SOUND SYSTEM

DAVE RANDALL

THE POLITICAL

POWER OF MUSIC

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CHAPTER ONE

Roots

Look around any crowded street, bus or subway carriage almost anywhere in the world and you see people experiencing music. It spills from a sea of headphones and reverberates from shops, cars, buskers, bars, places of worship and homes. Our lives are steeped in the stuff. It lulls us to sleep when we are babies and helps us acquire language. It's part of children's play and expresses our identity as we navigate our way into adulthood. It walks us down the aisle and marches us off to war. To paraphrase Quincy Jones, it is the 'emotion lotion' applied to adverts and films. It can help create the atmosphere in which we seduce our lovers, make babies and reminisce when we are old. Finally, it plays tinnily from the speakers of crematoriums as we slip behind the final curtain.

For me, music is also a job. I'm writing these words from seat 27H of an American Airlines Boeing 777, 36,000 feet above the Atlantic. My current boss, the Irish singer Sinead O'Connor, sits a few rows ahead in business class. We, along with the rest of her new band, are flying to Los Angeles, where we are due to perform in a couple

of days. I've been lucky in my career. Getting the call to play guitar for Sinead was the latest piece of good fortune. Over the past 20 years, I've toured four continents and countless countries with some amazing artists. I've seen people, places and events that an ordinary Essex boy like me would never have otherwise seen. Before I joined the group Faithless back in 1996, I'd hardly left the country. There are downsides. More late nights, long flights and free booze than any doctor would recommend and a creeping sense of financial insecurity, occasionally abated by a big tour, though never for long. But questions of health and wealth are not those that spin around my head like old shellac 78s. As I sit wakeful on this long-haul my thoughts settle on questions of music. There is no doubt that music matters to people, but what is its impact on society? How does this universal human activity reflect changes in economics, technology and politics? How has music shaped our world – and what contribution can it make to the struggle for a better one?

My political awakening began when I was a teenager. I'd grown up in the 1980s in a seaside town known for spiteful proto-punk rhythm & blues and a very long pier (1.34 miles). Local musicians like to describe our area as the 'Thames delta'. I somehow rose from the coveted position of 'Saturday boy' in the local guitar shop to roadie for blues-rock heroes the Hamsters. My world became the backseat of a splitter van, pubs, bikers' clubs and late night truck stops across the UK. Politics may well have

remained largely off my radar, were it not for one August night spent in a field in Northamptonshire. Some mates had invited me to a music festival called Greenbelt, run by left-wing Christians. In a packed marquee between bands, the DJ dropped a tune by the Special AKA: 'Free Nelson Mandela'. I had no idea who Nelson Mandela was, but I knew by the end of the first chorus I wanted him to be free. In that moment, surrounded by thousands of festival goers hollering the hook, I learned – instinctively felt – that the future is unwritten and ordinary people like me could have a say. Music, I realised, is our weapon.

In 1996 I got my first real break. After playing for a string of semi-professional bands I was finally offered a fulltime gig. Faithless had started as a studio project assembled by the ambitious dance music producer Rollo Armstrong. With their tune 'Insomnia' racing up charts across Europe demands for a tour started to flood in from label managers convinced that a 'proper' live band would secure sales and longevity in a way DJ sets alone would not. I was one lucky beneficiary of this foresight. Until then I'd been content squeezing into old splitter vans, but now my lift took the form of luxury tour buses and aeroplanes.

Being a part of a band when it breaks onto the international circuit is exhilarating. I don't think anyone considered, in those early days, the possibility that Faithless would go on to become one of the biggest dance music acts in recent history – or that our occasional

singer Dido would one day sell over 30 million albums in her own right. Back then just being on a tour bus, flying to a gig and having a crew were thrilling signs that we'd 'made it'. One of the first things to learn was the language of touring. Europe hadn't yet agreed to monetary union, so every day meant a different currency. All were labelled 'shitters', as in: 'have you got any shitters?' Distances were measured in 'clicks', fans were 'punters', gaffa tape found stuck to the sole of your shoe 'gig turds' and bottle openers 'gig spanners'. Tour bus rules included sleeping with your feet facing forward (less likely to break your neck in the event of a crash) and no pooing in the toilet (pees only). If during a night-time gas-stop you get off the bus to find a toilet, make sure you tell the driver. Our percussionist learned that lesson the hard way. Wearing only boxer shorts and a T-shirt, he emerged from a petrol station restroom somewhere in Germany to see the tour bus disappearing into the distance. It wasn't until the soundcheck, some twelve hours and two national borders later that we realised he was missing. The crew guys – and on that first tour they were all male – seemed to be seasoned sages of the road. They were lovable, sometimes scary, often hilarious, and by far the hardest working and hardest drinking of all the music professionals (I hadn't yet met any riggers). One of their mantras, repeated with dry irony, was 'Hurry Up . . . And Wait'. There's a LOT of waiting around.

'Free Nelson Mandela' had planted a seed in my mind. Soon after I heard it, other artists caught my ear. Billy Bragg, Public Enemy, the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, Ani DiFranco and Rage Against The Machine all underlined the idea that music could be a political force in the world. Now I was part of an up-and-coming band, I wanted to know more about this strange power. I decided to use all that waiting around time to read about the politics of pop.

