

World Music Does Not Exist

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It takes an era of world culture for world music to exist—despite my title—as an idea in the mind of journalists, critics, and the buyers of records. It is real if only because it is talked about as though it were real. When so much of the world seems immediately accessible without our ever having to leave home, and our experience of things is really an experience of the representations of things, the idea of world music is arguably as important, and as real, as a world music that really existed.

Through television at any rate, we appear to have access to a bewildering array of music from around the world. In Germany, where I lived in 1997 and 1998, one could find on MTV or the Viva channel both rock and rap and shades of pop from France, Italy, Britain and the United States, all available without ever having to buy a record. A visit to a theatre brings one into contact with movie soundtracks of an even more varied and more truly global scope. In that kind of venue most audiences, even without looking for them, will hear South African township music, Latin salsa, West African rock, Hindi pop, Moroccan chaabi, Brazilian samba, Colombian cumbia, and Algerian rai—musics that over time actually become familiar, although the film-goers will not know the names of the styles or where they originated or anything about how they signify in other locales. In stores, metropolitan listeners find a whole section of shelves with CDs grouped alphabetically by country in a bin labeled “world music.” And there, in the altogether normal place

that is a record store, world music is born, and becomes real. The very everyday and haphazard act of simple marketing suddenly coalesces into an idea or, rather, clarifies physically an idea that already exists. In the countries of Europe and North America, the idea is what hearing music from other parts of the world must be, the only thing we can make of it: namely, not a specific *form* of music (symphonic, choral, written, improvised, rural, or ritual) but a *place* of music—the music of everywhere else.

Indeed, Philip Sweeney recounts that in the summer of 1987 a series of meetings took place in an upstairs room of a North London pub, the “Empress of Russia.” Twenty-five British representatives of independent record companies, concert promoters, broadcasters and other individuals active in the propagation of music from around the world assembled to strategize. The objective was to discuss details of a modest promotional campaign for the autumn, and to boost sales of the increasing numbers of records being issued as a result of the African musical boom in other parts of the world. One of the obstacles to persuading record shops to stock the new international product was the lack of an identifying category to describe it. Record shop managers did not know whether to call it “ethnic,” “folk,” “international,” or some equivalent. They were inclined in the absence of an appropriate niche in their racks simply to reject it. As part of a month-long promotion, the broadcasters and record executives did not so much find as invent a solution:

[They] determined to create such a tag and attempted to spread its use via one or two music press adverts, a cassette compilation of music on the various labels involved in the campaign, and the distribution to record shops of “browser cards” bearing the new appellation, to be placed in the sections it was hoped they would now create in their racks. After a good deal of discussion the term chosen was “World Music,” other contenders such as “Tropical Music” being judged too narrow of scope. Within months the term was cropping up in the British press, within a year it had crossed the Channel and was rivaling the existing French phrase “sono mondiale,” coined three years earlier by the fashionable Paris glossy *Actuel* and its broadcasting subsidiary Radio Nova. (Sweeney ix)

The definitive new wave of the global music scene was in all truth an afterthought, a byproduct, as much of the unplanned world of the market tends to be.

World music is my subject, though, not because of the ironies of its origins, but because of its representative nature. More than just expanding tastes, world music characterizes a longing in metropolitan centers of Europe and North America for what is not Europe or North America: a general, usually positive, interest in the cultural

life of other parts of the world found in all of the major media—in film, television, literature in translation, as well as in music. It represents a flight from the Euro-self at the very moment of that self's suffocating hegemony, as though people were driven away by the image stalking them in the mirror. This hunger for the cultural practices of the third world is occurring just when one finds declarations far and wide that a single global culture is emerging, that nation-states are an obsolete political form, and that a common cultural currency already exists—or has begun to exist—among teenagers from Beijing to Santiago de Chile. Two sides of a contradiction come together without being recognized as contradictory: the appeal to difference and the announcement that differences are happily disappearing.

The idea of hybrid cultures in this context is a celebratory ideal that accompanying declarations of a new global and cosmopolitan outlook that breaks out of previous limitations, does away with former prejudices, and welcomes border crossings into one's own carefully nurtured cultural preserve. Nevertheless, to argue as Martin Roberts does, for example, that world music is "a kind of Trojan horse for disrupting the system from within" is very dubious (236). On the other hand, it has to be admitted that there is something about the new public fans of world music that is similar to what Pierre Bourdieu called the *lector*—a new kind of reader who calls to mind the social conditions of possibility for reading in a given time; the "priest" who comments on an already established tradition rather than the "prophet" who creates it (Bourdieu 94–5). There is a point, in other words, behind the cultural studies cheerleading section of radical music theory.¹ It is partly true, as they say, that movements are seeking to subvert the ideological parochialism of Euro-American popular music, and as such helping to dismantle the cultural logic of Western popular music. Listening to these products dialogically seems to entail a proposition, or a hope, of imaging a different kind of world, free from imperial domination. What is never pointed out, though, is that the subversive globalism envisioned here neither exists, *nor should exist* in the way it is being imagined, and that, although a harder argument to make, is my point. After all, the technological means of realizing transnational hybridity have existed for a long time without producing the massive movement towards hybridity that we witness today.

