

POLITICS IN MUSIC
Music and Political Transformation
from Beethoven to Hip-Hop

Courtney Brown

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Contents

Preface	ix
Music as a Conveyor of	
Political Messages	1
Representational vs. Associational Music	4
Orientation	6
Beethoven	11
Beethoven's Music and His Contemporary Political	
Environment	13
The Re-invention of Beethoven During the Second Reich	16
Beethoven and the Weimar Republic	20
Beethoven and the Nazi Peril	23
Post World War II and the Fall of the Berlin Wall	25
Political Manifesto Music: The Cases	
of Bob Marley and Richard Wagner	29
Robert Nesta Marley	33
A Prelude to Wagner	40
The Essential Plot and Allegory of the "Ring" Operas	41
Alberich, Wotan, and the Babylon System	46
Life without Fear, Siegfried, and the Rastas	50
The Connection Between Love and Revolution	56
Love as an Engine of Political Change	59
Nationalist and Patriotic Music	67
The Period of European Nation-Building	69
Italian Nationalism	70
Russian Nationalism	76
Finnish Nationalism: A Nation Musically Transformed	87
Spanish Nationalism	91
Musical Nationalism in England	92
American Nationalism	94
Modern Nationalist Hybrids	96
Nationalist and Patriotic Elements in American Country Music ..	98
National Anthems and Pseudo Anthems	104
The Psychology of Nationalist and Patriotic Music	109
Industrialization and the Emergence	
of Labor Music	111
A Selection of Songs by Joe Hill	117

“The Preacher and the Slave” by Joe Hill (1911)	118
“The Rebel Girl” by Joe Hill (1914-5)	119
“Casey Jones—The Union Scab” by Joe Hill (1912)	120
“Down in the Old Dark Mills” by Joe Hill (1913)	121
“Everybody’s Joining It” by Joe Hill (1911)	122
“There is Power in a Union” by Joe Hill (1913)	124
“Workers of the World, Awaken” by Joe Hill (1914)	125
“The White Slave” by Joe Hill (1912)	126
“Stung Right” by Joe Hill (1913)	128
“Should I Ever Be a Soldier” by Joe Hill (1913)	129
The Subsequent Labor Music Inspired by Joe Hill	130
“I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night” by Alfred Hays (1925)	130

Protest Music: Movement and	
Non-movement Motivations	135
The Vietnam War and Its Effect on the Development of Protest Music	137
Protest Music of the Late 1960s and Early 1970s	142
Comic Satire:	149
Calls for Peace, and Warnings Against Taking Protest “Too Far”:	150
Psychological Portraits of Profound and Personal Inner Conflict:	151
The Fusion of Political and Spiritual Change:	158
Protest Music and Other Wars: The Chilean and Northern Ireland Cases	166
Protest Music with Non-Movement Motivations	173

Politics and Hip-Hop	183
The Emergence of Socially Relevant Hip-Hop	189
The Radicalization of Political Hip-Hop Rhetoric	192
Class Warfare and the Rise of Ghetto-centric Gangsta Rap	194
The Transformation of Hip-Hop into a Vehicle for White Rebellion	200

Political Music and the	
Transformation of Civilization	209
The Underground	211
The Future of Political Music	217

References	221
----------------------	-----

INDEX	229
-----------------	-----

Preface

This book is an outgrowth of a course that I have taught at Emory University for a number of years. The course is titled, “Politics in Music,” and the idea of the course is to introduce undergraduates to the political content of music (mostly Western) as it has been expressed since the time of Beethoven up to the present. This requires a broad survey approach to the subject. To teach this course, I typically have the students read from a variety of books that cover more specialized areas relating to political music. This is fun for me to do since there are many such books, and I assign different books most terms, thereby keeping the course interesting to myself as well as to the students. The authors of some of these books sometimes offer their own theoretical perspectives that are useful to those students who want a more in-depth approach to the subject. But it has always been disconcerting that my lectures seemed to find no connection with a book that “fits” the general orientation of the course more closely. What I needed was a book that identified and summarized where political content can be located in a broad spectrum of music.

Interestingly, a university press editor contacted me after looking through my course syllabus and other materials that I offer on my web site (www.courtneybrown.com). The editor suspected that a book could be written from the course material, and he told me that he had done his own investigations prior to contacting me to confirm to himself that there was no broad-spectrum book in the extant literature that covered the subject in the manner that I address it in my course. He encouraged me to write such a book, and said that it might be a nice contribution to his press’s list. With that hopeful idea in mind, I began writing this book. Eventually, the editor decided to leave his position at the university press, and I was faced with the question of whether or not to complete this book. I finally decided that (minimally) the existence of the book would make teaching my course easier since

I could include material in the book that I did not have time to present in my lectures. I also considered that a more general readership that extended beyond the university environment may enjoy the book as well. So I pushed onward.

This is my first book that relies almost totally on secondary sources. That is, this book is in large part a summary and synthesis of what many others have written about the political content of music. While I have certainly added my own interpretive arguments to the mix, I have avoided writing this book from a rigid theoretical perspective. Rather, I have approached this subject with more of a journalistic orientation, encouraging readers to add their own interpretations along the way. Again, my main purpose here is primarily to describe where politics can be found in music, not to promote a particular ideological or academic/theoretical point of view.

For those readers who want to do additional reading in the subject, I might suggest starting with the references that are listed at the end of some of the chapters. Here I identify important sources from which I drew much of the information for the chapter in question. These sources often offer theoretical focuses that some readers may find useful or interesting. These sources also tend to be rich with additional information, and they offer other references that readers may want to pursue. The exceptions to this are chapters 4 and 6. Chapter 4 focuses on nationalist and patriotic music, whereas chapter 6 deals with movement and non-movement related political music. The primary sources used for these two chapters are too varied to include in a short list at the end of the chapters. For these chapters, I suggest following the various references that are included in the text itself and listed in the larger reference section at the end of the book. Some readers will also enjoy conducting their own literature searches to find other in-depth sources for the subjects of these chapters.

