JITTERBUGS WITH ATTITUDES.
AN ESSAY ON THE PROBLEMATIC RELATIONSHIP OF
POPULAR MUSIC AND POLITICS

Dietrich Helms

Most scholars working on the relationship of music and politics explore their subject from one of two perspectives: Some investigate what they consider to be the message of a piece of music. They presume that an author encodes his or her ideas into the form and content of a song and that these ideas can be decoded with the help of hermeneutics. Others look at what the audience does with a song and study the ways songs are used by certain groups of a society to act politically. German musicologist Helmut Rösing (2004: 160-165) has termed these two perspectives political and politicised music. Musicology has a long tradition of discussing the question, which side is decisive for the political effect of a piece of music — the author, who encodes a meaning, or the recipient, who decodes it? Some say that there has to be something in the music, others say that the political effect is all dependent on the context and the audience (see ibd. for a short survey of this discussion). My approach in this essay is not concerned so much with the encoding or the decoding side of the communication circle, but with the problems that lay in between. Rather than dealing with the meaning of a certain song or the social behaviour of certain recipients and the ways they use music for their political aims I will discuss the mechanics of communication that determine the relationship between musicians and their audiences.

At first sight popular music and politics seem to make an ideal match. Both crave for attention; both want to reach as many people as possible; both try to win adherents. These basic similarities of pop and politics may have led and may still lead some musicians and their audiences to believe that the world may be changed with a rock song. Indeed, pop and rock may

do a lot to support politicians or political organisations, but music is definitely not an ideal medium to convey political ideas. In my essay I will present some thoughts about why popular music is problematic as a tool for political propaganda.

1. Music as a temporal, non-committal communication system

I remember very well the moment in my biography when I lost my believe in the power of music. It must have been a painful experience as I can still remember it as if it had happened yesterday. It was some time around 1981 or 1982. I was a moderately active member of the German peace movement. We listened to songs of German Liedermacher and international singer/songwriters and wrote political lyrics for our school band. One day the Dutch band Bots gave a concert in the club I considered my home at weekends. By then Bots had had a huge success in Germany with their drinking song for happy protesters »Sieben Tage lang« — the title may be translated as »For seven days«, meaning the time they wished to drink before they would start working for a better society. The lyrics of their songs had been translated into German by many stars of the German leftist cultural scene: Wolf Biermann, Dieter Hildebrandt, Hanns Dieter Hüsch, Hannes Wader, Günter Wallraff und others. The concert was a success and a great party. When I looked around between songs I noticed a large group of schoolmates, who I knew to be members of the German conservative party's youth organisation. They were all singing and dancing just like me. The climax of the concert, I suppose, was the encore: Bots played a rock version of »Die Internationale«, the anthem of the Socialist International. The whole audience was chanting, »Völker hört die Signale, auf zum letzten Gefecht«, — among them the members of the conservative youth organisation. After all the frustrating experiences of my political work in the streets of my hometown you may imagine my enthusiasm seeing the conservatives joining in with the peace movement. A few days later, however, during a discussion at school, my schoolmates turned out to be as conservative as ever. In the following months Germany as a whole moved to the right, with Helmut Kohl becoming Chancellor and the Pershings and Cruise missiles being deployed in defiance of all our protests. Ever since then I have been sceptical when scholars or journalists praised the manipulative and political powers of music. What I have learned from this is that things you say (or better: sing) in music may be less obligatory than things you say in a spoken conversation.

We have, I suggest, to draw a very clear line between everyday communication and communication in music. According to sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1991: 35) everyday communication constitutes our highest level of reality, of reality »par excellence«. It is our standard of communication and it is in a way anchored in reality with the help of intersubjectively shared experiences and references to objects that we consider to be truly existent. This state is what we consider to be our normal state, the state we return to after temporal sojourns into other worlds of consciousness and communication like waking up from a dream, from the fascination of an absorbing book or from a game (ibid.: 39f.). For the moment, let me call this phenomenon reality of everyday life. When we change roles, e.g. to become part of a religious congregation or to join a game of soccer, we change into different temporal realities with different rules of communication that Berger and Luckmann describe as enclaves within our reality.

