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**Invisible republics and secret histories: music, movements and memories**

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## Introduction

In 1997, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington released a boxed record set: the *Anthology of American Folk Music*. At first glance, this might have seemed like yet another worthy example of archival preservation. It was, however, more than that. Intended only as a limited edition, the set sold thousands of copies, despite its cost (\$85), and ‘received twice the number of votes of its nearest rival’ in the *Village Voice* annual music critics poll (Hoberman, 1998). But its surprising sales and critical approval are mere details compared to the other claims made for the compilation. The six CDs are celebrated not just as an extraordinary repository of American music, but as a key document in the narrative of a nation. The *Anthology* helps constitute, in Greil Marcus’s (1997) words, America’s ‘invisible republic’. This paper is an exploration of this idea, that music - and popular music, in particular - can tell the story of a people and their ‘imagined community’, their invisible republic.

The *Anthology* was made in 1952 by a bohemian film-maker, poet, literary editor and discographer called Harry Smith. Drawing on the new possibilities offered by recording on vinyl, and hence the opportunity to sequence several songs on one side (compared to the single song per side of a 78rpm record), Smith brought together recordings made in the US in the 20s and 30s. The *Anthology* contains country fiddle tunes, folk ballads, church hymns and gospel chants, performed by people like Uncle Eck Dunford, The Carolina Tar Heels, Doc Boggs, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Mississippi John Hurt, Furry Lewis and Sister Mary Nelson. And then there are the songs - ‘When the Great Ship Went Down’, ‘Mississippi Boweavil Blues’, ‘Old Shoes and Leggins’, ‘Fifty Miles of Elbow Room’, ‘White House Blues’ - eighty-four in all, from almost as many different artists, and recorded sometime between 1926 and 1932.

In those LPS, Smith tried to draw a musical and social portrait of a country and its diverse peoples. Smith demonstrated a taste for the weird and the bizarre, but he was not a folklorist, in the sense that he used only commercially recorded examples, discs made to sell.

There are tales of revenge and murder, of lust and love; strange, bleak and funny accounts of lives lived in the cracks and on the margins of American society. Because Smith was not trying to create a musical typology, because he was more intrigued by the voices and the experienced they recounted than the formal sociological and musicological categories into

which the singers fitted, listeners are forced to hear the music more as a noisy conversation than an exercise in formal archivism. This is one reason why the record, both in its original incarnation and in its new digital version, has been seen as telling a story, constructing a narrative of an America in which the American dream is part ideal, part farce, part nightmare. But what needs to be asked is how music can do this. Certainly, music, like any form of historical evidence, does not simply document the past; that past has to be reconstructed and interpreted via an appreciation of the form and character of the document. Music poses particular (but not unique) problems of interpretation. To make the obvious point: the lyrics of a song cannot be taken as a straightforward revelation of experience; they are not, in this sense, oral history. The words are written to be sung, and as such are bound by rules of genres and rhyme, and in the singing, in the 'grain of the voice' (as Barthes famously called it), many other meanings are set in motion. Thus, insofar as the *Anthology* represents a historical document, it needs to be interpreted carefully. But the suggestion is that the *Anthology* represents more than one piece in the jigsaw of social and political history. It is also claimed as part of the present, and not just as part of a musical conversation across the generations (though it is this - the first track, 'Henry Lee', has itself been covered by Bob Dylan, PJ Harvey and Nick Cave), but as one of the narratives through which the present is *lived*.

### The *Anthology of American Folk Music*

To begin, though, with the more obvious features of the *Anthology's* significance. The compilation does not just document musical life at one specific time in history. Indeed, it does not even do this: Smith's choice is idiosyncratic and highly selective, but it was his unorthodox approach that gave the *Anthology* its power. As Robert Cantwell (1991: 367) notes, Smith refused the obvious compiler's categories. He brackets his choices under three headings: ballads, social music and songs. He rejects the traditional or typical categorisations - work songs, mountain songs, etc - and in doing so focuses attention on the voices and the stories they tell. This simple move initiates the larger narrative that people hear in the *Anthology*, the narrative of nations and peoples, but it also starts the intergenerational musical conversation too.

