Musical Message: Singing Our Way to the Next Culture Change

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Note:
Worldwatch Institute focused on culture change for the theme of its new book State of the World 2010. The following was originally written at the request of Worldwatch for the book. This report was ultimately rejected as "too historical and U.S. based." Worldwatch did thank me in the beginning of their book, and kindly mentioned my old band The Depavers. (The songs attributed to us in the book are not ours, although "It's Up to Us" is by my daughter Spring who had been in the band. To listen to it and Depavers tunes, go to Depavers.) - JL

A lot of people's favorite songs are about peace, justice, and defending nature.
"Imagine," by John Lennon, "If I Had A Hammer," written by Pete Seeger, and Joni Mitchell's "pave paradise" song come to mind. Increasingly, few of these kinds of songs get major exposure in the corporate-consolidated media, such that the genre of socially conscious music seems to have been reduced to a narrow niche. One could conclude it is of little consequence -- or is this so just on the surface?

The 1960s fervor for social change and its soundtrack -- as with the early work of fiery Bob Dylan -- passed, but activist music never stopped. And there are additional variations, such as for crucial matters of hygiene: Feliciano dos Santos of Mozambique won the 2008 Goldman prize in part for popularizing in a song the need to wash one's hands. [1]

While one cannot identify a wonderful mass musical trend helping to make the world a better place, the tenacious existence and regeneration of peace songs, eco–songs, and the like can serve to launch a resurgence any time soon –- coming to a coffee house or listener–supported radio station near you. Grassroots activist music is liberally scattered around almost everywhere, and no one can keep track of all of it or know how much of it is being played. The aficionado can successfully seek activist music out on the streets or in subway stations, or just do it oneself. Or keep reading this report, and, as the singers and songwriters urge, take action.

The genre does have a foothold in the mainstream: Roots is the popular hip–hop (or rap) group with the best known social conscious standing of all such bands. With its regular late–night U.S. network television house–band exposure, Roots' message can reach millions, if the group pushes it.

If one is an activist and gets out and about, certain artists on the circuit will be encountered. At many a rally and on tour frequently is David Rovics. Combining humor with ballads about protesters, he sings such tunes as "The Flag Is Just a Rag" and "Boxcar Betty." From across the Atlantic to Seattle for the WTO meeting's shutdown, one of the more exciting performances at a tavern was the British group Seize the Day. In Britain, Billy Bragg is the top musician agitating for justice over the long haul.

Mobilizing People with Music

What do these artists and others concentrating on different issues have to do with tomorrow and the need for a more sustainable culture? Each one believes in it, but they go about it in diverse ways. No matter what the cause, there are three major roles for music–with–a–message:

- To tell stories for entertainment while providing a moral messages as well (Cows with guns; Big Yellow Taxi – Pave Paradise)

• To educate (Feliciano dos Santos (the hand-washing songster); children's educational songs; birth control ditties such as The Pill)

• To mobilize. Songs are then tools for building social movements and political change, e.g., civil rights songs, workers' rights ("Joe Hill" sung at Woodstock in 1969), etc.

An example of "mobilization music" is what was attempted with the United Nations climate meeting in Copenhagen climate in December 2009. Given that efforts at governmental reform and saving the climate have failed, music could play a surprising part.

Zero Carbon Caravan, whose main message for the Copenhagen meeting was the mobile means of activists' arrival — by sailboat and bicycle, using no carbon–emitting engines –- also used music as an organizing and fundraising tool. The Caravan relied not only on music for the travel experience and rallying in Copenhagen, but got music industry support in return. [2]

The Primal Place that Music and Lyrics Enjoy

Homo sapiens is the only animal that makes music or has rhythm. Therefore, music must be a key feature of our species, and integral to our very survival if we consider language and tool making as so integral by virtue of their uniqueness to humans. It has been observed that some pets like music and that plants can benefit from it, so we might go so far as to say music is good for the planet beyond human appreciation.

For those who are open to particular songs, a communication of feelings and ideas through the heart is achieved — sometimes on a mass level. Any idea can become more powerful through a song than though mere speech or publishing.

No wonder that music and lyrics that express dissatisfaction with the dominant order of society are sometimes suppressed or banned, just as plays, books and films can be. However, a melodic, short song with rhyming lyrics cannot be easily kept out of the ears of people. Folk songs stir emotions, often for freedom and equality. Other songs might be revolutionary or somehow are identified with opposition to the rulers, even if the lyrics are not explicitly political. The question for the activist–minded is, how can such songs get exposure? Others have wondered how can such songs be kept away from people.