Music as a communication system between musicians and listeners, I suggest, is one of these parallel realities. It is a temporal communication system that has its effects only because we know — consciously or subconsciously — that it is limited in time. As soon as music is playing and you have decided to become a part of it — as a listener, a dancer or a musician — the rules of communication change. You may even do things you wouldn't or shouldn't dare in your master-reality: As a dancer you may come close to a stranger without being accused of molestation. And you may coordinate your movements with her or him in a rather ridiculous or immoral way if seen from the perspective of everyday communication. As a listener in a concert of classical music you may sit and daydream intensively — without being accused of laziness. As part of a religious congregation music can make you feel closer to heaven. Music opens up parallel worlds but these worlds end when the music is over. Everybody has experienced the magic of a concert, when the lights are turned down and the musicians play the first notes; and everybody knows the sobering effect at its end, when the applause is over, the doors open and everybody queues to get out. A dancer knows that the licence to touch a partner and to be close to him or her ends with the very last beat of the song and that extending the touch a few seconds beyond may give the gesture a very different meaning.

Musical communication is comparable to a game or a kind of fiction, it may feel real — and it is real, while the music is playing, but it is a reality that is detached from reality of everyday life by a clearly perceptible beginning and the certain knowledge that it will have an end. Everything that is said or done when someone is »inside the music«, as I call it, has to be ac-

3

cepted with the proviso that it might have no consequences for the master reality. Would you believe someone who looks at you and sings »Love me tender, love me sweet«? Or would you rather believe someone who confesses his or her love in spoken words, without the accompaniment of any music? The proviso of fiction makes musical communication an ideal playground to try a behaviour that won't be possible in your reality of everyday life. You may play the lover, or the gangster, or the socialist — just for the fun of doing it. And when the music is over, you may become the shy, law-abiding conservative again that you've always been in everyday life (Helms 2012: 391-394).

In his article »On Popular Music« Theodor W. Adorno compares listeners of popular music to the marching masses of the totalitarian systems of his times. »Their response to music«, he writes, »immediately expresses their desire to obey« (Adorno 1941: 40). For him, listeners of popular music are »jitterbugs«, consciously giving up their free will and turning into an unconscious insect to jitter along with millions of others to the manipulating beats of the latest hits. If Adorno were right, popular music would indeed be a great danger for societies whose political systems depend on the idea of their citizens' free will. And at the same time it would be a great tool for totalitarian systems to keep their people in line with the prevailing ideology. However, since 1941 history has shown that popular music is no danger to the political and social dedication of listeners, it neither prevented people from protesting in the late 1960s nor did it induce protests at the climax of the cold war in the mid-1980s. Adorno himself wrote that

»there is an element of fictitiousness in all enthusiasm about popular music. […] The jitterbug is the actor of his own enthusiasm […]. He can switch off his enthusiasm as easily and suddenly as he turns it on. He is only under a spell of his own making« (Adorno 1941: 47).

Indeed, music produces temporal worlds of communication that depend on the decision of listeners to join in. But this is exactly the reason why there's no relation of cause and effect between dancing to the beat of a song and acting in line with political propaganda. It's fun to allow yourself to be manipulated by music but you have the right to deny everything you did and said at the end of the song or the concert; or at least you should have the right to deny everything — we will have to come back to music in more obligatory contexts later on.

2. The fluidity of meaning in popular music

The non-committal character of musical communication is a major problem for musicians who wish to act politically with their songs. They may play their songs a thousand times for enthusiastic audiences and still not change their behaviour. But this is not the only problem musicians face when they try to convey their ideas in order to influence decision-making processes in their societies. If it is the aim of politics not only to condition the members of a society like Pavlov's dogs, but to convince them why it is important to act in a certain way, a political message has to make sure that it transports a meaning that is as unambiguous as possible. Music, however, and popular music in particular, is definitely the least suitable medium to convey a meaning unambiguously and to convince an audience of facts. The communication system of popular music leaves only few chances for musicians to influence the way their songs are interpreted by their audiences (see Helms 2004 for a longer elaboration of this argument). From the late 1960s onwards there have been a number of studies which show that audiences of popular music obviously have very individual ideas of what a song means (see e.g. Denisoff/Levine 1972 and Robinson/Hirsch 1972). These ideas may even include the opposite of what the musicians had intended.

When on September 11th 2001 planes crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, into the Pentagon, and on a field somewhere close to Pittsburgh many people in the world considered themselves at a turning point in history. The very strong emotions of fear, helplessness, confusion, and anger also changed the ways they listened to music. On October 2nd 2001 a memorial concert for John Lennon was staged at the Radio City Music Hall in New York City. Jon Pareles, music critic of the *New York Times*, reported of the astonishing effect the events of 9/11 had on the perception of the songs that were played this evening:

»Many of Lennon's songs are filled with a sense of private loss that has now taken on a public resonance… The hallucinatory itinerary of ›Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds,‹ sung by Marc Anthony, became a New York travelogue, with all its whimsicality vanished« (Pareles 2001).