The many articles and books written on "world music" today give us a sense of what is taking place in this apparent hybridization. A fairly representative case is the book, *World Music: A Rough Guide* by Simon Broughton, Mark Ellingham, David Muddyman and Richard Trillo, which is a beautifully produced compendium, complete with

texts, photos, and maps acquainting readers with the variety and richness of folk and popular musics from literally everywhere. It has entire chapters with several subheadings devoted to the Celtic world, the Balkans, the Maghreb, the Gulf, the Indian subcontinent, and the Far East. We are taken on a fact-filled journey through bhangra music, Sufi devotional music, Siamese bikers rock, Transylvanian metal music, and the political pop of Southern Africa—Chimurenga and Soukous. Each of the sections is written by someone who is either from the region or has lived there continuously, and the renditions are accurate and sensitive to detail.

If one had reservations about such a book, it could not be that it was ill-informed. The problem is rather a categorical one, which, I am suggesting is also, a phenomenological one. To take the Qawwalis of Pakistan and place them alongside the Benin rock of Angelique Kidjo is to get a false sense of both, regardless of what is said about them. One is a form of devotional music that has no desire to become *of* the world, for example, while the other is a music based on American models, altered by the addition of local rhythms and instrumentation, and produced in European recording studios for global distribution and consumption. Albanian epic, to take another example, has a primarily narrative content whereas Ethiopian groove is dancehall music. The categories on display—quite apart from the intentions of the authors to inform their public—force them into offering a training that inevitably misinforms. Its subtitles, in order to prompt interest, cannot help flattening all this variety out into a series of manageable clichés. The section on Turkey, therefore, is called “Rondo a la Ataturk,” the section on flemenco, “A Wild, Savage Feeling”; on Zaire, “The Heart of Darkness,” and on Indian Classical music, “From Raags to Riches.”

This last example may be the most instructive, since to anyone who knows the complexities and millenia-long commentary on Indian classical music would be stunned to see it placed in the company of Irish folk music. It would be unimaginable, I think, for the authors, to place European classical music into such a context, since it quite rightly would be seen as requiring a training in a whole array of specialist skills, and historical understanding that simply could not be captioned or captured in this way. Paradoxically, what is found in this book is precisely *not* world music, but rather local or regional music that either does not travel well, or has no ambition to travel. An ethnographic impulse to study the foreign here confuses those protecting their art from invasion with music seeking to enter a transnational youth culture of entertainment. The specimens of the first, tacked to a musical wax board like a butterfly’s wings, are placed alongside the work of immigrants who

want nothing more than to enter the display-case rooms. But there is more to the paradox. What *is* world music—in the sense of being globally disseminated and popularly, even reverently, internalized almost everywhere—is precisely what is *not* “world music,” which is to say included in books like these: namely, European classicism and American jazz, blues, rock, and (now) rap. In spite of the enormous regional popularity of Hindi film songs, for example, or Quranic religious music, only New World African music and European classicism are the traditions that can be called with any justification “world.”²

This is not to say that forms of music cannot or should not be exported globally or enjoyed out of their contexts; or that it is impossible *really* to understand a music if one is not from the culture producing it. But, circuits of leisure and relaxation like those involved in consuming music are also distractive and therefore adept at slipping arguments past us, without our noticing or criticizing them fully. When one is dealing with a world music, some of its implicit claims are highly questionable. The concept of a world music is a loaded one, even an offensively narrow one, and yet it is hard to see the matter in this way in a record store, because the ideological questions conflict with the act of buying enjoyment.³ Given that leisure is a form of work and recreation a form of consumer labor, it is also the case that ideological persuasion is more effective in relaxed minds where resistance may gnaw at the ethical soul but rarely prompts one to kill the moment in the name of principle. The collective displeasure elicited by bothering with such ethical quibbles is all too palpable.

