

## Making Music Politics – Around the World in A Song<sup>1</sup>

M.I. Franklin

### *Intro*

In 2016, the singer-songwriter, Bob Dylan, was awarded the 113<sup>th</sup> Nobel Prize for Literature, in recognition for "having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition"<sup>2</sup>. This made Dylan the first American laureate for literature since Toni Morrison, the African-American novelist, in 1993. Much media attention was devoted to the fact that Dylan was not only the first musician to receive this internationally prestigious award but also that, in so doing, the Nobel Committee was granting him the status of a "great poet in the English-speaking tradition"<sup>3</sup>. Amidst debates about whether or not this decision erased the longstanding divide between 'high' art – classical art music and popular, commercially successful 'low' art – folk/pop music<sup>4</sup>, Dylan's media silence signalled a seeming indifference to the iconic status of this Nobel Prize. He was performing in Las Vegas at the time apparently. Despite eventually accepting the award, Dylan kept his distance by delegating Patti Smith, another singer-songwriter - and 'punk poet', to receive the prize on his behalf. Her, less-than-word-perfect, rendition of "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" (released in 1962) generated another wave of media commentary; about the significance of Dylan's continued absence and Smith 'blinking out' on the lyrics part-way through the performance.<sup>5</sup>

This scenario encapsulates some of the complexities of any discussion about the interplay between arts and culture (music in this case) and politics today. This is a time in which the world's super-powers, corporations, and various sorts of civil society organizations can be seen interacting in the 'post-Westphalian', internet media-dependent venues in which international relations now unfold, and through which inter-cultural exchange, geopolitical power-plays are performed and mediatized<sup>6</sup>. These shifts in locale, types of venue, terms of access, and the demographics of participation and authority beg the question of demarcation as well as of definition. Where to draw the line between one domain and another in order to consider where, and how actors make a difference; how to identify those human, but also techno-economic, military, cultural, and legal forces that sustain, or resist the status quo?

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<sup>1</sup> An abridged version of this essay appears in *Music and International Relations*, [Provisional title/German language] edited by Roland Grätz and Christian Höppner, Stuttgart: Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen / Deutscher Musikrat (German Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations/German Music Council), 2018 (in press)

<sup>2</sup> Nobelprize.org (2018)

<sup>3</sup> Sara Danius, cited in Smith-Spark (2016). See also Sisario et al (2016), Ellis-Peterson and Flood (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Pasler (2008), Said (1992), Longhurst and Bogdanović (2014)

<sup>5</sup> Some media reports focused on Smith's self-confessed nerves in her "emotional rendition" of the song (Kreps 2016) whilst others spoke of her 'bungling' the performance. The moment is preserved on YouTube so readers can decide for themselves, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=941PHEJHCwU>

<sup>6</sup> Fraser (2007), Rai and Reinelt (2015), Doran (2017), Feldman (2017)

In the case of *international relations*, do formal relationships between sovereign states adequately determine the field of action, or take account of all the possible, non-state actors also looking to make a difference in the world? However construed - some prefer the terms *world politics* or *global politics*<sup>7</sup>, these dynamics are anchored in the troubled history of the modern nation-state, and that of its multilateral institutions ostensibly enforcing the international law and norms that underpin 'world order'. Debates have focused on how polities should respond to the burgeoning constellations of *supraterritorial* techno-economic forces that are rewiring the rules of political representation, and cultural engagement. These overt, and covert powers have been redefining notions of belonging based on sovereign entitlement, territorial jurisdiction, citizenship, and the ownership and control of cultural heritage accordingly<sup>8</sup>. As for demarcating different categories, 'genres' of (pop) music, songs in particular, a comparable question arises. Are lyrics the only determining element in "what makes music work"<sup>9</sup>, to how people experience, or understand any music these days? The Nobel Prize for literature was for Dylan's *lyrics*, not his musical output, nor for his live performances. In this way the award reinforces the idea that depth of meaning, and artistic value resides with *logos*, the written word<sup>10</sup>. In this understanding music, broadly defined as various sorts of sensual 'organized sound', serves simply as an accompaniment.

I want to challenge these associations; first, because they rest on unquestioning emotional ties to the tonal 'home' upon which western harmonies, based on the major and minor scale, are based. This socialized sense of tonality is at the heart of western popular, and to a large degree, classical art music up until the mid-twentieth century at least. This acquired way of hearing certain organizations of sounds as music (or not) is part of a wider discourse in histories of western music and society that articulate an underlying quest for symmetry,

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<sup>7</sup> Caso and Hamilton (2015), Zehfuss and Edkins (2013)

<sup>8</sup> Jan Aart Scholte (2000) and Arjun Appadurai (2002) provide authoritative reconsiderations of the term 'globalization'. I discuss these ideas more fully in Franklin (2005, 2011, 2013), Davies and Franklin (2015). See also Jameson (1984), Harvey (1990), Habermas (1998), Chowdhry and Nair (eds, 2002), Inda and Rosaldo (eds, 2002), Shapiro (2004), and Kulesza and Balleste (eds, 2015) for a range of other approaches to thinking about what large-scale changes in the physical and symbolic ordering of the socio-economic and political world means for local, and national axes of cultural life and society.

<sup>9</sup> This is the title of Talking Heads' former frontman, David Byrne's book on what makes a piece of music 'work' as well as how making music has been affected by technological, economic, and cultural changes. This discussion follows Byrne's emphasis on the multiple dimensions to the contexts in which any music is conceived, performed, and experienced (2012: 10). This position straddles popular music research and developments in theory and research into classical art music, in the west in particular as these schools of thought take their distance from the 'absolute music' tradition that considers music in the abstract rather than as socioculturally, political, or techno-economically constituted (Said 1992, Barenboim and Said 2003, Barrett 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Patti Smith and Bob Dylan are, however, also published authors. Smith began as a poet – heavily influenced by Rimbaud, and has published two volumes of her memoirs (2010, 2015). Dylan's memoir, *Chronicles Volume One* (2005), along with the Smith's first volume about her relationship with the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and the beginning of her musical career, *Just Kids* (2010), have been bestsellers and book-award winners. That said their main output has been writing and performing music.

progression, and assurances that the direction in which cultural influence, creative practices *should* flow is towards resolution: Back to the tonic – home<sup>11</sup>. Second, because these associations undergird a widespread assumption that there is but one aesthetic position, one experiential axis from which to measure, or evaluate differing cultural forces, as these are expressed musically.

