

The Political Power of Song
Jenny Berkel

In 1939, Billie Holiday released “Strange Fruit,” her most powerful and intimate song. Described now as the first great protest song, it was released to a mix of critical acclaim and outrage. On the recording, the sorrow and emotion caught in her voice mimic and bring to life the devastating lyrics. The song draws heavily upon a frightening metaphor, describing black lynched bodies as fruit that hangs on trees. Fearing backlash, Holiday’s label refused to release it. Instead, they allowed her to release the song with a different label. Upon its release, radio DJs across the country refused to play it. At concerts, fearing the crowd’s response, some promoters ordered her not to sing it. In response, Holiday added a clause to her contracts that ensured she maintained the right to sing the song. Despite all of these hurdles, the song found its way to ears across the country; it became a *cause célèbre*, attracting a huge amount of public attention, both positive and negative (Lynskey, 2011). Throughout the history of recorded music, people have recognized the tremendous power of song. In the case of “Strange Fruit,” the music industry was afraid of the potential repercussions of releasing this song into a country rife with racial injustice. Billie Holiday knew the political power of this song, so she continued singing it. While some listeners were enraged, it also helped incite activism against racial injustice.

This story demonstrates the political power of music. There is a potency in music; it can affect listeners deeply. Because of this power, we are consistently faced with the question of artistic freedom in the context of the public sphere. These questions become even more pertinent when art is augmented by the platform fame provides. What role does the famous musician have in society? Do they have a responsibility to be political through their music? Or do they have full license to do whatever they please? I believe that, in general, artists should have full artistic

freedom. However, in a society rife with injustice, famous musicians must be aware of the powerful position provided to them by their platform of fame. Art has a unique ability to influence and transform, in both positive and negative ways. The artist must, therefore, practice awareness and ensure that their art does not perpetuate violence or injustice. Because of the impact music can have, the artistic community (which in this paper will be understood to comprise the music industry and the audience) has the right to create boundaries in order to enhance public well-being. However, unlike in the case of Billie Holiday and “Strange Fruit,” these boundaries should be rooted in progressive values that seek justice and equality. When the artist oversteps these boundaries, the artistic community has a right to nudge the artist towards these values. Thus, in this paper I will argue that famous musicians have a responsibility to be aware of the political power they hold, and to use that power to create positive change.

In the first section, I will outline the common responses to this issue. In the second section, I will demonstrate that music has a unique, transformative power on its listeners; this power means that musicians must wield their craft carefully. In the third section, I will discuss the role of art in society, pointing out the ways in which the well-being of the public can legitimately override an individual’s artistic freedom. In the fourth section, I will demonstrate the role of the artistic community; that is, how the music industry and audience can and should respond to art they deem dangerous.

PART 1

Humans have been questioning the political nature of art and the role of the artist in society for thousands of years. Indeed, in the Western tradition, the question of how art and politics intertwine can be traced all the way back to Plato and Aristotle. The debate continues today and has become even more pertinent in a globalized world where art is mass-produced and

the artist's audience is broader than ever before. Popular songs on Youtube can receive millions, or even billions, of plays from around the world. In the context of modern celebrity culture and the heightened awareness of social injustice around the world, the debate of the famous artist's role in society is vital. Should the famous musician have the freedom to create art simply for art's sake? Or do they have some sort of obligation to help improve the society in which they live? The common responses to this question depend on how one views the artist. In a liberal democratic society like Canada and the United States of America, the most common belief is that the artist should have full artistic freedom. Art should not be controlled by a moral, religious, or political agenda. It is the right of the artist to express themselves however they see fit. In this view, the artist does not have any responsibility to create art with society or public well-being in mind. Instead, their responsibility is to themselves and their art alone.