It is therefore hard to force oneself to work through the claims implicit in a category like world music. For example, one has to consider the forces of market selection on the transformation of the material. What most people understand to be salsa today is a 1970s studio sound developed by Latin musicians in New York in order to compete with rock music, and win a share of the youth audience. It was also meant to recreate the enormous success that Latin music had commercially in the American and Mexican *mambo* of the 1940s and 1950s. The point is not that “salsa” is therefore simply a dilution of Afro-Cuban *batá* drumming or the a cappella songs of devotion, the so-called “cantos” to the *orishas*, or even of the early *septetos* in Cuba of the 1930s, even though salsa originally grew out of all of these, and well as other leads from elsewhere in the Caribbean. The point is that the direction in which “salsa” developed was increasingly dictated by a world music concept, which is to say a joining in sound of already established American popular and commercial forms. It had to take that road, which meant there

were other roads it could not take, or that it even did take in Cuba (a country partially, although not completely, protected from the world market) while meeting bewilderment abroad—at least before being “borrowed” by musicians in Miami, Los Angeles and New York, and then transformed into local variants of an older same. In this structure of creation and reception, the message audiences take away is not about the North Americanization of the Cuban *son*, but the openness of the market to non-Western forms of music.

The circuits of leisure, then, for the very reason that they do not seem to be a place where arguments are taking place, are especially effective arenas of persuasion. This is all the more true when one considers that music-listening is not only a leisure activity, but one where serious affective commitments are thought to be elaborated: the deep investment, for example, in the high cultural appreciations of art; or the playing out of various lifestyle politics through music, where music is seen to be youth rebellion. When one speaks of Jimi Hendrix, Charlie Parker, Bob Marley, or Chucho Valdez, for example—leave alone European classical music—one is not just talking about passing time. In metropolitan circles, at any rate, the implication is always that these icons place us in the presence of high art. There is an amazingly developed literature of devotion to this art that is very technical and very dedicated to the notion of innovative “genius.” Similarly, from early blues through British punk, one of the major avocations of music has, quite simply, been rebellion—the use of secret codes known only to initiates, a cacaphony as a commentary on the chaos that others had socially created but which was visited upon everyone.

In world music, however, these layers of meaning and traditions of codification undergo a disastrous transformation and traducement. What is, or was, on the mind of Marley in those slow, ganja-inspired, Jamaican complaints about Babylon and the march to an African Zion, is not on the minds of those who play him at parties in Chicago. Again, this is no argument against the alternative uses to which music can be put, but it does add a note of clarity about the limits of hybridity in the widely advertised, but still somewhat dubious, emergence of a world culture. Club or theatrical music, dance, and food—not oil painting or literature—are *the* cultural markers in most of the world, including in those civilizations recognized by Europe as its worthy competitors: China, India, and the Arabic world. The status of literature is itself, relatively speaking, a narrowly regional, affected, intellectual mode of cultural exchange with exaggerated ramifications in the contest of civilizations. Its priority in education in Europe and the United States—a priority that cultural studies has only ineffectively challenged—is an interested

one. The state of literacy and of institutional infrastructures in the undeveloping world practically ensures that literature as such cannot be the art form through which national-popular cultures elsewhere define themselves.

Thus, my attention to music should not be seen as ethnographic or anthropotistic: the study of unbroken tradition or the study of cultures in which tradition is still alive to a greater extent than in overdeveloped countries. The approach taken here is rather a contemporary investigation of cultures that make do while going without—a study of the atmospheres that accompany musical shifts in taste or in aesthetic choice in low-technology zones of economic disenfranchisement. And yet, even here, it is easy to get confounded by prior expectations. World music is not always about “folklorizing” a non-transportable, domestic classicism. In the act of reception, even the amateur knows that the categories are more complicated. A Gilberto Gil or a Youssou N’Dour, for example, cut their records in studios that early Seattle grunge bands never dreamed of. Gil and N’Dour partake of a publicity apparatus whose layers of sophistication are mind-boggling. If there is an unspoken value system in which it is assumed that the raw material of third-world style is transformed in Western recording studios, the idea collapses in individual cases where the prestige or studio finish of the supposedly disenfranchised village artist withers the pretensions to stardom of rich kids from Westchester, even those who eventually make it big.

Beyond that, music as I have been using the term in this essay significantly recalls a larger issue of influence, one that is decisive in battles over the inclusion of new literatures or new cultural forms in the revised curriculums of universities seeking to expand into the postcolonial field. Where did, or do, the original ideas come from that are then taken up by others and used internationally in hybrid forms? While there is quite an emphasis on hybridity itself, or its counterparts—*mestizaje*, transculturation (emphases that seem to obliterate the emphasis on origins, or the question of historical clout in colonial relations)—I do not think the issue of primacy is ever far from view. It always finds its forceful place, even if secretly, on the ledgers of comparative cultural value. As it turns out, with some exceptions in literature, the greatest influence on the West, culturally speaking, has been in the field of music. The flow and direction of North American and European society was much more profoundly affected by the polycultural blendings of tango, mambo, the Cuban septetos, American jazz, Jamaican reggae, Brazilian samba, and Hindi film music than by works of literature. To judge from the Viva channel in Germany or from the specialized sections of the

record stores, such flow and direction is also being affected by “world music,” although only in this containable form. It is not only that much of the music of the Western repertoire, in the classical sphere as well as the popular cultural, comes from other parts of the world, but that everyone knows that it does. Nevertheless, the use-values of the two types of foreignness are dissimilar. Unlike the passive listeners of movie scores, the audience of world music has otherness in mind, whereas the classical amateur hears Dvorak’s *Romany* dances, Tchaikovsky’s Arabic rhythms or Ravel’s Cuban melodies as a whitewashed domesticity.