Harry Smith's archival work was to be an inspiration to a generation of US folk performers. Cantwell (1991: 364) describes the *Anthology* as founding the 1960s folk revival,

for which the *Anthology* was 'its enabling document, its musical Constitution'. Bob Dylan told one recent interviewer: 'I heard that record [the *Anthology*] early on when it was very difficult to find these kind of songs ... That's where the wealth of folk music was, on that particular record. For me, on hearing it, was all these songs to learn. It was the language, the poetic language - it's all poetry, every single one of those songs, without a doubt, and the language is different than current popular language, and that's what attracted me to it in the first place.' (Interviewed by Serge Kaganski, *Mojo*, February 1998: 64) The voices and songs on the *Anthology* legitimated a kind of musical personality and perspective. Dylan used those songs and characters, not just to produce his own cover versions, but to establish his own artistic persona. Dylan's use of the *Anthology* can be detected from his first recordings, through to the *Basement Tapes* (recorded in 1967; released in 1975), to *World Gone Wrong* (1993). The songs and singers of the *Anthology* created the possibility for Dylan to adopt the voice of the disenchanted, those who sat on the margins, but who still held to the vision of the American dream. Writing of Dylan's contribution to the folk revival, Greil Marcus (1997: 21) argues that the singer 'embodied a yearning for peace and home in the midst of noise and upheaval, and in the aesthetic reflection of that embodiment located peace and home in the purity, the essential goodness, of each listener's heart.' And Marcus goes on to claim that 'this purity, this glimpse of a democratic oasis unsullied by commerce or greed' was what people in the 1950s and 1960s heard 'in the blues and ballads first recorded in the 1920s and 1930s'.

Why they heard it like this, as a particular union of politics and aesthetics, is a result of the context in which people listened. The *Anthology* emerged at a time when the politicised folk of the Weavers and other Communist sympathisers were being forced off the airwaves by Senator McCarthy (Denisoff, 1971). Left-wing culture appropriated the *Anthology* as an example of the people's spirit, but the compilation did more than simply embody a political populism. It also gave a particular aesthetic to those politics. As Cantwell (1991: 364-5) points out, the fact that the anthology appeared on long-playing records, which were typically reserved for classical music, bequeathed the music a distinct cultural capital. The music of the poor was 'reframed as a kind of *avant garde* art'. And, argues Cantwell (1991: 370-1), it was an art that engaged the aesthetic of those who were reacting against the impoverished imagination which television's emergence threatened to impose. In defining

itself *against* the new video culture and *with* the avant garde and left populism, the music of the *Anthology* founded both an aesthetic style and a political vision, and it was this combination which legitimated Dylan's musical (and political) persona.

Importantly, the story of the *Anthology's* musical role does not end with Dylan. It still features in accounts of contemporary music. Indeed, its moods and aesthetics continue to haunt a whole tradition of US music making. Beck, one of the current stars of US music, recalled recently: 'I was immersed in stuff like the *Anthology of American Folk Music* when I was growing up. Of course, a certain amount of it was romantic and macabre and intriguing and fascinating. That faraway strange quality is definitely something I gravitated towards when I was younger. And I guess travelling through America, I realised that a lot of that strangeness is still out there, only it's maybe a little more frightening because it's alive here and now.' (Quoted by Barney Hoskyns, 'The shock of the old', *Mojo*, December 1998: 64-5).

The rock writer Ben Thompson (1998: 93) has identified an entire genre, which he calls 'Woodchuck Nation' (a play on Abbie Hoffman's 'Woodstock Nation'). It is a genre that, says Thompson, sounds 'strangely familiar' to anyone who has heard the *Anthology*. Bracketed in this new category are performers such as Sparkelhorse, Smog, Freakwater, Lambchop, who play music that is a ramshackle, stumbling amalgamation of country and rock, in which eerie voices whisper about lost souls and dark secrets. To offer an illustration of the musical legacy of the *Anthology* in the present: *Deserter's Songs*, a record released last year by the band Mercury Rev, contains a song called 'Holes':

Holes, dug by little moles, angry jealous  
Spies, got telephones for eyes, come t'you as  
Friends ....

Some 60 years earlier, Bascom Lamar Lunsford, a lawyer and singer whom Smith includes in his *Anthology*, sung 'I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground', in which he tells of a railroad man who will kill you and drink your blood as wine. The two songs, with their strange mix of the whimsical and the weird, seem to echo each other.

The thought that the *Anthology* provides a musical template for current music-making is important to being able to locate in a larger narrative, but it is only a small, first step. We need now to turn attention to the grander claims, the ones that locate the music in the histories and imagination of peoples. In doing this, I want to concentrate on the writer who has

contributed most to this interpretation of the *Anthology* and of popular music generally. Greil Marcus, described by Sean Wilentz (1998: 101) as ‘cultural historian-cum-mysterian’, has in a series of widely read, and acclaimed, books propagated the idea that popular music constantly makes and remakes the political myths and reality of ‘the old weird America’, configuring invisible republics and telling ‘secret histories’.

