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The Utopian Blues

Hakim Bey

Why is the spirituality of the musician in “High” cultures so often a low-down spirituality?

In India, for example, the musician belongs to a caste so low it hovers on the verge of untouchability. This lowness relates, in popular attitudes, to the musician’s invariable use of forbidden intoxicants. After the “invasion” of Islam many musicians converted in order to escape the caste system. (The Dagar Brothers of Calcutta, famous for their performance of sacred Hindu music, explained proudly to me that their family had not converted in Mughal times – for worldly advantage – but only much later, and then as Shiites; this proved that their conversion was sincere.) In Ireland the musician shared the same Indo-European reputation for lowness. The bards or poets ranked with aristocrats and even royalty, but musicians were merely the servants of the bards. In Dumézil’s tripartite structure of Indo-European society, as reflected in Ireland, music seems to occupy an ambiguous fourth zone, symbolized by the fourth province of Munster, the “south”. Music is thus associated with “dark” druidism, sexual license, gluttony, nomadry and other outsider phenomena.

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Islam is popularly believed to “ban” music; obviously this is not the case, since so many Indian musicians converted. Islam expresses grave reservations about art in general because all art potentially involves us in multiplicity (extension in time and space) rather than in the unity (tawhid) by which Islam defines its entire spiritual project. The Prophet criticized worldly poetry; he criticized realism in art; and he relegated music to social occasions like marriages. (In Islamic societies the minstrels who supply such festal music are often Jews, or otherwise “outside” Islam.) In response to these critiques, Islamic culture developed “rectified” forms of art: – sufi poetry (which sublimates worldly pleasure as mystical ecstasy); non-representative art (falsely dismissed as “decorative” by western art-history); and sufi music, which utilizes multiplicity to return the listener to Unity, to induce “mystical states”. But this restitution of the arts has never entirely succeeded as an uplifting of the musician. In Tehran in the 1970’s, one of the more decadent sufi orders (Safi-Ali-Shahi) had enrolled the majority of professional musicians, and their sessions were devoted to opium smoking.

Other musicians were known as hearty drinkers or otherwise louche and bohemian types – the few exceptions were pious Sufis in other, more disciplined orders, such as the Nematollahiyya or Ahl-i Haqq. In the Levant, Turkish sufi music leaked out of the tekkes and into the taverns, mixed with Greek and other Mediterranean influences, and produced the wonderful genre of Rembetica, with its witty odes to whores, hashish, wine and cocaine.

In the rituals of Afro-American religions, such as Santeria, Voudoun, and Candomblé, the all-important drummers and musicians are often non-initiates, professionals hired by the congregation – this is no doubt a reflection of the quasi-nomadic “minstrel” status of musicians in the highly evolved pastoral-agricultural societies of West Africa.

Traditional Christianity places a high value on music but a low value on musicians. Some branches of Protestantism tried

The late George Huddleston, Organist, Christ Church, New Brunswick, NJ
Sasha Zill, soprano saxophone
“Listening with Watson”
Richard Watson (no relation), viola
Jean During, tar, sehtar
Dariush Safvat, Society for Preservation and Propagation of Classical Persian Music
The late Ustad Ilahi of the Ahl-i Haqq
“Barq-i sabz” (Radio Tehran)
The Dagar Brothers, dhrupad
Pandit Pran Nath, vocalist
James Irsay, piano
Tony Piccolo, piano
Martin Schwartz, Rembetica collector
Bill Laswell, basses
Claddagh Records, Dublin
Steven Taylor, guitar

derstood that utopia must make places for monomaniacs and specialists in ecstasy. Far from disappearing, only now can the “minstrels” (and the “bards”) make their re-appearance – as aspects of an integral and creative “personality” of the social. Because nothing can be commodified, the musician is at last free to “play”, and to be rewarded for play.

Under such conditions, what would become of the low-down spirituality of the musician? Utopia is a unity, not a uniformity – and it contains antinomies. Utopian desire never comes to an end, even – or especially! – in utopia. And music will always be the last veil (of 70,000 veils of light and darkness) that separates us from the “order of intimacy”. Music will never lose its holy unholiness; it will always contain the trace of the violence of sacrifice. How then could the “blues” ever come to an end – that orgone indigo utopian melancholy caress of sound, that little-bit-too-much, that difference? The low caste of the musician will of course be dissolved in utopia – but somehow a certain untouchability will linger, a certain dandyism, a pride. The one tragedy that this Harmonian Blues will never lament is the loss of the blues of itself, its appropriation, its alienation, its betrayal, its demonic possession. This is the “utopian minimum”, the money-back guarantee, the sine qua non – the music is ours. At this point a grand dialectical synthesis occurs – the unbroken order and the broken order are both “overcome” in the moment of the emergence of a new thing, the low-down utopian blues, the Passional Opera, Composition, the music of utopia dreaming about itself and waking to itself. In heaven itself the harpists will be drunk and disorderly. “And the Angels knock at tavern doors” (Hafez.).