This essay explores another approach to these relationships through an example of how a song travels through different, even competing musical cultures and political sensibilities. This example helps shed light on the uneven cultural geographies of musical meaning-making, within the commercial capriciousness of a global music industry that, nonetheless, cannot completely control the ways in which music travels. Nor can these economic sovereigns (the so-called Music Majors) completely dictate to whom broader cultures of musical practices ‘belong’, or how people respond as these practices circulate through diverse locations of entitlement and experience.

## Reverberations

Back to the winter of 2016 in Stockholm, as Patti Smith takes to the stage, dressed in a formal-like white shirt under her trademark, black over-coat, and waits at the microphone for her cue to the first verse of ‘A Hard Rain’. Longstanding debates about whether ‘globalization’ is effectively a euphemism for ‘Americanization’, if not western ‘cultural imperialism’ are evoked as Smith embodies the influence that her generation’s “musico-literary” national cultures have had on the emotional and political sensibilities of successive generations around the world<sup>12</sup>. Both she and Dylan were born in the 1940’s, and made their mark in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, New York underground cultural scenes as these intersected with the rapid internationalization of anti-Vietnam war and civil rights protest movements of the time. Yet here ‘they’ are, accepting an honour in a European cultural institution that officially precludes music as one of the Nobel Foundation’s sponsored categories. Dylan’s accepting the prize whilst cold-shouldering the public ritual of the award ceremony underscores the crosscurrents of cultural ownership that run along the breadth, and depth of the global reach that American popular culture has into other societies, through the market dominance of its film, television, and music conglomerations in particular.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “Do Re Mi”, from Rogers and Hammerstein’s 1963 Hollywood musical, *The Sound of Music*, provides as good an example as any of the way in which a culture inculcates its respective scales, sonic cultures (this historical setting for the story, and related musical cues in the score notwithstanding); in this case the major and minor tonal harmonies as the norm in the western musical tradition. Jacques Attali’s *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1989) is a prominent example of this line of thought. Alex Ross (2010, 2011) provides a more nuanced exploration of the relationship between (late) modernity and western classical music, as do Barenboim and Said (2003), and Said (1992). Barrett (2016), however, deconstructs this whole enterprise by questioning the very supposition that ‘music’ is defined by its sonic qualities, as sound. The writings of Theodor Adorno on music, weave in and out of these treatises by virtue of his commitment to both critiquing and reconceptualising the sociocultural and political potential of western classical art music tradition, not popular music. See Witkin (1998), and Adorno (2002).

<sup>12</sup> Shapiro (2006). See also Inayatullah (2016), Miller/DJ Spooky (2010), Gilroy (1993), Monson (2003), Saha (2012), and Zuberi (2017).

<sup>13</sup> As for the development of ‘Nobel Prize’ awards for other categories such as music, these have been sponsored by a range of corporations and foundations such as Siemens and, in the case, of the ‘Nobel Prize for

The extensiveness of this reach has gone hand-in-hand with the historical trajectory of US military and geopolitical power, but also with expressions of individual, community, and organized resistances to that power, from within the North American region and elsewhere. These dynamics are regularly played out in the theatre of multilateral institutions - from the UN to the World Trade Organization, national legislatures, events in art galleries and cultural centres, through the playlists of radio stations, and public and private television programming-decisions. Worldwide waves of mobilization around civil rights, women's liberation, and anti-racism from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century have inspired, and carried rich and widely appreciated soundtracks made up of many traditions, starting new music/s on the way. Those rooted in the African-American experience, of slavery and racial segregation, continue to express and challenge the racial cleavage that still defines American public life, however. In so doing they constantly re-echo these other histories, invert the triumphant narrative of Anglo-American (read; white, settler) economic and military prowess, political and cultural *exceptionalism*. Dylan's oeuvre encapsulates one musical-narrative arc of experience and possible dissent to these forces, even though he has publicly rejected being labelled a political artist.

Other singer-songwriter-authors have been less coy about the political reverberations in which they work. The late Gil Scott Heron - heralded as a 'New Black Poet' with the release of his first album, *Small Talk at 125<sup>th</sup> and Lennox*, in 1970, was from the same generation as Bob Dylan and Patti Smith. Heron devoted his whole career to voicing these contradictions, re-scoring and so making audible silences in the official play-list, and business model of the largely US-owned global arts and entertainment industry. He also played no small part in the success of mobilization, led by Stevie Wonder, to establish a national holiday to commemorate Dr Martin Luther King. Heron did this as a pioneering exponent of another sort of "musicking"; one that is now a global market-leader in music sales, a dominant commercial and cultural force in its own right<sup>14</sup>. Emerging from poor, Black urban neighbourhoods in the US East - and then West Coast in the 1970's - 1980's, rap/hip-hop is embedded in socially and politically *conscious* music-making that comments on the frustrations, violence and injustices of socio-economic deprivation and racism in the everyday lives of millions of Black Americans and so resonating with these exclusions in other parts of the world.

Rap and hip-hop as a musical/spoken-word practice draws on African/African diasporic musical cultures (rhythms, beats, and instruments), Jamaican reggae and dub traditions (improvisation, 'scratching' techniques with record turntables, the dialogue between MC and audience, and the 'selector' influence of *Deejaying*). From the outset it made free use of African-American blues and jazz musical cultures through a range of lo-tech, and later digital

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Music', the Polar Prize, by music industry moguls like Stig Anderson who was manager of the Swedish band ABBA. Smith was awarded this prize in 2011 for "devoting her life to art in all its forms [demonstrating] how much rock'n'roll there is in poetry and how much poetry there is in rock'n'roll. Patti Smith is a Rimbaud with Marshall amps" (Polarmusicprize.org 2011).