When I take “world music” critically or skeptically, I should clarify that here I am not favoring a cultural imperialism model with its 1970s sense of pointing to the tyrannical export of mass cultural objects to the third world for the purpose of disarticulating native cultures. On the other hand, unlike many of the critics of so-called salvage ethnography, I believe that this model still has some utility for describing a process that continues into the present. Houston Baker has observed that “a nation’s emergence is always predicated on the construction of a field of meaningful sounds” (Baker 71). However, what is at stake is more than, and different from, the process of cultural imperialism. Deborah James, for example, points out that a certain branch of ethnomusicology displays an interest in “‘pure’ traditional music, and a scorn for hybrid styles or those which have evolved out of the experience of proletarianized communities” (309). Thus, say, Afro-pop elicits a certain scorn for its souped-up studio sound, the mimicry of English or American rock that is then spliced onto more recognizably African communal forms. Purist critics see this as dilution. But such a critique should not be confused with mine.⁴ I would rather point to the critical frame through which music is discussed—a frame that obscures what the music is and is not doing. Once more, I am talking here about the problem of categories, which perhaps is a different way of posing the issue of cultural imperialism precisely in an era of the excited inclusion of non-Western cultures.

The problem of categories is illustrated as well by looking at hip-hop under the rubric of the foreign and the imperial. The coverage of hip-hop in the United States, I would argue, belongs in a study of postcoloniality because it replays in many ways those reports by colonial officials in the nineteenth century on the primitive customs of unruly natives. The U.S. mainstream media’s grasp of the genre known as “rap” is as distant from the source and often as hostile as much of the imperial travel narratives from earlier centuries—viewing events within their own country with the confusion and distaste usually reserved for reporting on antique

lands. This reporting—which for at least a decade has been part of an unofficial public consensus—partakes of the same tropes as those found in the discourses of colonialism, even if it is a domestic issue by and about Americans. Now everywhere—from Senegal to Cuba, from Sweden to Italy, spread along the airwaves—rap is all the more hidden. The mistaken assumption that rap is *only* surface is easier to make in the moment of rap’s runaway popularity. In this atmosphere, all that seemed so important in rap five years ago no longer obtains simply because the extent of its dissemination has so radically changed.

I write these words long after the first version of this essay, and so my examples and focus are in some ways dated. Unlike four years ago, rap now typically sweeps the music video awards, thrills the teeny-bopper crowd in the made-for-primetime displays of Will Smith (the embodiment of the Monkeys of an earlier era), and has itself become a large marketing cliché—a fourth-generation ‘tude copped from folks who once invented a sound, a sound now freely translatable to the hairstyles of L.A. skateboarders and the clothes of the middle-class brats who fill the cast of *Survivor*. Along with the watering down that comes from the deadening embrace of success, there arrives a countervailing hysteria—the one-upsmanship of an Eminem, whose traumatic rhymes still retain the fed-up flavor of the old school, but whose strategies of running from containment slot him in a fast track with only so many tricks to play. Hyperbole has its limits; one can only scream so loud before it becomes laughable. Rap changes so fast that my comments below already describe an era that has passed, but I don’t think the points are obsolete. *Mutatis mutandis*.

Three years ago, one of the biggest rap stories in the popular press covered the wars between East and West Coast. Those based in New York contented themselves by knowing they performed in the place where hip hop was created about twenty years earlier (or at least successfully ripped off from Jamaica before being radically altered by U.S. kids with access to home stereo equipment and their parents’ R&B collections).⁵ Those from Los Angeles basked in the evidence of being the rappers most written about, the ones living in the neighborhoods where most of the big-distribution films about rap were set, the only rappers who truly sold in the platinum range. It was a fight, one could say, with two different faces: on the one hand, authenticity, on the other, market share. But the mainstream reporting of the fight sounded in many of its particulars like the news coverage of intertribal warfare in Rwanda—the kind of association, in fact, that the writers of the articles tried to convey without even winking.