This view of the artist mimics the liberal democratic view of individual freedom. The artist, just like everyone else, is entitled to freedom of expression. Their status as famous musicians does not obligate them to work politically. Instead, in this view, they should be given the same freedom as other citizens, choosing whether or not they want to engage in political efforts (Heller & Prose, 2017). Yet, by the same token, the artist also has the same moral obligations as any other citizen. In a liberal democratic society, citizens are held up to certain standards of behaviour. We live in a free society, but our freedom generally ends when our behaviours hurt other people. As John Stuart Mill, the paradigmatic liberal, declared, "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others" (Mill, 1859, p. 22). We rightly balance individual freedom against communal rights. The musician's artistic freedom, therefore, must be discussed against the backdrop of these communal rights. Artists are people before they are anything else;

this means they cannot be removed from regular moral standards. Their freedom to create should stop when it is hurting other people. While freedom of expression is important, so too is one's responsibility to the members of the community in which they live. It is this combination of factors that I believe warrants further discussion in the liberal position.

PART 2

This question of a musician's artistic freedom is particularly vital because of the unique power that music holds. There is something special about music, something that makes it different from other fields of human endeavour. It is not just the regular listener who has noticed the power of music. Indeed, music philosophers and scientists acknowledge that music has a power that other art forms do not have. It is able to express that which is difficult to articulate; it is a language of its own that can surpass boundaries and differences. Visceral and temporal, it works upon people's emotions in a way that other art does not. Neurologist Oliver Sacks dissects this power in his article "The Power of Music," emphasizing the physical, social, and emotional elements of music. Throughout history, music has frequently been used to bring people together. It is a primal, communal experience. It has the capacity to overcome its listeners, inciting excitement and a sense of solidarity (Sacks, 2006, p. 2528). But music goes beyond communal experience. It is also deeply powerful for individual experience. People turn to music because of the way it arouses emotion. It has an "ability to move us, to induce feeling and moods, states of mind" (Sacks, 2006, p. 2529). It is an incredibly evocative art form, one that has the ability to transport its listeners deep within themselves and their memories.

There is also a power particular to this pleasure that music brings. John Street, a professor of politics, has written multiple books and articles regarding the unique capacity of music. Aside from lyrics embodying political messages, Street believes that music — sound itself — has

political potential and impact (Street, 2013, p. 55). Music that gives people pleasure has the ability to “command a following, to move people and to make them believe and feel differently” (Street, 2003, p. 128). Music also has a strange ability to replay over and over again inside our minds, whether or not we want to re-hear it. Indeed, most people are familiar with the phenomenon of the “ear worm.” That is, when a song is so catchy that it gets caught inside one’s head and will not leave. Oliver Sacks calls this “perseverative music” — music that gets trapped inside our heads, involuntarily and unconsciously. According to him, it is an example of cerebral networks that are caught in a “circuit of mutual excitation” (Sacks, 2006, p. 2530). While researchers have not yet been able to unravel precisely *why* music has these strong effects on the human mind and body, there is no question that it is very powerful (Sacks, 2006, p. 2532). This power of music demonstrates the unique position that musicians, especially famous musicians, hold in society.

Governments and political figures frequently harness this power. Music works directly on people’s emotions, making it a powerful political weapon. Because of this, it has often been used as a political tool for propaganda (Street, 2013, p. 55). While we are accustomed to associating this type of propaganda with societies that we deem restrictive or oppressive (for example, in the Soviet Union or in Hitler’s Germany) it is important to acknowledge that this type of coercion exists in liberal democratic societies as well. For example, modern politicians take great care with song choices that will accompany their public appearances. They know that the music chosen can sway its listeners. Thus, they choose songs that will work upon their audience’s emotions and produce the desired feelings. For example, at his 2016 campaign launch, Donald Trump used Neil Young’s song “Rockin’ in the Free World” (Grant, 2016). Clearly, this was done to tie the song to his public persona and platform.