<sup>14</sup> *Musicking* is a term coined by Christopher Small (1998), see also Mowitt (2002: 211). Scott Heron preferred to call himself a "Bluesologist" (Scott Heron 2010).

technological innovations such as *sampling*, that are now commonplace. Borrowing, directly or indirectly through figurative and literal forms of musical quotations, said 'sampling', generates a complex interplay between horizontal and vertical layers that move the track along, and hold it together<sup>15</sup>. Rap and hip-hop infuses the formal properties of the spoken (rather than the written) word, 'lyrics', with a particular sort of delivery and musicality, spoken/sung as both rhythmic and literary forces. These are part of an intra-cultural and intergenerational conversation as the artist refers to, and thereby recognizes - 'respects' - her cultural precursors and contemporaries. This process is known, in the vernacular, as *signifyin'*.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1970 track, "Whitey on the Moon", a sardonic commentary on the Space Race, in which the USA and Soviet Union spent billions to put humans into outer space and then on the moon, Heron asks over the single, conga rhythm:

...With all that money I made last year  
For whitey on the moon  
How come I ain't got no money here?  
Hmm, whitey's on the moon

You know I just about had my fill  
Of whitey on the moon  
I think I'll send these doctor bills  
airmail special  
(To whitey on the moon)

In late 2016, the Nobel Prize award ceremony, taking place between the election and inauguration of Donald Trump as US President, touched on a contemporary articulation of these issues. This is mass mobilization around the world, online and through traditional outlets, against the ongoing lack of diversity in linguistic, racial, ethnic, and gender representation in national but also international cultural domains, and media spectacles, where achievement is celebrated. The domestic, and foreign policy implications of the incoming US President's disinterest if not hostility to these concerns cast another light on the significance of Patti Smith acting as Dylan's proxy, and her choice of this song. The original meaning of the opaque lyrics of 'A Hard Rain' are still debated today even as

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<sup>15</sup> See Katz (2004), and Laderman and Westrup (2014).

<sup>16</sup> See Gates (1988: xxix-xxxiii). It bears noting that commercialized forms of rap and hip-hop, branded as *Gangsta Rap*, have dominated global sales (Richards 2018). Concerns about overtly misogynist if not violent references in the lyrics, and depiction of women in videos have preoccupied researchers as well as rap and hip-hop artists since the first releases, back in the late 1970's and early 1980's. See Rose (1994) and Krims (2000) for benchmark explorations of rap and hip-hop as music, poetics, and political expression along race, but also class lines as this music has reached all corners of the globe, shaped and anchored in the respective issues of these non-US societies. Rap and Hip-Hop acts, in the US, the UK and around the world have responded to the Black Lives Matter campaign, inner-city violence, and events such as the US Presidential elections in recent years. The website, <https://www.themaven.net> has a top-twenty list going back to the early years of political rap and hip-hop for instance, lest we forget.

precisely for that reason their meaning, and the musical setting, can be adapted to changing historical contexts. But the pessimism of the lyrical reiterations of its title is clear.

### **Music Travels - Listen to this, again**

This section focuses on one case in order to explore how exactly, as a sonic but also literary art form and mode of performance, any music travels. It offers ways to unpack how musicians and their collaborators deploy a piece of music, musically, for a range of sometimes competing agendas.

The example is a popular song from the 1960's that originated in France, embedded in the French-language *chanson* tradition and its pantheon of superstars (Claude François, France Gall, Jacques Brel for instance). The song has come a long way since then. Travelling, first, across the Channel to the UK briefly but then onwards across the Atlantic to become, *My Way*, it was a chart-topper for both Frank Sinatra (1969) and Elvis Presley (1973); covered and caricatured hundreds of times since then. The discussion below explores what happens when a song is "sounded" in different musical ways and then made to reverberate with various sociocultural or political contexts. Even without lyrics that are explicitly political, or forms of social commentary on current events, a pop song can also emerge as a 'conscious' contribution to wider issues.

The original song, entitled *Comme d'habitude*, was co-written by Jacque Revaux and Claude François, who released it in 1967. The melancholy title ('As usual' or, rather, to fit the melodic line; 'like you/I always do') and lyrical storyline are carried by a simple, sing-able melody which is based on the upward movement of an interval called a *rising 6<sup>th</sup>*<sup>17</sup>. The original lyric ruminates on the pending end of a relationship, a common theme in pop songs. It was the American singer-songwriter, Paul Anka, who bought the rights to adapt the song. David Bowie attempted his own text over the original melody with considerably less success (according to Bowie) at about the same time. Anka changed the words, the number of stanzas and, the title. The first line, "And now, the end is near, I face the final curtain..." shifts the sentiment, the life-time trajectory and, at least as far as the lyrics go, alter the meaning of the song; from bitter-sweet ruminations on a relationship ending to an, arguably, defiant affirmation of individual agency and determination; "I did it my way"<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> The song opens with the first "rising (major) 6<sup>th</sup>", namely a melodic phrase based on two pitches separated by six notes (do, re, mi, fa, so, la). On piano or keyboard, if in F-major, this would be Middle-C (Do) to A (La) for the first words, "And now...". This interval can move, be transposed, upwards or downwards with different bottom notes, though where you end up with the higher note, can change the effect, sonically. In *My Way* the second rising 6<sup>th</sup> (if in F-Major) for the second verse moves up one note, starting in this case on D and ending on B-flat. This second melodic phrase for the second verse, "My friend, I'll say it clear..., is thereby a minor 6<sup>th</sup>", sounding one semi-tone lower than the preceding interval, with a different inflection as a result.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Anka negotiated the rights to adapt and record, sharing the proceeds with Revaux and Francois, until the French entrepreneur Xavier Niel bought the French rights in 2009. Anka apparently considered the original a "shitty" song but one with potential. In later interviews he takes a propriety attitude in references to "my song". Value judgments aside about either the original lyrics, Anka's version, or the musical qualities of the composition itself (which I would argue is both a well-written lyric and well-structured song of its sort), Anka is being rather disingenuous about why the song has been covered so many times and, in the cases below, across many musical idioms. Frank Sinatra apparently despised the "self-indulgent" nature of the Anka version, despite its record-breaking sales (BBC 2000).

