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The Politics, Aesthetics and Dissonance of Music in Everyday Life

The role of music in everyday life, and the representation of the everyday in music and art are important themes for those interested in music and its social, cultural and political meaning. The everyday, and music as part of it, is often seen as mundane, as in the case of muzak and programmed mall music, contrasting to the more serious spheres of politics and 'important' events, or sites like concerts and various forms of media. However studying the role of music in the everyday offers a complex aesthetic dimension which has cultural and political dimensions, including considerations of the way different groups listen to music, and the way music functions within a capitalist order, as well as offering an opportunity to revisit the well worn path of what Jazz is and isn't. It is helpful in this regard to bear in mind Sherrie Tucker's influential 'Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition' which spoke about 'dissonances' as a way of re-figuring jazz studies, including everyday media. As she put it considering 'dissonance may help us to develop approaches to difference that do not always demand hierarchy, and that may open our ears to multiple and unexpected sources.' (Tucker 2014, 282) Studying jazz in everyday contexts is part of this process.

This paper will offer some thoughts on the relationship between the everyday and the role of music. It will look at how critics and artists have established the importance of the everyday, and how this has appeared in their work. It will then explore what music in the everyday reveals about the nature of modern society.

The importance of the everyday has been noted by a number of intellectuals, critics and artists, although the interest in music and the everyday is a more recent development (Frith 2002, Tea Denora 2000 and Hesmondhalgh 2013). Nicholas Gebhardt has recently summarised the philosophical approach to the role of music and jazz in the everyday, and this included a quote from the French sociologist and anthropologist, Marcel Mauss, who wrote in the 1920s how 'A tin can characterises our societies better than the most sumptuous jewel or the rarest stamp.' (Gebhardt 2019, 392) This captures what Mauss felt was the importance of everyday items and experience. Jumping forward a century, the debate has developed to the point that Sherri Irvin recently has suggested 'If we attend to the aesthetic aspects of everyday experience, our lives can come to seem more satisfying to us, even more profound'.

This position challenged Dewey's notion of a division between full experience and causal experience with the emphasis upon the former. Could, she asked, a focus on the everyday lead to a more moral approach to life? (Irvin 2008, 41) There has also been a longer running interest in the political nature of the everyday, including from Marxist thinkers, most notably Henri Lefebvre's important work on this area. Lefebvre also stressed importance of everyday life in modern society where older forms of industrial and class structures were changing, stating, 'The everyday, established and consolidated, remains a sole surviving common sense referent and point of reference.' (Lefebvre, 1987, 9, Lefebvre 2014)

Of course artists have long focused on the everyday as a subject, and a way of defining the essence of human life. For example William Carlos Williams famously rejected Eliot and Pound's move outside America, focusing instead on observation of everyday experience largely in the geographically contained world of New Jersey. As Christopher Burns has put it, Williams' 'line breaks and meter' were 'determined by the rhythms of raw speech. The subject of the poems would be everyday life.' (Burns, 2011, 12290)

A good example of this was his 1934 poem 'This is Just to Say', which described the eating of a plum and which conveyed the aesthetic and deeper meaning of this action.

This is Just to Say (1934)

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious

so sweet
and so cold ¹

Other poets including Frank O'Hara, also explored the everyday. His *Lunch Poems*, many of which were composed during his lunch break, were mostly spontaneous, conversational and presented observations of the everyday. Indeed the poems were published by Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Books, as part of their 'Pocket Poets' series, which encouraged portability, and reading in various locations. The summary on the back of the volume suggested that 'often this poet, strolling through the noisy splintered glare of the Manhattan noon, has paused at a sample Olivetti to type up thirty or forty lines of ruminations.' O'Hara was a jazz fan and included in the book was the juxtaposition of everyday experience and the death of Billie Holliday. 'The Day Lady Died' described walking through the city and ruminations on art, as he bought a burger, read poetry, walked to the liquor store, and then bought cigarettes and a *New York Post* 'with her face on it'. The tone of the poem changed at this point, and continued,

'and I'm swearing a lot now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing' (O'Hara 1964, 25-6)