At the same time the same song appeared on the infamous »List of Songs with Questionable Lyrics« that is attributed to the management of the then largest radio network company in the world, Clear Channel Communications. The list contained more then 150 songs that were supposed not to be broadcast in the days after the attacks (Phleps 2004: 60-62). Re-reading the

lyrics of »Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds« from the distance of quite a few years it is hard to imagine why in the days after 9/11 people at a conservative broadcasting company considered the song to be so dangerous or so offensive that they advised their DJs not to play it. It's true, the song contains a few key words that might be associated with the atmosphere of 9/11: a river, »marmalade skies«, »towering over your head«, a girl that is gone…, but all these associations are rather weak, and: wasn't the song supposed to be the description of an acid trip — although Lennon never confirmed this interpretation and stated that he had been inspired by a painting of his son Julian and his memories of *Alice in Wonderland* (Kasser 2013)?

Another well-known example for the fluidity of meaning in popular songs is the idea of Ronald Reagan's campaign staff to recruit Bruce Springsteen, whose record »Born In The USA« had come out a few months before in June 1984. The hymnal chorus of the title song had induced them to take it for a patriotic hymn (see Cullen 2005: 6-25 for an analysis of this [mis-] understanding). The history of interpretations of »Born In The USA« has another chapter: On July 19th 1988 — a year before the GDR collapsed — Springsteen gave a concert in East Berlin on invitation by the FDJ, the youth organisation of the ruling socialist party. GDR media announced him as the working man's voice. Obviously GDR censors had read Springsteen's lyrics carefully and perhaps they had found that songs like »Born In The USA« criticise the effects of a capitalist society. However, when Springsteen played the song on that evening and an estimated 250.000 people in the audience — all of them born behind the Berlin wall — enthusiastically sang along, the song gained a meaning that, obviously, no official had foreseen. It became a powerful call for freedom.

Impressed by Springsteen's concert the amateur band Sandow, based in Cottbus in the GDR, wrote the song »Born In The GDR«. The last verse of the song has the lines:

»Wir können bis an unsere Grenzen geh'n
Hast du schon mal darüber hinweg geseh'n
Ich habe 160.000 Menschen geseh'n
Die sangen so schön, die sangen so schön
Born in the GDR«[1]

Springsteen's song that had turned into a hymn for the freedom of travel was still sold and broadcast after his concert in the GDR. Sandow's song,

---

1   We can push our limits (with a second meaning of: we may go up to our national border) / Have you ever looked across them/it? / I have seen 160.000 people / Singing so nicely, singing so nicely / Born in the GDR [translation by the author].

however, was censored. It is one of life's ironies — or perhaps rather one of the audience's ironies — that »Born In The GDR« had a similar fate as Springsteen's »Born In The USA«: some perceived it as a patriotic hymn celebrating the GDR (Kraus 2012).

I have quoted only a few examples for changes of a song's meaning that were publicly observable; many more cases might be listed. I am convinced that everyone who cares for music may tell several stories of highly emotional incidents, which radically changed the meaning of a song for her or him. Meaning in popular music is fluid. It may always change when the context of a song changes. Reasons for this neither lie in the musicians' incompetence or unwillingness to write an unambiguous, comprehensible musical message nor in the audiences' inaptitude to understand a ›message‹ ›right‹. They lie in the structure of communication between musicians and their audiences.

The concept that a communication act should transfer a meaning is based on an idea of communication as language. And indeed language is the one medium developed by mankind to make communication as versatile, unambiguous, and precise as possible. Language has developed semantics because of its dialogic structure: language works on the principles of question and answer, thesis and anti-thesis, order and action, statement and reaction. Speakers take opposing roles: someone (let's call her Ego) says something and the other one (we may name him Alter) answers. Alter's answer shows Ego whether he has understood her message right. If Ego notices that Alter's behaviour in answering to her communication deviates from what she has expected, she may interrupt the conversation and explain in more detail what she had actually meant to say. The same is true for Alter, who constantly checks Ego's behaviour to make sure that his communication is understood correctly. The reciprocal dialogic structure of language in a face-to-face situation allows us to control understanding down to the minutest morpheme and has helped to develop a system of symbols which refer to things even without requiring their presence or to ideas and actions even without acting them out. Language refers and therefore produces meaning.