Finally, let me mention a bit about chapter 3. In this chapter, I offer a controversial interpretive connection between the music of Richard Wagner and Bob Marley. It seems likely that some readers will find my enthusiastic comparative pairing of Wagner

and Marley intriguing and lots of fun. Perhaps some will even find the argument compelling. Nonetheless, I am also certain that some readers will find the comparison insufficiently defended, or even preposterous. Comparing an iconic operatic genius with a “people power” Reggae star is not normally done, at least in academic circles. Nonetheless, I am raising ideas in this chapter, not trying to sell them. I like to make the Wagner and Marley comparison in part because I think there is something to the idea, but also because it may help some readers think “out-of-the-box.” To draw from my own teaching experiences, I sometimes fear that students too often seek to find the “right” answers rather than their own answers. Combining ideas from highly divergent schools of thought can sometimes provide an opportunity for original thinking. This is how I view the Wagner and Marley comparison. I hope readers find the comparison between Wagner and Marley compelling. But if some readers do not find the argument compelling, I hope they at least find the ideas sufficiently provocative such that they serve as a basis for subsequent political argumentation with friends and colleagues. Arguing, after all, is much of what politics is all about! Thus, in the spirit of inciting a healthy and intellectually stimulating good spat, I offer the Wagner and Marley comparison with serious enthusiasm.

CHAPTER 1

Music as a Conveyor of Political Messages

Music is filled with political content. One only has to be a casual listener of any number of musical genres to observe this. For example, hip-hop music is historically rooted in the expression of social and political protest as voiced by urban African-American youth. Similarly, the protest music related to the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement in America during the 1960s and 1970s was profoundly political, and country music is widely laced with overtly patriotic overtones and politically explicit content. But music has also been a venue for profound political expression for centuries, with contributions coming from composers as diverse as Beethoven, Wagner, Verdi, Mussorgski, Sibelius, Copeland, and many others.

The potential for music to directly influence the political evolution of society has long been recognized by some thinkers, and even Plato warned that “the modes of music are never disturbed without unsettling of the most fundamental political and social conventions” (Republic, Book IV: 424). Indeed, the need for social scientists to understand the interaction of politics and music is especially cogent given the potential long-term impact this phenomenon is likely to have on current and subsequent generations of young adults. Ignoring this would of course put contemporary social scientists in the same position as Marshall D. Beuick subsequently found himself in when he prophesied in 1927 that the content of radio broadcasting was not likely to ever penetrate the national consciousness, that the attraction of radio would be a passing fad, and “the sophisticated city dweller will tire of the novelty” (Beuick 1927, 622).

Many of the extant social and political investigations of music

have been conducted by social scientists and musicologists who focus on musically-mediated approaches to social theory. For example, Cerulo (1984) demonstrates that music creation responds to the events of society, and societies that experience dramatic change or trauma tend to develop music with message content that reflects these circumstances. Elsewhere, Cerulo (1989) examines how degrees of social and political control by elites correspond with the choice of musical styles in the creation of national anthems. Blau (1988) finds that listening to popular music is related to feelings of social dislocation and alienation, while listening to music with elite appeal (such as classical orchestral music) corresponds with low levels of alienation. Peterson and DiMaggio (1975) argue that evolving musical styles can reveal emerging classes within cultures that are defined more in terms of consumption patterns than by socioeconomic criteria. And Ballantine (1991) examines the social role of Black Jazz in the growth of radicalized political consciousness in South Africa. An excellent (although early) survey of research examining the political relevance of music as a force of change can be found in an examination of musical preferences of college students by Fox and Williams (1974). Scott (1997) and Bokina (1997) have published research that extends the idea of linking musical analysis to the examination of social and political thought. Here Scott (1997) explores the connectivity between the musical writings and political philosophy of Rousseau, while Bokina (1997) offers political interpretations of a variety of operas.

It is most likely that political and sociological musicology will continue to mature as an area of research as social scientists become increasingly aware of the developing interactive dependency between the evolution of our society and the music that it generates. Also, the productive interaction between political science, sociology, and psychology in the study of music seems inevitable as music continues to be recognized as a cardinal element of political and social change, and indeed one can see Peter Martin's attempt to create a sociology of music prescient in this respect (Martin, 1995). Leppert and McClary (1987) also

attempt to extend such a discussion of music in much the same way in their interesting collection of essays on music and its social and political groundings.

What is new about the contemporary relevance of music as a conveyor of political ideas is not that music is being used at all in this regard. Rather, what is new is the magnitude of this phenomenon combined with technological advances in the distribution and accessibility of music, minimally affecting hundreds of millions of mostly young adults across nearly all cultures in the world today. It is not difficult to witness music's potential as a political force. For example, it is arguably a common experience for many to observe passengers in cars who are singing (or rapping) along with a song containing politically potent lyrics that is being played on a radio or from a tape, CD, or iPod, and one can assume that this activity is repeated in countless other settings as well. To do this, of course, the lyrics must be memorized by such listeners. Forcing a comparison with a more traditional source of political information, I have yet to meet an individual who has memorized the words of any recent speech made by a presidential candidate over the past few elections.

Here we see a continuation and possible acceleration of the diminishing role of political parties as socializing agents and informational pipelines which guide both the formation of attitudes as well as the influence of political behavior for members of mass society. (See Wattenberg 1984, and for a contrasting perspective, see Hetherington 2001.) This well-documented process of party decline began in earnest with the rise of network television, and continues with the emergence of the Internet and other alternative sources of political information. Indeed, and crucially among the younger generation, music is now a primary player in this increasingly diverse competition for the attention of the masses with respect to the dissemination of political ideas, and the increasing importance of political music is not at all limited to the most recent ascendancy of rebellious hip-hop.

