# Music on the March

**How Protest Learned to Dance**

Jean Leason

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Another Saturday afternoon rally. Signs wave above the Crowd. Someone has been speaking semi-audibly through a borrowed PA system."\What do we want" they shout. "Fill in the blank!" cries the crowd, a little bored. A bass drum becomes audible a block away, and people begin to tap their toes. As it comes closer, people begin to shift their balance in time with the tune. Why not wave that banner like a flag? Why not dance instead of shuffle? As a festive mood rises, the band leads the rally down the street.

In the past five years, marching bands have been sprouting like mushrooms. Some are spontaneous pick-up bands and instant bucket brigades, but many are longer-term musical projects. Some consist mostly of professional musicians, while others welcome anyone who can bang a pot in time. They vary in structure, inclination and musical style. Many of them, however, share a vision of music as a way to disrupt and transform public space.

The Infernal Noise Brigade at the 2004 Republican National Convention protests in New York City.

## On the march

The first brass marching bands walked in front of the Ottoman Empire's armies to frighten people (one wonders what they were playing) and to direct troops. Based on the Ottoman model, Prussia and other European countries adopted brass bands. As the need for audible troop direction waned with the advent of the radio, military marching bands took on a support role in ceremony ("fanfare" means brass marching band in multiple languages).

The film *Brass Unbound*, which features interviews and recordings of post-colonial brass bands from across the globe, is a testament to cultural and musical diversification of the brass band form. Another interesting dispersal of brass music occurred when Roma (Gypsy) people fled the Ottoman Empire in the 1860s, carrying with them their music and brass horns; many landed in mostly Black parts of town in the southern US. Brass music has mixed with musical styles around the world, creating a unique common language which continues to cross-pollinate.

Many members of today's political marching bands began their musical adventures as kids in school. In public schools, music funding (where it exists) tends to support marching bands over, say, mariachi or hardcore punk. High school bands are usually required to play at team sports events and pep rallies, and to compete. Remnants of the military origin of these bands are found in their costumes, marching terminology, and patriotic tunes, although many school bands now also play hip-hop and rock. Members of political marching bands are well aware of the crowd-rousing effects of a loud brass band or drums; the use of these in protest is a subversion of the state form of the marching band. The "legitimacy" conferred on this state form is made confusing by its playful inversion–red and blue become pink and silver; lockstep becomes dance.

## Name that tune

This kind of subversion and mixture is a central feature of brass music. As empires have crumbled and the music of militaries has melted into local cultures and musical traditions, a rich variety of sounds have evolved. Played on common instruments, these songs have been mingled and elements of innovation shared for centuries.

Some of the new political marching bands embrace this array, as in the case of Seattle's Infernal Noise Brigade (INB): "Songs in different tongues further infect the monoculture. In the path to constructing a better reality, and in deconstructing a system based in the misery of alienation, we choose noise as our tool." New York City's Rude Mechanical Orchestra (RMO) has a similar stance, choosing music that "pay[s] tribute to the world's cultures and the revolutionary role music has played throughout history." Other bands experience anxiety about cultural appropriation and representation. A typical argument might center around questions of whether or not one is honoring another culture's music if one doesn't play it well, or when it is taken out of context. Some solve these dilemmas through explicit acknowledgement of songs' origins, seeing the process as collaboration. Others lean toward playing only certain types of music.

Roma brass band music is popular with political brass bands both in Europe and the US, as is rock and roll modified for marching. Jazz and big-band tunes, klezmer, Mexican brass, punk rock, Moroccan music, Indian wedding music and a number of other styles from taiko to disco have all made their way into the political marching band pool. The musical and carnival traditions of New Orleans have also been incorporated into many groups' musical and theatrical repertoires,

and political marching bands have paraded during Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Newer political marching bands with names like the Brand New Orleans County Brass Band and the Second Line Social Aid and Pleasure Society Brass Band are obvious examples of the influence.

At gatherings like the Honk Festival last October in Boston, songs are shared and swapped. When the bands play together, they all know the sad but upbeat Bella Ciao — about Italian partisans fighting fascists in the mountains — and, of course, Tequila.

Political marching bands in the US have been discovering their counterparts in Europe in the past few years, and the number of North American bands has grown to a size that now supports gatherings of a reasonable size. The Hungry March Band has enjoyed recent European tours that included the Sbandata Romana in Rome, a gathering of many marching bands organized by the politically-oriented Titubanda, and played shows in Italian social centers. They have connected with political marching bands elsewhere in Europe, like the Blech and Schwefel and Express Brass Bands in Germany and the Dutch band Fanfare van der Eerste Liefdesnacht.