This case is a quintessential example of 1960's 'crooning'<sup>19</sup>. This malleability is one clue, perhaps, to the song's longevity. As we will see below, it allows artists to articulate an inner world of emotions and at the same time - in the same bar, or breath even, gesture towards broader societal issues. The melodic structure and basic harmonic lines did not change significantly between the original and Anka's adaptation, however. But this is not why this example is of interest to this inquiry, the immediate impact that changing a lyric can have on how people can respond to a song notwithstanding. It is the geocultural and symbolic border-crossing qualities to this song's inter-national, and intra-cultural trajectory over the last fifty years that provide insights, on listening again, into the dynamism, the porousness of any musical tradition, or artefact, as it travels through time and (cyber)space. These shifts emerge as performers re-adapt, and then re-deploy the musical elements in question. Precisely because the lyrics of this song are not overtly political, neither in the original French, nor English versions, how these shifts in register resonate with not only the sociopolitical but also the commercial context in which they emerge becomes possible to follow, and hear.

In 1978, the song took on a completely different, socially antagonistic demeanour when Sid Vicious, from the British Punk band, The Sex Pistols, covered it. The video-clip of this version, taken from the album, and film called "The Great Rock and Roll Swindle" (Dir. Julien Temple, 1979), opens with Vicious descending a staircase onto the stage to a descending orchestral glissando. In a white blazer (crooner-style), Vicious takes to the microphone and sneeringly sings, off-key, the first four verses (sixteen bars); "And, now, the end is near". At the moment of the first repeat of the melody (four more verses) the punk intentions become clear. There is brief pause, orchestral glissando again, and then the rhythm doubles with 'pulsating' electric guitar as Vicious modulates to punk vocal, along with the usual repertoire of punk gestures. The audience is pictured as both shocked, and in raptures at the sudden shift in speed and sentiment, as Vicious makes up some of the lyrics, expletives included.

The effect of this break from the archetypical delivery of this song was electrifying at the time and it still is, for more reasons than the visual cues might suggest<sup>20</sup>. The double-target is clear, mainstream classical concert cultures and, on the other hand, the trappings of fame and fandom - punk made audience-confrontation an intrinsic element in the performance - that sustains the music business. The video ends with Vicious pulling a gun, and then

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<sup>19</sup> The song was featured in an episode of the BBC Arena series, aired in 1979 on BBC 2 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/profiles/5cSdD53NknkB4nWXRKCWwd4/the-origins-of-my-way>. This program focuses on differences in how people (from the street to organist and choral-masters, to professors of musicology) perform the song but in particular how best to interpret the Anka lyrics, as an expression of supreme egotism or a celebration of individual determination against the odds? This focus appears at odds with the range of musical settings, serious and tongue-in-cheek, that are threaded throughout these opinions about the English lyric.

<sup>20</sup> The conventional delivery is without major changes in speed, or rhythm throughout the performance, differences in orchestration or instrumental interludes notwithstanding. The emotional tension is achieved through the rising melodic lines that take the last verse of the song, beginning "For what is a man [sic], what has he got..." upwards, heading back to the home-key yet on a 'high'.

shooting into the audience of mostly older white, well-dressed concertgoers. Pandemonium, punk-style, ensues visually and sonically. Vicious gestures obscenely to his 'victims', to then re-ascend the staircase. He did it not just '*His Way*' but '*Another Way*'. This version encapsulates the challenge of Punk as the transgressive youth movement of the day. It also signals some of its future contradictions as a musical innovation, and shifting status over the next forty-odd years; from a grassroots form of socio-economic protest against the vested order of class and privilege to a global, and commercial phenomenon encompassing fashion, alternative media, and major publishing outlets, and archive for subsequent counter-cultural statements<sup>21</sup>. Vicious (20 years old at the time) takes this crooner-classic well out of its comfort-zone, and original social context in order to "sound" another sensibility about status, value, and what counts musically.

Issues of class-exclusion and identity politics are evoked in this Punk version of *My Way*. Other approaches to the song trace the race dimensions at the intersection of class and gender axes of exclusion, in life and in the music business. The first is characterized by the formative musical contribution, not only the commercial success, of Black artists across the racially encoded commercial divide that still governs the global business model of music marketing and its African/African-American centres of gravity. These other examples throw into relief inter-generational dynamics of race, gender and sexuality when considered in light of the entrenched under-representation of women composers and musicians, in classical art-music and popular music domains as well as in writing about music<sup>22</sup>. The African-American singer-songwriter, and classically trained musician, Nina Simone, exemplifies these dynamics. Like Gil Scott Heron, Simone (born Eunice Kathleen Waymon) was raised in the southern states of the USA. She became prominent during the 1960's civil rights struggles led by Martin Luther King, at his side in the March on the Selma to Montgomery (Alabama) marches in 1965. Simone penned a number of world-renowned anthems of the Civil Rights movement and was politically outspoken all her life. She eventually left the US (claiming that she was pursued and threatened by the authorities) to live and perform in exile, in Africa (Liberia) and France, where she died in 2003, at the age of seventy.

In 1971, Simone, released her (single) version of *My Way*, with RCA Victor Records. It was included on the *Here Come's the Sun* album of the same year. The audio of this release is (currently) available on YouTube<sup>23</sup>. One of the hundreds of comments on this clip, posted by Gérard Derwael in 2017, goes to some length to articulate what makes it so striking. For this listener, Nina Simone has

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<sup>21</sup> There is a burgeoning literature on the working class-gender, and ethnicity/race-implications of punk music and its global spread since. See Davies (2005), Dunn (2016), and Reddington (2007) for instance.

<sup>22</sup> On International Women's Day, 8 March 2017, the BBC Classical music radio station BBC3, devoted the whole day to women composers. It was not difficult to fill the playlist. Since then there is evidence of a bit more effort being made to include women composers as a rule, beyond the output of Clara Schumann and annual commemorations of the ongoing gaps in pay, and access for women in the music business.

<sup>23</sup> The single was released in France, Spain and the Netherlands between 1971 and 1972 with the original French title on the first two releases' sleeve.

“Had the good sense not to make a schmaltzy version as is often the case... Rather to give it an unbelievable [*dingue*] rhythm...that is punctuated along the way as if to show that life is also made up of brutal accidents. And the stroke of genius of the last minute (1’ 15”) of instrumental... that continues to support this rhythm as the strings build in intensity a whole new melodic line.”<sup>24</sup>

I will discuss these ‘punctuations’ below. Suffice it to say that the version referred to above is two minutes longer than usual, by virtue of this long instrumental at the end. Simone’s vocal on the title-line is never quite the same on each return and it is these variations on those five words, those nuances on the rising 6ths, chromatic lines, in her melodic shaping that are, in themselves, worth concentrating on whilst listening.