Representational vs. Associational Music

There are two primary approaches by which music can convey political content. The first is “representational,” and this is by far the most direct method of linking music with a political perspective. Representational political music presents a clearly defined political point of view that corresponds with the composer’s intent with respect to the music. This is normally the consequence of the composer placing explicit political content into a piece of music. Obviously this can be done through the lyrics in a song, and a national anthem is one example that fits into this category. Normally, representational political music addresses politics that are contemporary with the composer, but this is not an absolute requirement. It is possible for music to convey an explicit political message that is entirely relevant to a time period that resides in the future relative to the life of the composer. For example, a composer may write a song about the destruction of the Earth’s environment and the political corruption that is ultimately responsible for that destruction. This is an explicit political message that would directly address the precise issue regardless of time period, and so this song would remain an example of representational political music long after the death of the composer. But again, it is far more common for representational political music to be identified as such in relation to the politics that are contemporary with the life of the composer, and future representations of that same political message tend to be more the exception than the rule.

“Associational political music” is somewhat of a mirror image of its representational counterpart. Associational political music is the result of activities by individuals who are normally not involved in the original composition of the music. Typically, associational political music is created when someone or some group makes a connection between a particular piece of music (or in some instances, the entire collected work of a composer) and a political message or ideology. This individual or group makes this connection as a means of using the music to support a political

agenda. A classic example of a composer's work being exploited to support a political campaign long after the death of the composer was the 20th century portrayal of Beethoven's music by Germany's Nazi Party as intentionally supportive of a fascist world view (see chapter 2), an occurrence that would have surprised no one more thoroughly than Beethoven himself.

When political music is associated with purposes or meanings that are not intended by the original composer, it is typical for this to happen after the composer's death. It is obvious that the composer cannot protest the use of the music in this manner, and other defenders of the composer's original intentions can be more easily drowned out by the general noise of political campaigns. Also, in many situations it can be unclear as to what a composer actually intended with a particular piece of music, and the defense of a political association with that music may not be entirely demonstrable without resorting to after-the-fact interpretations of the composer's own political perspective.

But it is also possible (although less frequently) for associational political music to appear in venues that are contemporary with a composer's own political setting, such as when a musical composition written for a particular purpose nonetheless seems to tie in well with a related or similar situation or setting. In such a situation it can sometimes be quite clear that the association between the music and the new setting does not strongly violate the original explicit meaning of the music, yet the connection is not so clear as to warrant calling it "representational." A good example of such music would be an anti-war composition that was composed in response to, say, the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War, but which might find itself revived in connection with a future conflict between the United States and another country, or perhaps a conflict involving two entirely different nations. Indeed, sometimes the composers themselves attempt to connect their old protest songs with new conflicts, a phenomenon that has occurred recently with respect to the invasion of Iraq by the United States military in 2003 (see especially "Decades Later, 60's Icons Still

Live by Their Message," by James Barron, *The New York Times*, Sunday, 30 March 2003, p. B15[N]).

Orientation

Politically laced music is present in every culture on the planet, and it is impossible for any one book to address satisfactorily the great diversity of such music. For this reason, the current volume focuses primarily on political music originating from Western society, from the classical period to the present. This also is a large body of music to include in any single volume, and one could easily argue that no book could cover every element of even this more limited collection of material. Indeed, one need look no further than Ben Arnold's extensively organized and heavily annotated discussion and listing of war-related music to understand how challenging it is to be truly comprehensive in any single volume dealing with musical interpretations of significant social and political events (see especially Arnold 1993, pp. xiii-xiv). But since one of the primary purposes of writing this book is to identify both the clear existence as well as some of the dominant strands of political music within Western society over an extended time period, heuristic choices regarding particular musical genres, composers, and musical pieces become a desired and necessary element of the discussions included in these pages. Thus, this volume is not a collection of essays defining the absolute scope of extant political music, nor is this volume a comprehensive listing of political music within any one society or genre. Rather, it is a tracing of some of the most important political themes that have resonated in much of the music of Western society for over two-hundred years.

Crucially, this book is not about music as music. Rather, this volume is a discussion of politics as it has been—and continues to be—expressed musically. This may require some flexibility from the reader with respect to traditional approaches to music categorization and history. For example, from a musical perspective, it would be natural to object to comparisons between

the music of Richard Wagner and that of Bob Marley, or perhaps to discussions of nationalist and patriotic music that extend from the Romantic period all the way up to contemporary examples in the pop and rock genres. But the politics in music is quite different from the music itself. In the above examples, I obviously cannot compare the *music* of Wagner with that of Marley. But in these pages I do examine their political ideas relating to revolution and other matters that they expressed musically. Similarly, and again for example, I cannot compare Modest Mussorgsky's music with that of Bruce Springsteen, but I can and do point out similarities in the manner with which both composers have expressed their nationalist political ideas in their music.

In the chapters that follow, these discussions are arranged according to general themes. Many of these themes may also appear to have a rough chronological ordering as well, and this is certainly a consequence of the way in which history self-organizes itself to inspire new waves of political music. But chronology is not the dominating element here, as can clearly be seen in an early chapter on political manifesto music that combines discussions of Bob Marley and Wagner's "Ring" operas.

Among all classical composers, none have had their musical works more often and profoundly exploited for political purposes than Ludwig van Beethoven. The next chapter focuses on the way much of Beethoven's music has been laced with political meaning from the time of the composer's life up to the present. This chapter also offers an early opportunity to demonstrate the concepts of representational and associational political music, since both ideas are appropriate in various contexts to a discussion of Beethoven. Since identifying the way in which music is connected with politics is a required component of any analysis of political music, the clarity of the dual usage of Beethoven's music in this regard provides an ideal opportunity to offer a base-line application of the representational and associational ideas that assists with the discussions that follow in later chapters.

Chapter 3 introduces the idea of "political manifesto music." This type of music is so blatantly political that it is hard to miss at

least the overt elements of its political content. But there are nuances to such music, and indeed for the general category. Political manifesto music has the added element of offering a more coherent set of political ideas than is often the case with political music more generally, and so it usefully expands early-on the discussions in this volume that address the range of purposeful uses of music as a political tool. This chapter juxtaposes two very different musical personalities, Bob Marley and Richard Wagner. Readers may find it intriguing that two such diverse composers can be analyzed in the context of one chapter, and it is here that the definition and purpose of political manifesto music becomes so crucial to that treatment.