Thanks to:

to exclude professional musicians altogether, but Lutheranism and Anglicanism made use of them. Church musicians used to be considered an ungodly class of beings, a perception that survives in the reputation for naughtiness of choristers, choir-masters and organists. Thomas Weelkes (1576 – 1623) represents the archetype: brilliant but erratic (praised justly by Ezra Pound for his wonderful arrhythmic settings of “cadenced prose”), Weelkes was fired from his job at Chichester Cathedral as a “notorious swearer and blasphemer” and drunk, who (according to oral tradition) broke the camel’s back by pissing over the organ-screen onto the Dean’s head.

Christianity and Afro-American spirituality combined to produce the “Spiritist” churches where music forms the structure of worship and the congregation attains “professional” artistry. The ambiguity of this relation is revealed in the powerful links between sacred “gospel” and worldly “blues”, the outcaste music of taverns, and “jazz”, the music of the bordello (the very word evokes pure sexuality). The musical forms are very close – the difference lies in the musician, who, as usual, hovers on the very edge of the clearing, the in-between space of the uncanny, and of shamanic intoxication.

In all these cases the music itself represents the highest spirituality of the culture. Music itself being “bodiless” and metalinguistic (or metasemantic) is always (metaphorically or actually) the supreme expression of pure imagination as vehicle for the spirit. The lowness of the musician is connected to the perceived danger of music, its ambiguity, its elusive quality, its manifestation as lowness as well as highness – as pleasure.

Music as pleasure is not connected to the mind (or purified elements of spirit) but to the body. Music rises from the (inarticulate) body and is received by the body (as vibration, as sexuality).

The logos itself must be given musical expression (in chant, e.g. Koran, plainsong, etc.) for precisely the same somatic rea-

son – the influence of body on spirit (through “soul” or psyche – imagination). Chant is music which sublimates the body.

Paradox: – that which is “holy” is “forbidden” (as in the Arabic word *haram* which means either holy or forbidden, depending on context). As Bataille points out, sanctity and transgression both arise from the fracturing of the “order of intimacy”, the separation of the “human” from “nature”. The “original” expression of this violent break is undoubtedly musical – as with the Mbutu Pygmies, who produce as a collectivity the music of the “Forest” as an expression of their closeness to (yet separatedness from) the wild(er)ness. Subsequent to this “first” expression, a further separation begins to appear: – the musician remains involved in the “violence” of the break with the intimate order in a special way, and so is seen as an uncanny person (like the witch, or the metallurgist). The musician emerges as a specialist within a still non-hierarchic society of hunter/gatherers, and the musician begins to take on the sign of the taboo to the extent that the tribe’s undivided culture or “collective self” is affronted by this separation or transformation. The undivided culture (like the Mbutu) knows no “musician” in this sense, but only music. As division, and then hierarchy, begin to appear in society, the position of the musician becomes problematic. Like “primitive” society, these hierarchic “traditional” societies also wish to preserve something unbroken at the heart of their culture. If society is “many”, culture will preserve a counter-balancing cohesiveness which is the sign of the original sacred order of intimacy, prolonged into the deepest spiritual meanings of the society, and thus preserved. So much for music – but what about the musician?

Hierarchic society permits itself to remain relatively undivided by sacralizing the specializations. Music, inasmuch as it is bodiless, can be the sign of the upper caste (its “spirituality”) – but inasmuch as music arises from the body (it is sublimed – it “rises”), the musician (originator/origin of the music) must be symbolized by the body and hence must be “low”. Music is

– an erotic relation. In Composition, “production melds with consumption ...in the development of the imaginary through the planing of personal gardens.” “Composition liberates time so that it can be lived, not stockpiled ... in commodities.” Because of the anarchic nature of Composition and the consequent danger of cacophony, “tolerance and autonomy” must be presupposed as conditions.