Radical music accidentally proliferated on a mass scale in the 1960s when the phenomenon of FM radio and changing popular music trends spread into the mass and commercial culture. The results were legendary, with lasting effects on the listeners who often became practitioners of the same songs. Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Peter Paul and Mary, and song–writing by Pete Seeger swept the U.S. and beyond. This generated British musical artists to do the same, with lasting effect also: Jimi Hendrix Experience, The Kinks, Beatles (through John Lennon starting in 1970), and, through their rebellious, experimental style, such groups as the Rolling Stones. Meanwhile American groups such as Jefferson Airplane ("up against the wall"), The Doors ("what have they done to the Earth?"), Country Joe and The Fish (Fixin' to Die Rag), and MC5 (American Ruse) started producing seriously anti–war and anti–establishment songs.

A youth culture, later dubbed the Counterculture by T. Roszak, was building -- decidedly anti–war, anti–authority, and pro–liberation of the mind and body. Psychedelic and psychoactive drugs played a role in stimulating rebellion against institutions, much through song. It has been said that the Vietnam War draft was a main reason the movement existed, but this does not explain how a youth movement combined with labor unions shut down France in 1968 and nearly

overthrew the government. Thus, for activist music to have a resurgence, we need not see a draft. [3]

To thwart this movement in the U.S., COINTELPRO and other secret government programs subverted liberation movements along with the peace movement. John Lennon was targeted by the Nixon regime for deportation only because his influence was feared. These kinds of efforts did not stop the musical influence on social change. Across the global youth movement, music for peace, sex and drugs spread like wildfire. While it did not result in a sustainable culture as yet, there is a thread that continues today. [4]

The term “rock ‘n roll” was a Negro (later Black) term for the sex act. Rock ‘n roll was Black music that broke through to white culture when whites played the Blacks’ songs in the same style. Folk music (as done by Woody Guthrie, an anti–fascist activist) was another blending agent for the 1960s phenomenon of social cataclysm.

Eco–music had to be born because the '60s groups faded quickly, or more accurately the social climate changed or was manipulated. In 1970 the first two environmental hit songs, remaining top examples of the genre to this day, aired frequently: Joni Mitchell’s “Big Yellow Taxi” (Pave paradise), and Nature’s Way by Spirit. The public loved these songs but the corporate music establishment, if not “conservative”–leaning, was looking for repeats of sure–fire, innocent love songs. Radio stations’ play lists became more “hit” oriented with fewer album cuts aired, which limited that which could become a hit. Hits were often decided in advance, and payola played a part. [5]

Activist or radical music and the experimental trend did not really stop after 1970, but visibility was reduced. Young people did not tire of sex, peace and drugs. Even though the Indochina War kept on, radical music became less accessible because the corporate owners of radio stations and record labels began to crack down on impassioned messages for social change. The words “peace” and “war” were often in lyrics from 1965 through 1970, but after this these concepts were heard less and less. Mind–bending drug references, in songs by the successful group The Byrds (and many others), were also discouraged. The spirit or message was not merely about getting high, but about transcendence which can lead to social change. Biting social criticism was a major part of the appeal of Frank Zappa and his band the Mothers. If it were not for their avant garde musical strides, Zappa and the band would have been part of the disappearance of rebellious music after 1970.

Bob Marley was the protest–singing prime exponent of the unique genre of reggae. Rastafarianism was combined with Marley’s radical lyrics and love songs. The other act maintaining a radical stance was Pink Floyd which began to inject radical lyrics in 1975 with “Wish You Were Here.” The Floyd continued with a vengeance in 1977 with all the songs being political and rebellious on Animals. Aside from the somewhat marginalized Punk rock scene, Animals might have been the only radical album in the mid–to–late ‘70s for the mass market excepting the less mainstream Bob Marley records. Both acts’ 1970s work are still radicalizing listeners today.

A coincidental and seemingly unrelated spate of deaths of major artists occurred in 1970 and 1971: Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison died suddenly. When the murder of John Lennon happened in 1980, with suspicious clues pointing toward assassination, one reason suggested was his finally returning to recording on the eve of the Reagan–Bush regime. Reggae star Bob Marley, who was along with Fidel Castro the top leaders of the non–aligned world in the 1970s, is thought by many to have been assassinated. Some investigative journalists looked at the deaths of those aforementioned leaders in rock music saw patterns suggesting that outside forces had much to do with the deaths previously written off as mere drug overdoses or other accidents. The upshot of such a campaign, if it existed, was that another John Lennon figure as activist would be discouraged when artists do not want to be murdered. [6]

A fine artist for the peace and environmental movement was Kate Wolf, who died from leukemia in 1986 at age 44. Her

career began at age 30 when she was a married mother, but she chucked the conventional path and lived for the music and the message. Her songs against nuclear annihilation (The Sun is Burning) and for a native-American kind of Earth defense (Brother Warrior) were more or less incidental to her main output of personal, intense love songs.

