Dancing in Chains

Why Music Can't Keep the World Free

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My title comes from Friedrich Nietzsche (247), but currently it is being quoted by Chinese writers, artists, scholars, and journalists as a way of describing the experience of working under the growing repressions of President Xi Jinping. There are, of course, many Western scholars and journalists who make similar complaints about various formal and informal pressures to "self-censor."[1] So in that broad sense, we are all dancing in chains.

But there are chains and there are chains. The political liberty and freedom of expression enjoyed by those of us who live and work in the West are not perfect. But they are a lot better than the authoritarian alternative.

There was a time, half a century ago, when American popular music was seen as a beacon of political liberty and free speech and expression. As such, it played an important role in making liberal democracy attractive to millions of people living under fascist or communist domination. That time spanned World War II and the Cold War, and while the story was never a simple morality tale, neither was it false.

The thesis of this essay is that the relationship between American popular music and US public diplomacy has changed drastically. Not only has popular music ceased to be a beacon of liberal democracy, it has also, at times, propagated a negative image of Western freedoms that repels ordinary people and strengthens tyranny.

1 There are countless examples of this view, but one very prominent statement came from the novelist Salman Rushdie, who stated before an audience at the University of Vermont on 15. Jan. 2015, "the moment somebody says, 'I believe in free speech, but,' I stop listening" (Associated Press).

This essay has four parts: 1) an overview of how popular music (first jazz then rock) enhanced American prestige during the crucial period of World War II and the Cold War; 2) a brief summary of the drastic changes that have occurred since the Berlin Wall fell in 1989; 3) some examples of how today's popular music does and does not support freedom in the world; and 4) a warning that if Americans—and Europeans—are to develop a renewed public diplomacy for the twenty-first-century, we will have to draw more cogent lessons from this history than we have so far drawn.

FROM GOLDEN GLOW TO PLASTIC PEOPLE

Europeans and Russians discovered jazz around 1917, when Sidney Bechet accompanied the composer-conductor Will Marion Cook on a European tour. Then, during World War II, the jazz programs of the US Armed Forces Network provided respite, not only to US servicemen, but also to ordinary Europeans. Building on this popularity, the Voice of America (VOA) began in 1955 to beam "the music of freedom," as host Willis Conover called it, to a regular audience of 100 million worldwide, including 30 million behind the Iron Curtain (Thomas). Then in the early 1960s, the State Department sponsored tours by such jazz masters as Sidney Bechet, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dave Brubeck, Benny Goodman, and Dizzy Gillespie.

The appeal of the VOA broadcasts is well documented. To the Russian novelist Vassily Aksyonov, they were "America's secret weapon number one . . . a kind of golden glow over the horizon" (Richmond 207). To a young Russian fan, Conover's program was "a source of strength when I am overwhelmed by pessimism" (Lester). Looking back on his years as an underground jazz musician in Czechoslovakia, novelist Josef Škvorecký writes that "our sweet, wild music was a sharp thorn in the side of the power-hungry men, from Hitler to Brezhnev, who successively ruled in my native land" (83).

The tours were more challenging, in part because key decision makers at the State Department were less interested in the music than in using African American jazz masters to blunt Soviet criticism of American racism. Historian Penny von Eschen notes that there was "a glaring contradiction" in using "black artists as goodwill ambassadors . . . when America was still a Jim Crow nation" (9). This is true. But as von Eschen also notes, the tours succeeded in large part because the musicians were allowed to speak freely about racial discrimination. Even Gillespie, whose acerbic comments on the topic upset his State Department

sponsors, admitted that "our interracial group was powerfully effective against Red propaganda" (Gillespie qtd. in Eschen 17).

And the music transcended politics. During the darkest years of the twentieth century, millions of people around the world came to see jazz as proof that freedom and democracy can co-exist with a highly cultivated artistic sensibility. It would be nice to think that artistic cultivation is a necessary condition for successful musical diplomacy, but to judge by what happened next, it is not. As the Cold War unfolded, the official export of jazz mattered less than the unofficial export of a vigorous but much less refined genre of music: rock.