But it is another clip, of a more stripped-down, live studio-session of this arrangement with only keyboard and rhythm sections (no orchestra, no backing vocals), that makes it possible to see, as well as hear how Simone re-situates this song, taking it into quite a different place than versions had to date<sup>25</sup>. She stays true to Anka’s lyrics but it is in the high velocity rhythm that has her vocal delivery shifting from melodic to a more emphatic, dynamically urgent emphasis. In this manner Simone is able to convey quite another sentiment; not one that is “self-indulgent” as Sinatra would have claimed. What is so ‘unbelievable’ [*dingue*] about the rhythmic power of this studio mix of the single, for anyone accustomed to the standard version, is the prominence of the percussion. Afro-Caribbean bongos provide a rapid, challenging counterpoint to the melodic line from Simone as it creates a counterweight to the recurring, sweetly rising melodic phrase on piano. These three lines – vocal, keyboard, percussion - generate a complex texture, and quite another pulse. The galloping, increasingly intense rhythmic patterns on the bongos take Simone’s vocals, and her body as it happens, not only forwards but also around, and outwards. For she also moves, dances in and out towards the pull of the percussion as the song builds to its rhythmic rather than the usual, melodic climax and harmonic resolution.

One more sort of punctuation, another interpolation also sets this version apart. This is the interlude (‘interruption’) between sections in which Simone changes the accent on the delivery of the title line. Briefly pausing, she rat-a-tat-tats the phrase ‘I did it my way’ that fuses with a four-beat rhythm, played in unison, from the percussion and keyboards;

‘I did it *myway*  
da da da DA  
da da da DA  
da da da DA

Simone’s inversion of the usual hierarchy between dominant vocal line/lyric and supporting instrumentation changes the emphasis entirely. Her repertoire of ways to intonate, embellish the melodic and rhythmic inflections on the phrase “my way” in both these

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<sup>24</sup> My (rough) translation, the full text is available in the Comments thread below this clip. See Note 24 below.

<sup>25</sup> The audio of the French release is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45BqY0cpapQ>. The film of the studio session is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5slKnOULnU>.

versions notwithstanding, the stress here is somewhere else. It is no longer on the penultimate syllable – I did it MYYYY way, reiterated any number of times in grand finales (these five words-syllables are usually held for at least four beats, extended and modulated upwards in varying degrees of volume, or emotional embellishment by the vocalist). In so doing, the addressee and positioning of the subject/object relations within the manifest content shifts as well; *myway* as rage but also as part of an intimate conversation with another; male other as Simone then subtly shifts the line ‘what is a man, what has he got’ to ‘what is a man what have you got---’ in the last third of this studio performance<sup>26</sup>. The Afro-Caribbean rhythm, jazz keyboard inflections, and Gospel-based delivery are part of three, interwoven yet equal sonic lines. *My Way* has crossed the racialized genre-gender divide, redrawn it, thrown it back, and “*spat* it out”<sup>27</sup>.

One other version should suffice to complete this discussion. It is by another Nina, Nina Hagen. Hagen also improvises, extends, and reshapes the piece in a ways quite similar to the Punk version now identified with Sid Vicious. Hagen, raised in East Berlin and trained as an opera-singer with a complex and not uncontroversial relationship to her East German roots and career in the West, has been covering this song for some time. One of two versions can be heard in the live recording of one of two concerts held as the Berlin Wall collapsed in 1989. The one that Hagen took part in was a rock concert. The other was a classical concert, of Beethoven and Mozart, conducted by Daniel Barenboim<sup>28</sup>. There is, however, an earlier version from 1978 that comes very close to the Sid Vicious cover, which was recorded in April 1978 in Paris, according to one source, though only released in 1979<sup>29</sup>. The similarities (if not in the vocal pyrotechnics) include the opening glissando - on synthesizer in the Hagen’s version, slow intro and transition to loud, fast, and raucous, albeit with a different sort of guitar riff to segue from ballad to punk-rock anthem. In both performances, Hagen also proceeds to improvise, in German<sup>30</sup>. The decade separating these

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<sup>26</sup> For the Anka version at least. The original French version ends with a fade-out. This is where Paul Anka’s revised lyrics changes the original sentiment whilst maintaining the original five notes of the melodic line/five-syllable. In the French this is not five words but three pronounced as five syllables: “comme --d’hab--i--tu--de”. The stress on the syllable “tu” could imply the addressee here in François’s lament but the point here is that the English version is in the first person, the subject singing alone, not just in the manifest content of the lyric but also through the melodic and rhythmic emphasis. This is where Nina Simone’s version transgresses this male archetype of the liberal subject as well.

<sup>27</sup> Simone delivers those lines (l’ 44”), “ I ate it up, and spat it out, I ----- stood tall, I did it my-way.-... “ by roaring, figuratively spitting the words out, to then hold the first person (I) for four beats before moving into the aforementioned rhythmic motif on *myway*. In these respects her delivery, from a different musico-time and politico-cultural place, presages later punk versions.

<sup>28</sup> The latter, classical program was entitled *the 1989 concert for citizens of the GDR*. It took place on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1989, still available online at the Berlin Philharmonic’s *Digital Concert Hall* website at <https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/22093>. Hagen performed her version of *My Way* at the other event, a free concert organized by the radio station, Senders Freies Berlin (SFB), two days earlier. It was eventually released in 2014 as a compilation with Universal Music’s Panorama label as *Mauerfall – Das legendäre Konzert für Berlin ’89* (KlassikAkzente 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Géant-Vert (2004),

two performances provide their own slant on her lyrics, then and in retrospect. The “I” of ‘my way’ is now a “We” before, and after the geopolitical, and cultural significance of the collapse of the Berlin Wall; ostensibly signalling the ‘end’ of the Cold War and the beginning of the ‘end of history’.

