

Has music ever significantly changed the course of history?

The ability of music and art to change the course of history was one of the most important debates in philosophy in the twentieth century. An era of nationalism, war, and extreme ideologies, intellectuals in this time examined the connection between music and social change. Perhaps the most famous of these was Theodor Adorno, a Jewish-German philosopher who witnessed the rise of Nazism and fled to the United States, where he also saw capitalist wealth. Together with his colleague, Max Horkheimer, Adorno developed an important and insightful thesis on music and historical change, which argued that 'serious' music can change history because it can make people think critically and reflect on important events themselves. By contrast, Adorno contended that 'popular' music had no causal power, and reinforced many of the problems of the world. Entertaining people without making them think, popular music was a commercial product devoid of art. This essay analyses Adorno's thought in detail and argues his thesis is incredibly valuable in interrogating the role of music in historical change.

However, history itself proved Adorno's thesis wrong in an important way: several popular music movements in the twentieth century *did* create changes and cause people to engage with their own critical thoughts. One example of this is jazz, which played a highly important role in increasing people's rights, particularly in the United States. Jazz artists were very involved in the political events of their era and composed music based on their life experiences, such as when they noticed inequality happening around them. Using their lyrics and powerful melodies to encourage oppressed groups to fight for themselves, jazz was a big part of civil rights. This essay therefore also explores this history and offers an alternative reading of 'the popular'. Using cultural theorist Stuart Hall to complement Adorno, it is argued that music can change history when it is genuinely challenging, *and* that many popular forms can be challenging in this way.

The Degraded Culture Industry vs. Aesthetic Art

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry refers to art being commodified and sold because of the declining cultural standards of late capitalism.¹ These products are created by businesses to appeal to customers and culture itself is dependent not on people's desires or self-expression but on profit. Art under late capitalism, like Hollywood movies and elevator music, does not require consumers to critically think while being entertained. People relax to recycled formulas and originality in expression is lacking.

According to Adorno, a good piece of aesthetic art or music conveys its ethical purpose. It will be able to create a space aside and make a person move away from their ordinary life. This "utopian" space allows the viewer to free themselves and express their own feelings. However this is not the same as didactic art, for example revolutionary music that simply instructs people to be more progressive. Instead Adorno argued that a good piece of art will make a person 'shudder.' Without initially knowing or being able to articulate why, the listener or viewer of something 'truly' aesthetic will be able to find their true self, and move beyond the society and moment they are living in. "Ultimately, aesthetic comportment is to be defined as the capacity to shudder, as if goose bumps were the first aesthetic image... freeing itself from the blind anxiety... that transcends the spell."²

A good artwork should bring spiritual shudders to the viewer or listener and can change history. If we are astonished, transformation can happen. This will cause changes to social movements and historical events

because true aesthetic art contains a “resistant truth,” in which it can “say ‘no’ to the existing state of the world,” and “point beyond it.”³

Popular and Serious Music under Capitalism

Music is important in this shudder for Adorno. According to Michael Gallope “Among all the arts, for Adorno, music stands as exemplary”⁴ because it had an ‘ineffable’ character that could not be expressed in words. This is what Adorno meant by ‘serious’ music, including classical and avant-garde pieces. Such music is able to stimulate the imagination of a person and expresses the emotion of oneself. By contrast, ‘popular’ music is where there are no new ideas or innovations happening in it. It is merely catering to the audience's preferences, rather than having a real dialectic meaning it does not struggle against old ideas and help create new ones.