Rock music, or rock 'n' roll as it was called then, first gained a following in the Soviet Union in the 1950s, via smuggled 45s, audiotapes made from foreign radio broadcasts, and (my personal favorite) the *roentgenizdat*—an ingenious method of transferring the grooves on a vinyl record to discarded X-ray plates. This "music on ribs" became a booming underground industry, with a distribution network that at one point reached as far as Siberia (Ryback 32-3). By the mid-1960s, VOA had caught up with the craze and was broadcasting the various styles of rock (and soul) popular at the time.

But rock's greatest moment came later, during the 1970s and 1980s, when growing communication and travel facilitated a steady eastward flow of American and British popular music, from commercially successful rock, soul, and folk acts to more underground groups, such as Frank Zappa's the Mothers of Invention and the Velvet Underground. With their dark lyrics and discordant sounds, the latter two would never have passed muster with VOA. But given the rebellious mood of their fans in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, their unofficial status only added to their impact (Bayles, "Struggle").

The best example of this impact is the Plastic People of the Universe, a Czech band modeled after the Velvet Underground. Formed in 1968, shortly after Russian tanks crushed the Prague Spring, the Plastic People's music was neither refined nor especially crowd-pleasing—indeed, their 1970s performances were more like avant-garde "happenings" than rock concerts. But over time, the band's stubborn defiance of the communist authorities attracted a following. In 1976, when its members were subjected to a Kafkaesque trial, Václav Havel spoke out in their defense, and the trial became a rallying point for the Czech movement of resistance to Soviet domination (Vaughan).

Thus did the American counterculture, intended to subvert authority at home, become even more subversive overseas. The process continued through the 1980s, as American and British popular music became second nature to a generation of Russians and East Europeans. Then came the collapse of the Berlin Wall, followed by the 1990s—a transformative decade whose definitive history

has yet to be written, perhaps because our present world is still reeling from the transformations it brought.

POST-COLD-WAR TRANSFORMATIONS

We now turn to three of those transformations: a steep decline in US public diplomacy efforts; an upsurge in the export of US popular culture; and the rise—in Russia, China, and many other countries—of a new kind of authoritarianism, in which social and economic freedoms are expanded, at least for a while, while political liberty remains as restricted as ever.

The first transformation occurred between 1993 and 2001: funding for US cultural and educational exchanges was cut by one third, from $349 million to $232 million (Curb Center 18). Overseas this meant closing many American libraries and cultural centers that had long served as meeting places and free-speech zones. Finally, in 1999, the US Information Agency (known overseas as USIS), which had conducted public diplomacy since 1953, was dismantled, and its activities scattered throughout the State Department. This meant a drastic loss of independence, not only in terms of budget, but also in terms of public diplomats' ability to operate in the field.[2]

The second transformation was the opening of new media markets around the world, as state-controlled terrestrial channels gave way to new, privately owned satellite services. Hungry for content, these services acquired a huge number of US feature films, TV programs, and popular music, at a time when many of the most successful individuals in Hollywood were busy pushing the envelope of violence and vulgarity. The result was a sudden flood of American entertainment into parts of the non-Western world where the vast majority of people had no real exposure to, or knowledge of, life in the United States.

Did anyone in the US government worry where this might lead? In most cases, no. But there were some notable exceptions. For example, in 1998, when the USIS was about to be closed, its director, Joseph Duffey, warned against leaving "the portrayal of American culture . . . exclusively to the mainstream media." With remarkable prescience, Duffey continued:

2 This statement, like many others made in this essay, is based on the many interviews the author conducted with former public diplomats and foreign service officers (see *Through a Screen Darkly*).

