

Music and Identity — Tim Lawrence (Music Meanings)

This week I want to continue to explore ways in which we can make sense of music, and I'll be paying particular attention to the question of identity.

To begin, get into groups of two or three with your immediate. I'm about to play three songs. Discuss the songs in your group and try to analyse the influence of identity in these songs. Think about both the artist, the instrumentation and also the way in which audiences might have received these songs.

MUSIC: Donna Summer "I Feel Love" from *I Remember Yesterday* (1977)

MUSIC: Nirvana "Smells Like Teen Spirit" from *Nevermind* (1991)

MUSIC: 50 Cent "In Da Club" from *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'* (2003)

Discussion and note:

Summer:

- The rise of the black female diva in 1970s disco.
- The "struggle" between the diva and the producer, with the diva aiming for expression and the producer attempting to impose studio control.
- The influence of disco gay constituency in promoting figures like Summer.
- Summer's attempt to distance herself from disco's gay constituency, especially in the 1980s.

Nirvana:

- The history of white straight expressionism at the centre of the rock cannon.
- The identity of the rebel, dating back to figures such as James Dean, as expressed in the thrash guitar.
- Nirvana, Cobain and the crisis of masculinity.

50 Cent:

- Black urban poverty.
- Gang culture and empowerment.
- The club: sex, drugs, music (and the twist of the "sex, drugs and rock'n'roll" of rock).
- Electronic instrumentation and the break with black connectivity of Public Enemy-style sampling.

Background to the question of identity

So far we've spent a fair amount of time exploring Marxist models of analysis: Adorno brought a Marxist analysis to bear on popular music, while the subculture theorists of the 1970s developed a Marxist critique of the relationship between youth, class culture, resistance and co-option. Within these critiques, the question of identity was more or less contained within the question of class — whether one was working class or middle class, which related primarily to one's relationship to the means of production, or the economy. But this analytical perspective also came under sustained pressure during the 1960s and 1970s, during which time questions of racial identity, gender identity and sexual identity became increasingly prominent.

These alternative identities came to the fore as a result of the work of a series of activists within the civil rights movement, the feminist movement and the gay and lesbian movement. All of these groups were engaged with the struggle for equality.

The US civil rights movement was led by Martin Luther King, whose ideas were most forcibly expressed in his famous speech "I have a dream..." As the African American struggle for civil rights and black equality before the law began to founder, the figure of Malcolm X, who advocated a more radical strategy of black resistance and black power became more popular, with groups such as the Black Panthers increasingly influential.

The feminist movement had been developing via the suffrage movement since the beginning of the century, and the so-called "second wave" of feminists began to argue for full social and economic equality during the 1960s. One of the key issues for these campaigners was the right to take birth control pills as well as the right to abortion, which were seen as key goals if women were to gain control over their own bodies.

Meanwhile, the gay liberation movement also campaigned for equal rights before the law, including the right for gay men to congregate with each other as well as have sexual intercourse. The Stonewall Rebellion of June 1969 marked a turning point for the campaign. The rebellion took place when police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar situated in Greenwich Village, when the owners failed to pay off the local police officers, and the ensuing riot lasted for days. It marked the moment when gay men also began to wage a campaign that drew parallels with the civil rights and feminist movements.

These black, female and gay/lesbian protests weren't contained to the USA, but also developed in Europe. Yet whereas race and queer rights were more accentuated in the US, the European campaign movements tended to develop a wider critique of the state and the failure of the labour movement to take account of the corrupting tendency of the state. The peak of this reaction occurred in the Paris in 1968, when students and others engaged in a general strike and attempted to close down the city.

From this point on, identity became a central political question. It became the question through which questions of culture and politics have been regularly framed, and it's something that might concern many of us. Whether we're black Jewish, Latin, male, female, gay, lesbian, straight, working-class or middle-class, identity is something that is

likely to be an important question. Interestingly, the group that tends to be least concerned with its identity is the most powerful group of all — white straight middle-class men — because this group is the most powerful and has the least reason to be concerned with the need to transform society. As a result, white straight men tend to be "invisible", especially when they are middle-class. If you're interested in reading more about this argument, please pick up a copy of Richard Dyer's book *White*. Then again, as the world becomes more complicated and less stable, and as previously marginalised groups gain more power, even white straight middle-class men have started to experience a crisis in confidence and have become increasingly concerned with their own identity. This gets to be expressed in various ways, from calls for men to get back in touch with their "real manhood" by spending a day in a forest eating bark and howling like a wolf, to calls for the Britain to become more British and demonstrate the strength of traditional values by introducing a ban on immigrants or going to war against a Middle Eastern country.

All of these questions pervade music: hip hop is overtly concerned with the condition of men and women in the United States; R&B explores the field of black heterosexuality; rock tends to focus on relationships between straight men and women, as well as the "new sensitivity" of men, who have become increasingly insecure since the decline of industrial capitalism during the 1970s; house explores the role of the body in relationship to black culture and queer culture; techno engages with questions of the relationship between the human and the machine; grime amounts to a meditation on black poverty and the attempt to escape that poverty in East London, and so on. In other words, music engages with and expresses people's lives — their identities.