Jazz also played an important role in Jack Kerouac's autobiographical writing. This often revisited stories, and drew on the everyday when presenting the aesthetic beauty of seemingly ordinary experience. Jazz played a central role in Kerouac's writing, with biographer Tom Clark recalling being told Bebop hit him 'with the enormity of a new world philosophy.' (Clark 1997, 71) Jazz influenced Kerouac and the beats more generally both culturally as well as stylistically, including Allen Ginsberg describing Kerouac's work as 'Spontaneous Bop Prosody.' (Kerouac 1992, 57-8, Nicosia 1994, 453-4)

Kerouac's love of jazz encouraged him to perform his poetry and prose live in a jazz setting. In Christmas 1957, after completing *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac planned a

three-week reading at Village Vanguard in New York. However at this time, following on from the success of *On the Road* and the public and media attention that accompanied it, Kerouac had been drinking heavily as well as using Benzedrine, and the engagement came to a halt after one week. Kerouac had friends in the jazz community, and Lee Konitz complimented him on his performances, however he was relieved when the shows came to an end. Kerouac went on to record three albums, starting with 'Poetry for the Beat Generation', which was recorded in 1958 and released in 1959.² (Clark 1997, 166-70) This included 'October in the Railroad Earth' which captured the essence of Kerouac's approach and style, and worked much better as spoken word with a jazz backing than on the page. It looked back to when he was holding down a job working on the railroad in San Francisco. The words are given extra meaning in a musical setting, and the rhythm of Kerouac's writing comes to the fore. The words had their own musicality, as this extract illustrates 'There was a little alley in San Francisco back of the Southern Pacific station at Third and Townsend in redbrick of drowsy lazy afternoons with everybody at work in offices in the air you feel the impending rush of their commuter frenzy as soon they'll be charging en masse from Market and Sansome buildings on foot and in buses and all well-dressed....'

'October in the Railroad Earth' is a remarkable work mixing nostalgia with elements of humour, a sense of wonder, but also sadness within everyday life, including reflecting on his troubled past. He describes how first a 'bum', then an MG sports car driven by 'an eccentric' fell into a construction hole: 'Saturday afternoon local to Hollister out of San Jose miles away across verdurous fields of prune and juice joy here's this British MG backed and legs up wheels up into a pit and bums and cops standing around right outside the coffee shop-.' It ends with Kerouac getting thrown out of a bar at the end, before trying to trying to get back in: 'out on the street I tried to rush back in but they had locked the door and were looking at me thru the forbidden glass in the door with faces like undersea-'³(Kerouac 1962, 154-7, Charters 1973, 154-7)

Kerouac's presentation of everyday experience was aesthetic and intrinsic to his view of his life and place as an artist in the post war US. Both Williams and Kerouac saw beauty and meaning in everyday life, but others saw it as more problematic. Other artists used the everyday, and music within this, as both a subject in itself, and a more

consistent site of discord and alienation. A good example of this was Ignatius Reilly the central character in John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, who visits the factory of the failing company Levy Pants. He ostensibly works in the office for this company, making signs and filing by putting all the paperwork in the bin. At war with what he sees as the corrupt values of the modern world, Reilly seeks to bring the mostly African American workforce into this struggle by organising a protest, but he needs them to listen which he sees as problematic due to music playing in the factory. 'In my innocence, I suspected that the obscene jazz issuing forth from loudspeakers on the walls of the factory was at the root of the apathy which I was witnessing among the workers. The psyche can be bombarded only so much by these rhythms before it begins to crumble and atrophy.' So he switches it off which 'led to a rather loud and defiantly boorish roar of protest from the collective workers.' So, he turns it back on 'Smiling broadly and waving amiably in an attempt to acknowledge my poor judgement and to win the worker's confidence'. Here we see music in an everyday context, playing a significant role, but creating a different response from the characters. (Kennedy Toole 1981, 102-10)