While the United States enjoys a dominant position in the production and exportation of entertainment products, it remains debatable whether these products best serve America's broader interests and ultimately democracy itself. . . . If morally questionable programming is viewed as destructive to the moral fiber of American citizens, then what can be said of such programming when it is given wider airing on the international stage? On the one hand, it can have the same corrosive effect in countries that embrace American entertainment. . . . On the other hand, in countries that are repelled by American and Western values, such as those in the Pacific Rim, espousing a new "neo-Confucianism," or Islamic countries that reject Western secularism, such programming only confirms the worst suspicions that the West, and America in particular, is morally corrupt and intellectually devoid. (13)

The third transformation was even more worrisome: the rise of a new type of authoritarian rule, which, rather than control every aspect of people's lives, seeks only to control political thought and behavior. At the heart of this new approach are the media. With the exception of North Korea, the world has moved beyond the age of stultifying state propaganda. Instead, the media in Russia, China, and other authoritarian states have spent the last two decades copying Western entertainment and "infotainment," while at the same time strictly forbidding anything resembling Western political reporting—or press freedom more generally (Diamond et al.).

As Duffey suggests, these same regimes have also learned how to turn some of the West's popular culture against it, citing crude and sensationalist films, TV shows, and popular music as evidence that Europe and (especially) America are "immoral," "decadent," and "gay" (13). This provides these regimes with an excuse to crack down on Western cultural imports—a form of censorship that upsets Westernized elites but is often supported by the majority of the population. The next step, seen first in Putin's Russia and now in Xi's China, is to broaden the crackdown to include dissidents, artists, writers, scholars, activists, bloggers, and everyone else who dares to raise their voice against the government (see Diamond et al.; see Ostrovsky; Arutunyan for Russia; for China see Brady; Stockmann).

A different but equally worrisome dynamic is at work in the online recruitment efforts of violent Islamist extremist groups such as ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Boko Haram. These groups also denounce the immorality and decadence of Western media, but when staging and filming their own acts of brutality and murder, they, too, borrow from those media. In particular, they borrow the style and imagery of American action films, videogames, reality shows, even pornography (Cottee, "Pornography"; "Challenge"; "Jihad"). The result is a horrific

form of entertainment-propaganda that attracts young men (and some women) in both the Middle East and the West by appealing to their craving for excitement and adventure—not to mention freedom from the constraints of life in traditional Islamic families and communities (Fernandez).

These new threats are every bit as complex as those the West faced during the early years of the Cold War. But disturbingly, we do not seem to be grasping them as quickly.

HOW POPULAR MUSIC DOES—AND DOES NOT—SUPPORT FREEDOM

Back in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson described the new medium of film as "a universal language [that] lends itself importantly to the presentation of America's plans and purposes" (qtd. in de Grazia 299). Since then, Washington has consistently labored to boost the export of Hollywood's products. On occasion, these efforts have alienated other governments, as when Washington used coercive measures to pry open resistant foreign markets. But boosting the export of popular culture has never alienated Americans, in part because it imposes no burden on the taxpayer. On the contrary, it makes a hefty profit and helps to right the balance of trade.

Add the tributes to jazz and rock music that emerged from the former Soviet sphere after the end of the Cold War, and you have a sufficient explanation of why the export of popular culture in general, popular music in particular, has long been considered good business and good public diplomacy. But is this still true?

The export of popular music is still good business. Global revenue for the US music industry (including concerts and touring) has held steady at $15 billion since in 2012 (Media and Entertainment Spotlight). This figure is declining because of competition from European and Asian markets and, of course, the digital revolution. But America is still home to the "big three" record companies—Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and Warner Music Group—as well as a strong indie sector. And it still dominates the global performance-rights market, as well as earning half of all "synch revenue," or fees paid for the use of music in other media, such as films and videogames (Media and Entertainment Spotlight).

But the evidence suggests that, with regard to communicating America's most cherished ideals of political liberty and freedom of expression, there is

good news and bad news. Some of today's exports are effective in communicating these ideals; others are not.

First, the good news. In nearly every country, there is a localized version of the TV format pioneered as *Pop Idol* in Britain, *American Idol* in the United States. These shows are referred to as "reality shows," because they feature ordinary people, as opposed to professional performers. But there are two kinds of reality shows: the *exhibitionist* kind, where naïve, deluded people compete on the basis of foolishness and shamelessness; and the *talent-based* kind, where singers, dancers, chefs, and other ambitious amateurs compete on the basis of effort and skill. The pop-idol show is talent-based, and the values it displays—hard work, playing by the rules, and accepting the outcome of a fair contest—are everywhere associated with democracy.

