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MUSC 11A — C&I I

21 March 2024

Musical Culture in Postcolonial Movements: from Jamaica to Zimbabwe to the UK

Many social, cultural, and political movements have utilized music in some way. This became especially pronounced in the mid-to-late 20th century with the prevalence of recording technology and DJing. Examples range from UK pirate radio DJs, to Shona people and cosmopolitan Zimbabweans in Africa, to Jamaican producers, to urban battle DJ turntablists. The use of music and manipulation of recording technology through DJing was supplemental — and in some cases, formative — to oppressed groups and countercultural movements in their 20th century postcolonial fight against authority.

Music as a Social Force

Music plays a role in the social life of human beings. This can be more or less pronounced depending on a society's musical values, but is nonetheless demonstrated in a variety of ways. Participatory music is often thought to be a more potent social practice than presentational or recorded fields, a wonderful example of which is the Shona people of Zimbabwe. They highly value participatory music making and dance as part of regular life and specific religious ceremonies, utilizing repeated forms, dense sonic drumming, and a range of skill levels (Turino, CD 6). "Successful participatory performance *is* good social life… the feelings are partially remembered and help maintain or improve day-to-day relationships within the community…" (Turino 136).

A similar type of social practice emerged in Jamaica with the introduction of "discotheques," or large DJ parties. As Jamaican demand for American R&B grew, a new market allowed DJs to import records and play them at these events. "These 'blues dances' became a regular feature of ghetto life on the island. Stalls would be set up selling fruit, drink and traditional Jamaican dishes… And the people would sway for hours to the New Orleans sound…" (Hebdige 46). While these dance halls are markedly different from Shona traditions, they are nonetheless participatory musical experiences. More importantly, music played the same role in both examples as a driver of cultural formation — that is, creating "...a group of people who have in common a majority of habits that constitute most parts of each individual member's self" (Turino 112).

Music can also be understood as formative to what Turino calls "cultural cohorts," which are "distinguished *as cohorts* by the emphasis and development of selected habits" (Turino 113). Effectively, cohorts are more specific groups within formations. Black urban youth in the UK formed new cohorts, or perhaps even a sub-formation, through music. While Black music wasn't played on the government-controlled radio, clubs and pirate radio served to strengthen cohorts of DJs, producers, and fans while also creating the shared habits of the UK Black youth formation at the time. It is clear that music can play a formative social role in cultural cohorts and formations, especially for those lacking power or representation.

Music as Political Resistance

In certain contexts, music goes beyond the formation of subordinate groups and becomes a tool in their arsenal of political and social resistance to hegemonic authority. This has been achieved through use of the aforementioned social power of music, the use of music as a

platform for political speech or cultural pride, and/or the literal spread of music or musical objects as a head-on site of resistance to control.

In Zimbabwe, the social power of music was used in more than just Shona cultural traditions. Under colonial rule, an educated middle class of "cosmopolitan" Africans began to emerge. They partially assimilated into Western musical values, embracing "concert style" presentational music that was clear, unified, and followed a tight musical form (Turino CD 8). At the same time, these individuals blended traditional styles to preserve, or at least augment, their identity under the oppressive and assimilating colonial rule. The later African nationalist movement was a more direct example of utilizing the social power of music for a political goal. The National Democratic Party (NDP) incorporated local dances into their rallies. "Each of these dances indexed and was meant to appeal to the people from those regions. The same groups were juxtaposed onstage repetitively… new indexical associations began to form in people's minds…" (Turino 146). Music was a powerful tool not only because it was important to Shona culture, but because of its inherent social power: "...it is in the 'nation building' aspect of nationalist movements that music and dance often play a prominent role" (Turino 145).

