
Popular Culture

We are pleased to initiate what we plan to be a regular feature of the Theoretical Review. We hope to be able to include short cultural reviews in each issue on a variety of topic and levels, including literature, music, cinema and theater. One way we can ensure such a feature is for our readers to keep us abreast of cultural developments in their area. Further, since our expertise and experience (as well as budget) are limited, those who are reading, listening and viewing can help stimulate the interest and knowledge of others by writing about what they see, hear and think.

Though we have previously outlined the importance of the ideological and cultural struggle for progressive ideas,¹ some of our readers have not understood that we are concerned with all culture, and not just with overtly political material or punk rock. In this issue we attempt to give a brief overview of some of the work being done in other musical areas, as well.

Reggae

UB40 is one of the newest British reggae bands that have gained popularity in the wake of the pioneering work of Bob Marley and the first wave of Jamaican reggae musicians. The band produces exciting popular music which is a fusion of "hard political lyrics with sweet and gentle melodies."²

The name UB40 reflects these politics: it is the form number taken from an English Unemployment Benefits application card, which is reproduced front and back on the album cover of their recently released *Signing Off* (Graduate, 1980).³ And it is a sign of the times, that a racially mixed political reggae band can put a record in the number-4 spot on the popular music charts in a country with such severe social and racial contradictions as England today.

The song that achieved this recognition last year is entitled "King," and is a thoughtful reflection on the dreams of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his assassination. With a musical arrangement including sharp, crisp drumming, melodic saxophone duets, and a vocal noticeably similar to Stevie Wonder, it is easy to hear why this song achieved such wide popular acceptance.

Another of the many powerful political songs on *Signing Off* is a clear statement against imperialism which consciously appeals for a rejection of British national chauvinism and the colonialist mentality. The lyrics of "Burden of Shame" leave no question of the brutal role of the British government in the repression suffered by South African Black people, which speaks just as strongly to an American audience:

As a nation we're following blindly
No one stops to question why
Our money supporting an army
And a boy in Soweto dies.

I'm a British subject, Not proud of it
While I carry the Burden of Shame.

Must we go on ignoring forever

The cries of an African sun

There's a soldier's hand of the trigger

But it's we who are pointing the gun.

"Burden of Shame" (©1980, New Claims-Graduate-ATV)

UB40 carry their political protest still further with a song about Gary Tyler, the young Black man framed and imprisoned in Louisiana. A biting denunciation of "white justice" in the southern USA, "Tyler" outlines the various aspects of the frame-up and the legal maze that maintains that Gary Tyler is guilty. With a mournful saxophone solo to drive home the recognition of the desparate situation of Tyler and others similarly incarcerated, this song leaves no question of the continuing struggle of Black people to achieve social justice in America.

Several songs on *Signing Off* are instrumental numbers where the band stretches out to provide imaginative explorations into the realm of reggae/dub, generally avoiding the repetition and self-indulgence that can accompany such a "laid-back" musical form. Their innovative combination of saxophones with the more traditional use of guitar, bass and percussion, is highlighted by the reverberating electric piano and synthesizer, fading in and out and around the steady rhythm and beat.

Included with the album is an extended play (EP) 45 rpm disc with two of UB40's most damning denunciations of the situation of Black and working people in the US and Britain. "Madame Medusa," a track dedicated to Margaret Thatcher, outlines the strengthening of the extreme right and the intensification of impoverishment and repression for the masses in the wake of Thatcher's policies for "solving" Britain's economic and political crises:

From the tombs of ignorance/ of hate and greed and lies
Through the smoke of sacrifice/ watch her figure rise
Cringing in her shadow/ the sick, the poor, the old
Basking in her radiance/ Man of Blood and Gold . . .

©1980, New Claims-Graduate-ATV

Equally powerful in its haunting and mournful description of a lynching in the South is "Strange Fruit," based on the 1939 song of the same name by Billie Holiday and Lewis Allan.⁴ The poetic lyric starkly portrays the horrible sight of black bodies—"strange fruit"—hanging from a southern poplar tree, while the music adds intensity to the description of the incredible brutality which Black people have historically suffered in the USA. That this is not just a matter of history is witnessed by the April 22, 1981 *Guardian* report of the recent lynching of Michael A. Donald, a Black man from Mobile, Alabama.

Still other themes of protest developed by UB40 are found in "Food for Thought," which describes knife-sharpening budget cutters sacrificing babies lives, and their separate 12-inch '45' entitled "The Earth Dies Screaming" (Graduate, 1980), which paints a picture of the aftermath of nuclear holocaust where the chilling lyric is counter-posed to a lilting reggae arrangement with a touch of irony.

But while much of UB40's music is a passionate protest against oppressive social conditions, the band never gives up hope. In this they have retained the confidence and hope inherent in reggae's dedication to an earthly end to oppression in the future, while freeing it from the religious

strictures within which Rastafarians have sometimes confined it. They dream and sing about a time when "human kindness is over-flowing" on Randy Newman's "I think it's going to rain today" (the album's only cover song), and "Little by Little" celebrates the crumbling power of the ruling class.