Perhaps the most striking case occurred in China. For the observer of popular culture, there have been few more fascinating spectacles in recent years than Beijing's efforts to create what might be called "Youth Culture with Chinese Characteristics." During the 1990s and 2000s, these efforts were part of a system of carefully calibrated censorship, in which mass-market newspapers and films enjoyed very little latitude; but small-circulation newspapers, the fine arts, and English-language scholarship enjoyed a lot more. It all depended on the size and potential influence of the audience. But in television the pattern was different: the degree of control depended less on the size of the audience than on the content. TV news, especially political news, was tightly controlled, but TV entertainment was given relatively free rein.

Thus, in 2004 a regional TV channel, Hunan Satellite TV, came up with a pop-idol show called *The Mongolian Cow Sour Yogurt Super Girl Contest* (after its main sponsor). Better known as *Super Girl*, the show became a local hit, and when the channel got permission to broadcast it via satellite, it sparked a national craze. Auditions in Hunan, Guangdong, Henan, Zhejiang, and Sichuan provinces drew over 120,000 contestants. Fans held mass demonstrations in streets and shopping malls, prompting the official state newspaper, *China Daily*, to comment that millions of Chinese were being "swept . . . into a euphoria of voting that [was] a testament to a society opening up" (Zhou Dake qtd. in Zhou). And the season finale attracted 400 million viewers and 8 million texted votes (a number that would doubtless have been higher if texting did not cost money).

The winner, a 21-year-old music student from Sichuan named Li Yuchun, was a charismatic figure who defied convention by dressing in jeans and loose shirts, wearing no makeup, and performing songs ordinarily sung by men. Tall and slim with spiky hair, Li's appearance would not have raised an eyebrow in the West. But in China, the victory of this apparent tomboy set off a huge public

debate—especially after the Hong Kong edition of *Time* magazine asked, "*Super Girl*—experiment in democracy?"

The show's popularity made it hard for the Central Propaganda Department to cancel it outright. But according to an official in the Central Committee Global Communications Office whom I interviewed in Beijing, *Super Girl* prompted "an urgent debate in the higher circles of government" (Bayles, *Through a Screen Darkly* 104). Eventually, the propaganda department decided to do what it does best, launching a campaign to "guide" public opinion back in the right direction. This happened in stages: first, *China Daily* asked: "How come an imitation democratic system ends up selecting the singer who has the least ability to carry a tune?" (Zhou 52). Second, a rumor was planted about Li's sexual orientation. Third, an official opinion poll (predictably) found high levels of public disapproval of *Super Girl* (Bayles, *Through a Screen Darkly* 101-6).

With this justification, *Super Girl* was canceled just in time for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. The following year it was revived, but it was no longer the same. Indeed, it was no longer a bona fide pop-idol show, because instead of being chosen through a process of viewer voting, the winner was now selected by a panel of "experts." Even the normally compliant *China Daily* seemed disappointed. Griped one editorial, "the public voting system was dropped in favor of professional musicians and star-makers from entertainment companies acting as judges. It was the least interesting competition of the three years, because we all knew the answer" (Tian).

But here we see a crucial difference between past and present: Li Yuchun was not sent to re-education camp or prison, as would certainly have been the case in Maoist times. On the contrary, she was made into a Party-approved superstar. In 2008, she released an album called *Youth of China*, billed as a "gift blessing" to the Beijing Olympics. Today, her music is exported under the Anglicized name of Chris Lee; she is in demand as a celebrity model for designers like Jean Paul Gaultier, Donatella Versace, and Karl Lagerfeld; and she makes commercials for Coca-Cola and L'Oréal Paris ("Li Yuchun").

Far be it from me to begrudge Li her success. But I do wonder why, in the frothy cloud of international celebrity that now surrounds her, there is never any mention of the tomboy from Sichuan whose independent spirit and disruptive power to win votes made her threatening enough to provoke a government crackdown.