The difference between popular and serious music was “standardisation.”⁵ In the famous article “On Popular Music” Adorno stated: “The whole structure of popular music is standardised even where the attempt circumvent standardisation,”⁶ meaning every part of popular music can be interchanged with another. Popular music often uses hooks and repetition because it is composed by companies to appeal to the client, obeying mainstream culture and depending on profit rather than an individual's desire for self-expression. However standardisation is not determined by the complexity or simplicity of music. What matters is the significance of each detail towards the entire composition. For instance, many pieces from the classical period are rhythmically simple compared to the popular rhythms of jazz. They do not have convoluted dotted notes, or irregular paces. However, each part of the arrangement is indispensable and essential. Haydn's composition tends to revolve and shift around a prescribed chord that lacks complexity. Chords are often used far less than pianists such as Debussy or Rachmaninov. Yet such simple compositions are not being standardised and every part of the music is composed after detailed reflection. Serious music therefore creates a sense as a whole, with unchangeable details.⁷

Popular Music as Conservative?

Popular music cannot, therefore, be truly aesthetic or change the course of history according to Adorno. This is because “structural standardisation aims at standard reactions.”⁸ Each piece of popular music goes through an established procedure, and the fixed structure makes people no longer critically think about the logic and connotation of music. Standardisation is therefore part of the mass production of capitalism and is conservative, not revolutionary. “Standardisation of song hits keeps the customers in line by doing their listening for them, as it were.”⁹

However, the conservative nature of this music and its inability to change the status quo of capitalist history is not always clear. Ironically popular music, particularly among many subcultures, may initially appear individual and subversive. However Adorno argues that this is a form of pseudo-individualisation. Pseudo-individualisation refers to the fixed structure behind the nominal personalization, and the repeatability of its connotation of music compositions in the contemporary era. Although popular composers may emphasise the importance of individuation, this is only pretend. “By pseudo-individualization we mean endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardisation itself.”¹⁰ Despite appearing to be different, this music lacks imagination and creativity, the products of an industrial music assembly line formed by various pieces that can be easily replaced.

Popular Music as Revolutionary? The History of Jazz.

One of Adorno's biggest criticisms about popular music focused on jazz, which he argued was never a great form of art, being formulaic, banal, and fashionable.¹¹ Despite superficially sounding creative and expressive, under the notes jazz followed the same formulas. To be more specific, the solo and improvisational parts of jazz music were not a form of creativity. Adorno believed improvisation was "normalized," so many musicians regurgitated notes and rhythms in different ways. Jazz is therefore not dialectic, but a commodity for entertaining audiences only, even if it appears new, like pseudo-individualisation.

However, although Adorno claims that jazz weakens people's ability to think critically and does not have any artistic quality, actual history demonstrates its power and the influence; that the 'shudder' of jazz that cannot be underestimated, as shown by the history of inequality, race, and gender in America. Jazz music acted as a catalyst to stimulate social movements, protests, and political events. Musicians composed songs with powerful lyrics to motivate crowds to fight for their own rights and be brave against their enemies.¹²

Jazz was popularised in the 1920s, however as the Civil Rights Movement began, jazz musicians soon began to compose songs to fight for their rights.¹³ A teacher, as well as a civil right advocate, Billie Holiday composed the song "Strange fruit" after being horrified by the image of "Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees". Expressing her horror at the inhumane treatment of black people, the song conveys an atmosphere of fear, warning the public that this torture is still ongoing. With this song, the crowd began to raise their awareness of the experiences of black people. Therefore, Billie Holiday's first protest song defends the civil rights for black people and motivates people to protest for their own rights.¹⁴

Another jazz artist who contributed to political movements and brought 'shudder' to the public is the bassist, Charles Mingus. In the 1950s, the governor of Arkansas defied the desegregation order and called on people to prevent African American kids from going to school. Charles Mingus was inspired by this incident and composed the song "Fables of Faubus", criticising the Governor's discrimination. Mingus uses loping tunes with dialogues between himself and the drummer to satirise the action of the government. While performing, Mingus asks the drummer, "Name me someone who's ridiculous, Dannie," to which the drummer shouts back, "Governor Faubus!" With the publication of this song, he advocated that musicians should use music to be well compensated and recognized. The public also started to fight for their own race and rights after listening to this composition. Fortunately, Mingus' defiance was able to pass down until now.¹⁵

"Jazz speaks for life. The Blues tell the story of life's difficulties."¹⁶ This is a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his essay writing for the inauguration of the Berlin Jazz Festival. He believed that jazz was an important tool for the freedom and liberation of the American people. He claimed that jazz helped many people through their worst times and benefited many others by telling the stories they saw and expressing their opinions. In dark times, when people were treated unfairly, jazz brought light to them. Jazz is a modern music that can bring spiritual 'shudder' in its own way and be a salvation for many people.¹⁷

Conclusion: Popular Music as Revolutionary?