#### Narratives of nations: Greil Marcus’s invisible republics and secret histories

This idea of music telling a story, of it being part of a conversation taking place across generations and vast distances, is a key theme in Marcus’s writings. Although Elvis Presley died over twenty years ago, Marcus claims that the singer continues to haunt contemporary culture. Marcus (1992: xiii-xiv) talks of ‘Elvis Presley’s second life’, a life which is lived as ‘a great, common conversation, sometimes a conversation between specters and fans, made out of songs, art works, books, movies, dreams; sometimes more than anything cultural noise, the glossolalia of money, advertisements, tabloid headlines, bestsellers, urban legends, nightclub japes. In either form it was - is - a story that needed no authoritative voice, no narrator, a story that flourishes precisely because it is free of any such thing, a story that told itself.’ For Marcus, popular culture does not just form part of a collective narrative, the stories it tells are political stories.

In his book about the *Basement Tapes*, the 1967 collaboration between the Band and Bob Dylan, Marcus talks of the way they helped to reconstitute the ‘invisible republic’ of the *Anthology*. He describes the recordings as telling ‘a story’ and as sounding ‘like a map’ (Marcus, 1997: xiii). Of one song, ‘Lo and Behold’, he writes: ‘A new nation, reclaimed in this song as if the country were still new, still unsettled ...’ (Marcus, 1997: 65). And in connecting these sixties’ recordings to the *Anthology*, Marcus describes them as representing ‘a mystical body of the republic, a kind of public secret’. Acted out in this republic is a vision of ‘democracy’, but not a democracy of material resources and governance; it is instead a ‘democracy of manners’, in which ‘people plumb their souls and then present their discoveries, their true selves, to others.’ (Marcus, 1997: 125). And all of this is contained in the music, in the cadences of a banjo, in the bending of a note.

This investment of music with the identity and character of nations, with visions of democracy and invisible republics, is a constant theme in Marcus’s writing. In his first book,

*Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock'n'Roll Music*, Marcus describes the blues singer Robert Johnson as evoking a 'shadow America' (1975: 36); of the Band's songs, he says they 'bring to life the fragments of experience, legend, and artifact every American has inherited as the legacy of a mythical past', that they looked for 'the traditions that made new things not only possible, but valuable; a flight from roots they set a sense of place' (Marcus, 1975: 62 & 50); and Elvis Presley, Marcus suggests, 'takes his strength from the liberating arrogance, pride, and claim to be unique that grow out of a rich and commonplace understanding of what "democracy" and "equality" are all about: no man is better than I am' (Marcus, 1975: 204). What Marcus is suggesting in each of these tributes is not just that images of America can be 'read off' the music, that the country is reflected in the songs, but rather that the music helps to *constitute* America, creating a sense of what it means to be 'American', and also that the pleasures of the music, the way it moves its listener, is bound up with their experience as Americans. For Marcus, the pleasure is the politics; the songs are the country.

A similar sentiment echoes through Marcus's rambling account of punk, *Lipstick Traces : A Secret History of the 20th Century*. Throughout Marcus's writing there is the sense that what matters is what is submerged, what is lost to view, what lurks beneath surface. In *The Invisible Republic*, he talks of the 'mystery' of America, not as something to be laid bare, but rather to be recognised as part of the daily reality of American life. In *Lipstick Traces*, the pervasive theme is the secret, unspoken narratives that link 1970s punk to the artistic and political avant-garde of this century, the Dadaists, the International Situationists and many others. Recalling the Sex Pistols' performance at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco, Marcus (1989: 440-1) writes of singer Johnny Rotten: 'As he stood on the stage, opened his mouth, and fixed his eyes on the crowd, various people who had never met, some who had met but who had never been properly introduced, some who had never heard of some of the others, as Johnny Rotten had heard of almost none of them, began to talk to each other, and the noise they made was what one heard. An unknown tradition of old pronouncements, poems and events, a secret history of ancient wishes and defeats, came to bear on Johnny Rotten's voice - and because this tradition lacked both cultural sanction and political legitimacy, because this history was comprised of only unfinished, unsatisfactory stories, it carried tremendous force.' For Marcus, the Sex Pistols

were, in moments like this, becoming part of a secret, unofficial history, a history of people who said ‘no’, who challenged the dominant story, the conventional narrative. *Lipstick Traces* itself accumulates these moments of dissent: of, for instance, the members of the Lettrist International who preached a sermon in Notre Dame, in the middle of Easter high mass, on the death of God and the corrupting influence of the Catholic Church; or of the nightly performances at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, begun in 1916, where on stage someone plays an invisible violin, another bangs a (real) drum, yet another moves his bare bottom like a belly dancer, and Madame Hennings does the splits (Marcus, 1989: 192-3). For Marcus, this dissident art forms part of a political narrative, which, each time it surfaces, moves history moves on, leaving in its wake another story, one that refuses and resists the dead weight of convention and common sense.