Now for the bad news. Against this backdrop of authoritarian entertainment-propaganda, it is painful to see American and European pop stars, a group who despite certain constraints enjoy more freedom of expression than almost any artists in history, enriching themselves by lending their glamour to kleptocrats

and dictators. In May 2014 the American R&B singer Erykah Badu gave a concert in Swaziland celebrating the birthday of King Mswati III. When human rights organizations raised an outcry, Badu's response was: "I can't be held responsible . . . I signed up as an artist, not as a political activist" (Brown). To another critic who pointed out that Swaziland has not had a free election in 27 years, Badu's response was: "I think that's how kingdoms twerk" (Brown).

The reference to twerking was no accident. As defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to twerk means to dance "in a sexually provocative manner involving thrusting hip movements and a low, squatting stance." Performers like Badu are so accustomed to defending their right to free expression with regard to sexual content, they can be deaf to other kinds of criticism—including criticism based on something they claim to care about, such as the rights of ordinary people not to be starved and oppressed.

Badu is not alone in having poor political judgment. The list of other musical luminaries who have received lavish payment for concerts and serenaded tyrants includes the following:

- Kanye West was paid €2.7 million in 2013 by President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, who presides over a deadly gulag worthy of Stalinist Russia.
- Jennifer Lopez was paid €1.3 million in 2013 by President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov of Turkmenistan. Berdymukhamedov, who insists on being called "The Protector," is known for having brutally crushed the "personality cult" of his predecessor, only to erect a 21-meter-high gilded statue of himself on horseback. Turkmenistan is consistently found on Freedom House's "Worst of the Worst" list.
- Sting was paid €2.1 million in 2010 by President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, who is known to have forced large numbers of children into slave labor.
- Mariah Carey was paid €900,000 in 2011 by Libyan President Muammar al-Gaddafi. Despite claiming later that she felt "horrible and embarrassed" about this, Carey went on in 2013 to accept €1.4 million to perform for Isabel dos Santos, the daughter of Angola's deeply corrupt dictator, José Eduardo dos Santos.

Of the performers on this list, the only one to offer a convincing apology was Jennifer Lopez. The rest settled for variations on this inane comment from Erykah Badu: "In the end, I love everyone, and I see freedom ahead for those enslaved *and* the slave masters" (Brown, emphasis in original).

Troubling as it is, this habit of performing for dictators is hardly the sum total of America's twenty-first-century musical outreach. More significant are the

changes American music has undergone since the days when jazz constituted the "music of freedom," in Willis Conover's memorable phrase. American music still commands the world stage, and not always to ill effect. But there is no denying that for millions of people around the world, US musical exports are no longer about freedom in the positive sense meant by Conover. Instead, a great many of those exports are narrowly, obsessively, about sex.

Popular music has always been about romance, eroticism, and good times. But only recently has it verged on soft-core pornography. Significantly, this is not true of the pop-idol TV show. Perhaps this is because pop-idol shows are watched (and voted on) by families. Or perhaps it is because the contestants understand that they are not in a market where singing matters less than bumping and grinding for the camera. Whatever the reason, the pop-idol show offers living proof that musical entertainment can attract large audiences without succumbing to nonstop vulgarity.

Tune in to a commercial radio channel on any continent and you will hear popular music that does not quite sound American, often because it utilizes non-American instruments and vocal styles, but that nonetheless conforms to an American template. That is to say, the music is melodically catchy, rhythmically infectious, and structured into three-minute songs. To describe this music as derivative of American pop is to annoy those who champion "world music" as pushback against the US cultural hegemon. But except for the rare case when an unaltered folk style makes its way into the mainstream, the music referred to as "world music" is a hybrid, and its hybridity is deeply American.

Or more accurately, *Afro-American*. I borrow this term from the eminent critic Henry Pleasants, who used it to describe the dominant musical idiom of the United States. *Afro-American* no longer refers to the ethnicity of the musicians involved, because today these come from every part of the globe. Instead, it refers to a range of musical practices introduced into the Americas by enslaved Africans and their descendants. As used here, the term encompasses a broad range of musical styles, from ragtime to rap, that share certain distinctive characteristics, among them rhythmic complexity and the ability to absorb musical influences from very diverse sources (Pleasants, *Serious Music*; Pleasants, *Great American Popular Singers*).