Not all of the marching bands are brass bands, though, and samba is the music of choice for most of these others. Bands that adopt samba tend to play mostly samba, since it requires different instruments from brass-centered music, and because drums can be made from a variety of found objects. Political bands adopting samba, like North Carolina's Cakalak Thunder, which formed for 2002 World Bank and anti-police brutality protests, often do so in solidarity with Brazilian resistance movements. Ile Aye, the most influential political samba band, was the first all-Black samba group in the Rio de Janeiro carnival in 1974. It was an expression of the growing Black Power movement in Brazil. Bloco afro samba groups like Ile Aye play traditional rhythms (such as batucada) from Bahia, and often mix Afro-Brazilian religious music with jazz and disco.

Out of the primordial song

Although the way both marching bands and brass music have evolved is a rich mixture, the origin of the current marching band explosion can be traced back to a few major sources of inspiration.

Vermont's Bread and Puppet theatre, with its neo-luddite aesthetic and love of street performance, is one source. From an original troupe that started in the 1960s, Bread and Puppeteers have dispersed widely, inspiring musical and theatrical performance in the streets from New York to San Francisco, and Minneapolis to Santa Fe. A number of the marching bands discussed here have members who have been

with Bread and Puppet, or its west-coast cousin Wise Fool Puppet Intervention. The Brand New Orleans Brass Band includes some active puppeteers, and uses an Italian flipeasel-style storytelling device popular in Bread and Puppet performances.

Another major influence came out of the west coast punk scene. Percussion-heavy groups like openly anarchist Tchkung! and fire-wielding Crash Worship had ties to the early Burning Man art scene. They fused the heavy and loud sound of punk with a sort of ritualistic, fire-breathing circus to create an intense experience that often left the audience either singed or soaked. Members of these bands would later be part of forming subsequent influential marching bands (Infernal Noise Brigade and Extra Action Marching Band, respectively).

Some of the earlier political marching bands, like London's Rhythms of Resistance (ROR) and New York's Hungry March Band (HMB), took part in Reclaim The Streets actions in the 1990s. Like other groups that formed prior to the WTO protests in Seattle, HMB participated in other projects that combined political action and creativity like the Coney Island Mermaid Parade and the protection of community gardens.

In 1999, Reclaim The Streets in the UK spawned the carnival bloc, an approach combining political street party and mobility. At the June 18 1999 Carnival Against Capital in London, a samba band called Rhythms of Resistance (ROR) appeared in full carnival splendor. J18 posters touted carnival as "An expression of freedom involving laughter, mockery, dancing, masquerade and revelry. Occupation of the street in which the symbols and ideals of authority are subverted. When the marginalised take over the centre and create a world turned upside down. You cannot just watch carnival, you take part. An unexpected carnival is revolutionary"

The INB (1999–2006), formed for the WTO protest in Seattle, was inspired by both the Carnival Against Capital and by Rhythms of Resistance's role in the festivities. Complete with rifle-twirlers, a drum majorette and (mostly) matching uniforms, they paraded the streets of Seattle wearing gas masks during the demonstrations.

The INB's mission, as articulated by founding member Grey Filastine, was to "Strike fear and incomprehension in the minds of the powerful. Disrupt the dominant trance. Be calculatedly unpredictable and undermine the spectacle by introducing music of a

disorienting or ecstatic nature into the sterile political discourse. Disrupt the stale dichotomy of leftist protest and police cliche. Facilitate the self-actualization of the mob. Be the dope propaganda." Following Seattle, the INB popped up everywhere a marching band was needed for fanfare against globalization, from Prague to New York, until their disbanding with a large public "funeral" in 2006.

The rapid spread of the marching band in protest is no doubt in some part due to the kind of world event that Seattle was and the global nature of the movement that sparked it. With anti-globalization protesters whirring from meeting to Social Forum to summit, many ideas were swapped and tried in new contexts.

## Musical anarchy?

Marching bands provided Reclaim the Streets actions with a more portable answer to the technical hassles involved in setting up, fixing and transporting sound systems (much less getting permits), but their rapid spread has obviously not been a simple matter of convenience.

The early and influential Rhythms of Resistance was formed with the intent of bringing carnival into protest: "Carnival as a tactic is a highly effective way of disrupting and critiquing the 'business as normal' worlds of work and consumption and of liberating social space. It moves beyond the leftist / militant approaches which limit our actions to being merely demonstrations of our 'victim' status in relation to capital and can incite / excite members of the general population to take a part in the collective realisation of our desires for a socially and ecologically just world." ROR is an activist franchise concept as well as a band; their website includes detailed instructions for starting your own group, including tunes and how to make drums from cans.