Another more recent novel illustrates a more general debate over what actually constitutes the ordinary or everyday. Greg Marnier, the hapless central character in Benjamin Markovits remarkable *You Don't Have to Live Like This* is discussing a documentary made by his pretentious on-off lover Astrid, who films large parts of her life, including having sex with Marnier, which has consequences later in the novel. Astrid is showing a documentary called 'A Conversation about Race', which lacks subtlety and irritates Marnier. He tells her 'I'm not interested in this kind of thing...It's banal. The only interesting thing is ordinary life. The rest is boring.' Astrid disagrees and tells him that the film is about 'ordinary' life for many. The novel, which concerns a middle class residential insurgency in run down parts of Detroit, ends with the ordinary life of the new community disrupted by racial conflict and the complications of the politics and financing of the new colonials. In truth Marnier's belief that he could focus on ordinary, everyday life, as well as his formulation of what this consisted of, was as much of an illusion as Astrid's art. (Markovits 2016, 256-7)

Other negative view of the everyday can be found in popular music, especially post punk, as has pointed out by Simon Reynolds in *Rip It Up*, his seminal history of the movement. Talking Heads frequently referred to everyday life, including the 1979 album *More Songs About Buildings and Food*, whilst as the following year's *Remain in Light* spawned the hit single 'Once in a Lifetime' which used a familiar trope of existential angst and irony, with David Byrne later suggesting he saw it as critiquing the way life just takes people along without them intervening or having any control. (Reynolds 2005, xiii-xxix, 129-49)

And you may ask yourself, 'How do I work this?'
And you may ask yourself 'Where is that large automobile?'
And you may tell yourself 'This is not my beautiful house'
And you may tell yourself 'This is not my beautiful wife'⁴

Another example from post punk were the Gang of Four, who once famously failed to appear on top of the pops because they wouldn't compromise on their lyrics. Their take on love, the staple of pop songs for generations, in their first ep release 'Love like anthrax' (1979) offered a more angry dismissal of this trope. (Reynolds 2005, 116-21)

Woke up this morning desperation a.m.
What I've been saying won't say them again
My head's not empty, it's full with my brain
The thoughts I'm thinking
Like piss down a drain

And I feel like a beetle on its back
And there's no way for me to get up
Love'll get you like a case of anthrax
And that's something I don't want to catch.⁵

Their 1991 album 'Mall' was characteristic of their critique of the consumerism and the alienation of everyday life. The chorus of 'Motel' suggested:

Now watch this! It's an adult movie
She's going down on him
Now hear this! The third caller will win
Tickets to go to the wall ⁶

Whereas the title track to 1995's *Shrinkwrapped* suggested the mind numbing impact of everyday life under late twentieth century capitalism.

I don't walk, I always take the car
Tune to talk show talk about the stars
I don't speak, I got nothing to say
I'm a Capricorn anyway

I don't act, I react
Live as if, then I will be
Shrinkwrapped
I'm Shrinkwrapped ⁷

The central character 'reacts' and has no personality, feeling as if they are wrapped in cellophane, in a frightening vision of everyday life.

Gang of Four emerged from the Leeds arts scene of the 1970s and were influenced by Situationists and various Marxist thinkers, including the Frankfurt School. In this sense, art drew directly on the intellectual criticism of contemporary life, and in the case of the Situationists, using art as protest. (Reynolds 2005, 110-15) The Frankfurt school and others, mainly although not exclusively, Marxist intellectuals often focused on alienating and corrupted nature of everyday life under capitalism encoded with commercialism, class and oppression. Lefebvre who we mentioned earlier, moved to focus on the everyday as he saw it as a locus for struggle when more obvious dimensions of the class struggle seemed to have declined. Lefebvre plotted how the everyday changed over time, and had become a dominant and important

factor. As he put it 'the everyday can therefore be defined as a set of functions which connect and join together systems that might appear to be distinct.' These became a 'platform upon which the bureaucratic society of controlled consumerism is erected. Within this he argued, leisure is 'generalised passivity' which was unequal as 'it weighs more heavily' on disadvantaged groups. Interestingly, he also noted that this included the collapse of structure including, 'tonality in music'. (Lefebvre 1987, 9-11)