The 1990s' Re-Emergence of Message-Music

In the 1990s it was clear that movements for social change were gaining momentum, or trying very hard to do so. The environmental movement was gathering steam. But these movements were separate across movements and within movements, rather than comprising one movement as it was in the 1960s.

Even more glaringly absent than unity and mass appeal was the lack of radical music being exposed to the mainstream. By the time the 2003 invasion of Iraq occurred, media-conglomerate consolidation, enabled especially by Bill Clinton as President and the corporate-bought Congress, was a major limiting factor in musical/lyrical content. The Clear Channel, a friend to the Bush administration, banned any song that included the words "peace" and "war." Harmless love songs, and more car commercials than ever, filled the airways. Local DJs were more and more rare, as programmed music via satellite seemed to satisfy most listeners. [7]

Earth First! was born in the mid 1980s after some friends in the environmental movement read Edward Abbey's The Monkeywrench Gang. For the "meetings" -- campfire gatherings and action camps, participants used "forest names" to hinder government informants. It was and remains a nonviolent movement, but trespassing and the occasional tree-spiking had the authorities and timber companies nervous. To lighten the mood for activists risking arrest, there had to be inspirational music. Dana Lyons soon became a favorite, with such songs as "The Tree."

Darryl Cherney and Judi Bari, with guitar and fiddle, respectively, sang songs at many an Earth First! campfire and rally that were even more explicit than those of Lyons. Other Earth Frist! musicians of the early days included Alice DiMicele and Robert Hoyt.

In the early 1990s these artists were joined most significantly by Casey Neil, famous for "Dancin' on the Ruins of Multinational Corporations," an exuberant sing–a–long that became popular among anti-globalization activists around the world. One of his earlier songs, the a cappella "Open Your Eyes," was performed by one of the '90s up-and-coming eco-musicians, Spring, at the 2004 Power to the Peaceful concert at San Francisco's Golden Gate Park before 40,000 fans.

Other musicians who came along in the early to mid–1990s -- still on the scene -- included David Rovics, Joanne Rand, Jim Page (who had started in the '80s), and Danny Dolinger. In the larger market was John Trudell and his radical poetry set to blues rock and American Indian chanting and drumming. He was aided in the studio by Jackson Browne and Kris Kristofferson, two of the very few activist-oriented artists known to the mainstream. (They were both concerned about nuclear weapons and U.S. imperialism in Central America, but not so much n their actual lyrics.)

The Depavers out of Humboldt County had "Have a Global Warming Day" aired on NPR and CNN–International in 1997. Spring, sometimes with the Depavers, helped publish a songbook of radical campfire favorites, "Hootenany," containing over 250 songs with DIY illustrations. The DIY movement -- do it yourself -- covers not only Earth First!ers but urban squatters, Food Not Bombs activists, and anti–globalization activists often fond of wearing black. Some of the latter activists' music tends to be electrified punk rock rather than acoustic nature music. But much Punk rock, which can also be acoustic, is quite radical -- stemming from its roots as an underground, rebellious tool for beginning musicians who would vent their rage. [8]

For the purpose of attaining a broader ecological culture, what may have to develop is not more eco-music but songs for an overall movement -- as in the 1960s, so that music for the defense of nature is not some separate, fringe phenomenon. Besides, ecological justice is one and the same as social justice.

Eco–music, nevertheless, was and is a solid genre. It's hard to say how much nature was saved by mere songs, but anyone in that movement knows it couldn't manage without the camaraderie and music. One eco–troubadour, the only one with a modicum of commercial success, provides his insights for this article:

Humor Songs with an Environmental Message

Dana Lyons calls his song Cows With Guns a "Trojan cow." It brings people to a new way of thinking and exposes them to further steps toward liberating animals and resisting authority.

Cows With Guns was introduced in 1995 and slowly built. Soon it was clear environmental music was seen as not taking off, and worse, the whole movement was not succeeding. But the song has been useful in Lyons' activism for a decade and a half, helping him to play many kinds of venues. This funny song gives him credibility with young people, more than just what an environmental educator can get.

Lyons, dubbed by some the "king of the eco–troubadours," is one of the few "major" artists from the 1990s still hard working today who gave hope for expanding consciousness through greater exposure of his work. But the truth was barred at society's gate at some point. It appears the reason was record company greed more than any other factor.

Lyons did see his bookings and invitations such as media interviews end up fewer than what he would have projected, although he does about 50 concerts a year.