CHAPTER TWO

Culture

Jukebox Suckers

I soon discovered the relationship between music and politics has been contemplated for quite some time. In 380 BC, Plato noted Socrates' warning that 'a change to a new type of music is something to beware of as a hazard of all our fortunes. For the modes of music are never disturbed without unsettling of the most fundamental political and social conventions'.[1] The emperors of China set up an Imperial Music Bureau tasked with supervising court music and keeping an ear on the music of the masses, believing it to be a telling portent of social unrest. Music was also deployed by both sides during Europe's reformation and the hundred years of state sponsored terror that followed. The Catholic Church even set up a *Vatican's Got Talent*-style panel of cardinals at the Council of Trent in the mid-1500s, to judge which composer could best deliver them a musical knock-out (Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina got the gig).

In the modern era, a German intellectual called Theodor Adorno ruminated on the subject, writing his most important essays in the 1940s. Sociologist and Mercury Music Prize impresario Simon Frith considered Adorno's to be 'the most systematic and the most searing analysis of mass culture and the most challenging for anyone claiming a scrap of value for the products that come churning out of the music industry'.[2] Adorno was certainly prolific. He wrote around a million words about music and also found time to train as a classical pianist. He particularly admired the ground-breaking Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg and studied composition for three years with Schoenberg's one-time student, Alban Berg. Adorno's devotion to challenging new European music was undeniable, but as Frith implies, he didn't like pop.

Adorno was part of a group of left-leaning scholars known as the Frankfurt School. The rise of the Nazis forced the school to relocate to New York City in 1935. Although the USA provided Adorno with refuge from the Nazis, he didn't see it as 'the land of the free'. Instead he insisted that it had more in common with Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia than people realised. It too was based on an economic system that gave a monopoly of power to the few. Focusing on the output of America's original hit factory – a New York street filled with songwriters and publishers nicknamed 'Tin Pan Alley' – Adorno delivered his damning assessment. Like tins of baked

beans or any other mass manufactured commodity, pop hits, he noted, were pumped out by the production lines of a cynical 'Culture Industry' to standardised formulae. Sure, the melodies change a little from song to song, but only to give a fake impression of originality and authenticity. Lapped up by a mass audience who knew no better, this was music designed to blunt our desire to think for ourselves. As David Byrne puts it:

> Adorno saw the jukebox as a machine that drew 'suckers' into pubs with the promise of joy and happiness. But, like a drug, instead of bringing real happiness, the music heard on jukeboxes only creates more desire for itself. He might be right, but he might also have been someone who never had a good time in a honky-tonk.[3]

Adorno never really differentiated between mainstream commercial pop and other less formulaic popular sounds. Had he taken time to appreciate the varied and often anti-establishment popular music made beyond Tin Pan Alley, he may have arrived at a more nuanced view. That he didn't is surprising – there was certainly plenty of it. During the inter-war Weimar Republic of Adorno's native Germany, Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht brought socialist opera to the masses with an adaptation of John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* entitled *Threepenny Opera* (its songs would later be covered by artists as diverse as Ella Fitzgerald, Michael Bublé, Pet Shop Boys and Tom

Waits). Others explored social questions and celebrated sexual diversity through the decadent Berlin cabaret scene. Meanwhile, in the US, a coalition of left-wing intellectuals, including the influential folklorist Alan Lomax, decided popular culture provided an important platform for politics. They championed folk and blues musicians including Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly and argued that African American musical traditions such as New Orleans Jazz were a form of 'proletarian protest and pride'. None of this seemed to permeate Adorno's world, or at least influence his position. He remained steadfast in his belief that progress was found only in serious music such as Schoenberg's – music that dismantled traditional approaches to harmony and replaced them with new sounds to stimulate the intellect as well as stir the soul: 'It requires the listener spontaneously to compose its inner movements and demands of him not mere contemplation but *praxis*.'[4]

In his later years Adorno did concede that there was some value to what he called 'low-brow' art: 'The distinction between entertainment and autonomous art points to a qualitative difference that ought to be retained, provided one does not overlook the hollowness of the concept of serious art or the validity of unregimented impulses in low-brow art.'[5] But his views remained fundamentally the same as those he articulated in the 1940s. Pop can only strengthen the hand of the powers that be: 'Even the best-intentioned reformers who use

an impoverished and debased language to recommend renewal, strengthen the very power of the established order they are trying to break.'[6]

Seemingly on the opposite side to Adorno is a branch of cultural theory that celebrates everything pop in all its kitsch, consumerist glory. As well as throwing out the hierarchy implicit in Adorno's conclusions (difficult art music good, pop music bad), its advocates also rejected the narrow focus of musicology. They weren't just concerned with the sound and structure of the music itself – they were also interested in the messages communicated through fashion choices, record covers, promo shots and all the other tools of music marketing. By the late 1970s, the approach had become an established part of a new field called Cultural Studies. Thinking seriously about pop was acceptable – trendy even. But there's no doubt snobbery persisted. Some intellectuals simply indulged their fascination with the exotic proletariat and their strange ways. As keen ornithologists might, sociologists discussed the amusing mating rituals and colourful plumage of the working class. But others started from a position of solidarity. Marxists including Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige saw symbolic political resistance and class pride in youth cultures. To identify as a 'teddy boy', 'mod', 'rocker', 'skinhead', 'punk', or whatever, was to reclaim some control over your life – to actively choose your identity. Music that went with that identity therefore, was nothing less than the soundtrack of class struggle. With