

POP MUSIC AND POLITICS



Many studies centred on popular culture, and in particular 'youth music', have agonised over the interaction between society and 'capital'. Sociologists have frequently broached complex theoretical questions surrounding the pop industry's relationship to wider, social, musical tastes. For example, to what extent does the British record industry purposefully tailor socio-musical opinion? Is the music it promotes confined by a 'contrived market', created by the industry's own preferential agenda? And therefore, does the popular music scene represent a 'site' in which artists, the general public and the record industry struggle both ideologically and culturally for positions of prominence?

POPULARITY AND MANIPULATION

Transposing Marx's dominant ideology thesis, Dave Harker views the record industry to be the main dynamo for, and manipulator of, the public's musical taste.¹ He argues that new forms of 'popular music', or 'original trends', are usually initiated by small, unrecognised, 'alternative', 'working class' groups.² Moreover, he asserts that up until the 1950s these musicians, without widespread recognition or acclaim, were free from the 'constraining' 'dictates' of public opinion and, more importantly, 'industrial control'.³ To Harker, a 'tri-actical' structure of interwoven industrial interests manipulates the success of records⁴ by socialising the public's ear. Firstly, he argues, that as the record companies selectively commission songs, they have the power to set the market's agenda: Ultimately they decide what the people will or will not listen to. Secondly, the industry's journals, the *New Musical Express*, *Rolling Stone* and *Melody Maker*, rely on record company advertising revenue, and so promote those tracks most favoured by the record industry's producers. Thirdly, radio broadcasters, both nationally and locally, regularly meet with industrial representatives and music journalists, to 'select' the songs most expected to receive public adulation. At the core of this Marxian argument is the perception of a 'passive' audience, a conglomerate of 'industrially socialised' consumers.

Harker's belief, that fresh musical sounds are 'swallowed up' or 'encapsulated' by capitalism, rests on the simple notion of a distinct industrial socialisation process. The record companies, he says, set the agenda of 'musical acceptability', and therefore dominate the 'sounds' produced by the artists in the name of consumer sovereignty. This in turn stifles musical diversity and thus limits the 'public ear' to narrow pre-set cultural boundaries. The musician in desiring public acclaim and financial reward artistically 'sells out' to the forces of capitalism. He/she sells out to a market in which the public is 'manipulated' or socialised into merely desiring/purchasing 'what's on offer'.

In the British post-war era of unionised labour, full employment and better rates of pay, Harker argues that the new-found economic status of teenagers made them an important 'industrial target'. Secondly, working class youngsters became able to purchase musical instruments for the first time and the late 1950s bore witness to a dramatic upsurge in the number of rock and roll groups. However, according to Dave Harker these developments did not threaten any 'established social order', as has often been argued. They did not represent a working class 'cultural revolution', but instead aided capitalism, which utilised popular leisure as a domain with which to institute social control. Economically it engendered cultural passivity.

"If the lads were down at the youth club, practising, they formed less of a threat than they had done on the street corner. That media construct, 'delinquency', had been a problem for those in authority well before rock 'n' roll; but now it could be more effectively contained, or at least diverted. Aggression could be vented in and through music. Adolescents could be helped to 'socialise' themselves with the minimum of expenditure: they could be converted into customers."⁵

By historically analysing song lyrics, performances and presentations, Harker qualitatively traces capitalism's 'envelopment' of popular music. He says that the Beatles for example, were originally out of the music publishers' hands, and thus free to write their own material. Yet when Brian Epstein finally got them a record contract and took them off on tour ... "these 'happy little rockers' accepted uniforms, submitted to a stylised version of long hair, made sweeter music and became, in short, thoroughly respectable. Even *The Times* began reviewing their work."⁶

For Harker the Beatles' best selling single, "I Want to Hold Your Hand" typifies big business's manipulation of the cultural market place: "... the song has little to do with holding hands. The repetition of the word, and its part in the build-up to the shrill chorus, would have been enough to convince the dimmest pre-pubescent youth that some other activity was being hinted at."⁷ [The Beatles managed to] "... associate their lyrics and music with a beatier version of US High School songs, without directly offending the professional guardians of middle-class decency ... when George Melly writes of this period as one in which 'revolt' was emasculated into mere 'style', we have to question whether there was any revolt in the first place."⁸