The two genres of Afro-American music that have proved most globally absorptive in the late twentieth and early twenty-first-centuries are the pop style associated with Michael Jackson; and hip-hop, also known as rap.[3]

3 Hip-hop is the more inclusive term of the culture, used to describe both musical and nonmusical aspects, such as music, clothing, dance, graffiti, and education. Rap origi-

With the advent of MTV in the 1980s and the "concert spectacular" pioneered by Michael Jackson, American pop music shifted its priority from pleasing the ear to dazzling the eye. This created a problem, because musical talent does not always correlate with physical appeal. The Indian film industry, which relies heavily on music, solved this problem years ago by having "playback singers" with beautiful voices provide the soundtrack for actors with beautiful faces. This solution has not caught on in America, where lip-syncing is considered cheating. Instead, the American solution, adopted in the heyday of MTV, has been to crank up the sexual heat.

According to one study, the percentage of American music videos containing sexual content rose from 47 to 73 percent between 1985 and 2005 (Turner 160). Most of this content was not explicit, but it was relentless: an unending stream of female bodies (the point of view was relentlessly male), writhing and gyrating in outfits that grew ever tighter and scantier. The highest concentration of these images appeared in videos by black performers, including rappers and pop singers—a fact that has not gone unremarked, either in African American communities or overseas.

A similar pattern is evident in hip-hop. By the mid-2000s many African Americans who had grown up embracing hip-hop as a grassroots, multimedia art form began objecting to the way commercial rap videos were depicting black women as gold-digging "bitches" and "ho's." The same videos also depicted black men as foul-mouthed pimps and gangbangers, but that was less remarked upon. In 2005 the black women's magazine *Essence* launched an online debate about the topic ("Take Back the Music"). And as editor in chief Diane Weathers told me, there were quite a few comments from African readers expressing "disgust at what their African-American brothers and sisters are doing in entertainment. They wonder if we've lost our minds" (Weathers).

This is not to suggest that Africans dislike hip-hop. On the contrary, its less offensive forms are popular throughout the continent. This is hardly surprising, given that the original rappers were West African *griots*: oral historians who could recite clan histories, offer praise songs, and practice the fine art of ritual insult. In the Caribbean, where enslaved Africans were cut off from their clan histories and had few occasions for praise, the *griot* tradition became focused on

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nally referred only to the rhyming verses spoken by a rapper working with an emcee, or deejay. But later it came to be used interchangeably with hip-hop. These are not formal definitions, but it seems that in contemporary American English, rap connotes the more vulgar, commercialized type of music, while hip-hop connotes grassroots, often political, expression.

insult. Over time, this gave rise to two broad tendencies: bragging about oneself while bad-mouthing one's rivals; and, in straitened political circumstances, giving voice to the voiceless.

In North American hip-hop, which was created in the 1970s largely by Afro-Americans and Afro-Caribbean immigrants to New York, the first tendency dominated, as rappers and emcees vied for gigs. But during the 1980s and 1990s, when rap caught on with the larger and more lucrative white audience, the danger arose that, like nearly most previous genres of Afro-American music, it would be appropriated by white performers. One way to "keep it black" was to "keep it ghetto." First this meant gangsta rap, which began with a political message but soon devolved into lurid tales of gang violence. Next came party rap, with its many references to hard drinking, striptease, and lap dancing.

Gangsta and party rap have made a lot of money, both in America and overseas. But they have also tarnished hip-hop's reputation. Throughout the world, rappers continue to speak out against injustice and tyranny. But their reach is limited, because as noted by journalist Robin Wright, serious political rappers in places like the Arab Middle East must struggle to distance themselves from "the materialism, misogyny, vulgarity, and 'gangsta' violence' of 'Western hip-hop'" (121).

DOES POPULAR MUSIC HAVE A PLACE IN A RENEWED AMERICAN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY?