These troubling parallels are helped along by the fact that the fight was not only a battle of words. The murder of Biggie Smalls (Notorious B.I.G. of the group, Junior Mafia) brought to the fore a spatial and symbolic war with colonial echoes. West Coast vs. East Coast rap, far from only being a feud within the rap elites, was a dichotomy recalling older East/ West pairings, including the notion of the Orient and the Occident itself, the West and the rest. In the new urban geography of post-industrial America, this East Coast/West Coast feud within rap pitted a decaying industrial, European and Caribbean immigrant New York of high rises and tenement halls against the sunny image-capitalism of postmodern, decentered, Los Angeles—a city with a large Asian and Latino immigrant base, whose eyes were looking West towards the Pacific. East and West in this sense describe not just the coasts of a single country, but the antipodes of America. The pairings that arose between them underlined a different and much larger, cultural conflict characterized in many ways by time itself: a conflict over modes of development and cultural definition that were occurring on a global scale. New York vs. Los Angeles meant also celluloid vs. print, veranda vs. salon, microchip vs. finance; the celebrity or movie star vs. the author; the predominantly Asian vs. the predominantly Black; the Central American Indian Latino vs. the Caribbean Island Afro-Latino; pastel stucco vs. the pseudo classicism of New York's famous steel grey glass and steel; fun vs. seriousness; the image vs. literacy. The deeply held American myth of the march West was invoked here, silently, as though the Westward direction of American history needed now, having reached the Pacific, to look still further to find its points of significance. Reminded that he or she lived on a globe, the U.S. American found in the Orient, paradoxically, the next West to be discovered. Los Angeles in the rap sphere, as in other spheres, was for many, then, cutting edge. The present that would be future.

As the most celebrated instance of the East/West rapper feud, the death of Biggie Smalls (who was, incidentally, an East Coast rapper) suggested the complicated local specificity of even so widely known a music as rap. This apparently very bald and easy-to-read sort of action—the murder of a popular songster—concealed stories that the reporters missed. The meaning of the murder turned out to be difficult to export outside its locality. Indeed, not only are the contexts of rap tough to make out once exported to Nigeria or France, but they can barely get out of the Black community within North America without being transformed into a narrative with all the subtlety of a comic strip. For Biggie was killed in, of all things, a drive-by shooting. Also, for this reason, the newspapers were able

to portray the killing as part of a turf war among gangsters. The evidence for this news was drawn from the lyrics of the music the “gangsters” listened to, a remarkable illustration of the miserably ill-informed writing of otherwise intelligent American men and women on the subjects and styles of rap.⁶

For the better part of a decade or more, the press and public commentators had been equating rap as a whole with only a small branch of it—the form known as “gangsta rap.” In a literalism they would never accept in an undergraduate essay on Shakespeare, these writers saw the murder as playing out the content of rap’s songs, like some crack-dealer replay of a James Cagney movie or a scene from *The Untouchables*. In March of 1996, the major national newspaper *USA Today* argued that “the beef between the rival coasts centered largely on who created the hard-core style of rap music known as gangsta rap, a genre whose graphic language and vivid descriptions of violence have made it one of the best-selling vehicles in recorded music” (*USA Today*, March 10, D-2). It is not only, as I have argued elsewhere, that the genres of rap are multiple (ranging from subgenres like prankster, the love lyric, bootstrapping civic betterment songs, ganja-vegetarianism, and so on), but that the subtleties of East/West conflict completely escaped the media commentators. What the media were calling “gangster” was a given; it didn’t have to be argued. But what the artists themselves were alluding to, without the media’s being hip to it, was not a bad-ass form at all, but a political aesthetic that bled into all of the rap genres, even the ones a neophyte would recognize weren’t properly “gangsta.” What the media vilified was not a ho-bopping, pill-popping sociopathology but the *uniqueness* of rap, which refused to translate or abstract black experience even as it mythified it on its own terms. Unlike R&B or soul, rap would not fudge the language. It refused to speak the inviting creed of integration solemnified by the legacy of Martin Luther King, which had practically been the passport for black public utterance in the past. Nor was it that distilled heroin haze of bebop that could, along with Jackson Pollock, form a new classicism among the cigarette-smoking beat intellectuals of white America. Rap became sweepingly popular in white suburbia, among the American racial minorities who are not Afro-American, and indeed throughout the world. In this, consumers may have displayed more savvy than the commentators. The image (if not always the reality) of a *roots* Blackness—working-class and unemployed—had become mainstream. Not even ragtime, bebop or Motown was able to do that.

I want now to consider this claim in order to approach from another angle the proposition that world music does not exist—at