### Whose World is Audible?

“These are *political* frequencies”<sup>31</sup>

The word “analysis” easily associates itself in music with the idea of all that is dead, sterile and farthest removed from the living work of art. One can well say that the general underlying feeling toward musical analysis is not exactly friendly.”<sup>32</sup>

Thinking through how politics and music-making are interconnected, across a spectrum of audible, psycho-emotional and visceral domains, that now travel digitally and through internet-enabled channels, opens up other ways of listening to, and thinking about familiar music. These openings require analytical approaches that can consider music/s as mobile rather than static artefacts or cultural practices, passive instruments for domination, or transparent soundtracks for liberation struggles. This discussion has aimed to show, in musical terms, how political forces that are also cultural dynamics of power are discernible within even the most popular, if not hackneyed pieces. In so doing I have been aware of Adorno’s warning above on how ‘living works of art’ defy analysis. Aware of the limits to his own listening parameters, however, I have also aimed to follow his cue that musical analysis need not only be about describing formal structures (harmony, melody, rhythm and other ‘materials of music’). Rather that it includes developing ways to engage in “structural listening [to] what is going on, musically, *underneath* these formal schemata”<sup>33</sup>. Getting underneath also involves considering what is going on, culturally as well as musically *around* the analytical, or commercial categories that distinguish one musical form, communities of practice, measure of creativity, from one another. This approach means breaking the habit of locating the political, or any other meaning in the literal, lyrical content alone.

By way of summing up, several issues bear reiterating in light of this discussion. First, the cultural and political spheres, however demarcated these may be from one another in the literature or through institutionalized communities of practice and taste, are not *a priori* separate domains of human endeavour with mutually exclusive hierarchies of power,

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<sup>30</sup> The clip from Hagen’s 1978 performance is taken from a show in Dortmund, in December of that year, also available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHEwCagBtN0>. Lyrically, this version is mostly her own, German take on the lyrics (“*Die Welt ist so kaputt....*”) after delivering the first verse of the English lyric

<sup>31</sup> Aniruddha Das (Asian Dub Foundation) speaking at the *Strictly Vinyl* Conference, January 2018, Goldsmiths University of London (original emphasis).

<sup>32</sup> Adorno ([1969] 2002: 162)

<sup>33</sup> Adorno ([1969] 2002: 164, original emphasis): Ross (2010) and Byrne (2012) pursue similar, though more musically expansive lines of inquiry.

privilege, and influence. But this does not mean to say that these two domains are synonymous, or to deny that music/s can be manipulated, or repressed for political agendas. The historical record shows many examples of musicians, like other artists, grappling with the impositions, indeed dangers, of upsetting incumbent powers<sup>34</sup>. What I have tried to show through the case of *My Way*, is that *how* a piece of music (re)articulates politics, conforms to - or defies - powerful forces of control and obedience, can be literal only up to a point in light of how musicians use the power of suggestion, connotation, and interplays between familiar and introduced sonic and lyrical (as the case may be) elements.

In the second instance, the Nobel Prize “rebranding” of Bob Dylan’s musico-poetics as ‘high art’ throws into relief the gatekeeping powers of cultural institutions, at home but also abroad as they seek to keep at bay culturally suspect art-forms. In this case the honour of inclusion is reserved for a global superstar, whose career is as much embedded in the trajectory of political and social commentary on his work, as it is in the economic hegemony of the Anglo-American “Culture Industry”<sup>35</sup>. Much ink has been spilt to argue that whilst art may want to be political it may not necessarily ‘work’ as good ‘art’. Such concerns are political as much as they are aesthetic and, thereby, cultural and ethical questions<sup>36</sup>. Many artists and musicians, several of whom have been discussed here, have combined their political and artistic commitments effectively, and without any sense that there need be a compromise. Vested interests, political and economic powers of ownership and control continually look to take charge of any cultural agenda - from funding through to programming. For centuries, musicians, like any other artists, have been navigating these minefields of patronage, copyright, legitimacy, creative autonomy, and obstacles to dissemination.

Third, this discussion reconsiders questions about how music communicates, and for what purpose, in order to suggest that such an inquiry, whatever the disciplinary perspective or musical preference, needs rephrasing. Music, defined beyond its formal structures, has

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<sup>34</sup> The examples are many. They include controversies over the political associations, and affiliations of major figures in the classical tradition, from Beethoven and Wagner to Shostakovich (Ross 2010, Barenboim 2003). They include how the arts and contemporary music became part of the geopolitical and financial webs undergirding the US-backed Congress of Cultural Freedom and its Soviet Union counterpart in the Cold War era. As noted earlier, music has been an integral force in freedom struggles, and protest movements; e.g. in the 1960’s anti-war and civil rights movements, through to that era’s mass mobilization in decolonization struggles around the world, the global anti-apartheid movement and, more recently, the sonic practices and music-making of the Gezi Park and “Umbrella” political protest movements in Turkey and Hong Kong respectively (Şener 2013, Ozturkmen and Martin 2014, Rühlig 2016, Miller/DJ Spooky 2004, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> This, highly influential phrase was coined by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno [1944] 2002) and then developed further by Adorno in his political philosophy of “new music”, one that eschews not only all forms of jazz and commercial musical forms, like the pop song, but also other classical composers who, in his trenchant view, conformed to rather than challenged the vested order [1938] 2002. The ghost of Adorno haunts all those who write about music. David Byrne, for instance, dismisses him as a “grumpy” (2012: 99) complainer whilst conceding that in many ways, he had a point. Alex Ross takes a similar line (2010, 2011). Robert Witkin explores these issues in Adorno’s work more fully (1998), without resolving the tensions.

<sup>36</sup> Irvine Welsh, author of *Trainspotting*, was reported as being unimpressed with Dylan even accepting the prize for instance.

always travelled, geographically and, nowadays, through all sorts of informal, and commercialised computer-networked domains. The communities of practice, and the artefacts that are produced when people, as individuals, groups or communities, come together to make and listen to any sort of music need to be considered, thereby, not in isolation. Rather they need to be apprehended as complex wholes, “travelling cultures” that are not entirely reducible to their socio-historical timelines, or politico-cultural associations<sup>37</sup>. Moreover, as a predominantly sonic, spontaneous and yet also consciously crafted force, music/s also travel physically; through the airwaves as beat, pulsations in varying frequencies, vibrations, as acoustic or amplified volumes of sound organized as melody, chord clusters, vocal or instrumental configurations, pitch and rhythm. People were singing, making and playing “found” or crafted instruments, and sonically-poetically articulating the world around them long before the portable audio cultures that emerged with the invention of recording technologies; from the phonograph, through to the tape recorder, Walkman, Discman, iPod and, 24/7 live-streaming services.