In each of his books, therefore, Greil Marcus links the pleasures of popular music to a political narrative. In the music of punk and Presley, the blues and the Band, he hears the traces of hidden histories and political beliefs. It is tempting, particular for social scientists, to dismiss such claims as mere rhetoric, as the hyperbolic extravagance of an over-active imagination. It certainly is true that Marcus offers little in the way of ‘hard evidence’ to support his arguments. The reader is treated to a sequence of vivid anecdotes, intriguing byways, and novel interpretations, but not the working out of some elaborated theory of history and culture. But none of this, it seems to me, provides a reason for discounting the general claim about how popular music is linked to political narrative, nor the specific claims about the place of works like the *Anthology* in that narrative. Firstly, the fact that it is ‘rhetoric’ is not, in itself, a reason for discarding the argument. All culture, whether high or popular, is a mediated product; its meanings are partly a creation of how it is written about. A work of art is not approached in innocence, with ‘open’ eyes and ears, but with pre-established values and expectations. In his study of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Wesley Monroe Shrum (1996: 7) writes of the vital role played by the critic: ‘The difference between high and popular art are neither intrinsic to the art itself nor simply an effect of the kinds of people that produce and consume the cultural objects. Rather, they are a function of the discursive practices that mediate the relationship between art and its public.’ Critics and journalists help constitute the meaning of a cultural experience. They may do this through the way they identify a particular kind of audience (Thornton, 1995); or through the way they



disguise the commercial realities of cultural production (Stratton, 1982). The point is that rhetoric is a necessary and inevitable part of cultural pleasure, and the issue is not, therefore, avoiding rhetoric so much as selecting the appropriate rhetoric. Thus, what Marcus represents is a particular rhetorical constitution of popular music, and what I want to do is draw upon evidence and arguments which allow us to reflect further upon his claims.

### Political narrative and the sound of music

One of the implications of drawing attention to the mediation of cultural experience is that we need to be wary of reducing music (or any other cultural form) to a single isolated text. It makes little sense to ask questions about what this song or that song is 'about', or to talk about 'the music itself', as if there was a settled meaning. At the same time, rhetoric has to work on something, and has to recognise the different ways in which songs move us (or fail to move us). As Simon Frith (1996) argues, critical discourse identifies the things that matter in a song, the values we attribute to it (its 'authenticity', for example), but these discourses do not determine absolutely the feelings we have when we hear it. In thinking about music as music (as a voice, a melody, a rhythm), the question becomes: how does a sound acquire a political dimension; what does it mean to talk about music as 'political', as being part of a political narrative? .

*i) Lyrics:* The most obvious way to address the question is to focus on lyrics. The words of a song provide 'hard evidence' of what the song is about and what the composer wishes to say. And there are, of course, many songs which are about political issues or which are intended to generate a political response. These are not confined to folk traditions inhabited by such figures as Woody Guthrie or Pete Seeger or Joan Baez, but can be heard in rap and country, rock and salsa, and in the work of performers like Victor Jara, Public Enemy, Sting, Billy Bragg, Tracy Chapman, and Crass. In most of these examples, the political sympathies and the political message are relatively clear, at least as read off the lyric sheet. But of course, the politics of even the most simple text can be ambiguous and multi-layered. Or to put it another way, lyrics which appear to have no explicit political content, may still convey a highly ideological message. That at least is the conclusion of Mecthild von Schoenebeck, who analyses contemporary German folk-like song (one of which, 'Patrona Bavariae', by the

Original Naabtal Duo topped the German charts and sold over a million copies). Schoenebeck (1998: 290) writes that these songs, despite their ostensible concern with love, nature and childhood, actually fit ‘perfectly the political programmes and ideas of Germany’s right-wing parties.’ The fact that the lyrics lack any direct political references is not evidence of an apolitical character. Simple celebrations of pleasure - like, say, Little Richard’s song, ‘Rip it up’ - can contain implicit criticisms of a protestant work ethic and deferred gratification (Lipsitz,1990: 116).

However lyrics encode their meaning, they also tell a story. They do this, most obviously, by recounting a tale. The ballads on Smith’s *Anthology* are almost all like this, as are songs by Dylam like ‘The Ballad of Hattie Carroll’ or ‘George Jackson’; many rap songs also develop a conventional narrative form as they tell tales of ghetto life. But even a song written in the present tense still establishes a narrative: today’s broken heart evokes yesterday’s cheating and the day before’s romance. ‘All songs,’ writes Simon Frith (1996: 199), ‘are narratives.’ But though words matter to these narratives, they are only one part of the song’s narrative resources.