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One of the key observers of this protest was a figure called Michel Foucault, who we will return to later in the module when I outline the concept of discourse theory. For now it's enough to know that Foucault emerged as one of the key theorists to challenge the Marxist model of class and power, or the idea that power is located in the bourgeoisie, which attempts to secure its control over the means of production (i.e. its wealth) by perpetuating an ideology of individualism and competition and, where appropriate, as Gramsci noted, making concessions with working-class groups in order to gain their consent.

Foucault, however, didn't accept that power was simply located in class, but argued instead that it was dispersed rather than central, and could be found in every area of society. Foucault's early investigations centred on prisons and hospitals, where he showed how power was exercised outside of the framework of class, and could be exercised for its own sake — so psychiatrists or prison wardens weren't part of the property-owning bourgeoisie, yet nevertheless exercised concerted power. From this, Foucault started to pay particular attention to the body, and he concluded from the 1968 rebellion in Paris

that the Marxist analysis of class power could no longer explain the oppression of so many groups in society, or provide the solution to widespread oppression. In other words, Foucault argued that if the current ruling regime in France was simply replaced with a new ruling group that represented the unions, then most forms of oppression would continue to be exercised.

Although Foucault didn't pay much particular attention to questions of race or gender, his theories became important for theorists around race, colonialism and gender, as well as sexuality. Edward Said, for example, adopted Foucault's theories in his critique of Western imperialism, which he developed in his influential book titled *Orientalism*. Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler also drew on Foucault in developing an analysis of gender inequality; Butler's most influential book is titled *Gender Trouble*.

Drawing on Foucault, as well as the failure of left-wing politics parties in the 1960s to take their repression into account, black, female and gay and lesbian activists began to argue that it wasn't enough to postpone their struggle for equality while campaigning for the wider cause of economic equality. And these groups also asked: how come we are excluded from the leadership of the traditional left, and also don't feature in their political agendas.

These developments were part of a wider movement in which the so-called grand narratives that explained the world came under unprecedented pressure during the 1960s. Grand narratives are narratives that attempt to capture the entire meaning of the universe in their story. The first grand narratives to come into play were religious narratives that contained an entire explanation of the universe: how the world came into being, how human beings are organised in the world, how they should behave in the world, and what will happen in the future. Marxism did much the same thing as Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism: it provided what many believed to be a scientific explanation of the development of the world, of the class division of society, and how that class division could be ultimately resolved. Psychoanalysis, which emerged at the beginning of twentieth century, did much the same thing in its attempt to explain the development of the child and how the child could mature into an adult and, having repressed its desires, continue to lead a health mental life.

All of these grand narratives or metanarratives remain compelling, yet all of them tended to place white straight men at the centre of their concerns. (As I've mentioned before, Freud wrote about girls, but he was mainly concerned with the development of boys.) And during the 1960s and 1970s, black groups, feminist organisations and gay and lesbian groups started to ask why they had been excluded from these accounts of history. And they also began to demand that their concerns and inequalities also be taken into account.

This provides part of the background to the three tracks that I played at the top of the lecture:

Donna Summer is part of a group of "doubly oppressed" black women who began to discover their voice in the 1970s. Up until this moment, women tended to play a subjugated role within the music industry: there were very few female musicians and even fewer female producers, and when women sang they were often part of an anonymous group (the girl groups) and performed songs that were written for them by men. But linking into the rise of disco, which was powered by the gay male adoration of black women, women started to both articulate (i) a form of resistance and (ii) a form of sexual desire. So disco tracks regularly featured black women berating men for not being reliable enough, or, on "I Feel Love", expressing the desire for pleasure and satisfaction — the kind of desire that had been expressed previously by men such as Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones ("I can't get no satisfaction...").

Nirvana and Kurt Cobain were part of the generation of white rock and rollers who no longer believed that their position of authority was secure. Previously, white groups could be fairly sure of their position in society, and could more or less guarantee that they would do better in life than their parental generation. This was based on the steady upwards curve of the western economy since the 1930s, which carried on through to the oil crisis of the early 1970s. Following the recession of the early 1970s, however, industrial capitalism came under increasing pressure, and the previous scenario in which unemployment was low and jobs usually existed for life began to break down. This process accelerated during the 1980s when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan worked in tandem to privatise large swatches of the economy and introduce cuts into the welfare state. The neoliberalism of the 1980s was freer and more dynamic, yet it was also much riskier than before, and this led to a much greater sense of insecurity. And at the same time, industrial manufacturing in the west began to break down and the economy became more service-oriented, so men spent more and more time at computers or working as shop assistants and less and less time performing tasks of manual labour. In other words, the male work sector became less "manly"; men became less sure of their ability to function as the breadwinners of a family; and within the family unit women started to play a greater role in earning money thanks to the rise (in the new flexible economy) of flexible part-time work. It's no wonder that Kurt Cobain felt so insecure and angst-ridden, or that he took to dressing up in female clothing and eventually committed suicide. And fans who felt a similar sense of insecurity helped make Nirvana the most influential rock band of the era.