When nations emerge through war or merely the codification of cultural boundaries, the new citizens seek various means of political expression. Nationalist political music (or simply, nationalist music) plays an important role in this regard. In chapter 4, nationalist music is both defined and identified through the works of various composers who mostly appeared in the late-Romantic Era (late 1800s) which immediately followed the Classical Period. However, there are nationalist composers that are very active today, and their works span a variety of musical genres, including contemporary pop. The discussions in chapter 4 differentiate nationalist compositions from those that are more clearly patriotic. The distinction is important since the purpose of nationalist music is quite different from that of patriotic music.

The 20th century was a period of tremendous growth for political music that had a working class or labor orientation. Chapter 5 focuses on this brand of music by following the development of labor music primarily in the United States. The discussion begins with an introduction to the highly controversial figure, Joe Hill, and it includes an outline of his involvement with a number of labor luminaries of his day. The discussion then extends through the century up to the modern period, addressing examples of such music from sources as diverse as Woody Guthrie and The Rolling Stones.

When many people think of political music in general, they

probably thing of protest music emerging from the Vietnam War period. This indeed is much of the focus of chapter 6. While it is obvious that protest music can emerge from a political movement as potent as the anti-war movement of that troubled period, this type of music can also occur without the presence of a major movement. Chapter 6 addresses the general topic of protest music as it may appear in both movement and non-movement situations. This is probably one of the most powerful genres of political music, and without doubt its importance to the transformation of society becomes clearer during intermittent times of national stress.

Hip-hop is a very contemporary genre of politically rich music, and it is the focus of chapter 7. Born of the inner-city ghetto, the style and content of hip-hop is transforming the political and musical landscapes in new and provocative ways. Lyrics—spoken poetically with driving rhythms—have assumed a significance that rivals that of the strongest examples coming from the genre of protest music. Watching this relatively new hip-hop genre continue to develop is one of the most interesting elements in the general evolution of political music today. There are both subtle and sublime elements in this genre, and I attempt to outline the most important political characteristics of this type of music in that chapter.

Never has there been a more pregnant opportunity than now for people to turn their attention to an investigation of how music conveys political ideas in our society. Following more traditional paths of research, social scientists have long examined how the flow of political information to individuals and groups affects the development of political attitudes and behaviors in our society. The focus of such research usually has one of three orientations: (1) psychological influences (e.g., Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960), (2) theories of rational decision-making on the individual level (e.g., Downs 1957), and (3) the influences of social and political contexts (such as those identified in group-defined milieu) on mediating the acceptance or rejection of

political information (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1988). Nearly all of these approaches focus on political information as it is presented to individuals through orthodox informational conduits, such as through political parties, nightly news broadcasts, interactions with campaign workers, candidate advertisements, and so on. However, a huge amount of political information is now transmitted to contemporary society—particularly younger elements of society—through nontraditional sources, and it serves us well to examine these other contributions to our informational mix more closely.

Music is one of the most important of these increasingly pervasive new sources of political content. It is perhaps because of the explosive rise of music as a venue of political expression that it has become so timely to take a retrospective and generalized look at the phenomenon. If politics is the blood that feeds our societies with the energy to evolve, then music is an essential ingredient to political transformation. We listen to music not only to be entertained. We listen to music to understand ourselves both individually and collectively. Yet it is precisely because music is so entertaining that it carries such great potency as a venue for political expression. It conveys more than the written or spoken word. Through rhythm and tone, music becomes a powerful link between the emotionally rich ideas of a political thinker and the listeners. We are both political and musical creatures. This is, indeed, one of the things that makes it so fun to be human, and this is also why it is so crucial to understand the potential of music as a mediating factor in the political transformation of society.

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INDEX

Listing Note: When searching for a name, check both the first and last names. First names especially are useful when referencing a performer, composer, or noted personality, since first names are integral parts of formal identifiers regardless of whether or not the full names have one part (as in Madonna and Bono) or two parts (as in Africa Bambaataa and Dr. Dre).

1812 Overture	86, 89
2 Live Crew	188
2pacalypse Now	196, 199
A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall	157
A Life for the Czar	77, 78
A London Symphony	93
A Night on Bald Mountain	82
Abd-ar-Rahman al-Ashmawi	218
Abraham	77, 81, 82, 221
Afeni Shakur	187
Africa Bambaataa	184
Al Gore	181
Al Qaeda	216, 218
Alan Jackson	102
Albéniz	91, 92
Alberich	42-44, 46-52
Alfred Hays	130
alienation	2, 49
Alonzo Westbrook	197
American nationalism	94
Amnesty International	169
anarchist	40, 41, 45, 52, 59
anarchy	50, 55
Andre Young	195
Andy Morahan	180
anticlerical	14
antisemitism	40
anti-Semitism	192, 224
anti-war	5, 9, 103, 129, 148, 181
Antoine Carraby	195
Appalachian Spring	97
Arabian Prince	195
Arabic	218
Arendt	48, 221

aristocracy	12, 22, 106
Arlo Guthrie	132, 135, 149, 150
Arnold	6, 12, 23, 221
associational	4, 5, 7, 16, 17, 23
associational music	4
Atlantic Charter	127
Attila	73-75
Attila the Hun	73-75
Augusto Pinochet Ugarte	169
Ayatollah Khomeini	212
Babylon	35, 36, 38, 39, 46, 49-52, 54-56, 58, 59
Babylonian Empire	71
Bakhturin	78
Bakunin	45, 54
Balakirev	76, 78-80, 83-86
Ballantine	2, 221
Bangladesh	159, 160, 162, 164-166
Barbarossa	71, 75
Barenboim	26, 40
Baroque	11
Barry Goldwater	146
Bartók	87
Bastille	106
Battle of Victoria	15
Beastie Boys	187
Beatles	135, 151, 160
Becker	147, 221
Beethoven	3, 4, 9, 1, 5, 7, 11-16, 18-27, 40, 146, 209, 223, 224, 226
Beggar's Banquet	132
Berelson	10, 221
Berger	40, 66, 73, 222
Berlin Wall	25
Berloiz	80
Billy Bragg	111, 123, 133
Billy Joel	175, 180
Billy the Kid	97
Bismarck	17, 18
black nihilism	195
Black Panther Party	187
Blau	2, 222
Bloody Sunday	172
Bob Dylan	132, 135, 151-154, 158, 159