PART 3

It is this power, combined with the magnitude of their platform, that gives the role of the famous musician in society a heightened responsibility. Music can heal and transform, but it can also be destructive. For example, a quick scan through radio stations in North America will uncover songs that seem blatantly misogynistic. These kinds of messages are problematic and worth examining as a society. Despite the progress feminists have made in the last century, there is still rampant misogyny in Canada and the United States. According to Statistics Canada, half of all women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16. On any given night in Canada, over 6000 women and children are forced to sleep in shelters because their homes are not safe. Furthermore, a woman in Canada is killed by her intimate partner approximately every six days (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2016). The statistics are no better in the United States of America. In fact, according to the Bureau of Justice, they are even worse: in America, an average of three women per day are killed by their intimate partners. The National Crime Victimization Survey has determined that over 230,000 women are sexually assaulted or raped every year in America (National Organization for Women, 2009). Misogyny has certainly not disappeared.

With this in mind, musicians must consider the repercussions of their art in society. Songs are not released into an empty void; they are released into public space, where listeners engage with and construct meaning from the work (Barry & Flitterman, 1970, p. 48). Many people resist these sorts of probings and undermine the potency of a song, shrugging it off as “just” a song. But is a song just a song? Oliver Sacks discusses how music becomes embodied, or even trapped, inside its listeners. John Street discusses how music transforms people. Philosopher of music Lydia Goehr believes that music is prophetic: it can show what the world is

and also envision a different future (Goehr, 1994, p. 107). If this is the power of music, then what a special role for musicians to bear. Of course, this does not mean that all responsibility lies upon the artist. Each individual has their own responsibility for how they interpret and engage with art. Still, musicians who engage with public space should be aware of the social and political implications of their art. Unfortunately, this is often not the case. For example, what are we to make of a song like “Blurred Lines” by Robin Thicke? The song is catchy and infectious, yet the lyrics are reprehensible:

No more pretending
Cause now you're winning
Here's our beginning
I always wanted a

Good girl!
I know you want it
I know you want it
I know you want it

You're a good girl!
Can't let it get past me
Me fall from plastic
Talk about getting blasted

I hate these blurred lines!
I know you want it
I know you want it
I know you want it

But you're a good girl!
The way you grab me
Must wanna get nasty
Go ahead, get at me

It seems clear that the lyrics evoke date rape; at the very least, they blur the lines on the meaning of consent. And yet, this song was a number one hit around the world, as well as the longest running number one single of the year. There was much debate over the lyrical content; in fact,

some universities and institutions in the United Kingdom banned it, but the song remained wildly successful (Lynskey, 2013).

In a society rife with sexual assault, these lyrics seem in line with commonly held incorrect conceptions of consent, so perhaps it should not be surprising that these lyrics are allowed to be broadcast. But I would argue that this is exactly the type of song that should be monitored: in order to help abolish misogyny and sexual assault, lyrics that include dangerous views about consent should not be released without backlash from the artistic community. In North America, explicit language is censored in order to protect children, but what about protecting children from messages that promote dangerous misogyny? When songs like this are released and popularized, they (albeit often subconsciously) infiltrate our consciousness and settle inside, imprinting themselves upon us. These ear worms have a potency; rather than working to end derogatory, misogynistic attitudes, they perpetuate them. While it is true that monitoring songs like this restricts artistic freedom, it is in cases like these that the well-being of the public can legitimately override an individual's artistic freedom. Certainly, it is more important to build a safe, just world for women than it is to protect artistic freedom at all costs.

PART 4

Once this has been established, what is the role of the artistic community? That is, how should the music industry and audience respond to art that perpetuates destructive ideologies like misogyny? I believe that the music industry should actively promote progressive values like feminism, despite how this might restrict artistic freedom. Clearly, the harms that are happening to women in society are very real; working to eliminate those harms outweighs the importance of protecting the musician's artistic freedom. Thus, when famous musicians release music that perpetuates these harms, the music industry and audience should respond accordingly. Again,

while we often associate censorship with more repressive societies, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which censorship already exists in liberal democracies.