In other contexts, music itself may be imbued with political commentary or cultural pride in the face of suppression — usually through lyrics. This can be seen in Jamaica. As R&B turned into dub and ska, rocksteady, and later Reggae, the music took a political flair as part of its own distinctive style. This political nature of Reggae is a product of the political instability and rampant inequality of the country at the time. While it's true not every Reggae song is political, many are — especially popular ones. Take Delroy Wilson's 1971 track "Better Must Come." The lyrics are pretty direct, with the opening (and repeated) phrase lamenting, "I've been trying a long, long time still I didn't make it / Everything I try to do seem to go wrong / It seems I have

done something wrong / But they're trying to keep me down" (Wilson). While the song captures the mood of the country at that time, the message — and the song itself — was embraced by the People's National Party (PNP) in their election campaign against the conservative party. The PNP would go on to win the election. "Reggae was a militant form of music that was closely linked to Rastafari and the black power movement… Reggae was the soundtrack of the new political movement… Many of the key reggae personalities were very close to the campaign, and reggae artists had followed the campaign around the country playing at meetings" (Meeks).

Finally, in unique cases, music may also be the specific site of head-on conflict between government oppression and countercultural resistance. This form of resistance is best represented by UK pirate radio. In the UK, the government exerted strict control over the airwaves via the BBC and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). Traditionally Black music such as jazz, R&B, reggae, soul, disco, etc. was generally not played on the radio and only played by white suburban clubs (e.g. Soul Mafia). A newspaper reported: "'BBC1 is both predictable in its choice of material and patronising in the way it puts it over,' a teenager told me this week" (Gibbings).

As a result, and as part of the larger Black countercultural movement against the conservative Thatcher government, many Black DJs began to illegally broadcast their music in London (*Last Pirates*). While Thatcherism promoted entrepreneurism and free market ideals, the DTI cracked down on Black pirate DJs who were embodying those same attitudes. Pirate radio was entrepreneurial at its core, embodied by personalities such as Zak, the leader of LWR. So the crackdown sent a clear message of who the government believed should have access to such freedom (whites) and heightened racial tensions. Thus, illegal broadcasting was an undisguised form of resistance to the racist policies and controls of the time. The music became an expression of culture and, simultaneously, a political message.

While much of this movement centered around radio broadcasting, it was also fueled by the emergence of urban multicultural clubs such as George Power's club Crackers. Here, Black people (and anyone) could finally enjoy the music they identified with and partake in lively parties, dancing, and fashion. Also influential were specialist record shops, where those passionate about Black music would socialize, shop, and sometimes be recruited by pirate radio stations (*Last Pirates*). Similar to examples in Zimbabwe and Jamaica, music served to socially integrate the cultural cohort of Black urban youth. Nonetheless, radio DJs were still instrumental to forming this cohort as they served to propagate the music that brought these people together. In fact, DJing is its own valid form of music making that was central to these movements.

Cultural Manipulation of Technology through DJing

While many historical developments seem to suggest that music and recording technology influence culture (technological determinism), it is often argued that the two forces influence each other at least equally, if not that culture is predominant (social constructivism). In postcolonial and countercultural contexts, DJing serves as a prevalent example of the cultural influence over recording technology and recorded objects. Furthermore, this technological manipulation may become a defining feature of cultural cohorts in and of itself.

Turntablism and the battle DJ scene provide the most compelling overview of recorded object manipulation. This movement is a subset of DJing and related to hip hop. "Although the term hip-hop is often used to describe music, it refers more broadly to a set of cultural practices that arose in New York City's black and Latino community in the 1970s" (Katz 117). Hip hop at this time, and like Reggae, often commented on political or social conditions while sampling Black music of previous decades (more cultural manipulation of technology). Take Public Enemy's "Fight The Power" — a popular track with revolutionary language. Lines like "Our

freedom of speech is freedom or death / We got to fight the powers that be" capture the racial tensions of the time (Public Enemy). So turntablism and battles, although not a direct site of political resistance, is still connected to politics through hip hop. Additionally, the DJ battle draws on two important African American cultural practices: "playing the dozens," a rhetorical verbal insult contest, and "cutting contests," which were competitions of instrumental virtuosity with an audience (Katz 133). It is clear that the origins of DJ battles are both placed in a political context and draw on rich cultural practices as well.