Similarly, Jon Stratton, concerned with the popular music press, analyses some of the premises which the writers in the music press take for granted.⁹ Stratton asserts rock music to be a product of the intense demands made by capitalism on the music's creators and originators. Moreover, the intensity of the participators emphasis on 'emotion' as a defining quality, disallows the intrusion of any 'analysis'.¹⁰

For Stratton: "'Art' and commercialism are articulated as two separate domains by music journalists. Consequently one domain may be discussed without the intrusion of the other. The result is an ideological resolution of a real economic conflict. The conflict exists in the industry itself where 'artist' meets 'capitalism' and centres ... on the A & R (artist and repertoire) people."¹¹ Stratton sees the music journalists primarily as 'blur agents'. For the inherent tensions which exist between artists and capitalists are reduced, by newspapers which present both sides as one 'integrated', 'organic' structure.

Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie theoretically juxtapose Harker and Stratton by describing how the pop industry perpetuates and

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reproduces sexual stereotypes. They contend that the 'popular music arena' is a site of ideological conflict, in which radical political songs are classed as 'deviant', and deliberately placed — out of the way — on the market's fringe.¹² They argue that sexually, rock is explicitly 'masculine' in format: [Rock] "... performers are aggressive, dominating, boastful and constantly seek to remind the audience of their prowess, their control."¹³ More importantly, female artists in the industry are themselves 'encapsulated' by these male rules and rarely deviate to "... make their own musical versions of the 'oppositional'."¹⁴ For women to be rockers, to become acceptable, they have, as Jerry Garcia commented on Janis Joplin, to become "one of the boys",¹⁵ their femininity 'sacrificed' in the desire for commercial success. For women rockers, the ideological problem is whether rock can be non-sexist. What would non-sexist music sound like? And, how can rock's dominant sexual message be countered?

Although sexual and political 'protest' songs were a prominent feature of folk music during the early 1960s, the 'rock revolution' rarely made direct references to current political matters. Dave Laing, in 'Interpreting Punk Rock', sees its introduction of political subject matter to be of great significance. Of particular importance to Harker's thesis is Laing's presentation of evidence which highlights the industrial censorship and banning of many Punk songs during the late 1970s. Records about unemployment ("Career Opportunities", "Right to Work"), the Notting Hill Carnival ("White Riot"), the monarchy ("God Save The Queen") and general expressions of an apocalyptic rebellion ("Anarchy In The UK", "London's Burning") were silenced, or at best pushed to the farthest corners of high street anonymity. Both W. H. Smith's and Woolworth's refused to stock many punk tracks in the name of decency.¹⁶

For Laing, the 'Punk Rock' rebellion, empirically highlighted three areas of industrial-ideological hostility.¹⁷ Firstly, a challenge was made by punks to the capital-intensive nature of contemporary popular music. Expensive studio technology was rejected for basic, 'low tech' recording facilities and instruments. Secondly, the ideology of 'artistic excellence' was abandoned. During the 1960s pop artists had been called 'entertainers'; in the early 1970s they were termed 'artists'. To the punks these labels were merely pretentious, authoritarian, capitalist-value-laden, slogans. The previous generation's songs were seen as "grandiose hymns to the multinationals". Thirdly they injected, as we have seen above, political subject matter into a sector which regarded serious issues as taboo.

In the broad sense, all social situations carry political messages. But for Dave Harker, and the other author's mentioned above, popular music is a site of political struggle; because musicians are not 'free' to produce and sell what they want. They are 'constrained' and 'restricted' by the ultimate wishes of 'industrial conditioning'. To these writers, drawing upon the Marxist perspective, records' sexual and political messages are ultimately 'controlled' by the capitalists who, so it is argued, attempt to internalise and perpetuate a plethora of ideological beliefs amongst social actors; a set of values which ultimately justify their own commanding economic position.