While it might not be as strict as censorship in other societies, there are guidelines in North America that limit the types of messages that can be broadcast on the radio. Naturally, these guidelines have evolved throughout the last century as our societal opinions on what is acceptable continue to change. For example, the Ed Sullivan show forced the Rolling Stones to edit lyrics deemed too sexual ("Let's spend the night together" to "Let's spend some time together"), but lyrics like this would not be shocking in contemporary society (Richin, 2015). However, there are still guidelines for things like explicit language. Because radio reaches such a broad audience (with no awareness of age), bands must still make radio versions of their songs in which swear words are either bleeped out or changed entirely. Their commercial releases of these songs must also be accompanied by a warning that they are explicit. Furthermore, songs that use hate speech are rightly not allowed to be broadcast. In their code of ethics, the Canadian Broadcasting Standards Council states that "...broadcasters shall ensure that their programming contains no abusive or unduly discriminatory material or comment which is based on matters of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability." This kind of censorship seeks to protect citizens from discrimination; through this, it also works to end the perpetuation of those discriminatory attitudes and beliefs.

So, although liberal democratic societies might believe in artistic freedom as a fundamental right, we do in fact already have some regulations in place to restrict artistic freedom. Yet, I would argue that these restrictions are insufficient. They are too general in their scope, too broad to make a fundamental difference. To better promote feminist values, artists

must be more responsible for the messages their songs invoke. The question then, is *how* to push artists to be more progressive in their art. What are the different degrees of coercion a society can rightly use to restrict artistic freedom in the name of community well-being? It is important to acknowledge the ways in which it would be unjustifiably repressive for the community to restrict an artist's freedom. While there are some examples in which it acceptable for the law to intervene on behalf of the public (for example, copyright infringement, defamation, hate speech), in terms of content and message, the artist must remain free to follow their artistic vision without fear of punishment by law. It would be repressive for society to respond to lyrics that condone misogyny by jailing the artist. The state should not punish a citizen for lyrics that are perceived to threaten community well-being. While the public may have issues with the messages contained in a musician's song, the law is not the place for dealing with artistic content. This does not mean that the public is obligated to accept what the artist creates, but it does mean that the artist maintains the right to create it. In matters of artistic freedom, government intervention reflects fascist, dictatorial states. This type of restriction is repressive, deeply coercive, and unwarranted.

If judicial intervention is too steep a repercussion, but the restrictions that are currently in place are not tackling the concerns we have, what then should the artistic community do to intervene? Surely there exists a more balanced, sensible path wherein the artistic community can nudge or guide the artist away from art that attacks public well-being. What exists between 'not far enough' and 'much too far'? The artistic community can, and should, be directly involved in responding to and monitoring artists who have overridden their artistic boundaries. I will now discuss tangible ways the artistic community can act. Firstly, I will discuss the role of the agents

and institutions involved in the music industry. Secondly, I will discuss the role of the musician's audience.

To begin, I will focus on key members of the music industry: radio stations, promoters, publicists, agents, festivals, venues, and music industry awards. These are the main players in the music industry. In many ways, they act as cultural gatekeepers. They decide what to promote, what to play, who will perform, and how the performers will be awarded for their artistic accomplishments. The music industry holds a tremendous amount of power in shaping what the public hears and sees. Therefore, they must work to ensure that what they are promoting to the public does not infringe upon public well-being. For example, the statistics regarding violence against women show the need for promoting feminist values. Thus, this monitoring should go beyond simply banning songs with hate speech and censoring lyrics with expletives. The music industry should practice critical analysis when deciding on songs that they will push into the public. The artist has the right to create what they want until it infringes on public safety. Misogyny, racism, violence — in the same way that society does not tolerate these behaviours, these messages should not be tolerated in songs. This is not to say that artists should be prohibited from speaking about these topics; of course, to a certain extent, the artist's job is to reflect the world around them. However, if music has a prophetic capacity, then the artist's work should not just include these issues, but envision a way forward. The music industry needs to set clear parameters of expectation.