In this respect, it is a truism to observe that music is everywhere, even when it is being heard in places some might prefer it not be – from the thud of the neighbour’s sound-system on the other side of the wall, to tailor-made forms of background *muzak* in lifts, hotel lobbies or shopping malls. It may be everywhere but the diversity, and richness of audio cultures in the round is unevenly available. So, fourth, whilst it is, indeed, an audible world not everyone is listening, or is able to practice, or experience the diversity of these sonic cultures in equal measure. This skewed geocultural terrain is shaped by the preferences for the music of some segments of society. The ability to hear, to be able to listen to music that is unfamiliar in form (neither three-minute pop-song, folk standard, nor classical symphony) or content (unusual harmonies or melodic lines, lyrics in another language, atypical instruments or instrumentation), is also shaped by habit and fashion, socialized by the play-lists of commercial and cultural institutions; from public radio stations through to school and university curricula through to funding for community centres, to concert-hall programs. A key problem in this regard is the undertow in the literature that assumes that there is an “isomorphism” between any music, as practice and artefact, and its provenance. Like all cultural forms, art included, the sociopolitical, if not economic conditions of inception, realization, and reception by others are reconfigured in the act of *musicking*, listening, or remixing. These conditions can affect, and they do inflect what an audience, or circumstantial listener might (be able to) hear.

This is where most of the fiercest debates that patrol the boundaries of writing on western classical art music and other kinds of music - those from other cultures are lumped together under the ‘world music’ rubric of commercial marketing genres - can be found. These boundaries and the way they are defended, or challenged by a musician, or musical culture in question, continue to pervade explorations into the international, say cross-border proclivities of any music making as it articulates dimensions of meaning not reducible to textual or visual terms of reference. Scientists, psychologists, and philosophers of music still argue over whether any sort of music can directly influence attitudes and actions, in an unmediated or decontextualized way. This is another take on the “Absolute Music” tradition

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<sup>37</sup> See Clifford (1997)

of analysis, and performance that characterizes western art music debates<sup>38</sup>. As noted above, the historical record shows that both incumbent and emerging powers - be they social, political, or religious authorities – seek to control cultural life. This includes punitive responses to musical forms of expression and communities deemed culturally suspect, transgressive, or a direct challenge to the status quo. Silencing opposition is, particularly in the case of soundwaves, a physical as well as a political act of violence.

And here lies the paradox, the moment of possibility. Once physical distance made access to the music/s of others difficult for potential, non-accredited listeners. In a time when all sounds can arrive through the airwaves, live-streamed or replayed on analogue (vinyl records and turntable cultures are alive and well) or digital recording devices, symbolic and material borders can be traversed and repurposed. Back-catalogues and innovations can be made accessible by ordinary people wanting others to hear something they want to share, and by musicians<sup>39</sup>. These contemporary tools of re-invention, re-production, and re-circulation characterise the informal, non-commercial dimensions to global circuits of contemporary play-lists, and those retrieving older musical traditions around the world. As powerful agents look to control agendas, responses from artists to the imposition of cemented, rather than the encouragement of ‘invented’ traditions are integral to apprehending how music is made, how it ‘works’, and for whom. These counter-cultural forces can be traced in the objectives of the avant-garde and experimental schools on classical art music from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to challenge the rigidities of the western classical canon, setting up an international network of musical centres on doing do and collaborating with popular music exponents as well. Another sort of pushback is evident in the way that the Do-It-Yourself musical and visual cultures of punk politics, and the *signifyin’* practices of politically conscious rap/hip-hop reinvent themselves for contemporary contexts. Both these sorts of *musicking* initially made their mark by challenging the way that corporations benefit from the revenues raised by licensing and copyright arrangements.

In principle, these digitally networked expressions of the musical arts and cultural life are also protected under the Right to Freedom of Expression and other fundamental rights and freedoms, as laid down in the treaties and covenants that make up international human rights law<sup>40</sup>. These challenges to direct (bans), or indirect (media panics) forms of censorship also include contemporary expressions of cultural - racial and religious – music diversity by successive generations of former colonial subjects living in Europe and, more recently, brought by the 65 million people around the world suffering, but also surviving the hardships of forced displacement. Music is listened to, and made in refugee camps, in

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<sup>38</sup> Barrett (2016) discusses these changes in the historiography of musicology, (popular) music research. See Franklin (2005), Davies and Franklin (2015) on the predominance of the literary and visual tropes in the academic literature.

<sup>39</sup> Byrne (2012: 81-145), Katz (2004), Stratton and Zuberi (2014)

<sup>40</sup> It is easy for overlook that artistic and cultural artefacts also fall under Freedom of Expression protections in this regard. In March, 2018, the German branch of *Reporters Without Borders* launched their Uncensored Playlist campaign in which the work of selected journalists around the world threatened by their respective governments has been put to music and released as an album. See <https://www.uncensoredplaylist.com>

besieged cities as bombs fall, in detention centres on the borders, and in penal institutions. These *musickings* are also travelling cultures and, thereby, have political resonance.

Historical events, experiences of oppression and violence can be evoked, and so called into question in this way because music is a living art. These phenomena need not be confined to an overtly political song, such as Simone's *Young, Gifted, and Black*. It can also happen with the most mainstream examples of music, emanating from any vested order, as artists transform, and reinvent these sounds, musical structures and idioms, in ways that challenge, rather than reproduce sociocultural, economic and political divides along race, class, gender and, nowadays, religion. As they do, these soundings (with, or without words) can, and do travel outwards as they move through, and around all possible worlds, evoking multiplex – mixed, not fixed - cultural imaginaries along the way. That said, and on a more sombre note, who gets the most recognition, the most airplay, if not the most financial recompense is, all too often not these artists.

