YOUTH AFFAIRS

Looney Tunes or Marching to a Different Beat? Popular music and moral panic

> Garbage, absolute garbage is the music kids listen to these days!
>
> Hoons in their cars trying to take over with their infernal sounds!
>
> No person with moral values would listen to that 'alternative' crap!
>
> It serves no purpose, all those bang and crash noises.

These are familiar comments made by many adults about the different genres of music listened to by young people. Some adults consider the popular music of young people to have little 'value', the sound perhaps grating and unbearable, or the lyrical content offensive or difficult to understand.

While this may highlight the difference in musical taste between generations, more importantly such comments indicate the inability to recognise that music can serve important functions for many youth. In particular, musical beat can be used to create psychological space which allows youth to shape an environment for their needs. Claiming physical space can also be achieved through the sound of music clearing space for young people to occupy. But young people's use of music to acquire space is not recognised by many adults. This is because of the assumption that popular music such as rap and heavy metal can have a negative impact on young people's behaviour.

Of course, legislation such as the *Children's (Protection and Parental Responsibilities) Act 1997* (NSW) and the *Police Powers and Responsibility Act 1997* (Qld) have increased the control of young peoples' movement in and use of public space. Such legislation reinforces negative sterotypes of young people and their use of public space. But these laws do not allow us to understand why young people claim such space and in particular how music operates to facilitate their occupation of public space. In short, the law controls young people in the street and shopping centres without understanding them.

Understanding youth music

The purpose music serves for young people has often been ignored by adults despite it having a long history of being used by marginalised individuals to express their dissent and to oppose dominant ideologies. As new musical types have been introduced by the young into society, 'moral panics' have been created around the possible negative impact popular music might have on young people's behaviour.

Moral panics can be explained as a process which 'defines phenomena as a threat to societal values and interests [and] its nature [is then] presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media.'[1] While lyrical content has often taken centre stage in such panics, musical beat has received its own limelight, targeted as a destructive source capable of turning youth into mindless deviants. Of course, lost in such panics is the importance musical beat has in giving young people the opportunity to create psychological and physical space. The salient issue is that moral panics only serve as a distraction from understanding the appeal of music to young people as a means of questioning their experiences and withstanding adult controls and expectations.

Music and the claiming of physical space

While the socio-economic and racial backgrounds of young people may be different, all youth share the characteristic of being part of a marginalised group who lack political power and have little voice in society. Placed in this position many youth often seek to create space of their own. By doing this, young people can shape an environment where they can make sense of their experiences, interact with other youth and withstand restrictions.

Music at high volumes can be a means of claiming physical space. One can thus understand why many youth take full advantage of consumer instructions on tapes and compact discs to 'play this music loud'. The overpowering sound of musical beat can clear a utopian space which young people can occupy. Claiming space through the use of music also increases the visibility of marginalised youth which signifies their alienated status and becomes a public act of defiance.[2] In addition, music is a popular mechanism for 'winning space'. The United States provides a good example where the rhythmic beats of rap music can be used to contest space. Ownership of a 'ghetto-blaster' is essential for young people who wish to draw attention to themselves to assert their claim over a particular area. The equipment which has the loudest volume ultimately wins the space. Of course, this does not necessarily make for peaceful co-existence between such youth and other users of public space. But as a first step to finding a compromise around the playing of loud music it is important to understand the motive behind its use.

Interpreting youthful behaviour

The reaction of the media to youthful behaviour often captures and expresses the societal fear and ignorance concerning the relationship between music and young people. This is patent in the large number of security guards employed at rap or heavy metal concerts. While one cannot deny that violent incidents have occurred at these concerts, overt security presence conveys a fear which assumes that such incidents will occur each time a concert which has a youth audience is held. But because of this fear, many adults cannot understand that music concerts provide space where young people can come together to share their experience and to use the music as a form of escapism. A rap concert in America which hosted a score of popular artists provides an insight into the adult panic around popular music and the failure of adults to understand the significance of beat. Media coverage of the concert condemns rap on precisely the grounds that make it compelling. One article presents the youth audience as mindless and dangerous fanatics, mesmerised by rap's rhythms:

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litigation. As Deemster O'Rourke said in *General Products v Revenue Department of the Isle of Man* (1725) Manx Rep 12 ...

KIRBY J. 'Cause I'm the taxman, Yeah, Yeah I'm the taxman / And you're working for no-one but me': *Re: The Taxman* (1966) Revolver Side 2, per Harrison, G. When The Beatles sang these words, little did they realise they would be quoted in an Australian court in 1998. But they have been. By me. Surprisingly, during the course of argument, counsel for neither party referred the court to pop music. However in tape-recorded submissions exchanged following the hearing, both sides tendered some groovy examples of late 60s British Blues musicianship. Unfortunately the taxpayer here was not familiar with the warnings of the Fab Four. But to turn to the matters raised by the pleadings in this case ...