Attali also worries about “the impossibility of improvisation”, and the lack of musical ability in some persons; nevertheless, these objections are not absolutes – and besides, if we recall the model of Fourier’s Opera, we will note that non-musical talents count for as much as musical talents in Harmonial Association. “Composition thus leads to a staggering conception of history, a history that is open, unstable ... in which music effects a re-appropriation of time and space.” “It is also the only utopia that is not a mask for pessimism.”

Does the disappearance of the audience already necessitate and predict a stage “beyond” that of Composition and the Utopian Poetics – a stage of the disappearance of the musician? Not according to Fourier. The Passion for music is precisely not the Passion for, say, horticulture – although many Harmonians will be masters of both. But obviously the Opera will still have its “stars”, even if these luminaries will also be adept at dozens of other arts and skills. Moreover, thanks to the liberation of all Passions to follow their Attractions “talent” will increase by stupendous degrees, such that (for instance) “the globe will contain thirty-seven millions of poets equal to Homer” (Theory of the Four Movements, p. 81) – and untold millions of “stars”.

In effect however every Harmonian is a star at something; and the opera is only one possible combination or constellation. Thus “the musician” may disappear as a professional, as a separate category or fetish, as a focus of separation – only to re-appear as a kind of shamanic function. Even Fourier, who expected everyone to master at least 12 different metiers, un-

luxury – a form of “excess” (as Bataille put it). It is the generosity of the social to itself – like a festival, only more formal, celebration as ritual rather than as orgy. (Of course the orgy is the other great organizing principle of phalansterian life!) The opera in this sense includes us. From our point of view we can now say that the music is ours – not someone else’s – not the musician’s, not the record company’s, not the radio station’s, not the shopkeeper’s, not the MUZAK company’s not the devil’s – but ours. In *Noise: the Political Economy of Music* (1977), Jacques Attali proposes that this “stage” in music’s possible future be called the stage of “Composition” – “a noise of Festival and Freedom”, as “essential element in a strategy for the emergence of a truly new society”. Composition calls for “the destruction of all simulacra in accumulation” – i.e., it avoids representation and commodification, and mechanical reproduction as “the silence of repetition”. “The emergence of the free act, self-transcendence, pleasure in being instead of having” is (violently) opposed to alienation, by which the “musician lost possession of music”. In Composition, “to listen to music is to re-write it, ‘to put music into operation, to draw it toward an unknown praxis’ (Barthes).” Attali warns that “blasphemy is not a plan, any more than noise is a code. Representation and repetition, heralds of lack, are always able to recuperate the energy of the liberatory festival.” True composition demands “a truly different system of organization ... outside of meaning, usage, and exchange”, i.e. marked in part by “the Return of the Jongleurs”, by “a reappearance of very ancient forms of production”, as well as by the invention of new instruments and recycled technologies (as in Dub). Music is separated from Work, and becomes a form of “idleness”. “The field of the commodity has been shattered.” “Participation in collective play,” and “immediate communication”, aim to “locate liberation not in a faraway future ... but in the present, in production and in one’s own enjoyment.” In this sense, then, “music emerges as a relation to the body and as transcendence”:

spiritual – the musician is corporeal. The spirituality of the musician is low but also ambiguous in its production of highness. (Drugs substitute for the priest’s ritual highness to make the musician high enough to produce aesthetic highness.) The musician is not just low but uncanny – not just low but “outside”. The power of the musician in society is like the power of the magician – the excluded shaman – in its relation to wildness. And yet it is precisely these hierarchic societies which create “seamless” cultures – including music. This is true even after the break – in the western tradition – between the “oneness” of melody and the “doubleness” of harmony. And note the reciprocal relation between high and low music – the various Masses on the “Western Wynde”, set to a popular tune; the influence of melismatics on the madrigal; the pop influences on Rumi and other Sufis. The ambiguity of music allows it to drift between high and low and yet remain undivided. This is “tradition”. It includes the subversive by excluding the musician (and the artist generally) and yet granting them power.

Thus for example the lowly musician Tansen attained the equivalent of aristocratic status in the art-intoxicated Mughal court; and Zeami (the great dramatist of the Noh theater of Japan, a form of opera), although he belonged to the untouchable caste of actors and musicians, rose to great heights of refinement because the Shogun fell in love with him when he was 13; to the Court’s horror, the Shogun shared food with Zeami and granted courtly status to the Noh. For the musician the power of inspiration can be transmuted into the power of power. Consider for example the Turkish Janisseries, the Ottoman Imperial Guard, who all belonged to the heterodox (wine-drinking) Bektashi Sufi Order, and who invented military marching bands. Judging by European accounts of Janiserry bands, which always speak of the sheer terror they induced, these musicians discovered a kind of psychological warfare which certainly bestowed prestige on this very ambiguous group, made up of slaves of the Sultan.