Bohemia	87
Bokina	2, 40, 61, 222
Bomb Squad	194
Bonn	13, 226
Bono	172, 181, 229
Boogie Down Productions	194
Boris Godunov	81, 82, 93
Borodin	76, 79, 81, 83, 221
Boulangier	96
Bourbons	70
break beats	184
Brett Sokol	191
Brown	3-5, 20, 21, 27, 81, 222
Brünnhilde	44-46, 51-54, 56, 58
Budden	71, 222
b-boying	184, 185
Calvin Broadus	195
Cambodia	141
Campbell	9, 184, 222
Cancionero Musical Popular Español	91
Cantos de España	92
Carl Rux	201
Carl Ryder	192
Carlton Ridenhour	192
Casey Jones	120, 121
Catholics	21, 37, 170, 171
censors	71-74
Cerulo	2, 222, 223
Charles Kaiser	142
Charles Shaar Murray	201
Child	38, 51, 63, 93, 103, 112, 115, 158, 178, 202-206
Chile	63, 64, 136, 166-169
Chopin	81
Chuck D	192
Civil Rights Movement	1, 63, 135, 142
civilization	35, 42, 45, 46, 52, 53, 55, 209
Clarence Darrow	116
classical music	11
Classical Period	6, 8, 11, 12
Claude-Joseph Rouget de Lisle	105
Clive Campbell	184
Cold War	152, 173, 175
Conservatoire Américain	96

Converse	9, 222
Cooper	14, 223
Copland	96, 97, 226
Cornell West	184, 187, 188, 195, 197, 207, 228
corruption	4, 52, 54, 58, 73, 108, 139, 141
country music	1, 33, 69, 98-101, 225
Criminal Minded	194
Crusades	72
Cui	76, 79, 81
culture	6, 21, 23, 26, 36, 67-69, 89, 99, 103, 178, 183, 185-188, 191, 206, 207
Czechoslovakia	87
Daddy	188, 198, 203
Daniel Ellsberg	139
Darryl Worley	102
David Allan Coe	214, 217
David Rohde	218
Daz	195
De La Soul	188
Death Row Records	195
Democratic	20, 25, 140
Dennis	12-16, 18, 19, 21-25, 27, 40, 63, 223
Devon Sawa	203
Dido	203
Dien Bien Phu	137
DiMaggio	2, 225
DJ Kay Slay	186
DJ Kool Herc	184
DJ Scott LaRock	194
Don Giovanni	12
Donington	44, 56, 223
Downs	9, 61, 82, 223
Dr. Dre	188, 195, 196, 203, 229
draft	141, 181
Dvorák	87
Dylan Thomas	151
East Pakistan	159
Eazy E	195
Ed Madden	129
Ed Sullivan Show	152
Edith Fowke	117
Eduardo Frei Montalva	166
Eisenhower	146

El Amor Brujo	92
El Corregidor y la Molinera	92
elections	3, 20, 108, 137-139, 159, 198
Elizabeth Gurley Flynn	115, 119
Elizabethan	93
Eminem	188, 195, 200, 201, 203-206
Emperor Nicolas II	171
En Saga	89
England	92, 95, 224
environment	x, 4, 13, 48, 75, 117, 179-181
Erda	44, 50
Eric (Vietnam) Sadler	192
Eric Clapton	159
Eric Wright	195
Ernani	72, 73
Eroica	14, 22
Eugene Onegin	86
Europe	11, 67, 69-71, 90, 92, 94, 106, 135, 141, 174, 214
European nation-building	69
explicit	1, 4, 5, 17-19, 31, 34, 39, 40, 46, 72, 74, 107, 110, 170, 197, 212, 219
Falla	91, 92
Fantasia	82, 93
Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis	93
fascist	5, 25, 40, 214, 215
Fascist Experimental	215
Fear of a Black Planet	192
Feuerbach	46, 47
Fidelio	14, 15, 24, 61
Finland	87-91
Finlandia	89
Finnish nationalism	87, 88
First String Quartet	95
Flavor Fav	192
Ford	12, 223
Foscolo	73
Foster	95
Four Legends	89
Fox	2, 210, 223
Francis Scott Key	104
Franklin Delano Roosevelt	127
Frederick I	71
Frederick William II	106

Free Music School	80
freedom	39, 49, 53, 57, 73, 74, 85, 101, 118, 119, 123, 124, 126, 164, 169, 199, 223, 226
Frei	166, 167
French Revolution	14, 61, 105
French Revolutionary Wars	15
From the New World	87
From the Salvation Army	95
Fugue in Four Keys	95
Furious Five	184, 187, 189-191, 193, 194
gangsta rap	142, 188-190, 194-200
Gene Autry	98
George Harrison	135, 158-160, 162, 163, 165
German	12, 17-21, 23-27, 40, 46, 63, 71, 75, 80, 85, 92, 95, 104, 202, 223
Germany	11, 12, 17, 20, 21, 23, 25, 26, 80, 104
ghazal	163
ghetto	9, 187, 189, 190, 193-199, 205-207
Gibbs M. Smith	111
Glaser	117, 118
Glazunov	81
Glinka	76-79, 82, 85
Glorious Moment	15
Gospel Oak	173
Gottschalk	95
graffiti	184-186
Granados	91
Grand Wizard Theodore	184
Grandmaster Flash	184, 187, 189, 191, 193, 194
Great Britain	92, 104, 127, 227
Great Depression	34, 131, 155
Great Five	76-82, 85
Greece	11
Greg Tate	184, 226
Gulf of Tonkin	138, 139
Gypsy Songs	87
Hammerfest 2000	216
Hank Shocklee	192
Hapsburg	13
Hapsburgs	70
Harriman and Illinois Central Railroad System	120
Harry Davis	197
hate music	214-217