*ii) Voice.* Lyrics exist to give the voice something to sing - not the other way around. In popular music, the voice invests the words with feeling, and hence with meaning. While the nuances of interpretation that different opera singers bring to the same score are no doubt important, the scope for re-interpretation is more limited than that for pop performers, who just by the tone of their voice can alter the song’s feel and its meaning. Contained in different versions of the same song (the same words, the same tune) are different visions, different narratives: alternative accounts of how the singer encountered their present predicament. How they do this is not just a function of technique, but of genre, of the conventions for articulating certain feelings. Thus, political anger can find expression in an open-throated roar or in a sweet falsetto. Whatever the rules, the voice serves to convey a character, to testify to an experience - to set up a narrative. Writing of the voices to be heard on the *Anthology*, Cantwell (1991: 375) suggests: ‘They accompany us, like so many Virgils; they reveal in the *Anthology*’s eerie environment of whines, cries, shouts, growls and other weird vocal sounds, the path which our own traditions have taken, at the same time positioning our own voices in relation to sounds lost, abandoned, or forgotten.’

*iii) Melody.* Meaning, including political meaning, is not captured only in the words and the tone of voice, but also in the melodies. This is obvious in the way film scores work, but it is true too of songs generally. Tunes are form of narrative: we follow a melody, making sense of its twists and turns - and in doing this, we also anticipate its route because we are familiar with the conventions which it observes. Sometimes these expectations are disrupted, and the tune follows an unusual course; and sometimes these unconventional melodic moves are interpreted politically. Susan McClary (1991: 155-61) writes about how Madonna disrupts 'the tonal narratives of the masculine canon' by refusing its conventions, and in doing so asserts her [Madonna's] identity as a woman. Even without recourse to musicological analysis, a similar point can be made about the way a melody conveys a (political) meaning by comparing two versions of the 'same' song. Bruce Springsteen's 'Born in the USA', as it appears on the album of the same name, has a different melody and arrangement to the demo version. The strutting, proud Vietnam veteran of the former is nowhere to be heard in the rumbling uncertainties of the latter.

Tunes can also convey their narrative through parody and sampling, through the borrowing of the references that become attached to a sound. Think of the Woodstock Festival in 1969 where Country Joe's 'I-feel-like-I'm-fixing-to-die-rag' used its ragtime accompaniment to counterpoint the song's anti-war anger; or of Jimi Hendrix deconstructing 'The Star Spangled Banner', a performance described by Charles Shaar Murray (1989:24) as 'the most complex and powerful work of American art to deal with the Vietnam War.' Today, in an echo of Hendrix's deconstruction, the technology of sampling is used literally - to recycle the past, to create new histories and connections. Paul Gilroy (1993: 37) observes of an 80s dance genre (Go Go): 'This style consists of a continuous segue from one tune to the next. The popular black musics of different eras and continents are wedded together by a heavy percussive rhythm and an apparently instinctive antiphony. A recent concert in London by Chuck Brown, the kinpin of the Go Go, saw him stitch together tunes by Louis Jordan, Sly Stone, Lionel Hampton, Melle Mel and T Bone Walker into a single epic statement.' In sampling from the past, it is being suggested, music does more the recycle history, it recovers the associations which music carries with it.

*iv) Rhythm.* Just as melodies can convey meaning and create narratives, so too can rhythms. Talking about the rise of rap, the jazz musician Max Roach said ‘the politics was in the drums’. He explained: ‘The rhythm was very militant to me because it was like marching, the sound of an army on the move. We lost Malcolm, we lost King and they thought they had blotted out everybody. But all of a sudden this new art form arises and the militancy is there in the music.’ (Quoted in Lipsitz, 1994: 38). In Britain, rhythm was politicised, not by historical association, but by the state. The Criminal Justice Act sought to outlaw the playing of ‘repetitive beats’ in its attempt to stamp out illicit raves (Rietveld, 1998). In New York, until relevantly recently, the authorities regulated the city zones by introducing ordinances which restricted the number and type of instruments to be played in a club. Drum kits were one victim (Chevigny, 1991).

Even without these moments when beats were caught up in a political story, rhythm still establishes a narrative. ‘To grasp the “rhythm” of a piece of music (which is in the end to listen to it),’ Frith argues (1996: 153), ‘means participating actively in its unfolding and trusting that this unfolding has been (or is being) shaped - that it will lead somewhere. It is at once a physical and mental process; it involves aesthetic and ethical judgements.’ This thought, that in the unfolding narrative of rhythm ethics and aesthetics are conjoined, serves to indicate again the way in which musical form refer beyond their musicological function.

*v) Performance.* Songs may articulate a political narrative through the voices, words, melodies and rhythms which shape them, but they can acquire further (or different) significance in performance. This can happen simply in the way that songs are introduced. In concert, Bruce Springsteen introduces his song ‘Growin’ Up’ with a long monologue about his home life, about how there were two things that were unpopular in his house: him and his guitar, and about how his dad wanted him to be a lawyer and his mum a writer. The story ends with the defiant announcement that tonight they’ll have to settle for rock’n’roll. The story becomes part of the song’s dramatisation of the American dream, drawing as it does on a celebration both of personal triumph (Springsteen as successful rock star) and of rock’s rebelliousness (Springsteen refighting his adolescent rebellion).