Traditional music always remains satisfactory (even when not “inspired”) because it remains unbroken – both the high tradition and the low are the same “thing”. Indian brass bands – Mozart – the same universe. In Mozart’s own character (reflected in his “servant” characters like Leparello) we again discern the figure of the outsider, the gypsy-wunderkind, the toy of aristocrats, with a strong link to the low culture of beer-gardens and peasant clog-dances, and a fondness for bohemian excess. The musician is a kind of “grotesque” – disobedient servant, drunk, nomadic, brilliant. For the musician the perfect moment is that of the festival, the world turned upside down, the saturnalia, when servants and masters change places for a day. The festival is nothing without the musician, who presides over the momentary reversal – and thus the reconciliation – of all separated functions and forces in traditional society. Music is the perfect sign of the festal, and thereby of the “material bodily principle” celebrated by Bakhtin. In the intoxication of conviviality in the carnival, music emerges as a kind of utopian structure or shaping force – music becomes the very “order of intimacy”.

Next morning, however, the broken order resumes its sway. Dialectics alone (if not “History”) demonstrate that undivided culture is not an unmixed “good”, in that it rests on a divided society. Where hierarchy has not appeared there is no music separate from the rest of experience. Once music becomes a category (along with the categorization of society), it has already begun to be alienated – hence the appearance of the specialist, the musician, and the taboo on the musician. Since it is impossible to tell whether the musician is sacred or profane (this being the perceived nature of the social split) this taboo serves to fill up the crack (and preserve the “unbrokenness” of tradition) by considering the musician as both sacred and profane. In effect the hierarchical society metes out punishments to all castes/classes for their shared guilt in the violation of the order of intimacy. Priests and kings are surrounded by taboos – chastity, or

the purpose of the hieroglyphs, this is their “moral effect”. (I’m putting the word in quotes because Fourier hated moralism as much as Nietzsche. Perhaps “spiritual” might be a better term.) This “harmonial association” in the production and experience of the Opera is (for Fourier) a model of the very structure of the utopian community. The phalanx will be spontaneously what the opera is by art. In effect Fourier has rediscovered the primal ritual, the dance/music/story/mask/sacrifice which is the tribe in the form of art, the tribe’s co-creation of itself in the aesthetic imagination. Fourier had healed the rift (in his writings, at least – in his imagination) – but not by a return to some paradisaical perfection of the past. In fact, for Fourier himself, Harmony was not even a state of futurity so much as one of potential presence. He believed that if one group (of exactly 1620 people) were to construct a single phalanstery and begin to live by Passional attraction, the whole world would be converted within two years. Unlike More, Bacon, Campanella and other utopians, Fourier’s plans were not meant as ironies nor as critiques nor as science fiction, but as blueprints (for non-violent) and immediate revolution. In this sense he resembles his (hated) contemporaries Owen and St. Simon – but unlike them he was not interested in the regulation of desire but in its total liberation – and in this he more greatly resembles Blake – or (as Fourier’s followers liked to claim) Beethoven, than any of the socialists, whether “utopian” or “scientific”.

The disappearance of the audience in Fourier’s opera reminds us of nothing so much as the Situationalist program for the “Suppression and Realization of Art.” Harmonian opera suppresses itself as a separate category of artistic production, with all the consequent commodification and consumption, only to realize itself precisely as “everyday life.” But it is an everyday life transformed and systematically informed by the “marvelous” (as the Surrealists put it). It is a communal and individual desiring machine. It is the field of pleasure. It is a

– perhaps not the “universal language”, but only because it is in fact not a language at all, unless perhaps a “language of the birds”. The “universal” appeal of music lies in its direct link to utopian emotion, or desire, and beyond that to the utopian imagination. By its interpenetration of time and pleasure, music expresses and evokes a “perfect” time (purged of boredom and fear) and “perfect” pleasure (purged of all regret). Music is bodiless, yet it is from the body and it is for the body – and this too makes it utopian in nature. For utopia is “no place”, and yet utopia concerns the body above all.

