

'I can't believe the news today': Music and the politics of change

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For over a decade, geography has become increasingly aware of the role of music in understanding the world. The importance of listening is often forgotten in a discipline criticised for being over dependent on the visual (Smith, 1994, 1997, 2000; Waterman, 2006). As well as listening it is important to consider the inherent power geometries in the creation of music and sound. In some instances, the messages being communicated or emphasised are not found in the music or lyrics but music provides a platform for engaging with particular issues. Two approaches are considered here: the role of high profile musicians in highlighting global issues and the evocation of a sense of place by musicians in their music.

Music may be considered as a process within a process. Music is a human practice that is always evolving and, as it evolves and develops, it shapes the practice of music-making. Instead of examining the everyday practices of music making in society, this paper identifies individuals who have become involved in some of the global debates for change in different parts of the world. Changes in American society and identity and the rhetoric espoused by President Obama may be linked with global issues concerning climate change, human rights and a way forward for Africa. Music is an integral part of the construction and representation of identity and attracts audiences to a variety of causes.

Introducing an edition of *GeoJournal* that “reflects several facets that relate geography and place with music”, the importance of sound is reflected by Waterman who states: “Sound aids us by *evoking* images; images *resound* and the *echo* our thoughts; while the eye stimulates our initial views, the ear restrains us, allowing us time to reflect and form second opinions” (2006: 1). Music is described by Waterman as “the epitome of organized sound; it is humanized sound” (ibid.). Music is always developing and the uses of music are as varied as the diversity of musical sounds that are created and diffused across space and time. The importance of music in the contemporary world is intensified as it is made more accessible to a wider, global audience, though simultaneously the live performance of music as a local activity is revalued.

The globalization of music is multifaceted and two-way. Sounds and influences reflect conscious choices made by performers and audiences. Connell and Gibson note: “Music has been transformed through spatial mobility. Simultaneously, music has influenced the manner in which wider global economic and cultural change has occurred” (2002: 10). The geographical importance of music lies in its role in reflecting and shaping geographical processes and, simultaneously, the role of geographical processes in shaping the music that is produced. Music performs a number of different roles in society. Music is connected to power (Attali, 1985), it is an economic resource, part of the heritage of a place or society and integral to the identity of social or political groups (Herbert, 1998; Sweeney-Turner, 1998). Ryecroft states that “the geographers of music are influenced and defined by a series of discourses surrounding politics, social order, and culture” (1998: 224). Globalization, climate change, third world debt and national identity are just some of the discourses with which musicians have concerned themselves and which have influenced the music that we hear.

Smith asserts that music “is no more isolated from politics than any other cultural form” (1994: 236). Music may relate to the local politics of power and integration in a community. Cohen (1993) notes the role of music in creating a sense of belonging and a sense of place. Noting the many contexts for music with clear geographical implications, Lovering states:

Music is not just a hobby indulged at the end of the working day, an aspect of ‘entertainment consumption,’ or even a personal door to the sublime – although it can be all of these things. It is often also a profound influence on the way we see our world(s) and situate ourselves in relation to others (1998: 32).

In considering music as a tool for communication of identity and ideology, a holistic approach must be used that examines the image consciously created by marketing executives and performers as part of a commercially driven industry. The symbiotic relationship between the commercial success of an artist and the cause to which they are associated requires a consideration of the ethical consideration given by the artist to their actions.

A nation in tune

Music can be used as an integrating component in the development of national identity, as outlined by Scruggs (1999) in relation to Nicaragua and as a mirror of

national debates, and by Bastos (1999) in the context of Brazil. People from disconnected communities on either side of the Nicaragua with different histories were presented with a new national identity that included elements of previously distinct musical traditions (Scruggs, 1999). The evolution of Brazilian music reflects and allows people to connect with changes in Brazilian society (Bastos, 1999). Noting the role between music and national identity McCarthy states:

Music is a cultural practice that is an integral part of a nation's identity. In certain historical periods, when the political ideology of a country is contested and an alternative ideology is advanced, the resulting tensions are visible in cultural practices, such as music, and social institutions such as education (1998: 73).