Hayden	11
Heffer	93, 224
Helen Keller	116
Hetherington	3, 224
Hindi	162
hip-hop	3, 1, 3, 9, 183-190, 192, 193, 195-201, 206, 207, 218, 225
Hispaniae Schola Musica Sacra	91
Hitler	24, 40, 63
Ho Chi Minh	137
Holocaust	40
Holy Roman Empire	17
Huckfeldt	10, 224
Huey Long	113, 155
Hugh the Drover	93
Hugo	72, 73
Hungary	69, 87
hyperrealism	188, 190, 195
I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night	130, 131
I lombardi alla prima crociata	72
I.W.W.	113-117, 119, 122, 127, 128, 132
Iberia	92
Ice Cube	195
Illuminati	14
Imagine	150, 191, 196
Imperial Court Theater	16
In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam	139
Indochina	137, 138, 141
Industrial Worker	113
Industrial Workers of the World	113, 119
Intelligence Report	214, 216
Inti-Illimani	63, 168
IRA	171
Iran	212
Iraq	5, 101, 102, 105, 139, 181
Ireland	166, 170-173
Irving	84, 122
Israel	40, 108
It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back	193
Italian nationalism	70
Italy	70-72, 74
Ives	94, 95, 227
J. Fred Helf	129

Jacobins	106
Jahd Adonihah	108
Janet Jackson	190
Jara	63, 168, 169
jazz	2, 99, 186, 221
Jerusalem	40, 72, 102, 103, 211, 212
Jerusalem album	102, 103
Jesus	61, 118, 164, 176, 178
Jimi Hendrix	105, 135, 143, 144
Jimi Hendrix's	142, 144, 146, 148
Joan Baez	130, 135
Joe Hill	8, 111-126, 128-133, 226
Joe Pytko	176
John Birch Society	152
John Lennon	135, 150, 151
John Stafford Smith	104
John Walker Lindh	102
Jon Pareles	180
Joplin	95
Jose Feliciano	105
Joseph Haydn	104
Joseph II	13
Joseph Ogidi	108
Joseph Saddler	184
Kaiser	63, 142, 224
Kalevala	88, 89
Kant	14
Kärntnertor Theater	16
Kathy Dougherty	175
Katz	40, 224
Keith Richards	132
Keith Shocklee	192
Ken Verdoia	112
Kennedy	174
Kenneth Gibson	186
Khrushchev	174
Knight	16, 224
Kriss Kross	185
KRS-One	194
Ku Klux Klan	176
Kukolnik	78
Kullervo Symphony	89
La battaglia di Legnano	70, 75

La Marseillaise	105-107
La Scala	72
labor music	8, 111, 130
Laos	141
Lauryn Hill	188
Lawrence Krisna Parker	194
Lazarsfeld	10, 221
Lee	65, 101, 192, 224
Leningrad	175
Leo Friedman	126
Leon Russell	159
Leonard	26, 77-79, 82-84, 175, 224
Leopold	17, 82, 106
Leopold II	106
Leppert	2, 224
Leviathan	48
Lewis E. Jones	123
liberation	26, 39, 57, 61, 64, 71
Lieutenant Kij?	174
Like a Rolling Stone	153
Lil' Kim	197
Lincoln Portrait	97
Liszt	69, 70, 80
Little Red Songbook	114, 117
Live from Rattle and Hum	172
Lobkowitz	14
Loge	43, 45
Lola Ogunnaike	186
Lombard	72
Lönnrot	88
Lorenzo Patterson	195
Los Pirineos	91
Louis Farrakhan	192
Louis XVI	106, 107
Louis XVIII	107
love and revolution	56
Luonnotar	89
Lyndon Baines Johnson	138
lyrics	3, 4, 34, 36, 46, 50, 71, 98, 99, 101-104, 107-110, 117, 130, 148, 151, 153, 154, 158, 168, 170, 172-175, 180, 187, 190-193, 198, 200, 202, 212
M.C. Hammer	188
Madonna	97, 98, 175-178, 229

Magee	33, 40, 47, 50, 55, 225
Maharishi Mahesh Yogi	160
MajiMaji	109
Malcolm X	187
manifesto music	7, 8, 29-33, 41
Marley	x, xi, 7, 8, 29-34, 36, 38, 39, 46, 48-50, 52-61, 63-66, 164, 165, 228
Marshall Bruce Mathers III	195
Martin	2, 61, 147, 176, 201, 223, 225, 227
Marx	35, 54
Mary J. Blige	197
Mary Lambert	175
Mase	188, 198
Mattern	64, 167-169, 225
Maximilian Franz	13
MC Ren	195
McClary	2, 224
McPhee	10, 221
Mead	147, 225
Melle Mel	190, 191
Melvin Glover	190, 191
Mendelssohn	80
Micetrap Distribution	215
Michael	45, 54, 179, 190
Michael Jackson	179
Mick Jagger	132
Middle Ages	11
Mik Lezan	195
Milan	72
Miller	9, 222
Mime	43, 45, 51
Mondino	97
Moscow	76, 80, 85, 86, 174
Moscow Conservatory	80, 85
movement	x, 1, 9, 16, 23, 63, 70, 81, 83, 89, 92, 96, 111-113, 119, 130, 135-137, 142, 159, 173, 179-181, 183, 216
Mozart	11, 84
Mozart and Salieri	84
Murray	183, 201, 207, 225
musicology	2, 40, 181
Mussorgsky	76, 78, 79, 81, 85, 92
N.R. Kleinfield	188, 200
N.W.A (Niggaz With Attitude)	188