When these boundaries of behaviour are transgressed, the industry should respond in powerful ways by creating repercussions. Too often, the industry focuses on the artist instead of the art. For example, when musician Chris Brown was charged with felony assault (after abusing his then-girlfriend Rihanna), the music industry was swift to respond. Some radio DJs pulled his

music from their programs (Kaufman, 2009). Yet, what about the songs that perpetuate this very behaviour? If somebody's art is overstepping the boundaries, industry members and institutions should refuse to work with the artists. Booking agents, publicists, and promoters should choose *not* to work with artists whose work infringes on public well-being. After all, their role in the music industry is to increase the listening audience of the artist — that is, to make the artist's music as public as possible. Promoting work that is harmful makes them complicit in the problem.

Furthermore, when festivals and venues are deciding on who will play their events, they should choose artists whose work aligns with the world they want to live in. That is to say, they should not hire artists whose work oversteps the boundaries of public well-being. Artist-buyer contracts should include clauses about the prioritization of the audience's well-being. For example, contracts can include agreements about community obligations, acknowledging that performances that invoke these behaviours will not be tolerated. In this way, festivals and venues can help create a safe, positive space for both the artist and the audience. Festivals and venues should also work to promote diversity of race and gender in their line-ups; by doing this, they can help create the world they want to live in. Radio stations should retain the right to refuse to play music that oversteps the boundaries. By being more critical of content, they too can contribute to public well-being. Finally, the institutions involved in the music industry must step up. Institutions should not offer awards or recognition to artists whose work is found to promote behaviours or messages that are dangerous to the public's well-being. Promoting this type of art counteracts the progress being made by perpetuating ideologies that society is trying to combat.

The audience member also plays an important role in responding to art they deem dangerous to their own well-being. Quite simply, without the audience, the famous musician

cannot exist. Their work and income relies on people listening to and purchasing their music, as well as coming to their concerts. This puts a significant amount of power in the audience's hands. In 2017, musician Nick Cave decided to perform a concert in Israel. The backlash he received from fans was significant — many of his listeners were tremendously disappointed in his decision to play in a country with a continued history of human rights violations. In fact, they were so disappointed that before the concert happened, fans petitioned him to cancel. When he followed through on the concert, many of his fans promised to boycott his work (Harmon, 2017). This example shows two powerful ways the audience can respond to art that crosses the boundaries of public well-being. Firstly, they can write letters and sign petitions to send to the artist or the artist's representatives. In contemporary society, social media is a formidable platform for this type of engagement. One has the ability to interact directly with the artist. Secondly, the audience can boycott the artist. As previously mentioned, the famous musician cannot continue their work without their audience. If the audience collectively decides to stop buying an artist's music, and to stop attending an artist's concerts, the artist will ultimately feel that backlash.

This type of societal monitoring will remove a measure of artistic freedom from the artist; however, the benefits of creating a safer, more progressive, and just world outweigh the drawbacks of these restrictions. The well-being of women outweighs certain types of freedom of expression. A musician can play whatever they want in their own home, but if they are planning to engage in public spaces, then they must be held responsible for what they create. Music is too powerful a tool to use without a sense of responsibility for its effects. Famous musicians must practice awareness about the relationship between their art and their listeners. A song is not “just a song,” especially when millions (or even billions) of people are listening and absorbing its

content. Furthermore, if music is prophetic, why not urge musicians to prophesy a better future — one that is just, compassionate, and free of violence? This does not mean that artists must write songs that are simplistic, idealistic, or utopian. Nor does it mean that all artists must become activists, or that there is no place for light-hearted, fun music. A song does not have to be blatantly political to have political repercussions, but an artist must be aware of their art's political implications when they release it into the public.

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