"There was a time when I hoped that environmental music as a genre would grow. I've kind of let go of that. I do fewer interviews now than in the early 1990s. But I'm about to tour with a new album and implement a youth program dandelionsunlimited.org that features successful sustainability projects in schools for networking."

Was Cows With Guns, and Lyons' follow–up Ride The Lawn, an attempt to get his more serious songs "through" with their eco-warrior aspect? Lyons replied, "My new album Three Legged Coyote has three comedy songs. Casey (Neil, producer and co–guitarist) says the environmental songs are more subtle but stronger."

Lyons' fans lament that the general public has not heard of him when they're sure he would go over well. Is the corporatizing of music after the free–form FM radio fare of the 1960s to blame? Lyons has his own label and organization for sales, promotion and bookings. This enable him to make a living instead of giving his income over to a corporation in a standard record deal.

The reason the public has not heard of Dana Lyons or Casey Neill: "In the U.S.," Lyons explained, "small artists are locked out of radio play because five major labels control 98% of commercial rock & country stations in this country. Through payola, big labels threaten stations with the withholding of money when they play local artists. Promotional money from record company agents ranges from $30-80,000 a year per radio station. A local station may play a local rock band, but

in reprisal the promotional money may be threatened to be lowered. Every country in world except the U.S. has laws for stations required to play local artists. Canada has a 20% Canadian content law. Africa and Europe have similar safeguards to protect musical freedom from the five major labels of U.S. In the U.S. the exception is comedy. Eco–troubadours must therefore be funny.

Lyons hopes the internet will even be heard in cars. He says record labels are being destroyed by the Internet, such as YouTube where Cows With Guns can be seen and heard.

Apart from what Lyons calls a corrupt system, a sharp musical focus on society in general may have also gotten too uncomfortable for the average audience as defined by corporate executives. And any cause can be drowned out by the craziness and escalating crises all around, but we don't know it because of big corporations dominating the media.

Lyons explained that there are three potential ways to get ahead in the music business: (1) A major label makes someone a star, (2) a local–content law mandates there is exposure for more diverse music, and (3) "Get our music out over internet – mine is free at CowsWithGuns.com," Lyons points out. [9]

A do–it–yourself book writer/publisher in the UK is Pett Corby, a population activist concerned about unplanned pregnancies. She uses music and the internet to get her message across, without benefit of major support. She is author of How to Avoid Unplanned Pregnancy Every Time You Have Sex Without Using Contraceptive Drugs. [10]

Music's Power through History to the Present

Before the '60s and on into the late 20th century there was "L'Internationale" (sung to the French tune "The Marseillaise") as an example of several countries' socialist, communist and anarchist elements sharing one movement thanks in part to the music. The movement may be dead or on hold, but music could help revive it.

Nowadays, after our 1990s awakening to global threats, it's even more obvious that the U.S. has led the way in environmental destruction and in developing the virulent materialism of consumer culture. So a counter–culture trend that incorporates music would be just what the world needs.

The role of technology in disseminating the music over the last half century–plus is a two–edged sword. Technology helped and then was used to hinder the spread of music for cultural change.

Local economics and community living need to have their own home–grown music, and not rely on distant groups and the industrial infrastructure of disseminating the songs (which means pollution and non–sustainability). International travel, if drastically reduced soon with a lack of jet fuel, can start to limit the global interchange of music appreciation -- and thus constrict the movement as it is now. However, this would be "Nature's Way" -- for the music is not about business-success or the convenience of today's modern lifestyle.

END NOTES

1. www.goldmanprize.org/2008/africa and watch video 3 minutes in to: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z17jURT5_F0)

2. “The Zero Carbon Caravan: Sail and Bike to Copenhagen!” Culture Change article by Chris Keene, March 7, 2009 at culturechange.org/go.html?349

‘Rhythms del Mundo’ album ‘Classics’ features Any Winehouse, The Rolling Stones, Jack Johnson, Kaiser Chiefs, Editors, Keane, The Zutons, The Kooks, The Killers, Fall Out Boy, KT Tunstall, and others. Album ‘teaser’ at www.rhythmsdelmundo.com

‘Classics’ was produced to raise awareness and funds for climate crisis projects and natural disaster relief. Cuba’s “finest musicians together with world famous artists, resulting in “a unique album merging Afro–Cuban rhythms”

3. Theodore Roszak, The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition, Berkeley, Calif., University of California Press, 1968.

4. COINTELPRO: (Counter Intelligence Program) was a series of covert, and often illegal, projects conducted by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) aimed at investigating and disrupting dissident political organizations within the United States. The FBI used covert operations from its inception, however formal COINTELPRO operations took place between 1956 and 1971.