50 Cent is another artist whose work is wrapped up in wider questions of African American identity and, in particular, the disintegration of black communal structures during the 1970s following the failure of the civil rights movement to create a meaningful form of equality for black citizens in the United States. The Ronald Reagan administration was notable for its spending on the military, which was deemed to be necessary to win the Cold War against the Soviet Union (now the ex-Soviet Union), and Reagan slashed spending on welfare in order to fund this expansion of the military-industrial sector. The poorest groups in society lost out — and these poorest groups tended to involve African Americans (as well as immigrants arriving from Latin America). As a result, many African Americans found themselves without educational and work prospects, and also lacked the kind of safety net that was previously provided by the welfare state. In response

they started to try and fare for themselves, seeking money and empowerment in any way they could. And the quickest and easiest way to get rich was to join a gang and deal drugs. For a compelling account of this urban condition, see Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. This is social condition in which a figure like 50 Cent — and countless other rappers — forged their sense of identity. They assumed the mentality of the boxer, who has to fight for survival and defeat the competition if he (and it's always a man) is to succeed. The result is an identity that is individualistic, competitive and lawless — and when that figure survives and even makes money, this is a victory to be celebrated in a very public way, thus: *bling*.

The final issue I want to consider in this lecture is to consider whether music reflects society, or shapes society — a question that is one of the most important considerations of Simon Frith in today's seminar reading, "Music and Identity". It is standard to assume that culture in general is somehow reflective of the wider social condition — that music, like television and films and other cultural forms, doesn't shape society but somehow reflects it. And this, to a large extent, is how I've been contextualising the three songs I played at the top of the lecture — that the Donna Summer record came about as a result of female expressiveness in regard to their sexuality (and we could also add the increasing prominence of technology in society, and questions this raised for human identity in general). Similarly, I've argued that the Nirvana track can be read as exploring the identity tensions that emerged out of some kind of crisis of masculinity that became prominent as the western world shifted from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. And 50 Cent appears to be a figure who has been shaped by the conditions of black deprivation in the USA in late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Yet is it important to explore the idea that music doesn't simply reflect the world, but also contributes to shaping the world. The Donna Summer record, for example, was the first to use the Moog in such a prominent disco context, and its proposition that dancers are in fact cyborg beings whose humanity is modified by an engagement with a range of technologies, ranging from sound systems to drugs to synthesisers to drum machines, became highly influential in encouraging dancers, musicians and producers to reimagine the aesthetics of music and the politics of being human. It was out of a record like *I Feel Love*, for example, that Detroit's innovative techno producers Derrick May, Juan Atkins and Kevin Saunderson started to record a whole new genre that explored the relationship between urban decline, black identity and the machine. For these and other artists and audiences, Summer (along with Moroder) was a key figure in rethinking the position of the human, and exploring the way in which humans increasingly interact with technology, and can assume alternative identities in this process.

The same is clearly true of 50 Cent. 50 Cent didn't invent gang warfare in US inner cities, but there is no inevitability that young black men should respond to their condition in this way, and 50 Cent's success has clearly had an impact on scores of young black men. I'm not arguing that consumers of music inevitably act on the practices of recording artists, yet 50 Cent has had a huge impact, becoming the most prominent black rapper of recent times. His presence as a global artist has helped establish the relationship between blackness, masculinity and violence as a central concern in US popular culture.

Therefore as Frith notes in his essay "Music and Identity" (in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, London: Sage, 1996), music doesn't just reflect identity but also shapes it: "the issue is not how a particular piece of music or a performance reflects the people, but how it produces them, how it creates and constructs an experience — a musical experience, an aesthetic experience — that we can only make sense of by *taking on* both a subjective and a collective identity." (109)

Frith adds: "Identity is not a thing but a process — an experiential process which is most vividly grasped *as music*." [110]

And Frith also argues: "The experience of pop music is an experience of identity: in responding to a song, we are drawn, haphazardly, into emotional alliances with the performers and with the performers' other fans. Because of its qualities of abstractness, music is, by nature, an individualizing form. We absorb songs into our own lives and rhythm into our bodies; they have a looseness of references that makes them immediately accessible. At the same time, and equally significantly, music is obviously collective." (121)

If we look around the room, we can see the way in which music has helped produce us — from the students who dress in clothing that's related to hip hop gear, or those who prefer an Indie rock look, or those who might be more interested in showing some flesh or accentuating their sexuality or displaying their connectedness with technology by flashing as et of i-Pod headphones. These are all ways in which music helps produce us, and not simply reflect us. And of course this production isn't simply reflected in the way we dress or talk or hold our bodies, but is most heightened in the moment when we listen to that music, and by absorbing its sounds waves, accept that music is actually becoming part of us — part of our bodies, our affective experience of the world and our identities.