Finally, in response to an inquiry concerning violence in the audience at a particular concert hall, Jim Brown, the band's drummer, responded that:

We are not pacifists, but we don't believe in kids fighting among themselves—there are other things to fight. We really think that music is for dancing. In terms of our political emphasis, we have no choice, do we? As a multi-racial band we are a political statement anyway.⁵

With music like this for dancing, music for revolution will be ecstasy!

Country Music

Country music has always been a highly contradictory phenomenon. On the one hand, it has been the vehicle for elements of overt racism, sexism and nationalism. The Charlie Daniels Band's "In America" is just one of the more recent blatant examples of the backward and reactionary wave of music propounding pro-nuclear sentiments, aggressive militarism, or drunken mindlessness and "high infidelity."

But at the same time there have existed songs of a populist character—songs that have protested against capitalist middlemen, credit foreclosures, rotten dead-end jobs and the hard life lived by working women and men ("Boney Fingers," "Take This Job and Shove It"). As Lenin said, "The elements of democratic and socialist culture are present, if only in rudimentary form, in every national culture, since in every nation there are toiling and exploited masses, whose conditions of life inevitably give rise to the ideology of democracy and socialism."⁶

Though the majority of country music tends to emphasize sadness, broken relationships and "wishing for a simpler time when heroes made issues seem clearcut"; and while these songs can quite often be obsessively nostalgic and sentimental, just as often they are honest and sincere reflections on the very real pain and sorrow that tend to dominate the lives of working people under capitalism.

Nonetheless, songs of hope and happiness, dancing and compassion are also to be heard on country radio. The recent single recorded by Don Williams entitled "I Believe in You" (MCA, 1980) and written by Roger Cook and Sam Hogin, falls into this latter category. Not only is this song a hopeful affirmation of life and love, it is also a strong critique of certain "popular" backward myths and notions.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this song is the use of a generally quite conventional country love song to critique a long list of backward ideas and conservative positions. Williams doesn't believe in superstars, or "that right is right and left is wrong," "that black is black and white is white," "that gasoline's in short supply," or in "the rising cost of getting by." Chiding the Moral Majority and traditional religious institutions for their narrow views, there are few backward ideas that are not at least implicated in Williams' calm statement of his refusal to uncritically

accept the dominant mythology of advanced US capitalism.

But in an ideological/theoretical sense, what Williams *does* affirm becomes equally important to analyze as a part of popular ideology. Far from championing a dramatic restructuring of society, Williams believes in the traditional values of familial love—babies, Mom and Dad, old folks, music . . . "and I believe in you." This picture of the sustaining values and moral beliefs of a large segment of the working population can be useful for the eventual construction of a popular-democratic ideological understanding in the struggle to break free of the ideological hegemony of the ruling class in America.

While the left and most narrow feminists have tended to celebrate the destruction of the family and traditional religion and morals, and at the same time have failed to salvage the positive elements in these highly contradictory phenomena (and generally disdaining personal emotions of love and female/male bonding), the Moral Majority and the "New Right" have concentrated on articulating sustaining ideological elements of a majority of the population into a backward rather than a forward looking vision of society. The challenge for the non-sectarian left and women's movements is to acknowledge the value of the strength and compassion present in elements of the popular ideology that can be articulated within a popular-democratic ideological formation that will sustain a socialist, anti-racist and anti-sexist alternative to the deepening economic, ideological and political crises of advanced capitalism.

Though we must not over-emphasize the importance of the rather timid and tentative counter-current within country music represented by Don Williams, and other musicians such as Hoyt Axton; we can use their example as a positive pole toward which we can encourage interest and support.

Within a musical form that is generally centered on single men, and dominated by traditional stereotypes of women, sex and love (the arrangement of "I Believe in You" is a beautiful, yet quite typically slow and melodic rendering of the *traditional* country love song), Don Williams has crafted a song of protest with a strong progressive message.

—Neil Eriksen

American New Wave

I won't be disenchanted
Even though the news is slanted . . .

. . . 60 minutes of excuses
Airwaves and wire service
Trying to make me nervous . . .

Put down your Time and Newsweek
Listen to me when I speak . . .
"Face the nation!"

©MCA Records, 1980

These defiant lyrics set to a gripping rock and roll arrangement are indicative of the tone of a large part of John Hiatt's most recent album *Two Bit Monsters* (MCA, 1980). *Who*, you may ask, is John Hiatt?

Born in Indianapolis, Indiana, twenty-nine years ago, he currently is based in the Los Angeles area, and recently toured England with Ry Cooder. As a young musician he wrote songs in Memphis and Nashville, and toured the folk-singer circuit in the US and Canada for several years.