As an example (not as a model), we might return to Fourier’s concept of the opera as it “will be” practiced in utopia, or the societal stage of Harmony as he called it. As a “complete art-work” the opera will involve music and words, dance, painting, poetry – in a system based on “analogies” or occult correspondences between the senses and their objects. For instance, the 12 tones in music correspond to the 12 Passions (desires or emotions), the 12 colors, and the 12 basic Series of the Phalanx or utopian community, etc. By orchestrating these correspondences, Harmonian operas will far exceed the paltry music-dramas of Civilization in beauty, luxury, inspiration, not to mention sheer scope. They will utilize the hieroglyphic science of Harmonian art to provide education, propaganda, entertainment, artistic transcendence, and erotic fulfillment – all at once. Sound, sight, intellect, all the senses will respond to the complex multi-dimensional emblems of the opera, made up of words and music, reason and emotion, and perhaps even touch and smell. These emblems will create a direct “moral” effect in audience and actors alike (somewhat as Brecht envisioned for “Epic Theater”) – and in fact, the tendency in Harmony will be for the audience to disappear, to become part of the Opera (at least potentially) so that the separation between “artist” and “audience” – the proscenium, so to speak – will be broken down, permeated, eventually erased. All Harmonians will be touched with genius in the Opera – this is

the sacrifice of the (vegetal) king, etc. The artist’s punishment is to be a kind of outcaste paradoxically attached to the highest functions in society. [Note that the poet is not an “artist” in this sense and can retain caste because poetry is logos, akin to revelation. Poetry pertains to the “aristocratic” in traditional societies (e.g. Ireland). Interestingly the modern world has reversed this polarity in terms of money, so that the “low-caste” painter and musician are now wealthy and thus “higher” than the unrewarded poet.]

The “injustice” of the categorization of music is its separation from “the tribe”, the whole people, including each and every individual. For inasmuch as the musician is excluded, music is excluded, inaccessible. But this injustice does not become apparent until the separations and alienations within society itself become so exacerbated and exaggerated that a split is perceived in culture. High and low are now out of touch – no reciprocity. The aristos never hear the music of the folk, and vice versa. Reciprocity of high and low traditions ceases – and thus cross-fertilization and cultural renewal within the “unbroken” tradition. In the western world this exacerbation of separation occurs roughly with industrialization and commodity capitalism – but it has “pre-echoes” in the cultural sphere. Bach adapted a “rational” mathematical form of well-temperedness over the older more “organic” systems of tuning. In a subtle sense a break has occurred within the unbroken tradition – others will follow. Powerful “inspiration” is released by this “break with tradition”, titanic genius, touched to some extent with morbidity.

For the “first time” so to speak the question arises: – whether one says yes or no to life itself. Bach’s anguished spirituality (the “paranoia” of the Pietist gambling on Faith alone) was sometimes resolved with a “romantic” effusion of darkness. These impulses are “revolutionary” in respect to a tradition which suffers almost-unbearable contradictions. Their very nay-saying opens up the possibility of a whole new

“yes”. Despite its tremendous inner tension, Bach’s music is “healing” because he had to heal himself in order to create it in the first place. Healing – but not un-wounded. Bach as wounded healer.

It’s not surprising that people preferred Telemann. Telemann was also a genius – as in his “Water Music” – but his genius remained at home within the unbroken tradition. If Bach is the first modern, he is the last ancient. If Bach is healing, Telemann is healed, already whole. His yes is the unspoken yes of sacred custom – naturally, of course, one has never thought otherwise. Telemann is still – supremely – our servant. This kind of “health” is exemplified in only a few composers after Telemann – Mendelsohn, for instance. One might call it “Pindaric”, and one might defend it even against “intelligence”.

The bohemian life of the modern artist, so “alienated from society”, is nothing but the old low-down spirituality of the musician and artisan castes, recontextualized in an economy of commodities. Baudelaire (as Benjamin argued) had no economic function in the 19th century society – his low-down spirituality turned inward and became self-destructive, because it had lost its functionality in the social. Villon was just as much a bohemian, but at least he still had a role in the economy – as a thief! The artist’s privilege – to be drunk, to be insouciant – has now become the artist’s curse. The artist is no longer a servant – refuses to serve – except as unacknowledged legislator. As revolutionary. The artist now claims, like Beethoven, either a vanguard position, or – like Baudelaire – complete exile. The musician no longer accepts low caste, but must be either Brahmin or untouchable.