More recently, neo-liberalism gave rise to thinkers, including Slavoj Žižek and Mark Fisher, who drew on Adorno, and offered a view of a degraded everyday life. For the latter this was captured within what Fisher called 'capitalist realism', which was a system based on Žižek and Jameson, including the idea of lost futures. He asked 'how long can a culture persist without the new?' where capitalist realism shapes 'desires, aspirations and hopes' and also sells culture that is seemingly anti-capitalist. (Fisher 2005, 3-15) The idea of nostalgia as a refuge from a more complicated present, noted by others including Reynolds, who described the way it permeated popular culture. He used the term 'Retromania' to describe this. (Reynolds 2011, see also Hatherley 2017; Garrido and Davidson 2019; Istvandity, Baker and Cantillon 2019)

Artists also picked up on this sense of cultural malaise in ordinary life under neo-liberalism, with Billy Bragg in 1986 describing the way English family life, and with it English identity, had become mired in the past, where 'nostalgia is the opium of the age'. The song continues, 'Our place in History is as/Clock watchers, old timers, window shoppers.'⁸ More recently Ben Folds referred to the circular way nostalgia can operate in contemporary society,

Kids today gettin' old too fast
They can't wait to grow up so they can kiss some ass
They get nostalgic about the last ten years
Before the last ten years have passed⁹

The suggestion of a shaped and controlled everyday experience present in the above sources, raises questions of agency, as well as questions of dissonance. Ronald Radano's work on Muzak is interesting in this regard. He argued that in many ways

Muzak and similar Mall and programmed music is the epitome of commodified music, designed to encourage the purchase and tying art to this end. Radano pointed out that Muzak was a 'sonic accompaniment, where people hear but don't listen', that is 'happy' but not seemingly any deeper. In other words it was 'non-reflective, non-intentional listening'. However, Radano suggested that we need to take 'into consideration 'real-life responses to Muzak', and that we need to think about the listener, rather than the critics. In this sense he suggests Muzak 'conveys more than it's immediate response', including past versions and meanings of famous songs. 'It becomes, in an everyday practical sense a public extension of personal, private, and domestic experience' In other words, Muzak can be seen as illustrating both reflective and non-reflective listening. Radano also pointed out that muzak actually shared some elements with avant Garde music. Part of the rejection of Muzak, he argued, was that it threatened 'artistic standards and authority' including notions of authenticity. (Radano 1989, 448-60)

Jonathan Sterne also looked at programmed music, focusing on music the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota. Sterne noted that in the early 1980s one in three Americans heard programmed music at some point every day, underlining the importance of this music. He saw mall music as not an accompaniment, but part of the structure of the mall, the architectonics. As he put it, 'Programmed music in a mall produces consumption because the music worked as an architectural element of a built space devoted to consumerism.' He was less interested in the issue of listening as such, than in the way Mall of America used programmed music. (Sterne 1997, 22-6) Whilst he accepted Lukacs concept of reification of experience and 'phantom objectivity' with regard to programmed music, he also pointed out areas of friction and division. Whilst the mall's ideal customer was white, adult and middle class, teenagers were actually the most regular users of the mall. This attracted the attention of security, and the placing of warning signs, and security targeted black teenagers in particular. This created 'alternative readings' of the mall and it's music, and an acknowledgement that music could alienate customers, with some taking an 'ironic distance' to music they didn't relate to. Sterne also pointed out that there were other factors that allowed actors to alter or challenge the sway of programmed music, with employees sometimes able to bring in their own playlists in certain shops, and also a

case where two adjacent shops played two different types of music as part of an argument. (Sterne 1997, 43-6)

Although there are differences between the approaches taken by Radano and Sterne, there is also an idea of space and agency. This was also underlined by Timothy Taylor who discussed how electronic music was included in adverts made by fans who worked in the advertising, meaning there is a 'porous' boundary between music used in advertising and listened to for pleasure. (Taylor 2007)

As we have seen, music is part of the everyday, as well as the subject of art. We have also seen how the everyday has been seen as site of oppression. However, Radano and others have contributed to a more nuanced view of the most commercial settings of everyday music, where there is space for individual agency and experience. However, Taylor's point about the porous nature of the boundaries between uses of music reflects the way music has and is rapidly changing in the C21. All that is solid is literally melting into the air, or so it seems. Frith has pointed out the ubiquity of music, but the spread of music on the internet, including streaming services, has increased the variety of sites where people interact with music in the everyday. More than ever people listen to music whilst travelling, cooking, working, sometimes using headphones in everyday contexts when walking or running, but with everyday sounds in the background. Reflective and non-reflective listening occurs in various settings. (Frith 2002, Wall 2013, ch.14, Jones and Bennett 2016, Eriksson 2019, Prey 2018, Wade 2015)