- Nabucco 71
- Napoleon 14, 15, 17, 22, 70, 71, 86, 107, 153, 227
- Napoleon Bonaparte 14, 107
- Napoleon III 17, 71, 107
- Napoleonic Wars 15, 16
- Nation of Islam 192
- national anthem 4, 71, 104, 105, 107-109, 142, 144-146
- national anthems 2, 104, 105, 107, 108
- National Constituent 105-107
- national development 68, 104
- National Socialist Black Metal 215
- nationalist x, 7, 8, 18, 22, 67-70, 73-81, 83, 85-89, 91, 92, 95-99, 101, 104, 109, 110, 137
- nationalist hybrids 96
- Nature 26, 30, 32, 33, 35-38, 42, 45-53, 55-59, 64, 70, 89, 97-99, 102, 106, 141, 163, 167, 180, 191, 197, 212
- Nazi 5, 20, 21, 23-25, 27, 63, 202, 215, 222
- Neal 183, 207, 225
- Nebuchadnezzar 71
- Neil Strauss 187, 214
- neo-fascist 214
- Newman 41, 225
- Ngo Dinh Diem 138
- Nicholas 77, 80, 88, 89
- Nick Brandt 179
- Nietzsche 33
- Nixon 138, 140, 141, 174
- Noches en los Jardines de España 92
- non-movement x, 9, 173
- Norfolk Rhapsodies 93
- Norman Lee Rogers 192
- North Vietnam 103, 138, 139, 141
- Northern Ireland 166, 170-173
- Northern Republican Army 171
- Notorious B.I.G. 188
- Notorius B.I.G. 198
- Oklahoma City Federal Building 214
- opera 13-15, 24, 46, 56, 61, 71-78, 81, 82, 90, 91, 93, 222, 223
- Orthodox Church 77
- Osama bin Laden 218
- O'Shea Jackson 195
- P. Diddy 188, 198

Pakistan	159, 162
Palestine	72
Panzerfaust Records	215
Parra	63
Patrick Leonard	175
patriotic	x, 1, 7, 8, 13, 19, 67-69, 71, 74, 80, 86, 89, 98-106, 109, 110, 132, 145, 180, 210, 215, 219
patriotism	103, 109, 142, 145
Paul Greengrass	172
Paul Krugman	210
Paul McCartney	135, 151
Paul Roberts	101
Paul Robeson	130
Pearl Harbor	127
peasants	21, 82, 106
Pedrell	91, 92
Pentagon Papers	139
Pepsi	175, 176
Peter S. Green	191
Petersburg Conservatory	80, 83
Peterson	2, 225
Phillip Atwell	203
Pictures from an Exhibition	82
Pinochet	63, 169, 170
Plato	1, 225
playas	197
Pohjola's Daughter	89
Poland	191, 202
Polish	77, 128, 191
political change	29, 59, 64, 65, 182, 211
political control	2
political information	3, 9, 10, 209, 210, 213, 224
political manifesto music	7, 8, 29-33, 41
political messages	1, 13, 29, 34, 64, 72, 108, 183, 187, 212, 217-219
political musicology	40, 181
political parties	3, 10, 20-23, 227
political science	4, 2, 27, 222, 224
political transformation	3, 10
Pollack	96, 226
Pope	70, 74
Por Nuestra Música	91
Prince Igor	81

- Professor Griff 192
 protest 1, 5, 9, 72, 113, 117, 132, 135-137, 141, 142, 145, 148-
 151, 153, 158, 166, 168-173, 180-182, 209, 211, 223
 protest music 1, 9, 72, 117, 132, 135-137, 141, 142, 145, 148,
 151, 153, 158, 166, 170, 173, 209, 211
 Protestants 170, 171
 Proudhon 55
 psychology 2, 44, 103, 109
 Public Enemy 187, 192, 193
 Puffy Daddy 188
 Pulitzer Prize 94
 Pushkin 76, 77, 82
 Queen Latifah 188
 Quilapayún 63, 168
 Racist Country 215
 Ragtime Dances 95
 rap 142, 183, 186-191, 194-201, 207, 218, 228
 rap music 183, 188, 189, 191, 194, 201, 218
 rapping 3, 183-185
 Rastafarian 33-38, 49, 53
 Rastafarianism 34, 36, 37, 53
 Ravel 82
 Reagan 173-175
 Realism 82, 85, 93, 145
 Renaissance 11, 218
 Renshaw 113, 226
 representational 4, 7, 13, 16, 99, 101
 republican 14, 15, 22, 61, 70, 71, 146, 171
 Resistance Radio 214
 Resistance record label 214
 revolution 7, 14, 15, 33, 46, 50, 52, 54-57, 59-61, 64, 65, 69,
 71, 105, 106, 151, 156, 172, 212, 214, 224
 Richard Griffin 192
 Richard Nixon 140, 174
 Richard Robbins 149
 Riders to the Sea 93
 Rigoletto 73, 222
 Rimsky-Korsakov 76
 Ring 41-46, 51-53, 73, 224
 Ringo Starr 159
 Risorgimento 74
 Robert S. McNamara 139
 rock and roll 141

Rodeo	97
Roeckel	48, 52, 56, 227
Roman Empire	17, 73
Romantic	7, 8, 11, 61, 64, 67, 84, 89, 92, 95, 96, 98, 135
Romeo and Juliet	86
Rosselli	70, 226
Rosser Reeves	146
Rousseau	2, 14
Rubinstein	79, 80
Ruslan and Ludmila	76-78
Russia	76, 78, 80, 81, 84, 86, 88, 89, 92, 171
Russian Easter Festival	84
Russian Musical Society	80
Russians	175
Saddam Hussein	102, 180
Sadko	84
Salt-n-Pepa	188
San Martin de Porres	176
satire	120, 148-150
Scheherazade	84
Schneider	14
Schoolly D	194
Schröder	24, 226
Schumann	80
Scott	2, 93, 95, 104, 194, 226
Scott of the Antarctic	93
Scott Sterling	194
Sean Combs	188, 198
Second Reich	12, 16-18
segregation	100, 135
Serov	79, 80
Servilia	84
Shah	212
Shaw	41, 43, 45, 59-61, 66, 226
Shelby Darnell	101
Shestakova	78, 79
Shirkov	78
Should I Ever Be a Soldier	129
Sibelius	1, 87-91
Siegfried	41, 45, 46, 50-54, 56, 58, 59, 155
Sieglinde	44, 45
Siegmund	44, 53
Sinead O'Connor	173