Wagner – and Nietzsche, when he was propagandizing for Wagner – conceived of a musical revolution against the broken order in the cause of a new and higher (conscious) form of the order of intimacy: – integral Dionysian culture viewed as the revolutionary goal of romanticism. The outsider as king.

... So we admit it – there is a problem. All is not necessarily for the best in the world of too-Late Capitalism – Music reminds us of one of those cinematic-vampire-victims, already so drained of life as to be almost one of the Undead – shall we abandon her?

Does any “solution” exist to this problem, any cure which is not a form of reaction, of bombing ourselves back into some ideal past? Is it even valid to base our critique on the assumption that music was or will be “better” at some point in time? Is “degeneration” any better a model than “progress”?

In the first place, is “music itself” in question here, or should we be focused instead on the production of music, and on the social structure which informs that production? In other words, perhaps music (short of sheer kitsch) should be considered “innocent”, at least by comparison with the constellation of alienation and betrayal and monopolization sometimes called the Industry – the musical arm of the Spectacle, as it were. By comparison, Music is the victim, not the cause of the “problem”. And what about musicians? Are they part of the Industry, or are they too (like their Muse) mere victims? Part of the problem, or part of the solution? Or is the whole concept of “blame” here no more than the ideology of a subtler Reaction – an incipient Puritanism – another false totality?

If we want to escape any vicious circles of retributive resentment (or musical revanchism) we need a wholly different approach – and if our approach (our strategy) is not to be based on “History” – either of music itself or of production – then perhaps it must be rooted instead in a utopian poetics. In this sense, we should not adopt any one utopian system as a model – which would mire us in nostalgia for some lost future – but rather take the idea of utopia itself, or even the emotion of utopia, for a starting point. Music, after all, addresses the emotions more immediately than other arts, filtered as they are through logos or image. (This explains in part why Islam distrusts music.) Music is the most border-permeating of all arts

creating the airport music of its own future, mourning the “sell-outs”, wondering what went wrong.

Western classical music has become the sign of bourgeois power – but it is an empty sign inasmuch as its period of primary production is over. There are no more symphonies to be written in C major. Serialism, 12-tone, and all the 20th century avant-garde carried out a revolution but failed to inflame anyone except a small elite, and certainly failed to deconstruct the Canon. In fact, the very failure of this “Modern” music is somewhat endearing, since it permitted the music to retain some of the innocent fervor of insurrectionary desire, untainted by “success” – Harry Panch for example. But I still remember with horror a scene I once observed in Shiraz (Iran), where the Festival of Arts had invited K. Stockhausen to present his music to “the people” of the city rather than solely to the Tehran aristocrat’s and international kulturvultures of the Festival audience. What an embarrassment! And the revolution which swept through town a few years later owed nothing to such “generosity” – except hatred of “decadent” Western music – which it banned. As for “Mozart” (to pick an archetype), how can he be “saved” from the Industry and the Institutions, from CDs and radio, from Lincoln Center and Kennedy Center, from Hollywood and MUZAK? I recall a passage from a Carson McCullers story, in which a poor little girl listens entranced, for the first time, to a 78 of Mozart, through the screen door of a wealthy neighbor – a quintessentially utopian moment. Even the technology of alienation can be “magical” – but only inadvertently, serendipitously, by distortion. A distant radio on a lonely night in a tropical town in Java, say, playing some endless Ramayana-drama till dawn – or for that matter ... choose your own favorite (perhaps erotic) moment of memory, marked by some overheard fragment of music. (You’d just better hope that LITE-FM never finds out which fragment, because they’ll turn it into nostalgia and use it to sell your own desire back to you, and taint your sweet memory forever with hucksterish greed.)

Opera is the utopia of music (as Charles Fourier also realized). In opera music appropriates the logos and thus challenges revolution’s monopoly on meaning.

If opera failed as revolution – as Nietzsche came to realize – it was because the audience had refused to go away. The opera of Wagner or Fourier can only succeed as the social if it becomes the social – by eliminating the category of art, of music, as anything separate from life. The audience must become the opera. Instead – the opera became ... just another commodity. A public ritual celebrating post-sacred social values of consumption and sentiment – the sacralization of the secular. A step along the road to the spectacle.