Musical communication works differently: ego plays a song for Alter. Again we have a face-to-face situation but the only correct answer for Alter now is to demonstrate his attention: in standing still, facing Ego and keeping quiet until the end of the piece, in singing along or in moving to the rhythm. The musician Ego has no chance to observe whether the listener Alter understands a single phrase of the song she plays right or wrong (and what does right or wrong mean in communication between a musician and

her audience anyway?). All Ego can see is whether Alter pays attention or whether he is absent-minded. Should Ego feel that Alter concentrates on what she does and should Alter feel addressed or touched by Ego's playing, both of them may have a strong feeling of unity and togetherness which may be enhanced if both dance to the same rhythm and sing along to the same melody. Ego and Alter — and all the Alters in the audience and all the Egos on stage — do the same at the same time. It's true that musicians play different parts, but these parts are usually not meant to give answers to the others. They are made to merge to become a single whole. The same is true with musicians and their audiences. They play different roles, but these roles are not antagonistic. The aim of a successful concert is to produce the feeling that everyone in the audience and on stage have become one. Music as a communication system remains intact as long as this feeling of togetherness, of unity, persists. The system breaks apart as soon as someone openly shows that he or she is no longer part of the system (playing wrong notes as a musician or starting to talk with a neighbour as a member of the audience).

Usually, communication is necessary when two or more people know or realise different things, have different views, different aims, and have to inform each other to coordinate. If two communicate the same thing at the same time, however, no communication is necessary and usually this would be the moment when communication ends. Music, I suppose, is the only communication system that has the capacity to run on even if everyone wants the same and does the same.[2] In line with Niklas Luhmann's systems theory music may be described as a medium that helps to solve the problem of consensual (»gleichsinnig«) communication (Helms 2012: 392). If communication in language works according to a dialogic principle, communication in music may be described as homologic.[3]

The only system of signs that is imperative for the functioning of communication between musicians and their listeners is signs that confirm togetherness. Musicians among themselves, musicians and listeners, and listeners (or dancers) among themselves constantly send out and observe signs of togetherness. A piece of music may end abruptly if the musicians in the band notice that they don't play together any longer; a concert may end un-

---

2   In a way small talk functions similar to music: It is communication for the sake of sociability (Jacobson 1960: 357). However, small talk does not produce such a strong feeling of togetherness as music does.

3   My use of the term »homologic« should not be confused with the idea of a »homology« between the structure of a piece of music and the society it was produced in as discussed in ethnomusicology, see e.g. Middleton 1990: 9-10 and 146-154.

timely if nobody pays attention to the musicians or everybody runs out of the hall banging doors; a DJ may give up if nobody dances to her or his music, a concertgoer might stop cheering and applauding if she or he notices that nobody else in the audience does. No concert, however, is endangered if the audience misunderstands the message of a song. How should a musician notice anyway? Bob Marley would have been highly irritated, I presume, if his audience had walked out of the arena and started a revolution right after the first chorus of »Get Up, Stand Up«. They would have demonstrated that they are no longer a unity with the musician and from the perspective of the musicians would have signalled their disagreement. When the concert is over, however, and everybody is back in his or her everyday contexts, the musician no longer has any chance to observe a listener's actions nor to correct him, if he or she has understood the song different from the musician's intention. If members of the audience started a revolution a week later, how would the musician know that his song was the cause? Considering these circumstances it is highly unlikely that a communication system will develop an intersubjectively valid, unambiguous code to transfer meaning comparable to language.[4]

I am not suggesting that music doesn't mean anything. All I wish to make clear is that the transfer of »meaning« in music is highly problematic, as musicians and listeners have hardly any chance to control and to coordinate the way they understand a certain symbol. This, however, is not a problem for the communication system as the feeling of unity during a successful concert can be so strong that both sides, musicians and listeners, are convinced that the others think and feel exactly the same — without having nor needing any proof.[5] And this is what makes music so wonderful: we can dive deeply into a dream world of our own imagination, be completely with ourselves and still have the feeling of being closely together with someone else: with the musician who asks to love him tender and/or with everybody else in the audience. This is why music has such a strong group building effect. But it produces togetherness for togetherness' sake and: the effect lasts only for the duration of the music.

---

4 Of course a listener may talk to the musician after a concert or write letters and ask her what she had tried to express. But in the age of musical mass communication these face-to-face situations are so rare compared to the many one-to-a-million mass mediated communication situations that they definitely won't be enough to induce the evolution of an unambiguous semantics of music. Already in the Baroque era with printed sheet music as the sole mass medium the idea to establish at least a rudimentary semantics by introducing a rhetoric of music failed.

5 This is what makes music a medium comparable to love — with one difference: music has a time limit (Helms 2012: 392-394).

A further reason for the fluidity of meaning in popular music is the fact that signs in music function rather connotatively then denotatively (cf. Tagg 2013: 164-166). Music has developed only very few signs with an intersubjectively acknowledged meaning, and even these are dependent on the context to be understood correctly. If a piece of music (and especially of popular music) gains a symbolic value it is usually the song as a whole that refers and not single parts of it that produce a meaning like the words in a poem. The song is perceived in a certain local and social context, in a certain state of mind, and if it makes an impression it is for some time associated with this context and the mood the listener was in. If a song is not regularly and exclusively used in the same context (like e.g. a national anthem) but in different contexts a single, unambiguous meaning (the things it refers to or is associated with) is unlikely to consolidate. Any new experience may change it as we have seen in our example of »Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds«.