From BlackElectorate.com: Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney's CBC Braintrusts: "Countering Culture: COINTELPRO Attacks On Political Musicians" hearing September 22 and 24, 2005. Sample of program:

Panel One: The Covert War Against Black Musicians

Paul Robeson and MKULTRA

– Paul Robeson, Jr., son

Operation CHAOS: War Against Rock – Hendrix & Marley

– Alex Constantine, author of The Covert War Against Rock

The Hip–Hop Generation – Tupac Shakur

– Afeni Shakur, mother

www.blackelectorate.com/articles.asp?ID=1466

5. In 1978 Jan Lundberg witnessed a major record company employee serving as a DJ on an L.A. rock station using a pseudonym. Ironically, his musical taste was more wide–ranging than a wannabe DJ who finally got a wee–hours: in order to appear acceptable he played tired hits by Fleetwood Mac and the Eagles, bands not known for being associated with any cause.

6. John Lennon in Wikipedia: deportation attempt and his anti–war activities: see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Lennon

A search in Google.com for “John Lennon assassination” yields many results.

A search in Google.com for “Bob Marley assassination” yields many results.

Rock & Roll deaths: www.whale.to/b/rock.html says
"To put down the youth movement entailed assassinating political leaders and musicians who spoke openly against the Nixon regime." – Alex Constantine

[The elimination of politics in music (by murder, directly and indirectly), combined with mind control was Operation CHAOS.]

Operation CHAOS: www.whale.to/b/chaos_h.html says

"American and British pop/rock music during the 60's created an art form that has been described as one of the most important cultural revolutions in history. Within a few years, between 1968 and 1976, many of the most famous names associated with this early movement were dead."——Mae Brussell

Rock star death tabulation: www.av1611.org/rockdead.html

7. From Sourcewatch Encyclopedia: www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Clear_Channel

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Clear Channel program directors issued a list of "potentially offensive songs" that it suggested stations not play. Many reports referred to the list as a "ban" on the songs, which included all Rage Against The Machine songs, the Notorious B.I.G.'s "Juicy" (which includes the line "Time to get paid, blow up like the World Trade"), John Lennon's "Imagine," Metallica's "Seek and Destroy," AC/DC's "Safe in New York," Bobby Darin's "Mack the Knife," Peter, Paul and Mary's "Leaving on a Jet Plane," and Jerry Lee Lewis' "Great Balls of Fire," and "The Drifters' On Broadway."

Also, in 2003, "after the Dixie Chicks criticized President Bush during a London performance ... some Clear Channel radio stations pulled the group's music from their play lists."[4] According to the New York Times (March 31, 2003), "More unified were the actions of Cumulus Media, which owns 262 stations, and has at least temporarily stopped all 42 of its country stations from playing the Dixie Chicks."

The Clear Channel's activities go beyond radio. In March 2003, its affiliate stations throughout the United States organized pro–war rallies, under the name of Rally for America, to coincide with the Bush administration's launch of war with Iraq.

8. Depavers' "Have a Global Warming Day" and activism: http://culturechange.org/go.html?225

Hootenanny: A Songbook Of Radical Campfire Songs: from AK Press, Oakland, California, year 2000 onward - Nearly 250 songs, with lyrics and chords… Leon Rosselson, Casey Neill, David Rovics, Alicia Littletree, Phil Ochs, Christy Moore, Ewan MacColl, Peg Millet, Utah Phillips, Samsara, Peggy Seeger, Pete Seeger, Michelle Shocked, etc.

9. Dana Lyons: www. CowsWithGuns.com

Book by Dana Lyons and Jane Goodall, The Tree (with music disk)

10. Pett Corby's efforts for her cause include the Virtual Gigs Club

www.you–choose–when.com/virtual_gigs_club

Online social networking is another tool she uses:

www.ecademy.com/user/pettcorby , www.myspace.com/pettcorby

www.myspace.com/virtualgigs

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The above report is part of the upcoming book Petrocollapse: The Basis of Crash and Culture Change, by Jan Lundberg. He added eco–music to his activist toolkit in 1991 after founding Culture Change (then Fossil Fuels Policy Action) in 1988. He has written songs, recorded albums and performed with The Depavers and as Depaver Jan. Listen at Depavers.

Note: Daniel Quinn's book Ishmael inspired rock bands in the late 1990s to write and record songs based on the book.

(See friendsofishmael.org) It was an inspiration to the founding of Culture Change. I suppose Ishmael inspired some of my songs too, if I were to go over my lyrics and consider. - JL