PROBLEMS FOR THE MARXIST VIEW

However, these arguments rooted in Marxism are theoretically inadequate and logically defective. Opposing them, Libertarians point to the dominant market position of the consumer. Marxists assume that because firms like EMI, CBS and Polydor are in a position to select, advertise and ensure their records reach public prominence, they must — automatically — be in a position to set the market's agenda — sell the records. Like so many Marxists Harker seems bent on ignoring empirical reality. Thousands of tracks are released annually - many on small labels - and only a few ever 'make it big'. Individuals are free to accept or reject the products offered; they have a choice. At the end of the day economic power must be said to rest with the consumer. Moreover, since the central feature of the capitalist rationale is the profit motive, these Marxists ignore the logical implications of their own assertions. For if we accept that the prime mover of capitalism is

the desire to make money, capitalists will surely market whatever sells. They will promote products irrespective of their ideological content.¹⁸

Indeed, in the case of the Sex Pistols, when they established a firm 'grass roots' following, Richard Branson, the dynamic entrepreneurial chairman of the Virgin Group, signed a contract with them, and soon they were to sell over 200,000 copies of "God Save The Queen".¹⁹ The reason why punk records were not initially broadcast and widely distributed was that the capitalists did not think they would sell. They thought they would offend the public and make a financial loss. The real problem for people like Laing, Frith and McRobbie is that the public tend not to share their desire for 'serious' or 'Political' music. The simple fact is that the popular music market is not the political property of any ideologically reproducing 'superstructuralist' elite, but an inherently reflexive system which expresses the wishes of huge numbers of people.

To argue that rock or popular music in general is inherently masculine in format is again to distort reality. It is widely accepted that many female artists explicitly use their sexuality, their femininity, to enhance and sell their music. So what? For Frith and McRobbie to complain about heavy rock being masculine, and to assert that it is therefore 'sexist', seems to me as absurd as saying that all chamber music can be interpreted as feminine, and that it too must be sexist and therefore morally repugnant!

When Stratton tries to make the dichotomy between emotion and analysis in music he too seems to enter the by now familiar, twilight zone of distorted Marxian reason. As we have seen above, Stratton claims that the intense demands placed by capitalism upon artists lead to a situation where emotion, not analysis, becomes the defining quality of music. But this is absurd. Who is he to say that people do not analyse what they buy? How can emotions be separated from our views and thoughts - our analyses - anyway? And why is it necessarily a bad thing for people to like or dislike a record according to emotion?

Unlike the authors mentioned above, Ian Chambers accepts that popular music is organised in a commercial manner, and stresses its 'social demand'.²⁰ New sounds in rock music for him are a result of vigorous cultural developments which 'emotionally inspire', and provide a dynamic leisure alternative to everyday work routines. It provides an environment where repressed feelings can be released; pop music psychologically motivates and physiologically replenishes.

For me too the popular music scene in general represents a forum which democratically transcends cultural boundaries, spectacularly responds to a vast divergence of consumer demands, and highlights capitalism's inherent potential to promote widespread social — organic — solidarity. However, the arguments presented by the puritanical Marxian opponents of 'free market music' must be said simply not to warrant the attention they have attracted in the past. Their assertions are not only false and irrational, but they offer no other empirical mechanisms (such as the free market) with which to operationalise their idealistic project — and for that reason more than any other, they lose credibility as serious analysts.

NOTES

1. D. Harker, *One For The Money*, Hutchinson, London, 1980, p.92.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 87-99.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. p. 76.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
9. J. Stratton, 'Between Two Worlds: Art and Commercialism in the Record Industry', *Sociological Review*, Vol. 30, 1982.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
12. S. Frith, and A. McRobbie, 'Rock and Sexuality', in *Screen Education*, Winter 1978/9, Number 29, pp. 3-5.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
16. D. Laing, 'Interpreting Punk Rock', *Marxism Today*, April 1978, p. 124.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.
18. D. Graham and P. Clarke, *The New Enlightenment*, Macmillan, London, 1986.
19. D. Laing, *op. cit.*, p. 124. Richard Branson signed a contract with the Sex Pistols the morning after their famous interview with Bill Grundy on ITV's 'Today' programme - during which 'offensive' language was used, resulting in the resignation of Mr. Grundy.
20. I. Chambers, *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture*, Macmillan, London, 1985, pp. 207-212.