Another fact that has prevented music from developing semantics: musical communication is not answered by music like language is answered by language.[6] When responding to musical information as a listener you have to choose another medium, either language or gestures (like e.g. applause). Every switch from one medium to another, every translation, however, increases ambiguity. We find it hard to talk about our experiences of listening to music as we feel that the essence gets lost in translation (cf. Berger/ Luckmann 1991: 40). And even more: pondering about what a song might mean distracts us from listening. We leave the communication circle between listener and musician that is dependent on attention, switch over to meta-communication in language (i.e. communicating about communication) and return to our »master reality« giving up being »in the music«. We can talk about the meaning of a song only from the position of an external observer who is not (or no longer) part of the communication between musician and listener. A song may make perfect sense when we listen to it, when we are »inside the music«. As soon as we are outside and we start to think or to talk about it with the help of language, however, the problems begin.

---

6   The only situations I can think of when music is answered by music are antiphonal or responsorial passages — in popular music we speak of call-and-response passages. However, when e.g. in jazz two soloists »answer« each other, they do not coordinate an action outside the music, like we do in language. You can not say, »Get up and close the window, please« with a trumpet solo. Again all the two soloists of my example can coordinate is the feeling of being together but not a knowledge of what the other one means.

Authorities may have an effect on the consolidation of meaning. In analysing TV-news formats Stuart Hall constructs »dominant-hegemonic positions« on the encoding side of communication that help to enforce dominant codes that ensure a certain message to be encoded the way the decoding side had intended to (Hall 1980: 116). In music, and particular in popular music, authorities only have a rather weak influence. We have already discussed the weak position of the encoding side (i.e. the musicians) in the communication circle; but even on the decoding side there are few authorities who might help to define the meaning of a piece of music — at least in today's Western democratic societies. Who cares about musicology and music theory when dancing to a pop song? Maybe some listeners acknowledge the authority of their favourite music journalists to tell them what they should listen to, but who would grant a journalist the authority to tell him what a song is supposed to mean to him? And although I know that Eric Clapton wrote »Tears In Heaven« after the death of his son, for me this »publicly acknowledged« reference plays a role only when I talk about the song in my role as a musicologist; as a private, individual listener the song means something completely different to me. It is my belief that popular music's importance for the individual lies not so much in its unambiguous, generally acknowledged and therefore perhaps »objective« meaning but in its function as an individual symbol for individual experiences marking off points in the biography of an individual or a small group of individuals. Popular music as we know it can do without objective meaning but not without individual appropriation.

To sum up: the communication system between musicians and listeners is dependent only on one type of signs as answer to the communication act by a musician: signs that signal mutual attention and togetherness; all other types are possible, but secondary. In consequence, a musician's foremost task in the communication circle is not to convey meaning but to keep up audiences' attention. Roman Jacobson calls this function of communication »phatic« (Jakobson 1960: 357; Helms 2015: 83-89). Unlike a communication act using language, in music the communication circle will not be disturbed if the audience understands the meaning of a song contrary to the way the musicians want it to — as long as they signal that they are still inside the music.

3. Appropriation and commitment

In his book *Performing Rites* Simon Frith writes about popular music: »The question is not what does it mean but what can I do with it« (Frith 1998: 13). If you wish to use a song as a means to create a feeling of togetherness it is not important that you understand it »right«, i.e. the way the musicians want you to understand it. It is important that the members of your group understand and use it the same way as you do: as a symbol for your group. This is why Ronald Reagan's team was right to consider »Born In The USA« as a hymn for their campaign. They acted on the assumption that everyone they wanted to reach understood the song as patriotic. A hit is a song that many people can do something with — whatever that may be. It doesn't imply that everybody who has bought the song buys into what the musicians consider to be its meaning.

It is my conviction that the ambiguousness of popular music, the fact that a song may have as many uses as it has listeners, is one of the central reasons why the evolution of our culture has brought forth this form of communication. Because popular music is ambiguous it allows and invites processes of appropriation. The fact that neither musicians nor any institutions have much authority to tell a listener what to make with a song supports its usability for various processes of identity and group building.

