrations, rallies, and protests. The examples listed in the survey may already be fulfilling that function, serving as the soundtrack for cyber-politics.

However, in the words of one respondent, music "has to be good" to fulfill a meaningful purpose. The most effective music appears to be that which is "good" enough to warrant our troubled attention as an audience (Pratt's Bruce Springsteen or Garofalo's Paul Simon) or, conversely, that which gets the entire community directly involved in music-making, regardless how good any single participant is musically (Mattern's community examples). The former is alive and well on the internet. However, participatory, communal, and political music-making is still underdeveloped in emerging electronically-mediated communication environments, where it might have as strong a potential as its face-to-face equivalents. Increasingly accessible musical performance and recording technologies make participatory and political music-making possible online.

The Larger Project and Future Research

The survey detailed here is part of a more inclusive ethnographic project. The other elements of the project involve a talented team of undergraduate and graduate researchers, including Desdamona Racheli and Pete Noteboom. In addition to the survey, the project involves interviews with performers, quantitative content analysis of lyrics, and, of course, participant

observation. Racheli is conducting the interviews and Racheli and Noteboom are both involved in the participant observation work.

The survey is providing useful context for the other subprojects. Although still at a fairly early stage, participant observation fieldwork has helped shed light on the process of forming a working music ensemble, the task of composing politically meaningful music, and the role of musical performance within political movements. However, the examination of a wider sample of activists has helped focus the ongoing participant observation and interviews. For example, the survey has shown us where much of the political music discourse is taking place, and helped explain why we were finding so little of it in local music scenes.

However, while the survey provides extremely useful context, it does not get at the deeper cultural meanings and functions of music. For example, musical moments like the one that leads off the chapter are not well captured in the survey. Although the information in Chief Baker's Bomb a Civilian was not new to the audience, the song as performed nevertheless played an important interpretive role, not necessarily informing, persuading, or even motivating the audience per se, but rather expressing a collective interpretation of news events shared by performer and audience alike. It takes participant observation to get at that sort of collective performance, to explore the depth of meaning and inextricable relationships between music, meaning, performers, audiences, and politics, none of which can be completely reduced to simple, measurable variables.

This is also where the anthropological definition of significance (cultural) might be at odds with the statistical definition of the term. Although local musicians might not show up in the survey as a significant political force, it certainly matters to local musicians and his or her audiences, no matter how small they might be. Such performers and audiences might slip through the wide net cast by a survey such as this. There are still small, intimate spaces where

local musicians and music thrive. At least in larger cities and countercultural contexts, cafes oriented toward progressive performers attract small, but dedicated audiences. While they might not be as statistically significant to activists as a whole, these spaces are nevertheless extremely important to those who choose to participate. Martha Nandorfy's experience in Canadian coffee houses illustrates the point (2003:174):

> [M]emories and hopes confronted the young Canadians who attended the peñas with a reality that seemed to belong to some secret society in that it was spoken about only within that community, while those who relied on television and other mainstream media seemingly knew nothing about the concentration camps, the disappeared, the CIA involvement and general U.S. support for fascism in Chile and elsewhere in the Americas.

As much as I would have liked such local performance contexts to show-up in the survey—challenging *a priori* beliefs is, after all, the point of such methods—they did not. However, that does not mean that local musicians are not important. Although not significant in a statistical sense, intimate local performances are nevertheless of great meaning to their participants. That is despite, or perhaps due to, their unrepresentative nature.

However, the survey served its intended purpose in several ways. The first was to reorient the rest of the ethnographic project in order to better capture the asynchronous forms of political music making and listening that dominated the survey responses. Whereas we had been mostly approaching the problem of political music as one of local musicians performing for local audiences in political contexts, we are doing more to incorporate the experiences most often detailed in the responses. That means opening up the project to include more recorded and, at the other end of the spectrum, participatory forms of music. Whereas we had initially been seeking out local spaces where political music is made, we now recognize that no matter how important

such venues are to the dedicated participants, they are just one, somewhat marginal, space for political music-making.

More importantly, before conducting this survey I underestimated the informational potential of popular music, as has most of the academic literature. It was an odd oversight. When Gilbert states that the "Clash may have woken up Midwest teenagers to the terrible things their government was doing in their name in Nicaragua and El Salvador," he could have been talking about my experience as a teenager (2004:364). Growing up in Iowa, I first learned about Central American intervention through Listening to Clash records, or at least first came to care about it that way. Their music along with that of Peter Gabriel and a few others demonstrated that there were points of view outside the narrow frames debated in mainstream news. Among other things, these tunes made me question the basic ideology of American exceptionalism. Listening to albums like Sandinista I came to understand that there were a lot of issues, events, and perspectives missing, downplayed, or narrowly covered in mainstream US news. The Clash and other musicians, such as Peter Gabriel, Billy Bragg, and Ani Difranco not only provided information, they made me and others like me curious about things that were not really represented in the news. Interested in music and new ideas, I sought out other, more complete and contextual sources of information. In fact, thinking back to my subsequent political involvement in both the anti-apartheid and Central American solidarity movements in the 1980's, music played a significant role in my becoming an activist. It was at the very least an important "spark" (Pratt 1990:2).

I am apparently not unusual in that regard. During my college years, several politically-active peers told me how they first heard the story of Steve Biko after listening to Peter Gabriel's tune, Nelson Mandela from the song by The Specials, new perspectives on the Nicaraguan Revolution from the Clash, and so on. Nevertheless, it really was not until reading the survey

responses that I realized the extent to which that has been true for other activists. Those sharing my age cohort cite many of the same artists. So too, each cohort of activists seems to have its seminal musicians, from the older folks who cut their teeth on Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, to the youngest respondents who count Rage Against the Machine and Michael Franti among their first sources of alternative information about the world.

Conclusion

There is a strong, often untested assumption that music plays an important role in political movements. This survey is part of a larger project designed to investigate the relationship between music, news, and political movements. Based on the survey results, it appears that music is an important source of information for these labor, environmental, peace, and human rights activists. That is especially true for the younger activists, many of whom first heard about an event or issue in a song. Music can provide essential information about people, issues, and events that are downplayed or even missing from mainstream news.

We entered into this intensive, long-term project in part to answer a basic political question: "Does music matter?" For most of these 139 respondents, the answer is clearly "yes." While that is a foregone conclusion in much of the literature, there has been a dearth of systematically derived empirical evidence. The survey results demonstrate not only that music does matters, but also provide some indication as to how.

In his song Waiting for the Great Leap Forward, Billy Bragg sings:

> Mixing pop and politics he asks me what the use is
>
> I offer him embarrassment and my usual excuses

Based on the survey results, it would appear that no excuses are required. There are several "uses" for music in political movements. Musicians perform several roles in the lives of peace,

human rights, labor, and environmental activists, including an important informational one.

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Bio

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[i] See a video of Chief Baker performing the song at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9UubxM9pjk
[ii] Nonparametric regression completed using loess function of R 2.5.1. R Development Core Team (2007). R: A language and environment for statistical computing. R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria. ISBN 3-900051-07-0, URL http://www.R-project.org. Statistical assistance and code by Aaron Rendahl.
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