ROR's embrace of carnival is echoed in the approaches of other subsequent bands, like the INB, for whom ROR was a founding influence: "We attempt, through our aesthetics and our fierce commitment to the politics of joy and desire, to create a space of carnival, where all rules are broken and anything is possible. We seek to dissolve all barriers between art and politics, participants and spectators, dream and action." Many bands create a carnival atmosphere, complete with some combination of elaborate costumes, puppets, dancing and lots of glitter.

Many of these bands contextualize themselves as part of the fabric of resistance. "What we do," says ROR, "is part of a long tradition of mixing music and politics. Look at Trades and Labour Union bands, Welsh voice choirs, miners brass bands, even the Diggers were at it 350 years ago with the Winstanley written 'World Turned Upside Down'." Music and carnival combine "generate feelings of independence, pride and political dissent."

The Rude Mechanical Orchestra, which formed to play protests in 2004, "exist[s] in order to serve the efforts of progressive and radical groups and causes," including "events that support feminism and women's rights, the queer community, labor, the environment, social and economic justice, peace and community self-determination." The group pledges to "fight racism, sexism, homophobia, war and violence in all its forms," with the aim of "bring[ing] joy and inspiration to these communities and to bring new people into radical causes." A small sample of the RMO's extensive list of performances is indicative: the Women's March in DC, the Republican National Convention protest, Critical Mass after-parties, a radical teachers zine release party, a May Day party, the Mermaid Parade, and protests against the IMF and World Bank.

The similar Brass Liberation Orchestra (BLO) of San Francisco "plays music to support political causes with particular emphasis on peace, and racial and social justice. We are a work in progress. We work to build a multigender/multiracial/multigenerational group that enhances and strengthens the culture of the Left," including a list of "points of unity and vision" including music as liberation, racial and social justice, respect for culture, and respect for the earth.

While the BLO, RMO, and INB were organized from the start as street protest bands, some complete with medics and scouts, other bands have gotten started as specifically music projects, or as a mix of art, performance and music. For these bands, there is more tension involved in decisions about what actions to participate in. Some regularly do paid work as musicians, while others perform only at protests, benefits and other unpaid events. This can be a sticky topic for struggling working musicians.

Other points of divergence between bands include whether or not the band is open to anyone who wishes to join, regardless of musical skill. Some, like the RMO, have a policy of "being a safe, welcoming place for all genders and gender identities, ages, races, backgrounds, sexual orientations, disabilities and musical skill levels," while others are made up of experienced, skilled and sometimes professional musicians. An-

other option is offered by the Leftist Marching Band, "designed to accommodate everyone… for musically challenged activists, the LMB flag corps offers a place to show your colors."

There's also the question of what kind of liberation the band incites. The Extra Action Marching Band describes itself not at all inaccurately as "a bacchanalian, infectiously celebratory, inappropriate, transcendent, freaky spectacle that amuses, arouses, and intoxicates the audience." Like its predecessor Crash Worship, Extra Action is a physical as well as auditory experience. Is a rowdy, grinding dance with the flag corps equivalent to a cartwheel in front of the courthouse?

Musical skill is part of the larger questions of organizational structure and decision-making within bands. Some are committed to consensus, others have founding members or leaders who direct content and (in the case of the IMB) "promise to be benevolent dictators." Some bands are cognizant of their gender balance; others have dance troupes that are mostly female and musicians that are mostly male. Samba bands have conductors, or "maestres."

Whatever the band structure and vision, there are costs to being a political marching band; anyone who was arrested or had their instrument thrown in the trash by police during the Republican National Convention protests in New York can certainly attest to that. The band in a protest march often plays a role in leading the crowd, which can lead to conflict with authority. "The police have come to see us (a bunch of pink and silver renegades) as a threatening force," says ROR, "…they see our strength in moving large crowds of people, maintaining momentum towards a desired end." During a protest in Barcelona, ROR led a group of dancing protesters from the end of a gathering to a police station where people attending a demonstration earlier that day were being detained. "If we hadn't played," writes a band member, "I think it would have been much more difficult to generate such prisoner support."

This is part of what makes the political marching band exciting. "It creates an immediate uplifting feeling, giving people the sense of self-confidence that will allow them to steF off the pavement and into the street," says ROR, describing it as "a very positive life-affirming way to protest… This is what so many people like about it."

## For more on marching bands:

www.rhythmsofresistance.co.uk
www.hungrymarchband.com

www.rudemechanicalorchestra.org
www.infernalnoise.org

*Brass Unbound* (1993), Johan van der Keuken, director "Infernal Noise: The Soundtrack to Insurrection," Jennifer Whitney. In *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anti-Capitalism*, edited by Notes from Nowhere (Verso, 2003).

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