However, in order to become a tool for identity or group building a song needs more than passive perception: it needs an active process of appropriation. A listener has to make a song his own. If he wants to use it as a means of individuation, he has to inform others: »This is my song and this is what I do with it«. Popular music has to be played loudly and in presence of others. Individuation and group building only work if others know that you consider a certain song your own. The only quality needed for a song to become such a symbol is its power to differentiate. This power may be found in the song, in its provoking lyrics, sound, or performance, or in the simple fact that it is already associated with a certain social group.

It is consensual among scholars writing about the manipulative effects of music that music is used for propaganda and manipulation of behaviour because of its group building function (cf. e.g. Brown 2006: 4-5). However, the relationship between music bringing people together and propaganda bringing people together behind a certain political idea is no simple cause and effect relation. As we have seen, groups that are built by music are of a different kind than political factions or political parties. They are temporal, non-committal, of another sphere of reality, and need no reasons except for

the pleasure of being together. Groups formed by music can bring together highly individual people without questioning their individuality — for the duration of a song. This is definitely not what propaganda — that wants true and permanent commitment to a certain cause in everyday reality — aims at.

I am not denying that music may be used effectively for propaganda but it is not music as such that convinces people. Examples for an effective use of music in propaganda are usually taken from authoritarian social contexts with a highly exclusive power of defining wielded by few and structures that reduce the plurality of opinion. Strong hierarchical social systems like totalitarian forms of government but also smaller social groups with a strong leader authority and censorship may reduce the meaning of a song so much that it becomes an unambiguous symbol with a clearly defined reference.

It is, however, not the song but the context that convinces a listener of a certain attitude. Listening to fascist rock songs doesn't make a listener a fascist but listening to music on a fascist rally may. It is the fact that a listener joins the music publicly to demonstrate a difference; it is the fact that people with a different attitude can see and hear him singing a song or listening to a piece of music, which they consider to be a symbol for this attitude, that in certain circumstances commits him to this attitude. It is the quality of the context in which a song is played that makes it politically committing and unambiguous. The socialist »Internationale« sung in the dimly lit auditorium of a rock concert in a democratic state definitely is much less committing than the same song sung during an illegal party rally on a market place in a state with a right wing dictatorship.

At the very end of »On Popular Music« Adorno explains that the unconscious state of consuming popular music needs a conscious decision to start. The act of giving up one's free will to become a jitterbug, he explains, is an act of free will (Adorno 1941: 46-48). I do not agree with Adorno's appraisal of the perception of popular music, but I agree that the moment that makes a song political is not the time you listen, sing or dance to it, but the second you decide consciously to join in and to become part of the music. The decision to join the wonderful temporal parallel reality of music is made in full consciousness of what I have called reality of everyday life. With your decision to join in, you know that in a particular social context you commit yourself to a certain attitude. The political significance of a popular song therefore is produced before the communication between musicians and listeners begins, before the listener becomes part of the music. This is the reason why music reaches only those who want to be reached, convinces only those who are already convinced. You have to decide before you be-

come part of the audience that you agree with the song, the musicians and the situation.

4. Consequences

What can a musician do that wants to act politically with his songs? A good idea might be to write a song that makes a difference to give it a quality necessary for group building and individuation. However, if the song is supposed to attract as many people as possible to further the proliferation of a political idea it should not be too different and too radical. Therefore, it might be advisable to concentrate on the construction of performance contexts that demand a great deal of publicly visible commitment to the political idea from those who wish to listen to the song. If you want to support or start a political movement you cannot do this with playing songs alone. Thus, you should make your concerts political rallies with long speeches explaining your position and less music. However, if you don't want to give up being a musician you might also try to strengthen your own authority and some authorities on the decoding side as well. Reward those members of your audience of whom you think that they interpret your songs right with distinction. Fight those actively who interpret you wrong. Try to monopolise the media and establish censorship. You might then reach a stage in that your music is unambiguously political — but will it still be popular music? It definitely won't have the power of individuation any longer and the audience will have lost its freedom to do with it what it wants to.

Those who wish to fight music with a certain political attitude I would advise to be tolerant and to make those performance contexts unattractive that require political commitment. If tolerated, songs with political lyrics will soon lose their power to make a difference (at least in relationship to your regime) and therefore can't be used as a symbol for opposition any longer. In the long term, tolerance is more effective than censorship. In today's democracies you have to go to extremes to provoke a reaction: the band Rammstein e.g. is a good example for how apolitical it has become to use symbols, sounds, and catchwords from extreme political positions.

The saturation of provocation, I suppose, has also had an effect on music with political attitudes. In April 2002, some months after 9/11 and on the eve of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq journalist Jeff Chang asked in an article: »Is protest music dead?« (Chang 2002). No, it isn't! In the time after the attacks there were several thousand songs commenting on terrorism and war as my colleague Thomas Phleps has shown impressively (Phleps 2004b).

