

Wilfried Raussert

‘What’s Going On’

How Music Shapes the Social

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# **‘What’s Going On’**

How Music Shapes the Social

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## **‘What’s Going On’:**

### **How Music Shapes the Social /**

Wilfried Raussert. –

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# 1 Music and the Social (Introduction)

What's Going On  
(Marvin Gaye)

Bruno Latour is one of the first critics in the twenty-first century to articulate the ‘crisis’ of the social. Stressing the “many ... contradictory cartographies of the social” (2005, 34), Latour highlights the interaction between human and nonhuman actors in making social connections and raises questions about the interrelationships between plural socialities. Latour favors a “sociology of associations” (34). A similar critique of Durkheimian or Marxian reductive “sociology of the social” (34) is present in contemporary music sociology. For instance, Tia DeNora claims that “music is active within social life” (2000, 3). Hence, the meanings of music “may be constructed in relation to things outside it,” and “things outside music may be constructed in relation to music” (3). Georgina Born, with a nod to Will Straw’s theory of musical scenes, makes a strong argument that “music necessitates an expansion of previous conceptions of the social” (2012, 266). In her reading, “music creates its own diverse socialities, animates new imagined communities, refracts wider social identity formation, and partakes in late capitalism’s multi-polar cultural economy” (267).

Daniel J. Levitin reminds us of the omnipresence of music when he lists human reunions and encounters such as “weddings, funerals, graduation from college, men marching off to war, stadium sporting events, a night on the town, prayer, a romantic dinner, mothers rocking their infants to sleep and college students studying with music as a background ...” (2007, 8) in which music play a pivotal role. We may add music’s role in the cotton fields in the American South, modern working spheres, shopping malls, and museums (8). Indeed, music is part of the fabric of everyday life. With the rise of modernity a strange division between performers and listeners emerged that overshadowed a historical presence of music as a basic human activity and condition in which all members of a community participated. Contemporary rituals like karaoke and sports hymns in soccer stadiums publicly perform the closure of the above gap. Music penetrates all strata of public life. Music is home entertainment. Music is a spiritual force in religious contexts around the

globe. As contemporary mall culture shows, it is also the bedfellow of commodity and market strategies that want to sell. Music is present in social and political movements as a mode of inspiration, reflection, a chant for action, and a tool for propaganda. It functions as a model and inspiration for artistic endeavors from literature to film to multi-media performance arts. Music has become immaterial heritage culture and a driving force in diasporic, subaltern, alternative, and mainstream identity politics, be they on a local, regional, national, or global scale. It is notable that music frequently assumes a seismographic function and transmits to a larger public the presence of social crisis through the act of performance. Since music appeals to all human senses, it carries the potential to push affective politics and sensitize its audience to social conflict, crisis, and injustice. It is the mix of affective, cognitive, and kinesthetic response to music that makes music a powerful medium to express, narrate, and reflect the social.

Jay Schulkin and Greta B. Raglin emphasize that “[m]usic is often functional because it is something that can promote human well-being by facilitating human contact, human meaning, and human imagination of possibilities, tying it to our social instincts” (2014, n. pag.). Most people today have access to music. The development of the recording industry and innovation in distribution technology have revolutionized the means through which music infiltrates all levels of the social. In regards to community- and nation-building it is important that we keep in mind that music is a powerful social player. Beyond verbal communication, music facilitates human bonding and communication. It takes a crucial role in creating and maintaining individual, group, and national solidarity. Music fosters physiological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses.

Music also functions as inspiration, action-stimulation, trigger of emotions and reflections, and therapeutic tool. On an individual and collective level, music forms the social by promoting bonding via sound and rhythm. It performs and narrates the social in its extension in dance and lyrics. Jill Suttie points toward a conceptualization of music as social and existential force of human survival:

For much of human history, the only way to experience music was live – there were no recordings allowing us to share music outside of perfor-