Hiatt's first "new wave" album *Slug Line* (MCA, 1978) indicated that he has mastered a wide breadth of musical styles, from reggae to country rock. *Two Bit Monsters* further exhibits this breadth of musical understanding with strong influences from the Talking Heads, Motown, Van Morrison, Cat Stevens and Elvis Costello. At times Hiatt even sings the cynical sneer of the early Bob Dylan; and the influences of the Beatles are clearly evident in some songs. Politically, we must again cite the social protest of reggae, the earlier Elvis Costello (especially *This Years Model*, CBS, 1978) and Dylan as fundamental influences.

All of these references make it quite clear that John Hiatt is much more than the "American Elvis Costello," as some rock journalists have billed him. Hiatt's musical style is distinctive and versatile, and his politics are presented in the context of the American "new wave" of rock and roll. His is a distinctively *American* social and political critique, a bitter response to existing personal, sexual, social and political relations, including world war and news media lies.

While his album *Slug Line* tended more toward an exploration of personal problems, music industry manipulation ("Slug line") and the power of the radio ("Radio Girl"), themes previously developed by the Clash ("Complete Control") and Elvis Costello ("Radio, Radio"), *Two Bit Monster* is much broader in its social commentary, though personal relations are a major part of this album as well.

As with "Face the Nation," cited above, much of Hiatt's new album is *explicitly* political. While "Face the Nation" is an open attack on the classic US media institutions of pseudo-information "news programs," "Cop Party" is an extremely biting critique of police brutality. Directed at the all pervasive power of the police (unlimited by law), and the increase in their lawlessness, this "party" has the "cops" running wild in the streets:

Cop party/and you'd better not go
Spend the rest of your life in this TV show
Cop party/and you'd better run
Because they're not gonna stop
Till they've had their fun,

Till "justice" is done.

©MCA Records, 1980

There is no ambiguity in *this* critique.

Other songs on *Two Bit Monsters*, however, take on added significance *because of* their ambiguity. "Back to the War" and "I Spy (For the FBI)" (the only song on the album not written by Hiatt himself) both function to politicize personal life while simultaneously personalizing a broad political critique. "Back to the War" (Isn't that what we're here for?) is a stirring anti-war song that provides a penetrating vision of the powerful "private sector" interests behind military activity. Ambiguity is added with the connection that is made between this broad social vision and the daily "wars" and truces of individual personal lives. Cynically outlining elements of the horror of constant war, Hiatt reflects how the militarized economy and US involvement in wars of one type or another ever since WWII has had a corrosive effect on personal relationships. For Hiatt we can never leave the war zone because the battleground is human interaction.

Similarly, the personal and political are ironically juxtaposed in "I Spy (For the FBI)"—the record's one cover version, and quite a discovery—[which] links sexual betrayal with political treachery, camera-eye voyeurism with espionage. Hiatt's X-ray vision recognizes that the song's jokey idea is no longer a joke any more.⁸

Another important twist on existing social/sexual relations is "Good Girl, Bad World," which goes beyond the usual "good girl/bad girl" dichotomy so common in male dominated rock and roll, to say that "You've been a good girl, you've been a bad girl, You're not a girl anymore." This challenge of accepted references to women as "girls" deepens the clear recognition in the song's title that the social context of the "hard world" is the reason for a woman's (or a man's, for that matter) contradictory character, rather than some mystical fused "essence" of "goddess/witch."

It is in all of his various comments on the existing social order that we can see that it is a unique vision of social problems and contradictions which generates John Hiatt's *Two Bit Monsters*. In the same way that the British punks took up and transformed the social critique of Jamaican reggae, Hiatt has taken up the social critique and musical styles of the punks and Elvis Costello and combined them with indigenous American styles to produce a unique American social commentary.

It is too early to tell how far John Hiatt will be able to further develop this approach *within* the context of the rock and roll counter-culture, which has so far been able to co-opt most previous visionary artists.

—Neil Eriksen and Paul Costello.

¹ Neil Eriksen, "Popular Culture and Revolutionary Theory: Understanding Punk Rock," *TR* No. 18, Sept.-Oct., 1980; and "Bruce Springsteen: Reading Rock and Roll," *TR*, No. 21, March-April, 1981.

² John Orme, "Signing On," *Melody Maker*, July 19, 1980, p. 19; see also "A Backdoor Revolution," *Melody Maker* Sept. 6, 1980.

³ Available from: Systematic Record Dist., Berkeley Industrial Court, Space 1, 729 Heinz Ave., Berkeley, CA 94710.

⁴ Billie Holiday, *Stange Fruit*, Atlantic/Commodore Records SO1614, 1972.

⁵ Orme, 1980, p. 19.

⁶ V. I. Lenin, *CW*, Vol. 20, p. 24. cited in Carmen Claudin-Urondo's *Lenin and the Cultural Revolution*, Humanities Press, 1977, p. 19.

⁷ Paul DiMaggio, Richard Peterson, and Jack Esco, "Country Music: Ballad of the Silent Majority," in *The Sounds of Social Change: Studies in Popular Culture*, R. Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson, editors, Rand McNally, 1972.

⁸ Tom Carson, "John Hiatt connects: A artist you're gonna like, whether you like it or not," *Rolling Stone*, No. 327, October 2, 1980, p. 91.

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