least in the ways it is often talked about. Even with what is arguably one of the most globally disseminated forms of music since the European jazz craze that launched the new technology of radio in the 1920s, rap (unlike “world music”) consists of a fairly untranslatable set of local meanings. Possibly more than other forms, it is dedicated to the in-joke, the group lingo, the neighborhood allusion, right down to a specific mass cultural canon (kung fu films, for example), so that when it is wrenched out of place, sounds impossibly hokey. The feud between East and West Coast is fight over the codes of rap meaning: about whether to restrict the spirit lodge or start charging admission. It’s a fight over who is being true to the South Bronx and who is putting on a show for the Man. *U.S.A. Today’s* turf war is a fiction woven out of the facts of personal rivalries that led to the very unfictional shootings of Biggie Smalls (and Tupac Shakur). The real “war”—like much of the gangsterism—has little to do with those killings. It is rather a trope carried on in a compendium of carefully constructed artistic debate by the Alexander Popes of the black community. When, for example, Chuck D.—the famous MC from the group Public Enemy—writes a song called “Free Big Willie” (a reference to a children’s movie about freeing a whale from a marina sideshow), he’s pimping the L.A. rap glitterati. So too, the medley of four years ago by a group of East Coast artists in a song called “LaLa”—a reference to LA, and an allusion to the traipsing, silly, lightheartedness of West Coast junk music with its sideshow stupidity. The fight between East and West Coast is about whether rap will end up “face down in the mainstream.” How much of the sacred can be pawned off in the quest for loot before something dies within the community? We are watching a fight over reality, and it is a fight in which frankly I take New York’s side.

The East/West split, although particularly charged as a matter internal to rap, and an issue that helps to clarify the bogus fixation on “gangsta” intimates something of that global stretching of boundaries that new technologies and deregulated corporations have produced, particularly in a place like California. New regional agglomerations of racial guestworkers, outsourcing, and color-blind capital investment cut across the boundaries boldly drawn on maps, and make California more a part of Mexico and Japan than Kansas or Massachusetts; similarly they make New York more properly a Caribbean hub, and European port, or the art and intellectual gathering-place of the new Hapsburgs and Romanofs of the international bourgeoisie, Persian, French, Chinese and English, with apartments on Sutton Place and memberships at the New York Athletic Club. The motifs of travel, migration, and transnationalism understandably dominate discussion in the humanities and social

sciences, but almost never in conjunction with the music of rap, which tends instead to be consigned to the African American studies wing of “popcult” theory where (in the identity politics of the academy, at least) one must be black to enter, and where, despite its Jamaican origins, the music is thankfully saved from “world beat,” that typical cobbling of bric-a-brac where music is the primary text and transnationalism is the theory.

In this sense, rap is no exception to that curious tradition of scholarship on the African diasporic musics of North America (ragtime, swing, delta, bebop) that despite global dissemination (after all, they largely created the success of radio in Europe in the 1920s) are a confidently American complex of musical forms. In other words, like blues and jazz before it, rap quite unreflectively signifies for most commentators as American even as the “transnational” is prophesied almost everywhere, and even as rap’s East/West split symbolizes a struggle over art and meaning that is central to the sorts of misunderstandings and violence of interpretation that accompany the physical violence of the United States as current leader of a transnational world. This sort of interplay has existed for a very long time. In 1941, Richard Wright somewhat ambiguously wrote: “Our music makes the feet of the whole world dance, even the feet of the children of the poor white workers who live beyond the line that marks the boundary of our lives. Where we cannot go, our tunes, songs, slang, and jokes go” (Wright 130).

What the media call multiculturalism in the universities combines a commitment to study at least some forms of non-Western history and art as well as the work of ethnic minorities within the United States itself. However, as the Gulf War patriotism of black and Latino communities shows, the status of the marginal or the oppressed is not completely fungible; on the contrary, it is heavily inflected by national-political allegiances, media-defined forms of homogeneous national identity, and the possession of one, rather than another, passport. If multiculturalism-as-non-Western has gradually given way to a multiculturalism glorifying American pluralism, so too has rap played a contradictory role both as domestic whipping boy and international brag—again, in this sense, like jazz. A domestic minority is at the same time a transnational majority, and rap is an American form above all in the crucial role it plays as a mass cultural success story. Its marketability is instrumental in securing a transnationality that is, at basis, American, even as blacks at home are third-class citizens, re-enslaved in a new prison-labor system, prevented from voting in presidential elections, profiled by the urban police, and corralled in dead-end, drug-infested ghettos

which (not coincidentally) are laboratories for creating new music. Thus, we have the sublimation of poverty as market share.

This, however, is not the end of the story. A critique still awaits within postcolonial studies demonstrating how mass culture in that field is simply consigned to the “low,” and then conceded to be uniformly American as though a properly mass culture had not been, and could not be, created in third-world countries without first being ushered through our own familiar domestic settings. The rap hardcore has eagerly challenged this view, even as it is placed in the uncomfortable position of disseminating American mass culture. Rap is American in quite another sense as well: it is American for challenging America, for being prisoners of its dream of commodities—with an emphasis not only on commodities but on *dream*. In its own odd and contradictory way, rap critiques the culture of the spectacle and of representation that dislodges the sense of the real.