In the same way, the reggae band Misty in Roots used to establish the politics of their music by the way they introduced it. They began their concerts with this announcement:

‘When we travel this land, we walk (work?) for one reason. The reason is to help another man think for himself. The music of our art is roots music, music which recalls history, because without the knowledge of the history you cannot determine your destiny. The music is about the present, because if you are not conscious of the present, you are like a cabbage in our society. Music which tells about future and the judgement which is to come. Our music is roots music ...’ (Misty in Roots, *Live at the Counter Eurovision 79*). Here the group are making the connection between past and present both explicit and political, but importantly the speech is not just a lecture tacked onto the concert, it is an integral part of the performance.

But introductions are not the only means by which a performance establishes a political narrative. In the GDR, in the months before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, live performances by East German rock bands played a key part in articulating the spirit of, and focusing the politics of, the reformist movement (Wicke, 1992). The very fact of these events (rather than their specific content) carved out a public space in opposition to the regulatory ambitions of the state authorities and censors. The concerts not only symbolised a collective desire for change, they actively promoted the change.

*vi) Context.* Arguably this last example is as much about context as performance. Either way, it is evident that the context in which music is heard also affects profoundly the meaning and significance which attaches to it. Schoolchildren in Soweto, resisting the attempt to impose the Afrikaans language, sang a chorus from Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* - ‘we don’t want no education’, giving the song a new meaning and significance. Linda Colley (1992: 337) tells the story of the campaign for universal suffrage in 19th century Britain: ‘When 60,000 men, women, and children marched on Manchester in 1819 ... the brass bands that accompanied each division of the demonstration cheered them along by playing “God Save the King” and “Rule Britannia”’. As Colley comments the songs were less an indication of national loyalty, but a pragmatic device for ‘countering the authorities’ condemnation’ of their activities as seditious. The formal meaning of the song and the singing disguised a more complex political story. Thomas Cushman (1995: 42-3) records how the glam/glitter rock of the British band T. Rex became a major icon of the St Petersburg music community long after T Rex’s leader was dead, and long after his music had been forgotten in the West. As with

the GDR, state intervention - through censorship and sponsorship of popular music - invested Western pop with a political significance it would not have when heard at other times and in other places. The music acquires its significance, its pleasures, through the connections it establishes, through the way it links audiences in the East to the West.

This last part of the paper has been about the ways in which popular music can generate meanings (and pleasures) and how these can be seen to establish political narratives. To this extent, it helps to explain the kind of claims made for the *Anthology* and by Marcus's larger claims about secret histories and invisible republics, but the focus has been primarily on how music can be connected politics, and not how it becomes *part* of politics as a lived experience. I want now, in the final section, to look at the ways in which music animates political thought and action. To this end, I look at music's relationship to history and memory, personal and collective identity and political movements.

### Music and history

It is a commonplace of music (although less so of other popular cultural forms) that it serves to date past times and experiences. To hear a favourite record years later is often to be dragged back to those times. This familiar banality disguises, however, a more important dimension. For Robert Cantwell, the *Anthology* is a form of 'memory theater', a 17th century idea about how all human knowledge can be ordered and recalled. The key to the memory theater was the sequence in which knowledge was arranged. Smith's compilation makes oblique reference to this 400 year old device, but Cantwell (1991: 374) makes it explicit: 'In the musical cosmos, then, the *Anthology* was a sacred narrative, reaching from origins to last things in a sequence of performances ...' Whatever the memories contained within the *Anthology*, music's capacity to recover the past is seen as politically significant. George Lipsitz, for example, argues that electronic mass media are unique in the way they enable people to recover a past which they would otherwise not have encountered. In particular, it allows them to escape the heavy burden of official history, the history of their oppressors. And through these encounters with these alternative pasts, they can explore values and beliefs that are permissible in art, if not in social life. 'Popular music is', writes Lipsitz (1990: 99), 'the product of an ongoing historical conversation in which no one has the first or

last word.’ Taking Little Richard’s ‘Good Golly Miss Molly’, Lipsitz’s (1990: 110) traces the ways in which African-American cultural history is bound up in this one song: ‘the band plays a rhythmic 8/8 time featuring the “rolling bass” notes popularized by “boogie woogie” piano players in the 1930s. The drummer complements this basic rhythm with accents and afterbeats that give the song a polyrhythmic quality reminiscent of African music.’ Music establishes, in this sense, an alternative cultural history, and this can then become part of an alternative political history. Echoing Marcus’ ‘secret histories’ and Cantwell’s ‘memory theater’, Tricia Rose (1994: 100-101) argues that rap ‘is a contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless. On this stage, rappers act out inversions of status hierarchies, tell alternative stories of contact with the police and the education process, and draw portraits of contact with dominant groups in which the hidden transcript inverts/subverts the public, dominant transcript.’ In a song called ‘Sound of Da Police’, the rapper KRS-1 playfully elides the words ‘overseer’ and ‘officer’, connecting slavery with contemporary police harassment. Just as the powerful write history, so the powerless try to re-write it, and popular music, as the most accessible of mass cultural forms, becomes a crucial site in the struggle for authorship and for the memories that give meaning and legitimacy to that struggle. This, I think, is what lies behind Greil Marcus’ recovery of the secret histories of which punk was a part. But it is important to recognise that the music, while working with the past and with injustice, is not political treatise. Robin Kelley (1997: 37) counsels against reducing ‘expressive culture to a political text to be read like a less sophisticated version of *The Nation* or *Radical America*’; instead, it is important to recognise ‘the deep visceral pleasures black youth derive from making and consuming culture.’ The political narrative constituted by music works only because of the pleasure it generates.