14

At the same time, and looking at the decoding side of the communication circle, I have to state: yes, protest music is dead — at least in large parts of what is called the Western world and its mainstream musical culture — if not even a music journalist takes notice of how many songs were inspired by 9/11 to protest against war and violence. There where incidents of censorship in the aftermath of the attacks but the huge gap between the numbers of songs that were produced to comment on this incident and the few songs that became known cannot be explained neither by censorship nor by the oligopolic structure of the music industry. One reason I can see is that only few people in the so-called Western world consider music to be a medium for political ideas any longer. In Europe or the USA only few listeners expect of popular music that it should have a political attitude. Consequently, even if a song is meant to be a statement on social or political questions by its producers only few listeners care about its message. Thus, Enya's sentimental song »Only Time« is definitely the one piece of music that is and will be associated with 9/11 for the time being. Added to the footage of the collapsing towers of the World Trade Center in slow motion the song makes very clear what a majority expects of popular music today: they want to use it to aestheticise and fictionalise the facts of reality and not to think about politics or social problems and everyday reality.

One might assume that Adorno was right to criticise the apolitical attitude of the jitterbug as highly political: the insect is partying in happy forgetfulness of the problems of reality around him, dancing to the standardised beat of a multi-billion dollar industry and therefore stabilising a political system that does not want it to have a mind of his own:

»In order to become a jitterbug or simply to ›like‹ popular music, it does not by any means suffice to give oneself up and to fall in line passively. To become transformed into an insect, man needs that energy which might possibly achieve his transformation into a man« (Adorno 1941: 48).

I suppose enlightenment will never have a chance if it is so rational, anti-pleasure and anti-sensual as Adorno's ideals. Unlike Adorno, I am convinced that the time we spend in the non-committal temporal worlds of music playing the jitterbug is not at all worthless for society and its development. In the virtual, temporal worlds of games, literature, film and music the members of a society may experiment freely with social behaviour. Music e.g. has been a highly important experimental field for patterns of courtship ever since the times of the troubadours. The fact that a society allows its members to act like jitterbugs should not be seen as a tendency toward an unenlightened totalitarianism as Adorno did but as a quality of a social

15

system that grants its members the right to create noncommittal virtual worlds in which they may experiment with attitudes, behaviour, and forms of communication. These experiments are performed in the sandbox situation of a world outside our reality of everyday life and it is crucial that the virtual world is marked off clearly and perceptibly lest the attitudes and the behaviour won't endanger the world outside the song, book, or movie. However, the separation is not that insuperable that they won't mean a provocation of our reality of everyday life. I suppose that virtual worlds of a negative character, e.g. full of violence, pornography, or misogyny, are no danger for a stable individual or society as long as their fictional character is clearly communicated and understood. They may, however, provoke individuals or societies to justify and to discuss their ideals, morals, or laws. They may help to keep individuals and societies alert of their moral and ethical boundaries and therefore help to stabilise a system, or to further its development if the behaviour in the virtual world is considered acceptable for everyday reality. This is why freedom of art is imperative for any democratic society. The provocation of our moral boundaries, I suggest, is the truly political effect of popular music; an effect, however, that no musician can control. When a song about violent behaviour induces a kid to take a gun and run amok, it is not the song that is to blame but a society that has failed to offer alternatives, a society that has failed to make clear the borderlines between virtual realities and everyday realities.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. (with the assistance of George Simpson) (1941). »On Popular Music.« In: *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung / Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences* 9, pp. 17-48.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1997). »Musikalische Warenanalysen.« In: Theodor W. Adorno, *Musikalische Schriften I-III* (= Gesammelte Schriften 16). Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 284-297.

Berger, Peter L. / Luckmann, Thomas (1991). *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin.

Brown, Steven (2006). »›How Does Music Work?‹ Toward a Pragmatics of Musical Communication.« In: *Music and Manipulation. On the Social Uses and Social Control of Music*. Ed. by Steven Brown and Ulrik Volgsten. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 1-30.

Chang, Jeff (2002). »Is Protest Music Dead? Music Used to Be the Dominant Voice against war. Now It's Easier to Shut Up and Get Paid.« In: *North Bay Bohemian*, May 9th-15th; http://www.metroactive.com/papers/sonoma/05.02.02/protest-music-0219.html (accessed 09/12/2013).

Cullen, Jim (2005). *Born in the U.S.A. Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press (1st ed. 1997).

Denisoff, Ron Serge / Levine, Mark H. (1972). »Brainwashing or Background Noise: The Popular Protest Song.« In: *The Sounds of Social Change*. Ed. by Ron Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson. Chicago: Rand McNally, pp. 213-221.