Four years ago when I first wrote this essay, KRS1 had just composed a brilliant song with the refrain: “Reality ain’t always the truth/ Rhymes equal actual life for the youth.” The philosopher that he is, KRS1 cuts right to the matter with an ambiguous resonance, and does so in three ways: 1) He gestures to the hostile literalism of the media that took the imagery of gangsta and mistook it for a glorification of senseless killing: the state apparatus who conventionally reduced black representation to factual evidence of conspiracies of evil. 2) By contrast, he alludes as well to the the opposite idea—that some artists take the real violence of police murder or ghetto desolation and dress it up for a record-label sensation, displacing a less flashy but more profound poverty. 3) And finally, he marks the power of symbology, and the need to fight a war of symbols, since rap, like other arts, reports by way of invention. The youth learn via the mediation of a musical form, where mediation is necessitated by the sheer brutality of state repression, like a Samizdat circular or the literary journals of the Argentine left during the dirty war.

There is simply no form as insistently self-vigilant as rap when it comes to keeping it real, although the inevitable mainstreaming has driven a wedge between the tv-fare and the mix-tape circuits of distribution. Every popular art (one thinks especially of punk in this regard) is always en route to commodification, always in the process of becoming a commercial. But for its first two decades or so, no form more than rap was so thematically concerned with demonstrating its resistance to the market and its desire to be in it but not of it, giving way to a whole subgenre where the wac mc was shown up not so much for being untalented but for gooning for the

cameras. Examples include Root's "What They Do," Big L's "Can't Understand it," and Jeru's "you demon motherfuckers/ start coastal rivalries/ Fuck a \$200 sweater/ We need to reach the niggers on the corner." This is, one might say, American by negation. It is a form insistently aware of its location: an America to which it aspires to be the cancellation. It swims in the mainstream, trying not to drown.

The critic Greg Tate is correct when he writes: "The circumscribed avenues for recognition and reward available in the Black community for Black artists and intellectuals working in the avant-garde tradition of the West established the preconditions for a Black bohemia, or a Blackened bohemia, or a white bohemia dotted with Black question marks" (Tate, 233). One could argue that the idea he presents here is not terribly new since the idea of the black undercurrents of artistic rebellion itself can be found at the beginning of the century. One located those undercurrents in the African shapes and forms of Cubism, the African nonsense poetry of early Dada, Rimbaud's African journeys, and the content of much of the self-styled primitivism and ritualized spirit-longing of Surrealism. Even in classical music, with Gershwin in the United States, Kurt Weill in Germany and Darius Milhaud in France, the so-called jazz popularized by early radio found its way into avant-garde expression, and became in a way inseparable from it.

Although right to establish this important link between black popular culture and avant-garde Western practice, Tate implies other claims that are more problematic. His reference, after all, is not only to a style of art but a way of living. Bohemianism is about lifestyle. And it raises the issue of youth in particular, who are typically the ones filling the ranks of bohemia. And what is more, he raises the question of the West where many of the black avant-gardists live, but who, in his account are apparently not *of* the West, only in it. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what allows him to write about this black bohemia with such confidence is that it has already become a public myth, accessible to everyone through the channels of a mass culture, the gallery system, the music industry, television and popular film. And so the issue of avant-garde popularity, a contradiction in terms, is there at the heart of his quotation, although unresolved. We have to ask, then, not only whether it is possible for a form of expression to remain avant-garde while being popular, but if so, what happens to the form in the arena of popular culture.

It seems to me that world music can only be understood through protracted sorties into the frameworks of dissemination and meaning of the individual forms that make it up. If I have barely begun to do so here with rap, I will say even less about "salsa," observing

only that Afro-Cuban music, as disseminated in the United States and in Europe throughout the twentieth century, lies at the center of a number of problematics that modify our understanding of modernity, and codify the ways that apparently nostalgic cultural forms are modern precisely in their gestures of preserving the unmodern—and the non-Western.

European avant-garde intellectuals between the wars—when jazz and Cuban music took off internationally—understood their revolt to be modeled on a presence that could not be assimilated. As bohemians, they were in their own minds in the 1920s, and metaphorically, either “Black” or “Red” in the sense that they staked out positions of incompatibility with power by borrowing attitudes and tropes from colonial intellectuals, on the one hand, and left fellow-travelers, on the other. Much of this process suggests in a very tentative way the theoretical complement of a colonial nationalist aesthetic practice and cultures of youth musical revolt, a linkage that has not received much play in the field of postcolonial studies. Black music, political outreach, and advertising all jostle together in uncomfortable and confusing ways. The long shadow of the European left along with political rumblings from the world periphery (in those years, China, Abyssinia, Haiti and elsewhere) supplied the image of an intellectual type confounding the bohemian for the very reason that it overlapped with it while departing from it. The mutual reliance of radio as a technology and jazz (including Afro-Cuban inflected jazz) as a commodity suggested a symbiotic relationship between black music and modernity. Afro-Cuban music was one of the sites in which the important distinction between bohemian revolt and cultural resistance could be seen clearly, unassimilable and attractive as a “not-West.”