### Music and identity

The power of pleasure is alluded to by Richard Rorty (1989: 37) when he writes: ‘Anything from the sound of a word through the colour of a leaf to the feel of a piece of skin can, as Freud showed us, serve to dramatize and crystallize a human-being’s sense of self-identity.’ For Rorty, identity is a product of drama and pleasure, not of revelation or expression. How this happens, how, in particular, sounds can ‘dramatize’ and ‘crystalize’ an identity, depends on taking a particular view of the way music works (and of the pleasures we derive from it).

Simon Frith (1996: 273), who also uses an anti-essentialist, narrative account of identity, argues that music has a special role in the constitution of identity ‘because of its unique emotional intensity.’ What he means by this is that music does not simply represent certain ways of being, it actually *creates* them. Music, by the way we ‘absorb’ it into our lives and bodies, gives us the experience of being one kind of person rather than another. Music provides a narrative by which an identity is realised, not expressed or revealed.. And what is true for individual identity is also true for collective identity. Frith (1996: 273, his emphasis) writes: ‘Whether jazz or rap for African-Americans or nineteenth-chamber music for German Jews in Israel, it both articulates and offers the immediate *experience* of collective identity.’ The music is not a symbol of identity so much as a way of living it and its pleasures.

Typically, music’s role in the creation of, say, national identity is concentrated upon the performance of national anthems or ‘indigenous’ folk traditions. But national anthems and folk musics are not the only musical sources of collective identity. Bob Marley fashioned a hugely successful career around a rastafarian vision of the return to Ethiopia, and set it the music, not of the promised land, but of the reggae of Jamaica (itself a re-working of rhythm’n’blues). And today, Turkish migrant workers in Germany find a sense of collective identity in the rap music of the United States. As the Ukraine struggled to create its own separate identity, to break from that of the Soviet Union, music played an important part. What is fascinating about this particular story, though, is the ways in which traditional musical cultures - the folkloric - proved peculiarly inadequate. They provided only nostalgia for a lost or utopian past. It was, instead, rock music that was the most potent symbol of nationalism. As Catherine Wanner (1996: 140) writes: ‘the ability to mimic the Western pop music tradition lent some credence to nationalists’ claim that Ukraine is an Eastern European country and does not belong in an “Asiatic Empire”, as many independence supporters refer to the Soviet Union.’ The Ukrainian performers, however, did not simply imbibe and regurgitate Western pop. They customised it to emphasise their ‘Ukraineness’. And when these songs were played at a festival, Wanner describes how the divide between performer and audience broke down as the fans formed ‘a human chain, encircling the singers on stage and each other. Some formed spinning circles of twenty or more people all holding hands. Others formed swirling chains ... The soccer stadium [the venue] became the central town square as the “imagined community”.’



Another ‘imagined community’ was constituted through music by Bosnian Muslims in the former Yugoslavia. There, a particular religious musical form - the *ilahiya* - became a powerful symbol of national identity. The *ilahiya* worked by conjuring up ‘the “good old days” of faith, when Islamic order was much more respected and powerful, when girls were modest and virtuous, and men religious’ (Lausevic, 1996:127). And just as some nationalist movements create their present through a music associated with an imagined past, so states try to manage people through music. Under apartheid, the South African broadcasting system denied urban music to their township listeners, and played rural songs instead - as part of the homelands policy which refused to recognise the rights of citizenship to those enduring urban squalor (Andersson, 1981). And today, the chants of Tibetan nuns are censored by the Chinese authorities, and their singers sentenced to seventeen years in prison (where two have been killed) for recording their songs (*Index on Censorship*, 1998: 134) .

Whatever the intention behind these different uses of music, they do not depend upon literal links to the past or to specific communities, to ‘authentic’ (ie unsullied and uncommercialised) folk musics. They depend upon the ways in which music creates the experience of collective identity - and the threat that these pose - through the pleasures they offer.