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, Washington scrambled to revive public diplomacy in the Arab Middle East. One highly visible effort was Radio Sawa, a government-sponsored radio channel playing a commercial-style mix of American and Arab pop music. There have been many criticisms of Radio Sawa, beginning with the fact that it replaced VOA's Arabic service, which at the time was lobbying for funds to expand its programming. VOA's Arabic service never received those funds—indeed, that service was terminated, in large part because, only a few days after the attacks of 9/11, its news editors had attempted to broadcast an interview with Taliban leader Mullah Omar (Bayles, *Through a Screen Darkly* 165-66).

A more important criticism, expressed by many Americans who know the region well, was that a radio channel playing pop music is a pitifully inadequate response to the violent radicalization of Arab Muslim youth. Underlying this criticism is the obvious but little noted fact that, unlike Eastern Europeans yearning to breathe free, most Arabs did not see the United States as a beacon of

hope for political change. On the contrary, they understood all too well that Washington had long supported many of the region's most repressive governments.

Still other critics (including this one) argued that, unlike VOA, which followed the public diplomacy strategy of reaching out to a carefully targeted audience of thinkers, movers, and shakers, Radio Sawa followed the commercial strategy of trying to attract a large, undifferentiated youth audience. Because entertaining the masses is not considered part of public diplomacy, these critics concluded that Radio Sawa was not the best use of resources.

Does this mean popular music can no longer be used in US public diplomacy? Yes and no.

Let us begin with hip-hop. The first wave of hip-hop diplomacy occurred in the mid-2000s, when the State Department began sending "hip-hop envoys" to North Africa and the Middle East, as well as to Pakistan, Mongolia, and Indonesia. The idea was to draw disaffected Muslim youth away from violent extremism by connecting with young Americans who personified their nation's racial and religious diversity, as well as its freedom of expression. In 2006 a similar program was started in Muslim immigrant neighborhoods in Britain, the Netherlands, and France, to the discomfiture of some British, Dutch, and French officials (Aidi).

In one respect, this effort was strikingly on target. According to Toni Blackman, the first and most celebrated hip-hop envoy, a key message of the program was that not everyone in hip-hop "behaves like a juvenile delinquent on MTV." Indeed, Blackman has repeatedly emphasized that the vulgar, offensive rap that "mainstream radio and television represent . . . Lil Wayne, or Jay-Z or 50 Cent, . . . is not what we're talking about" ("Hip-Hop Diplomacy").

Blackman has also described her own performances as an attempt to "reach across generations" with expressions of "spirituality, religion, feelings and emotions, love songs, celebration of one's parents . . . true stories from the heart" ("Hip-Hop Diplomacy"). To judge by the reaction of one Moroccan participant, the message got across—and the message was not just about hip-hop, it was also about America: "I went around saying to a lot of rappers, men and women, it's not what you see in TV and movies," this participant said. "People in America, they are not so vulgar, they are just talking like us, about real topics" ("Hip-Hop Diplomacy").

"Real topics" can pose a challenge, however. Hip-hop is a form of music that emphasizes speech and rhythm over melody and harmony. And like all speech, the supercharged lyrics of hip-hop can be turned to any purpose. For example, during the Arab Spring, hip-hop was used to express a variety of views: anti-

regime, pro-regime, anti-democracy, pro-democracy, and religious sectarian—even radical Islamist. In such a context, it is tricky for an American hip-hop envoy to connect with a particular audience without inadvertently taking sides in a local conflict (Aidi).

This challenge is reflected in the second wave of hip-hop diplomacy, a State Department program called Next Level, which in recent years has reached out to hip-hop performers in Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, El Salvador, Honduras, India, Montenegro, Senegal, Serbia, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. As stated on its Facebook page, this program's aims are "to promote cultural exchange, entrepreneurship, and conflict prevention" ("About Next Level"). Suzi Analogue, an American participant who traveled to Uganda with the program, has a loftier view. Testifying on the program's website, she claimed that its purpose is "to promote peace and understanding worldwide." Then, perhaps feeling the need to say something more down to earth, she added, "in hip-hop music globally, the beat itself serves as the backbone for people to come together and share ideas and self-expression" ("Uganda").