The musical structures of the Afro-Cuban *son* intimate an artistic sensibility that does not strive for modernity, and even gestures towards a pre-modernity. Its hybrid forms are designed to signal the insufficiently merged, which it seeks to keep unmerged, although in contact. The religious element in mass-cultural entertainment of the AfroCuban type is designed to hold in stasis the elements of its perpetually delayed unity. As such, it is not a striving backwards but a contemporary response, marked as contemporary, in which ethnic longing only allegorizes its actual ends: an escape by immigrant or domestic laborers (no longer colorful urban *griots*) from the *betises* of the market in a new kind of transnational community. Clearly the audience for salsa today and indeed in the Cuba of the 1920s has no necessary relationship to either the avant-garde or bohemianism as I’ve just described it. And yet bohemian intellectuals in New York live and work in surroundings that best illustrate the uses

of specific cultural receptions as global cultural receptions. Even without knowing it, bohemians drift towards the underworld history of music in pursuit of the glories of non assimilation. But the two worlds that colonialism erects cancel such symbolic slippage, where the bohemian gestures mean differently. The character of “salsa” as a secular devotion, or a national marker in international settings, is muted or missing.

What is now called world music signals a more open and systematic borrowing in a context in which the consumer already understands the critique of colonial cultural theft, and where he or she wears the badge of an elsewhere in a very modest protest against television. Under colonial conditions, metropolitan amateurs often borrow a resistance from the more dangerous terrains of the colonies themselves. But Amiri Baraka, best jazz critic of this or any time, gives us reason to be suspicious of so easy a generosity:

The New Music (any Black Music) is cooled off when it begins to reflect blank, any place “universal” humbug. It is this fag or that koo, and not the fire and promise and need for evolution into a higher species. . . . Beware the “golden touch,” it will kill everything you useta (used to) love. (Baraka 198)⁷

World music thrives in that great hothouse of education and propaganda known as entertainment, watered by the stern disciplines of leisure. It expands our field of cultural perception only by narrowing it, forcing us to admire artifacts that were made slowly and finely under irreducible conditions, but whose power to awe is then nullified by a uniformity of reception. Music, as Jacques Attali has told us is about violence (Attali, “Music” 21–45). As a major economic analyst and critic of globalization, Attali might also add that it is about the market too (Attali “Crash.”).

Notes

¹ The best example of such cheerleading, although rampant, is probably George Lipsitz’s *Dangerous Crossroads*. For a much better analysis of youth resistance through music, see Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland, eds., *Commodify Your Dissent*.

² Cornel West refers at one point to the “African-Americanization of global culture” (42). However, he says very little about the African-Americanization that is not Afro-Usonian (Afro-Latin music, for example). There is an assumed monopoly of U.S. black culture in such matters, and that—as Ken Burns’ recent PBS jazz series shows—is a corollary of imperialism. Stuart Chase recognized imperial jazz already before World

War II. Thus, *some* of what goes by the name “world music” is indeed world music in the sense I describe: for example, Jamaican reggae and Cuban *danza, son*, and *mambo*—the New World African musics that register in the United States as foreign.

³ Some of the better work on the global dimensions of black popular music does not avail itself of critiques of the market per se, or its effects on musical style, taste, and structure. In spite of being a very fine essay, this is true of Reebee Garofalo’s “Culture versus Commerce.”

⁴ For one of several available accounts of the richness of “diluted” African music in practice, see Jean-Christophe Servant, page 32.

⁵ This *domestic* internationalism in music, that fluid genre, is captured well by Greg Tate: “The period of ferment that produced Basquiat began on British soil and was then transplanted stateside. . . . Let’s go back to post-punk lower Manhattan, no-wave New York, where loft jazz, white noise, and Black funk commune to momentarily desegregate the Downtown rock scene, and hip-hop’s train-writing graffiti cults pull into the station carrying the return of representation, figuration, expressionism, Pop-artism, the investment in canvas painting, and the idea of the masterpiece” (236). As his last comment suggests, aesthetic value rather than simple sociological virtue (hybridity) is the primary goal of music theory.

⁶ Not that rappers cannot also at times be literal gangsters. Sean “Puffy” Combs entered a night club with a loaded gun, which was later fired by one of his bodyguards, injuring four people. This local proof of a general prejudice has made the incident predictably central in news coverage.

⁷ And Baraka went further as he began to open up the important way that class disparities are iconically reflected in the civilizational hierarchies that pretend to be superseded in world music: “The Blues impulse transferred, containing a race, and its expression. An expression of the culture at its most un-self- (therefore showing the larger consciousness of a one self, immune to bullshit) conscious. . . . [It is] the direct expression of a place . . . jazz seeks another place as it weakens, a middle-class place” (180).

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