### **Outro**

In an interview in 1985, Nina Simone speaks about her musical politics, and with that her political philosophy of music, making here no *a priori* distinction between “masters” such as JS Bach and key figures in the canon of what she calls “Black Classical Music” such as John Coltrane or Miles Davis. Her love, and knowledge of the classical canon is clear in this conversation, trained as a classical pianist but refused entry to the music conservatorium in the still segregated south<sup>41</sup>. The interview is either side of her performing in the studio a version of her “first civil rights song” from 1964, *Mississippi Goddam*<sup>42</sup>. What she does midway through playing this, relatively introspective version of the song encapsulates the complexity of this subject matter.

In this performance, Simone transitions in and out of the musical-spoken commentary as she moves sonically and figuratively outwards and back between two historical and socio-political points of reference. The way she plays, and speaks, exemplifies not only her commitment, but also her ability to draw on multiple traditions. It also underscores the ways in which music travels over and *underneath* the formal elements of sonic conventions. Her own songs, and cover versions make audible how music-making comes from more than one place, as it moves other spaces and sensibilities across the lines of material, and invisible sociocultural exclusion. As one interviewee on a radio series about the interplay

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<sup>41</sup> She is referring here to Jazz, Blues, Soul, and Gospel; in an interview some years later, again on the BBC, with Tim Sebastian (BBC HARDTalk 1999). Her pleasure in playing this music, despite her mother's disapproval or her commitment to become “America's first Black classical pianist” is a regular theme in interviews.

<sup>42</sup> See Feldstein (2005) on some of the possible reasons why Simone's artistic and political contribution to key events in American public culture in light of that of others from her generation of artists and activists remains under-recognized. Her absence from the scholarly and popular literature is not only symptomatic of silences around stereotypes of African-American women in music at the intersection of gender power relations, sexuality, and race but also because Simone's politics and music defied pigeonholing. This is down to more than the official narrative of her being a “difficult woman” (Feldstein 2005: 1351, Simone 1992). *The Black Lives Matter* movement, and Box Office success of movies such as *The Black Panther* echo this “rage that stems from the persistent legacy of colonialism” (Curtis 2018).

between the separation of white and black musical cultures in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America recalls, despite the physical realities of racial divisions at the time some commentators note that “the airwaves were not segregated”<sup>43</sup>.

Back to the moment in this performance: Midway, Simone pauses at the piano. Over the ‘honky-tonk’ chord progressions upon which *Mississippi Goddam* is based, she states that this song is written; “as you know, by Nina Simone; very much like in 1932 ... in which at that time Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill wrote another song called *Moon Over Alabama* ... What we’re going to do is combine *Mississippi Goddam* with *Moon Over Alabama*”. Without missing a beat Simone then segues effortlessly into her rendition of *Moon Over Alabama*; along to the same rhythmic pulse as *Mississippi Goddam* adjusting but also riffing on Weill’s melodic line<sup>44</sup>. With a fistful of dissonant chords serving as a bridge, she then modulates back to *Mississippi Goddam*’s first line, “Alabama’s got me so upset...”<sup>45</sup>. The historical associations have been made clear musically. But as the interview continues Simone explains why she chose this track to perform:

“I sing it for two reasons... First it’s one of the biggest songs I ever made. Secondly ... no-one really commemorated or remembered, in my opinion, enough Martin Luther King and *Mississippi Goddam* brings him back ... [she then refers, with pleasure, to the 1984 U2 track, *Pride (in the Name of Love)* that refers to King]... Because youth need to know the history of America. ...They need to know what we did there... [Thanks to this “new band” U2, King] is still alive in the minds and ears of young people. And that is my contribution.”<sup>46</sup>

A national holiday commemorating the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr. eventually passed into American law in 1986. It is observed on the third Monday of January every year. Along with Stevie Wonder, artist-campaigners like Gil Scott Heron and Nina Simone were able to take part in this inaugural holiday. Twenty years for this to happen may indeed be “too slow” (*Mississippi Goddam*). Even in light of the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Music being

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<sup>43</sup> Kip Lornell, in “Part 11: Closing the Racial Gap in Music” from *Honky Tonks, Hymns and the Blues*, NPR Radio, Morning Edition, edited by Tom Cole, presented by Paul Brown, September 12, 2003; <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1428887>. See also Hall (1996), and Gates (1988).

<sup>44</sup> This segment begins at 3’53”in the YouTube clip of this performance taken from the 2003 DVD, *Nina Simone – Live at Ronnie Scott’s* (Dir. Steve Cleary and Rob Lemkin: Quantum Leap), recorded in November, 1985; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SAGKjOTjQcY>. “Moon Over Alabama”, or the “Alabama Song”, is the best-known number from Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht’s satirical operetta, the *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*; *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* - in its original German title. This song, which is sung in English in the German libretto, opens with the lines, “Show me the way to the next whiskey bar ...I tell you we must die (2x)”. The original version, from Lotte Lenya, is also available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-5ata4jDyk>

<sup>45</sup> Feldstein goes into more detail about the political undertones of this song in with lyrics “filled with anger and despair [that] stood in stark contrast to the fast-paced and rollicking rhythm” (2005: 1349-50).

<sup>46</sup> This is a transcript from the clip online, taken from the DVD, *Live at Ronnie Scott’s*, (1984, op cit).

awarded to Kendrick Lamar (for his 2017 album, *DAMN.*)<sup>47</sup>, the sound of Nina Simone's outrage from the 1960's still resonates today.

## Biographical Note

M. I. Franklin (PhD) is Professor of Global Media and Politics at Goldsmiths University of London. This contribution draws on work for two forthcoming books, *Sampling Politics: Music and the Geocultural* (Oxford University Press) and *Change the Record: Punk Women Music Politics* (Transcript). Thanks to Aniruddha Das, Mauricio Escobar, Jakob Horstmann, Shirin Rai, and Raed Yacoub for conversations that have animated this exploration.

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<sup>47</sup> This is the first time the Pulitzer Prize for music (predominately awarded to contemporary classical music - the occasional honouring of jazz musicians notwithstanding) has gone to a Rap artist. After over thirty years since Rap and Hip-Hip music first made its mark as "an implicit conversation about the conjoined legacies of slavery, segregation, police brutality and other hideous injustices" (Richards 2018, Cane 2018) the Pulitzer committee commends Lamar for this "virtuosic song collection unified by its *vernacular authenticity* and *rhythmic dynamism* that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African-American life" (Pulitzer.org 2018, added emphasis).

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