Frith, Simon (1998). *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Hall, Stuart (1980). »Encoding/Decoding.« In: *Culture, Media, Language*. Ed. by Stuart Hall. London: Routledge, pp. 128-138.

Helms, Dietrich (2004). »›I Can't See New York‹? Der 11. September und die Bedeutung von ›Bedeutung Populärer Musik‹.« In: *9/11 – The world's all out of tune. Populäre Musik nach dem 11. September 2001*. Ed. by Dietrich Helms and Thomas Phleps (= Beiträge zur Popularmusikforschung 32). Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 131-154.

Helms, Dietrich (2008). »What's the difference? Populäre Musik im System des Pop.« In: *PopMusicology. Perspektiven der Popmusikwissenschaft*. Ed. by Christian Bielefeldt, Udo Dahmen and Rolf Großmann. Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 75-93.

Helms, Dietrich (2012). »Thoughts about Music, Love and Luhmann: An Epilogue and some Perspectives.« In: *Amor docet musicam. Musik und Liebe in der Frühen Neuzeit*. Ed. by Dietrich Helms and Sabine Meine. Hildesheim: Olms, pp. 385-399.

Helms, Dietrich (2015). »Pragmatic ›Pokerface‹: Lady Gaga's Song and Roman Jakobsons Six Functions of Communication.« In: *Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music*. Ed. by Ralf von Appen, André Doehring, Dietrich Helms and Allan F. Moore. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 73-96.

Jakobson, Roman (1960). »Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics.« In: *Style in Language*. Ed. by Thomas A. Sebeok. Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, pp. 350-377.

Kasser, Tim (2013). *Lucy in the Mind of Lennon*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kraus, Martin (2012). »Geburten jenseits und diesseits der Mauer. Zu ›Born in the GDR‹ von Sandow.« In: *Deutsche Lieder. Bamberger Anthologie*, November 5th; https://deutschelieder.wordpress.com/2012/11/05/sandow-born-in-the-gdr/ (accessed 04/03/2016).

Middleton, Richard (1990). *Studying Popular Music*. Ballmoor: Open University Press.

Pareles, Jon (2001). »Imagining John Lennon, In a Time of Anguish.« In: *The New York Times,* October 4th; http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/04/arts/pop-review-imagining-john-lennon-in-a-time-of-anguish.html (accessed 06/12/2013).

Phleps, Thomas (2004a). »9/11 und die Folgen in der Popmusik I. Ton-Spuren.« In: *9/11 – The world's all out of tune. Populäre Musik nach dem 11. September 2001*. Ed. by Dietrich Helms and Thomas Phleps (= Beiträge zur Popularmusikforschung 32). Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 57-66.

Phelps, Thomas (2004b). »9/11 und die Folgen in der Popmusik IV. Auswahldiskographie.« In: *9/11 – The world's all out of tune. Populäre Musik nach dem 11. September 2001*. Ed. by Dietrich Helms and Thomas Phleps (= Beiträge zur Popularmusikforschung 32). Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 175-208.

Robinson, John P. / Hirsch, Paul M. (1972). »Teenage Response to Rock and Roll Protest Songs.« In: *The Sounds of Social Change*. Ed. by Ron Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson. Chicago: Rand McNally, pp. 222-231.

Rösing, Helmut (2004). »9/11: Wie politisch kann Musik sein?« In: *9/11 – The world's all out of tune. Populäre Musik nach dem 11. September 2001*. Ed. by Dietrich Helms and Thomas Phleps (= Beiträge zur Popularmusikforschung 32). Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 155-168.

Tagg, Philip (2013). *Music's Meanings: A Modern Musicology for Non-Musos*. New York, Huddersfield: The Mass Media Music Scholars' Press.

Abstract

This essay discusses the communication system of popular music, i.e. communication between musicians and listeners, to find out why music is such an imperfect means to convey unambiguous political messages. Music as a communication system is described as a noncommittal, temporal reality comparable to a game with rules of communication that differ from those of reality of everyday life. Things said or done in music are therefore less obligatory than spoken statements in everyday reality. Music as a medium is rather used to produce unity, not to convey meaning. The communication system allows musicians to control attention or togetherness but not to control whether their audience understands the meaning of a song correctly. Therefore, music has developed no stable semantics. As a medium that produces a feeling of unity music has a strong group building function. These groups, however, are only temporal. Adorno's argument in »On Popular Music« is criticised: the time someone spends inside the fictitious world of popular music is not a waste of time that should rather be filled with conscious studies of music but a virtual realm for experimenting with attitudes, behaviour, and forms of communication.