### Music and movement

Just as music can dramatizing political identities and political histories, so it can be implicated in political action. Even before the Criminal Justice Act (1994) politicised the holding of raves in the UK, these events were already being invested with political importance. There were the self-conscious politics of collectives like Spiral Tribe and Exodus, who organised raves as part of their ecological and communitarian ideals. These politics were overlaid by a larger resonance of the so-called ‘DiY Culture’ in which cultural gesture and political protest were linked, and which, as McKay (1996) suggests, both deliberately and unintentionally revived the 1960s counter culture: in its celebration of hedonism and in its rejection of a technocratic order. The raves were not just instruments of a political cause. The raves provided a way of *living* those politics. Raves that lasted days and were attended by 25000 people provided experience, it was claimed by one participant, of ‘a world you didn’t know existed. The sun goes down, the moon comes up and you see the

world spinning. My record is nine days. It's a shamanic thing' (Quoted in Rietveld, 1998: 248). The re-organisation of time, the creation of an alternative narrative, has been used, most famously in the Birmingham subcultural analysis, as a marker of resistance and subversion (Willis, 1978). The rave itself became, within this rhetoric, an alternative social world, one that broke with the codes of the protestant work ethic, that refused the rhythms of the working day, and that replaced the hierarchies of dominant order. The rave was a democratic event, as embodying a spirit of collectivism: there were no stars demanding attention, just dancers looking at each other (McKay, 1996; Hesmondhalgh, 1997) .

Whatever weight we place on these claims about the politics of rave culture, the underlying suggestion - that music provides a narrative for living out political action - warrants closer scrutiny. Certainly, it is the thought behind some recent work on the new social movements. In *Music and Social Movements*, Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison (1998: 2) argue that, on the one hand, music serves to preserve the memory of past political action and to inspire future mobilization, while on the other hand, social movements create the conditions and space - the context - for 'cultural growth and experimentation'. Eyerman and Jamison argue that culture generally functions as a 'cognitive praxis' which provides the resources for mobilising social movements. Music becomes 'both knowledge and action, part of the frameworks of interpretation and representation produced within social movements.' (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998: 23-4). Their arguments echo Cantwell's particular claims for the role of the *Anthology* in the folk music revival. Eyerman and Jamison suggest that American (egalitarian) political culture in general, and the labor movement in particular, created a context for a radical populism within folk music. In the same way, the civil rights movement, it is suggested, imbued soul music with 'a special intensity and responsibility.'

Eyerman and Jamison (1998: 77) are not just suggesting that the social movement provide a context for the music, investing it with significance, but that the music itself articulates 'forms of social solidarity' which serve as 'exemplary social action.' Music provides a way of 'bearing witness' and 'truth telling', of recounting the story that underpins the social movement's political project. Thus, they write: 'Music as experienced and performed within social movements is at once subjective and objective, individual and collective in its form and in its effects. Through its ritualized performance and through the memories it invokes, the music of social movements transcends the bounds of the self and

binds the individual to a collective consciousness.’ (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998: 163) This argument incorporates the earlier claims I considered: for the way musical narratives articulate memories and identities. It also echoes a theme that has surfaced through out the paper: the way music allows people to experience and to live politics.

### Conclusion

This thought - that music is a form of *social* experience - is what, I think, connects the route I have tried to trace in this paper, and which, I hope, shows how music acts as a political narrative. It is there in the musical narrative created by the *Anthology*, through its integration into the populism of the folk revival and hence into an ever-evolving musical style. It is there too in the summoning up of an invisible republic of voices, which give form to Marcus’s ‘democracy of manners’. It is also to be detected in the secret history of those who renounced the dominant conventions and manners, and remained largely hidden from view, but who still found ways of telling stories of resistance and refusal. These were the images and ideas which writers like Greil Marcus heard in the music. These claims depend upon the way in which music can become part of the social world, the way it can be read politically, and more importantly how it can be felt and experienced politically. This has been the concern of the latter parts of the paper. I have not proved that music tells a political narrative, rather I have tried to show what such a claim would mean. I am not sure they can be ‘proved’ in the social scientific sense. Ultimately, these arguments rest upon a rhetoric about how music works, about the pleasure it gives. The kind of assumption that has to be made about this pleasure is that defended by Simon Frith (1996: 274) who argues: ‘Music making and music listening ... are bodily matters; they involve what one might call *social movements*. In this respect, musical pleasure is not derived from fantasy - it is not mediated by daydreams - but is experienced directly: music gives us real experience of what the ideal could be.’ Such claims are inimicable to the way in which a 1952 compilation of songs from the 1920s and 1930s can remain part of the invisible republics and secret histories of the 1990s. Even if these words alone are insufficient to persuade the sceptic, then maybe the sound of Sister Mary Nelson singing ‘Judgement’ (recorded in a Chicago Studio in 1927) might work.....

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