With this in mind, it becomes obvious how turntablism demonstrates cultural influence over recording technology. "Turntablism is a manifestation of a radical phonograph effect — one in which record players are no longer record players, but musical instruments capable of creating and manipulating sound in the most sophisticated ways" (Katz 136). Battle DJs use technology to manipulate records in virtuosic live performances. This was historically performed in a context of African American cultural practices and urban youth attitudes. This lives on in the multicultural battle scene today as the creative manipulation of technology (in the form of DJing) has become the central shared habit of the cultural cohort of turntablists.

With this framework around DJing and technological manipulation in mind, its presence and significance in the other examples becomes clear. For UK pirate radio DJs, they created a culture around the propagation of beloved Black records on the airwaves. Live mixing also became common on stations like KISS FM, furthering DJs' creative use of the technology. And an overall resourcefulness was demonstrated through their entrepreneurial spirit of capturing a restricted market. In Jamaica, groups set up powerful sound systems for their dance halls and, when competing for a venue, "the tension between the two groups would build up through the night. Each system would try to 'blow' the other off the stage with rawer and rougher r&b

sounds" (Hebdige 46). DJs also inspired new musical styles with "talk over" and "dub" on top of R&B records. In these distinct musical movements, cultural manipulation of technology in the form of DJing becomes an important shared practice for rebellious cohort formation. Furthermore, greater attitudes of resourcefulness are consistent in these groups as they sought to preserve culture in the face of political oppression and limited resources.

Cultural Outcomes

These various cultural movements utilized music to become strong and compelling. But what was the outcome? These examples demonstrate that culture prevails to have a lasting impact on society, but in different and nuanced ways in each case.

In Jamaica, class inequality and social issues were not magically solved. However, the country continued to reform, maintained democracy, and exercised its independence. More importantly, the cultural movements of the postwar decade — Rastafarianism, Ska, Reggae, dance, cuisine, sports, and other Black traditions mixed with past European influences — grew beyond the country's borders. These contributed to the national identity of Jamaica. Reggae, in particular, came to be characterized by its soulful yet political nature and became more broadly known in Western markets and beyond. Not ignoring the continued existence of inequality and violence, Jamaica is an impressive example of a postcolonial cultural movement that gave voice to the powerless and defined national culture.

In the UK, the pirate radio movement saw success during and after its time. Throughout the 80s, a thriving microeconomy of specialist imported records, broadcasting gear, competing stations, and recruitment was established (*Last Pirates*). This success validated and strengthened the pirate radio scene. The government eventually offered a chance at radio permits to some stations — not only recognizing these stations as legitimate, but appearing to cave to their

presence as well. KISS FM became the first pirate radio station to gain a license. This victory was bittersweet, as some DJs lament the loss of the station's soulful and rebellious spirit, but it nonetheless would lead to an opening of the airwaves to Black music. The UK's rave culture, too, can trace its origins back through Black music clubs and warehouses. This movement, though gone, obtained clear political and cultural victories in the face of racism and Thatcherism.

The final example demonstrates how a movement can shift away from its root culture, causing it to fail. In Zimbabwe, after the nationalist's movement successful use of traditional music to garner local support, Zimbabwe gained independence. The National Dance Company (NDC) was established in an attempt to "'revive, *develop*, and promote the traditional dance and music of Zimbabwe'" (Turino 149). However, this generally meant the appropriation of traditional dance into presentational forms aimed at cosmopolitan groups (Turino 149). The initiative experienced limited success as it "...led to major changes in the dances to the point where local people sometimes rejected the NDC versions of *their* dances" (Turino 151). In short, this attempted cultural movement didn't succeed because it became removed from the original source — Shona participatory music and dance. Thus, once again, rich cultural practices exert their predominance over technology, modernity, misrepresentation, and government.

In diverse examples across the second half of the 20th century, music played an important role in postcolonial and countercultural contexts and movements. It served as a social force to unite cohorts and preserve culture and was employed as a tool in political movements and conflicts. Many of these movements' use of music centered around the cultural manipulation of technology through DJing, demonstrating both the resourcefulness of these groups and the social constructivist power of culture over technology. Generally, these movements prevailed and left a lasting cultural impact on their society as musical traditions continue to evolve.

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