It may be that Walter Benjamin's ideas are relevant in this regard, particularly the concept of the loss of 'aura' in mechanised music. The aura of traditional art was encased with tradition, ritual and class, whereas modern music's embrace of technology presented a different situation. Stuart Jeffries recently suggested that 'The kind of art Benjamin prized...involved disruption, and estrangement', adding that 'absent mindedness was very nearly a virtue' for him. More specifically, he added that Benjamin might have seen jazz as representative of this, suggesting 'one could map his optimism about cinema's revolutionary potential onto jazz.' (Jeffries 2016, 184-5) Dissonance, technology, and crumbling barriers between the role of music in the everyday and more focused settings, would also seem to link to Deleuze and

Guattari, and the concept of the 'Rhizome' as a way of understanding music. (Barham 2009, Bogue 2000, Buchanan and Swiboda 2004, Hulse and Nesbitt 2010) The rhizome as a system like tree roots, was non-hierarchical, with new nodes and connections, plateaus, and de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation. Rather like a Jackson Pollock's 'drip' painting, there are no clear beginnings or endings. This may not be applicable as a broader view of history, but it may work with the everyday, including dissonances in music.

Whilst Deleuze was not a fan of jazz, he saw America, and American modernity, as important. As the authors put it, 'Everything important that has happened or is happening takes the route of the American rhizome: the beatniks, the underground, bands and gangs, successive lateral offshoots in immediate connection with an outside.' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 19) More specifically on music, they argued 'music has always sent out lines of flight, like so many "transformational multiplicities," even overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it; that is why musical form, right down to its ruptures and proliferations, is comparable to a weed, a rhizome.' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 12)

Conclusion

In different ways, Benjamin, and Deleuze and Guttari see a more fluid and less structured view of music, which we can incorporate the everyday. As Radano and others have suggested the distinction between everyday and more focused listening or reflective/non-reflective is less pervasive than we have thought. If we consider the critiques of hierarchies within music, and of notions of genre and authenticity, then dissonances also become more significant. Maybe in the sounds of everyday life we hear not only melodies but dissonance, rhythms of resistance, drum beats of commercialism and oppression, and dances of pleasure. The network of connections and interactions in music maybe more complex, but context matters and economic, social and cultural forces create these contexts. The question remains the extent of agency within these structures, and Lefebvre and other Marxist theorists remain relevant, as do the artists who present a critical picture of the everyday. Returning to William Carlos Williams and his plums, you need to be able to access and afford the

plums, even if the aesthetics of the plum's sweetness can be seen as something in its own right.

¹ William Carlos Williams, *This is Just to Say*
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56159/this-is-just-to-say> (visited 18 September 2019)

² Clark notes that Kerouac didn't rehearse before the recording sessions, and turned up with a suitcase of manuscripts and just extracted them when he when he wanted to read. Wine was drunk and on one occasion when an engineer told Kerouac it was 'a good first take', the latter replied 'It's the only take', pp.166-70.

³ Jack Kerouac, 'October in the Railroad Earth', was performed on *Poetry for the Beat Generation* (record, 1959) The other albums were *Blues and Haikus* (1959) and *readings of the Beat Generation*(1960). These were re-released with other audio recordings on *The Jack Kerouac Collection* (3 CD, Rhino Records, 1990) The text was reprinted with additional information as 'The Railroad Earth' in *Lonesome Traveller*.

⁴ Talking Heads, 'Once in a Lifetime', on *Remain in Light* (1980)

⁵ Gang of Four, 'Love Like Anthrax' on *Damaged Goods* ep (1979)

⁶ Gang of Four, 'Motel' from *Mall* (1991)

⁷ Gang of Four, *Shrinkwrapped* (1995)

⁸ Billy Bragg, 'The Homefront' from *Talking to the Taxman about Poetry* (1986)

⁹ Ben Folds, 'Bastard', on *Songs for the Silverman* (2005)

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