McCarthy notes the role of music "the important role of music in advancing the essential ideals of the emergent nation state" through a study of music in Irish national schools between 1921 and 1950 (1998: 73). Outlining the role of 'national musics', Leyshon, Matless and Revill note: "Music has always been implicated in the social and political world. Its power to affect, disturb, rouse and subdue has been used to great effect by monarchies, armies and governments throughout history" (1995: 426). An overview of conflict in various parts of the world should understand how music is used to communicate ideas, ideologies and a sense of place and belonging. This may involve 'folk music' but, as Waterman points out, all music is fundamentally folk music (2006: 2).

It is useful to consider the work of Alan Lomax in shaping and promoting concerns of place and regional difference in the study of music. Neither a geographer nor an ethnomusicologist, Lomax is categorised as many things but in his own writings depicts himself as a 'folklorist' and a 'collector' of songs and stories from oral traditions (Lomax, 1960). Perhaps his most outstanding legacy is the concept of cantometrics. Lomax's concept of cantometrics is a study of global singing styles that has deep geographical undertones (1959; 1968). Cantometrics was the term coined for a rating system that describes the main character of recorded song performance so that song may be "statistically compared and classified" (Lomax, 1959a, 2003: 143). Invented by Alan Lomax and Victor Grauer in the 1960s, it was used to analyse and categorise musical regions (Lomax, 1972). Inherent in the cantometrics model is the importance of difference and boundaries, which may be highlighted or diminished through music.

From an early stage, Lomax understood music as part of folklore and considered folksong and folklore as “living, growing and changing thing[s]” (1941, 2003: 64). Lomax also acknowledged the role of the phonograph as a “voice for the voiceless” and could be used for political purposes (1960, 2003: 174). Music could be used as a mode of communication to draw attention to a place or issue. In the context of highlighting various issues, the regional distinctiveness of a folk music tradition becomes more decisive in communicating other differences. Regional variations in folk music can then become institutionalised for political as well as aesthetic purposes. The concept of the region is further enhanced by the various agents and through the various processes that shape the sound and context of the music tradition.

The central concerns of Lomax’s project remain relevant as musical regions are identified or constructed and motivated by both politics and economics. It is important to note Jarviluoma’s observation that “music and music-making construct, rather than merely reflect, places” (2000: 103). Music and the act of making music is a powerful marker of culture and place. As Stokes suggests: “The musical event [...] evokes and organizes collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity” (1994: 3). However, the connection between music and place may also be a marketing construct motivated by a desire for commercial success (Vallely, 1997; Connell and Gibson, 2004). Connell and Gibson (2004) critique the association between music and place in the commercial music industry and examine the process of deterritorialization in music. Connell and Gibson acknowledge that “musicians are situated in multiple cultural and economic networks – some seeking to reinvent or revive traditions, others creating opportunities in musical production to stir national political consciousness or contribute to transnational political movements, and some merely seeking to achieve commercial success” (2004: 343). The connection between music and place and the identification of musical regions is thus a complex geography that requires an understanding of social and economic networks in which the music is created and the interpretation of the music by audiences outside the region.

The Promised Land

Bruce Springsteen has contributed significantly to a particular conceptualisation of American identity and has brought political discourse to a wider audience. Describing Springsteen’s early career, Lifshey states: “Despite his

dedication to working-class narratives, Springsteen and his songs were viewed as apolitical, authentic, and provincial slices of quintessentially national life” (2009: 227). However, a reading of Springsteen’s lyrics and an understanding of his personal life highlight the changes that both Springsteen and his music undergo (Moss, 1992).

The youthful, rebellious Springsteen sings of sexual objectification and constructs images that “paint a complex, detailed portrait of the social environment” (Moss, 1992: 170). As well as providing a social geography of urban America, Springsteen relates to the vast open spaces of the American landscape and identifies a variety of places, each with similar ‘American’ characteristics. ‘The Promised Land’, invoking the dreams, hopes and desires of young Americans, is the title of a song from Springsteen’s fourth album, entitled *Darkness at the Edge of Town* (1978), which precedes a darker phase in Springsteen’s music that reveals the American dream to be a double edged sword. By the release in 1984 of the album ‘Born in the USA’, the combination of lyrics, image and persona become an ironic and often misinterpreted expression and critique of American life and identity complete with reference to the Vietnam war, road trips, working on the highway and meeting girls at union dances. The cover features his blue jeans and white t-shirt against red and white stripes, a very overt reference to the American flag (see also Moss, 1992; Lifshay, 2009). Later, on the 2001 release *Live in New York City*, Springsteen reminds listeners that “you can get killed just for living in your American skin” in a song inspired by the police shooting death of Amadou Diallo that highlights the position of minority groups in American society. By commenting on the ills of American society, Springsteen is providing an opportunity for people to engage with his music and, through it, the politics of American society.