These claims recall Conover's Cold War statement that jazz is "the music of freedom." To support that claim, Conover sometimes compared the interplay of soloist and ensemble in a jazz performance to that of individual and community in American democratic society. In other words, Conover's claim tried to connect jazz with something important about America—namely, its system of political liberty and protection of individual rights. By contrast, the claims being made on behalf of hip-hop diplomacy seem hopelessly vague, perhaps because the program is trying to *avoid* the genre's connection with politics?

Let me close with a less visible use of musical public diplomacy: a series of presentations on the highly commercial genre of country music identified with Nashville, Tennessee, held by a former diplomat from Austin, Texas named David Firestein. Firestein did not grow up listening to country music (Austin being a long way, geographically and culturally, from Nashville). But after serving several years in Russia and China, Firestein came to believe that the State Department was too "jazz and hip-hop oriented" for socially conservative audiences overseas (Firestein, Event). So he used his fluent Mandarin and Russian to introduce foreign audiences to a more socially conservative form of American popular music.

Firestein's country music diplomacy struck a responsive chord. As he explained to me, "the Chinese and the Russians really liked the strong vocals and the melodies. They also liked the lyrics, because they emphasized a different side of America, a side they could relate to better: hard work, family, and learning the difference between right and wrong" (Firestein, personal interview).

When the Chinese presentation was broadcast on the Mandarin service of Radio Free Asia (RFA), there were many calls asking for more. One caller exclaimed, "Make Firestein ambassador!'" (Southerland).

In Washington I observed one of Firestein's presentations before an audience of 55 secondary-school teachers visiting from Muslim-majority countries (Event). He captured their attention through the simple device of handing out the lyrics of several hit songs, playing the songs, and discussing their themes: small-town life ("Boondocks," by Little Big Town); pride in humble origins ("Redneck Woman," by Gretchen Wilson); the work ethic ("Hardworking Man," by Brooks & Dunn); family ("Watching You," by Rodney Atkins); and faith ("Jesus, Take the Wheel," by Carrie Underwood). About the last song, Firestein declared, "You don't have to be Christian to appreciate this song. I'm not Christian, I'm Jewish, but I get goose bumps whenever I listen to it." The reaction was sustained applause (Firestein, Event).

Today VOA plays country music, and the domestic audience for the genre is actually becoming younger and more diverse (Rau). But in its wisdom, the State Department never followed up on Firestein's idea, and country music diplomacy ended when he took early retirement. Would the world be a better place if the State Department had scaled up his idea, perhaps even sending "country music envoys" to places where they would be appreciated?[4] It would be nice to think so, but given the hostility felt towards America in many parts of the world, it seems unlikely that even the most carefully crafted musical diplomacy would help very much.

But silence is not an option. Against the attacks being directed against liberal democracy, America and Europe need a renewed public diplomacy capable of defending liberal democracy as the only form of government that, in Abraham Lincoln's words, speaks to "the better angels of our nature" (Lincoln). This does not mean PR, "counter-narratives," or the type of manipulative "messaging" that tries to put a positive spin on real problems. Rather it means candid and open

4 There is one subgenre of country music, broadly defined, which the US government has sponsored overseas, and that is bluegrass. Created in the 1940s by the Kentucky musician Bill Monroe, bluegrass survives today as a "roots" style performed with creative variations by groups such as the Stash Wyslouch String Band, a group that has toured with the State Department's American Music Abroad program. However, a few moments of listening will reveal pronounced differences between bluegrass and Nashville country as exemplified by Hank Williams, George Jones, Loretta Lynn, Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton, Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson, and the like. Rarely, if ever, have these Nashville performers been invited to serve as "musical ambassadors."

discussion of those problems, to show that democracy is better than dictatorship at facing hard facts and devising solutions that do not oppress the powerless. Such a renewed public diplomacy would be effective precisely because so many people around the world are forbidden to speak their minds on any topic of public significance. And it would be even more effective if accompanied by the right music!

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