

An introduction to music & dance

The Revolution will be a mix tape

Oh No Bonobo

2003

Articles in this section

- Devil's Music
- The revolution will be a festival
- Sacred, Sweet, Wicked Ecstasy
- Joe Hill
- Dancing for Our Lives
- The Decline of the Choral Dance
- Tectum Theatrum
- The Ray Charles Riots

Jazz. Funk. Folk. Punk. Trance. Hip Hop. Old Time. Blues. Electric. Acoustic. Recorded. Live. When we decided to do an issue on "Music and Dance," we knew that we could not devote too much time to any one genre or artist.

When we thought of Gil Scott Heron, we knew that the revolution could not be a multi-platinum CD by some corporate rock clone; we knew that the revolution would not be brought to us by Clear Channel Communications; we knew that the revolution would not censor anything, except for songs like "Courtesy of the Red, White, & Blue" by Toby Keith. We knew that the revolution would be live, or, at the very least, a home-made mix tape/CD passed among friends.

Do times of dark turmoil and unease trigger innovative cultural strides? When people as mainstream as the Dixie Chicks and Madonna critique conformity, modernity, religion, and war, nobody can ignore the evocation of creation against alienation. While not every song released this year is a direct reaction to the Bush Empire, much music today reflects the social turbulence of the new world disorder.

However, not every song should be overtly anti-Bush to qualify as radical. For example, during World War II, the most ground-breaking artists didn't make paintings that said "Hitler is bad." Just having the world swirling around our heads makes the cultural mutations sharper, richer. And what about the role of revolutionary culture?

Think of Watts-born bebop great Charles Mingus, who said of his 1957 recording "Haitian Fight Song": "I can't play it right unless I'm thinking about prejudice and hate and persecution, about how unfair it is. There's sadness and cries in it, but also determination."

Think of Detroit's Layabout's discussing songs like "Fuckalot" and "I'm Tired" that appeared on their record No Masters in the late 1980s. Songwriter Alan Franklin refers to the Situationists and the critique of everyday life as inspiration in his instigation of a sort of danceable Debord.

Think of punk shows that were as much DIY festivals, vegan potlucks, and a cooperative contact-sport in the sweat lodge of slam. Think of a folk music, traveler kid with a heat-up, bumper-sticker covered guitar, ready to sing you anything from the Earth First! or IWW songbook as you roast dumpstered tofu dogs over the open fire.

Think of eclectic, elaborate, anarcho-pagan rituals that hide inside orgiastic, half-naked electronic dance parties that last all night until elated participants collapse at sunrise. Think of any oppressed people for whom music is the only autonomous and indigenous tongue capable of uniting them and disarming the oppressor.

Can musical work consciously produced to incite during times of upheaval inspire dissidents to take that next step? Can songs help to change the opinions of those who are not already keen on revolutionary change? In the 1970s, the Slits put out records that they described as "armed playground chants" for the punks living with no future in Thatcher's England. Around the same time, the Clash released the single "White Riot" with text printed on the back of the record sleeve that read: "Youth, after all, is not a permanent condition, and a clash of generations is not so fundamentally dangerous to the art of government as would be a clash between rulers and ruled."

Or is it just that there's something deliciously escapist and utopian about music? There are actual soundscapes of other worlds and places of dance (like the illegal warehouse raves of ten years ago and the Reclaim the Streets! hootenannies of today) where participants reorganize and reinvent the world in unexpected ways that dare us to think differently about the quotidian challenges facing us all.

In the recent documentary film *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*, we see how the music and dance of the townships helped overturn the savagely racist South African police state. So, where is the tipping point that pushes music from ecstatic entertainment and escapism into raw, revolutionary epiphanies of excitement, rage, awareness, and intense concentration? Or how can it be all of the above? The following pages provide only a glimpse from a few of our writers about how the old culture can erode from within through the crucial beats and bold refrains of our dance and music.

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