Springsteen provides a commentary on both the land where the American dream continues and the complex social antagonism that divides American communities. Borders and division are part of the America performed by Springsteen but the injustices and challenges portrayed impact on all parts of American society. Many of the challenges – poverty, migration, racism and a sense of identity – are global issues that concern the quest for a better world.

The role of Bruce Springsteen as the voice of ‘ordinary’ working-class Americans wearing blue denim jeans is shaped in two ways. He is both the New Jersey rock star and the road loving, justice chasing folk singer. Examining the

development of Springsteen's career in the light of comparisons with Bob Dylan, Lifshy notes: "All writers recognized that Springsteen's songs were committed to telling the trials of working-class individuals; yet the possibility that this characteristic marked a reinvigoration of a national folk music tradition in the line of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger rather than of rock and roll was gradually lost" (2009: 226). However, the release of an homage album and tour in 2006 called *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*, which connected Springsteen to a folk genealogy of protest music, realigns Springsteen's music with the politics of world social order. Lifshy, who identifies a variety of songwriters who deal with issues relating to the American-Mexican border and the issues of identity on both sides, describes Springsteen as "a singer/songwriter who theorizes the borderlands in ways that at first may seem at odds with his career-long, conscious associations with red, white, and blue semiotics" (2009: 221). The paradox suggested by Lifshy ignores the longstanding complexities of Springsteen's music and the relationship between the artist and his audience.

The political significance of Springsteen and his music was reinforced and further complicated during Barack Obama's presidential campaign. Springsteen, the working-class rocker and reinvented folk singer aligned himself with the black liberal intellectual of immigrant roots. There is conflict between their audiences and identities yet Springsteen serves to bridge the distance between disparate groups in American society. The evocation of emotion is harnessed through the use of Springsteen's musical reaction to 9/11, 'The Rising', as one of the Obama campaign's theme songs (Lifshy, 2009). From highlighting division, Springsteen becomes part of the hope for unity in America under a new president.

The title "The Rising", like the earlier "Born in the USA", requires more than a shallow interpretation of intent. Springsteen does not advocate retaliation but rather seeks to rise above the events of 9/11 and the challenges that face humanity. Springsteen continues 'Working on a dream', becoming almost romantic as he nears a quarter century of albums. His message may have softened but his emotion in highlighting the challenges in American, and by extension global societies, highlight the role of music in the diffusion of political and social discourse.

Feed the world

Bruce Springsteen is a successful artist who has highlighted a number of issues in American society. In the 1980s, Springsteen also contributed to other efforts including the song 'Trapped' that featured on the *We are the World* album that sought to raise money for Ethiopia during the 1984-85 famine. That famine reinforced the potential role of music and musicians in highlighting world issues and raising money. Possibly the most famous interplay between music and politics was the development of BandAid and later LiveAid. In response to images from a refugee camp in Korem, Ethiopia, showing dying children and starving women, broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on 7th October 1984, the Irish rock musician, Bob Geldof, recorded the song 'Do They Know It's Christmas'. Geldof went on to organize the LiveAid concert the following July, which was broadcast simultaneously from London and Philadelphia, and viewed by 1.5 billion people around the world. The records and concert ultimately raised between \$100 and \$500 million for famine relief in Africa. However, the projects also disseminated images of starving Africans that were often decontextualised and began, over time, to lose their impact. According to Jamieson:

These celebrity-driven, media-centered projects were valuable for a number of reasons. They created awareness of suffering in Africa, motivated people to act, and raised large sums of money. However, these events also contributed to creating some important misconceptions about the causes, consequences, and context of the suffering which they highlighted (2005: 154).

The ethics of raising these issues in an appropriate manner presents an affront to the motivation behind raising the issue in the first place. While Geldof's role as a performer has been overshadowed by his role as a social activist, other artists have benefitted from the attention developed by the cause.