The commodification of music measures precisely the failure of the romantic revolution of music – its mummification in the repertoire, the Canon – the recuperation of its dissidence as the rhetoric of liberalism, “culture and taste”. Wave after wave of the “avant-garde” attempted to transcend civilization – a process which is only now coming to an end in the apotheosis of commodification, its “final ecstasy.”

As Bloch and Benjamin maintained, all art which escapes the category of mere kitsch contains what may be called the utopian trace – and this is certainly true of music (and even “more” true, given music’s metase-mantic immediacy). Finally it is this trace which must serve to counter the otherwise-incisive arguments against music made by J. Zerzan in “The Tonality and the Totality” – i.e. that all alienated forms of music serve ultimately as control. To argue that music itself, like language, is a form of alienation, however, would seem to demand an “impossible” return to a Paleolithic that is nearly pre-“human”. But perhaps the stone Age is not somewhere else, distant and nearly inaccessible, but rather (in some sense) present. Perhaps we shall experience not a return to the Stone Age, but a return of the Stone Age (symbolized, in fact, by the very discovery of the Paleolithic, which occurred only recently). A few decades ago civilized ears literally could not hear “primitive” music ex-

cept as noise; Europeans could not even hear the non-harmonic traditional classical music of India or China except as meaningless rubbish. The same held true for Paleolithic art, for instance – no one noticed the cave paintings till the late 19th century, even though they'd been “discovered” many times already. Civilization was defined by rational consciousness, rationality was defined as civilized consciousness – outside this totality only chaos and sheer unintelligibility could exist. But now things have changed – suddenly, just as the “primitive” and the “traditional” seem on the verge of disappearance, we can hear them. How? Why?

If the utopian trace in all music can now be heard, it can only be because the “broken order” is now somehow coming to an end. The long Babylonian con is finally wearing thin to the point of translucency, if not transparency. The reign of the commodity is threatened by a mass arousal from the mediocrity of inattention. A taste for the authentic appears, suffers a million tricks and co-optations, a million empty promises – but it refuses to evaporate. Instead it condenses – it even coagulates. Neo-shamanic modes of awareness occupy lost or fractal unfoldings of the map of consensus and control. Psychedelics and oriental mysticism sharpen ears, masses of ears, to a taste for the unbroken, the order of intimacy, and its festal embodiment.

Is there actually a problem with the commodification of music? Why should we assume an “elitist” position now, even as new technology makes possible a “mass” participation in music through the virtual infinity of choice, and the “electric democracy” of musical synthesis? Why complain about the degradation of the aura of the “work of art” in the age of mechanical reproduction, as if art could or should still be defended as a category of high value?

But it's not “Western Civilization” we're defending here, and it's not the sanctity of aesthetic production either. We maintain that participation in the commodity can only amount to a com-

modification of participation, a simulation of aesthetic democracy. A higher synthesis of the Old Con, promising “The Real Thing now” but delivering only another betrayal of hope. The problem of music remains the same problem – that of alienation, of the separation of consumers from producers. Despite positive possibilities brought into being by the sheer multiplication of resources made accessible through reproduction technology, the overwhelming complex of alienation outweighs all subversive counterforces working for utopian ends. The discovery of “3rd world” music (i.e. primitive and traditional) leads to appropriation and dilution rather than to cross-cultural synergy and mutual enrichment. The proliferation of cheap music-synthesis tech at first opens up new and genuinely folkish/democratic possibilities, like Dub and Rap; but the “Industry” knows very well how to fetishize and alienate these insurrectionary energies: – use them to sell junkfood and shoes!

As we reach out to touch music it recedes from our grasp like a mirage. Everywhere, in every restaurant, shop, public space, we undergo the “noise pollution” of music – its very ubiquity measures our impotence, our lack of participation, of “choice”.

And what music! A venal and venial counterfeit of all the “revolutionary” music of the past, the throbbing sexualized music that once sounded like the death knell of Western Civilization, now becomes the sonic wallpaper hiding a facade of cracks, rifts, absences, fears, the anodyne for despair and anomie – elevator music, waiting room music, pulsing to the 4/4 beat, the old “square” rhythm of European rationalism, flavored with a homeopathic tinge of African heat or Asian spirituality – the utopian trace – memories of youth betrayed and transformed into the aural equivalent of Prozac and Colt 45. And still each new generation of youth claims this “revolution” as its own, adding or subtracting a note or beat here or there, pushing the “transgressive” envelope a bit further, and calling it “new music” – and each generation in turn becomes simply a statistical mass of consumers busily