The actual history of jazz, therefore, contradicts Adorno's thesis as it has been very important to changing history, particularly in terms of race relations. This does not mean, however, that all music changes history. As Adorno has shown us, under capitalism, many pieces of music are used to reinforce the status quo and support inequality. To understand how and why jazz is an important case of music changing history, we need to develop a stronger theory of the popular.

According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, the word 'popular', refers to something that can be widely accepted by the public.¹⁸ Music that is popular can be appreciated, bought, listened to, or consumed by society. Like Adorno, Hall argues that commercially, 'popular' products can be associated with the market, involving mass production, debasement, or manipulation, meaning they lose their artistic value and are just commodities. However, Hall argues that the culture industry is not totally in control of all music, or even all popular music because it is dialectical. Ordinary people do not just passively consume music. Rather, capitalists and workers struggle with one another and so 'the popular' should be reevaluated and considered in terms of the different demands placed on it by different parts of society.

By reconsidering 'the popular', and including diverse social groups into the consideration of popular culture, tensions between people who consume popular music and the capitalist culture industry clear. Therefore, even popular music can create a 'shudder' that changes history. This cannot just be a thoughtless commodity, but ordinary people are not just thoughtless, as the history of jazz has so aesthetically taught us.

¹ Cultural Reader, "Summary: Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception by Adorno and Horkheimer," accessed June 6, 2024, https://culturalstudiesnow.blogspot.com/2013/12/adorno-and-horkheimer-culture-industry.html#google_vignette

² Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 311

³ Michael Gallope, "A Companion to Adorno." In *The Blackwell Companion to Adorno* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 429

⁴ Gallope, "A Companion to Adorno," 427

⁵ Theodor Adorno, "On Popular Music", In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, ed. John Story (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 201

⁶ Adorno, "On Popular Music", 197

⁷ Adorno, "On Popular Music", 200

⁸ Adorno, "On Popular Music", 200

⁹ Adorno, "On Popular Music", 203

¹⁰ Adorno, "On Popular Music", 203

¹¹ Sam Murphy, "Is Pop Music Art? Theodor Adorno and the War on Modern Music," *The Collector*, 17 June 2022, <https://www.thecollector.com/pop-music-art-adorno-philosophy>

¹² William Poulus, "Adorno and Jazz," *Varsity*, 8 March 2018, <https://www.Varsity.co.uk/music/15086>

¹³ Zola Philipp, "The Social Effects of Jazz," York College, accessed June 19, 2024, <https://www.york.cuny.edu/english/writing-program/the-york-scholar-1/volume-6.1-fall-2009/the-social-effects-of-jazz>

¹⁴ Carnegie Hall, "Six Jazz Classics and the Fight of Civil Rights," accessed June 19, 2024, <https://www.carnegiehall.org/Explore/Articles/2021/04/26/Six-Jazz-Classics-and-the-Fight-for-Civil-Rights>

¹⁵ Carnegie Hall, "Six Jazz Classics and the Fight of Civil Rights."

¹⁶ Mark Taylor, "MLK Jr. on Jazz: The Soundtrack of Civil Rights," *San Francisco Conservatory of Music*, accessed June 19, 2024, <https://sfcu.edu/discover/newsroom/mlk-jr-jazz-soundtrack-civil-rights>

¹⁷ Mark Taylor, "MLK Jr. on Jazz: The Soundtrack of Civil Rights."

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular'", In *Cultural Resistance Reader*, ed. Stephen Duncombe (London: Verso, 2002), 186