That is not to discredit the humanitarian and political work of artists such as Geldof and fellow Irishman and U2 frontman, Bono. Bono, aka Paul Hewson, has been to the fore in lobbying for third world debt relief and has held audiences with a number of world leaders. Amongst the organisations Bono is involved with, he has co-founded DATA, EDUN, the ONE Campaign and Product Red that are concerned with debt, aids, trade, and climate change with a particular focus on Africa. As a young, emerging artist, Bono had famously sang the line " Tonight thank God it's them instead of you" on the original release but, partly due to their limited success at

that time, U2 did not appear on the Christmas Day episode of *Top of the Pops* in 1984 in which the line was mimed by Paul Weller. Bono underlined the importance of this line in the 2004 rerecording of the line, this time as an elder statesman of the global music industry and a significant lobbyist on world affairs. The new recording provided an opportunity for younger music stars to become familiar with the motivating factors behind the song's original release and raised the profile of political issues for a first world consumer audience.

The non-musical activities of Bob Geldof and Bono may detract attention from the themes and messages contained in their music. Though few songs tackle humanitarian concerns to the extent achieved by the song 'Do they know it's Christmas', both Geldof and Bono have provided social commentaries similar to Bruce Springsteen in an American context. 'Rat Trap' and 'Joey's on the street again' provide insight into Dublin of the 1970s and demonstrate influences of Springsteen and even Dylan. However, Geldof's contribution to music fades behind his contribution to politics and into near neglect.

In contrast, U2 have managed to maintain musical momentum alongside and perhaps in spite of Bono's political profile. In many instances, however, it is difficult to relate the music of U2 to any particular cause or social context. That is not to suggest that the band have not drawn inspiration from their experiences. One need only consider the American symbolism of *The Joshua Tree* (1987) or the more overt political references in *How to dismantle an atomic bomb* (2004). In the context of an Obama presidency that seeks to find an answer to global conflicts and made use of Springsteen's post-9/11 anthem, it is worthwhile considering U2's 1983 album *War* and in particular the song 'Sunday Bloody Sunday'.

In asking the question, "How long must we sing this song?", Bono sought to point out the atrocities of war without taking sides. Bloody Sunday refers to two events in Irish history. The first was in 1920 when British troops fired into the crowd at a football match in Dublin in retaliation for the killing of British undercover agents. The second was on January 30, 1972, when British paratroopers killed 13 Irish citizens at a civil rights protest in Derry, Northern Ireland. The song is more about the latter but also refers to Easter Sunday, a celebration shared by both sides in the conflict in Northern Ireland. It is not intended as a rebel song and, like Springsteen's *Rising*, Bono "won't heed the battle call". Music presents another option, a way of dealing with atrocities and conflicts through

discourse and debate. Other songs, including Phil Coulter's 'The Town I Loved So Well' and Paul Brady's 'The Island' reflect the musical responses to the Troubles that involve their audience in the discourse towards peace and reconciliation. The power and profile created by artists such as Bono through the commercial music industry strengthens the messages communicated through his music and creates opportunities for him to further engage with the political establishment.

I still haven't found what I'm looking for

This brief consideration of the role of music in understanding the world has reflected upon the role of music in geographical study, particularly in consideration of the politics of identity and conflict. As a process within a process, the connectivity of music and politics is based, in part, on the juxtaposition of roles of musicians and politicians. The appearance of Bono on the cover of *Time Magazine* as the man who may save the world (4th March, 2002) is matched by the appearance of Barack Obama, 'A new hope', on the cover of *Rolling Stone* (20th March, 2008). The rhetoric they present creates echoes and harmonies that bring attention to global concerns in a commercially driven, capitalist western world.

Music and musicians have a dual role to play in the global politics of the twenty-first century. Inspired by the situations in which they find themselves, musicians are artists who can create lyrical representations that engage with, highlight and bring to their audience the political issues of the day. Not only that, the lyrics can suggest an approach and attitude to responding to major world issues. As celebrities, musicians have another role in using their profile to influence the decision makers, in some instances acting as 'voices for the voiceless'. The issues championed in both lyrics and actions may be local or international.

In highlighting Springsteen, Geldof and Bono in the context of Obama's presidency, I have presented a particular aspect of the role of music in understanding global processes. Obama, Springsteen, Geldof and Bono will continue to climb the highest mountains, consider the consequences of city walls, and must speak with the tongues of angels if they are to achieve harmony in a world out of tune. In different ways, they seek to defend the rights of people in various situations and contexts and make the world aware of diversity and disparity in the world.

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