Sinfonia Antarctica	93
Slavonic Dances	87
Smetana	87
Smothers Brothers	135
Snoop Dog	195
Snow Maiden	84
social dislocation	2
sociological musicology	2
sociology	2, 222, 225
Solomon	14-16, 226, 227
Sousa	95
South Africa	2, 221
South Vietnam	137, 139, 140
Southern Pacific	120
Soviet Union	107, 159, 173, 174
Spain	17, 72, 91, 92, 128
Spanish nationalism	91
Sprague	10, 224
Springsteen	7
St. Petersburg	76, 171, 175
Stan	203-205
Star Spangled Banner	101, 104
Stasov	81
Steve Earle	102
Steve Gill	103
Sting	169, 173-175
Stokes	9, 222
Stokowski	82
Straight Outta Compton	194
Stung Right	128
Suite Española	92
Swafford	94, 227
Sweden	88, 112
Swiss Guards	107
Sylvia Plath	202, 204, 205, 207
Sylvia Robinson	191
Symphony for Organ and Orchestra	96
Synge	93
Tango in D Major	92
Tchaikovsky	76, 80, 85, 86
Ted Hughes	202, 203
Terminator X	192
Tet Offensive	140

The Alhambra	84
The Chronic	195
The Dream of the Blue Turtles	174
The English and Scottish Popular Ballads	93
The Golden Cockerel	84
The International	186
The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh	84
The Message	39, 63, 64, 109, 110, 148, 187, 207
The New York Times	6, 34, 40, 63, 90, 108, 109, 139, 148, 158, 180, 186-188, 191, 200, 206, 209, 210, 214, 218, 225
The Oprichnik	86
The Police	16, 42, 114, 119, 149, 169, 176, 177, 195, 196, 212
The Rebel Girl	119, 120
The Rolling Stones	8, 111, 132, 135
The Swan of Tuonela	89
The Tale of Tsar Saltan	84
The Three-Cornered Hat	92
The Tsar's Bride	84
The Turner Diaries	214
The Voyevoda	86
The Wizard of Oz	143
Three Places in New England	95
Timothy McVeigh	214
Tony Schwartz	145
Transcendental Meditation	160
transformation	3, 4, 9, 10, 50, 97, 127, 135, 155, 156, 189, 200, 209
Treaty of Versailles	20, 22
Trinh Cong Son	158
Troubles	38, 47, 75, 144, 199, 204
Truman	138
Tudor	93
Tupac Shakur	187, 188, 196, 199
U.S. Congress	104, 138, 141, 154
U.S. Maddox	138
U2	170, 172, 173
underground	211-215
Unger	135, 138, 227
United States	5, 8, 63, 68, 86, 87, 96, 98-101, 103, 111, 113, 127, 135, 136, 138, 139, 141, 152, 159, 166, 167, 173, 176, 180, 183, 209, 214-216, 226
Urdu	162

Ursula Vaughan Williams	93
Va, pensiero	71
Vakula the Smith	86
Valhalla	43, 44, 46, 52, 54
Variations on “America”	95
Vedic philosophy	35, 164
Verdi	1, 70-73, 75, 222, 226
Victor Jara	63, 168, 169
Vienna	11, 14-17, 67, 70
Viet Cong	139, 141
Viet Minh	137, 138
Vietnam War	1, 5, 9, 63, 68, 103, 132, 135, 137, 139, 141, 142, 149-151, 154, 158, 159, 181
Violent	19, 54, 55, 107, 115, 119, 171, 187, 188, 190, 193-196, 216
Voltaire	14
Wagner	x, xi, 1, 7, 8, 18, 23, 29-33, 35, 39-41, 46-51, 53-56, 58-61, 64-66, 75, 79, 80, 146, 221-223, 225, 227
Wah-Wah	163
war	1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 15, 17, 19, 20, 25, 47, 48, 63, 68, 88, 94, 97, 101, 103-106, 127-129, 132, 135, 137-142, 145, 148-154, 156, 158, 159, 170, 172, 173, 175, 180, 181, 196, 198, 218, 219, 221
War of 1812	104
Watergate	141
Waterloo	15
Wattenberg	3, 227
Waylon Jennings	33, 99
Weimar	12, 20-23, 104
Weimar Republic	12, 20, 21, 104
West Pakistan	159
Western	9, 6, 19, 36, 62, 77, 80, 81, 97, 98, 115, 174
Western Federation of Miners	115
White	33, 34, 37, 39, 63, 66, 74, 98, 100, 101, 126, 151, 176, 177, 187-189, 191, 193, 195, 198-201, 205-207, 215, 226, 228
White Album	151
white rebellion	189, 200
Whitney Houston	105
Wilhelm	17
William D. Haywood	115
William Drayton	192
William J. Obanhein	149

William Pierce	214
Williams	2, 92, 93, 223, 224, 228
Willie Nelson	33, 99
Winfield. S. Weeden	128
Wobblies	113, 115, 226
Woodrow Wilson	20, 116, 127
Woodstock	105, 130, 144
Woody Guthrie	8, 131, 132, 151, 152
Workers of the World, Awaken	125, 126
World War I	17, 19, 20, 127, 128
World War II	12, 20, 25, 63, 97, 101, 127, 132, 137, 170
Wotan	42-51, 53, 54, 58, 155
Wu-Tang Clan	188
Yella	195