HAYNE J. This is an appeal from a decision of the Full Court of the Federal Court of Australia, reversing a decision of a single judge of the Federal Court upholding an order of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (Taxation Division) in part affirming and in part denying an appeal from a ruling by the Commissioner of Taxation rejecting an application by the taxpayer-appellant for a ruling under section so on and so forth &c ...

CALLINAN J. This is an impudent little tax avoidance scheme, whose main redeeming feature is that it succeeds. However whilst finding for the taxpayer, I have taken note of the lack of corporate good-citizenship evinced by the company concerned, and propose penalising it by basing my next play around its dealings ...

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References

1. The scripture is from Psalms 91:12.
2. This style of judging was more common in less hurried times, although the citation, in particular, of 'canonical texts' (typically from safe, dead, classical European authors such as Shakespeare or the gospel writers, but also, surprisingly, including Lewis Carroll) remained an occasional flourish, especially by South Australian judges: Meehan, M., 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Judicial Literacy and the Australian Cultural Cringe' (1990) 12 *Adelaide Law Review* 431.

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> For almost five hours, devotees of the Afros, Queen Latifah, Kid 'n Play, Digital Underground, Big Daddy Kane and headliners Public Enemy were jerked into spasmodic movement by what seemed little more than intermittent segments of a single rhythmic continuum. It was hypnotic in the way of sensory deprivation, a mind-and-body-numbing marathon of monotony whose deafening, pre-recorded drum and bass tracks and roving klieg lights frequently turned the audience of 6500 into a single-minded movable beast.[3]

Unable to negotiate the relationship between young people and musical beat, the critic interprets the relationship as dangerous and automatic.

The manner in which the media has interpreted young people's behaviour as mindless and dangerous conveys the message and image that young audiences are threatening to the public. Of course the media can shape the images by exacerbating the behaviour to make them 'newsworthy'.[4] But in doing so, the media and the general public are prevented from understanding the appeal of popular music to young people.

Claiming psychological space through sound

The availability of walkmans has appeared as a godsend for some young people. The nature of these personal sound systems allows young people to withdraw totally into the musical beat and create psychological space. Engulfing themselves in the beat, young people can escape the pressures and lack of power which characterise their lives.

Many adults, however, have not recognised that music can contribute to the creation and maintenance of an alternative psychological reality for young people. Music can create another world, which for many youth is essential in order to cope with their problems, to question their identity and sustain emotional wellbeing. In this sense many young people experience a feeling of empowerment because they have the apparent ability to question themselves and prevailing adult norms which affect their lives. Within this space, young people can control an environment and shape it to their needs.

Young people's use of music is more complex than many adults are inclined to accept. While it is easy for some to be fearful, those who choose to ignore the moral panic and take the time to analyse musical beat will inevitably understand how young people can use sound in a physical and psychological manner to create space for themselves to understand and cope with their social exclusion. Acknowledging musical phenomenon as a youth culture would also give policy makers the opportunity to implement policies which truly reflect the issues and needs of young people. But if adults continue to invoke such panics, young people's use of music will only become demonised.

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References

1. Cohen, S., *Folk Devils and Moral Panics — The Creation of the Mods and Rockers,* MacGibbon and Kee, 1972, p.9.
2. Wheeler, E.A., 'Most of My Heroes Don't Appear On No Stamps — The Dialogics of Rap Music', (1994) *BMR Journal* 207.
3. Rose, T., 'Fear of a Black Planet: Rap Music and Cultural Politics in the 1990's', (1991) 60(3) *The Journal of Negro Education* 285.
4. Cohen, S., *Folk Devils and Moral Panics — The Creation of the Mods and Rockers,* MacGibbon and Kee, 1972, p.44.

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5. Evans, A., 'Specialised Clinical Legal Education Begins in Australia', (1996) 21 *Alternative Law Journal* 79.
6. Noone, M. A., 'Planning a Clinical Legal Education Program: What are the Issues?' (1994) 19(6) *Alternative Law Journal* 285.
7. Such as Monash, Murdoch, Newcastle, UNSW and UTS.
8. Some of this work is discussed in Giddings, J., 'Casework, Bloody Casework', (1992) 17(6) *Alternative Law Journal* 261.
9. Noone, M. A.,and others, 'Squatters' Victory — Bona Vista' (1983) 8(6) *Legal Service Bulletin* 252.