Who’s That Singing Over There

Global Mélange and the Rise of Yugoslav ‘Music of Commitment’

by Dalibor Mišina


The mid-to-late 1970s was a time of popular-cultural revolution in (now former) Yugoslavia. The essence of the revolution was the ‘substantive conceptual-ideological turn’ of Yugoslav rock music — i.e. the development of a new ‘musical ethos’ (Frith 1996: 29) which radically altered the priorities of rock music and shifted its essence from a situation where rock’n’roll spoke with its style (i.e. with a repertoire of performative gestures and codes chosen with great care and consideration) to a position where it spoke with its substance (i.e. with the meanings of the verbal message communicated through the lyrics of the rock song). The end-effect of this revolutionization of rock music was its recasting as a form of socio-cultural praxis — that is, as a purposeful and meaningful artistic undertaking grounded in a serious artistic dedication to society and a responsibility to their audiences. This new understanding of rock’n’roll as a ‘music of commitment’ inaugurated a radically new mode of expression — ‘poetics of the present’ — whose central preoccupation was a direct and unmediated reflection on the here-and-now of one’s social experience and one’s existence in the world, using language that was straightforward, honest and devoid of unnecessary stylistic and rhetorical adornments. The three ‘music movements’ that emerged out of this substantive turn — New Wave, New Primitives, and New Partisans — used the new understanding of rock music as an artistic springboard for articulating their own poetic expressions and offering forms of socio-cultural critique that engaged with the realities and problems of life in Yugoslav society. Their music of commitment was thus a form of socio-cultural praxis whose purpose was to use rock’n’roll as a ‘communicative arena’ (Mattern 2006) for channelling youth’s demands for participatory inclusion in society’s public life, and whose strategic objective was to aid in the realization of the country’s self-proclaimed ideal of a genuine socialist-humanist community ‘in the true measure of humanity’.

How does one understand the substantive turn and the consequent revolutionization of rock music as music of commitment? What inspired them? Where did they come from? Why did they take the form they did? All of these questions point to a need for some sort of explanatory mechanism that will render meaningful one particular socio-cultural phenomenon and make sense of its particularities in terms of something that is larger than, and goes beyond, the phenomenon itself. In a broader sense, they also point to a need to think about this (or, for that matter, any other) socio-cultural phenomenon not as an isolated occurrence but, rather, as something that is immanently tied to a larger socio-cultural universe of sources, influences and impacts — in other words, as something that is, in a manner of speaking, ‘of the global’ and ‘in the global’.
The need to think about and explain the local socio-cultural phenomenon in 'trans-local' terms requires, of necessity, tapping into the globalization discourse (or 'globe talk', as it became known) and its pool of explorations and analyses of mondialisme (i.e. of what, in translation, became known as 'globalization'). Of the three main hypotheses on the cultural dynamics of globalization offered by the globe talk (globalization-as-global Westernization; globalization-as-‘glocalization, and globalization-as-hybridization), the most recent one — i.e. the notion of globalization as hybridization, or global mélange — is perhaps the most useful for dealing with the questions and 'puzzles' of Yugoslav rock music's substantive turn. Taking a long-term and evolutionary perspective on cultural globalization, the global mélange hypothesis suggests that, to some extent, 'we have always been global(ized)', and that globalization is, really, a historical process of human integration, unfolding through a grid of global flows of contacts and relations, exchanges, interweavings, amalgamations, and (re)configurations. The reality of cultural globalization is thus the reality of ongoing cultural hybridization, or mixing, of cultural forms, idea(l)s and practices — “perennial as a process but new as an imaginary” (Nederveen Pieterse 2009: 54). The implication of the global mélange hypothesis is that, in terms of our cultural makeup, there is, in the end, no such thing as 'pure' cultural forms, idea(l)s and practices, and that all of our cultural expressions and experiences are the hybrids of perennial cultural flows which, through ongoing mixing, constantly (re)create what we as humans, existing in 'our own' locales, experience and internalize as 'our own' culture. Everything, in other words, influences, and is influenced by, something else; everything creates, and is created by, something else; everything exists because of, and gives existence to, something else. Period.

As applied to thinking about the matters of popular culture, music, and the diverse and seemingly distinct sets of music genres, the global mélange hypothesis reveals that all forms of music (and popular music in particular) are the products of ongoing cultural mixing through the processes of contacts and relations, exchanges, interweavings, amalgamations and (re)configurations, and that all popular music genres — no matter how unique they appear to be in the context of a specific local socio-cultural milieu — are, in the end, the outcomes of the locally appropriated and synthesized confluence of external impacts and influences. Thus to think about and explain the phenomenon of the substantive turn of Yugoslav rock music and the subsequent rise of the music of commitment means to, in the end, understand them both in terms of 'the locally appropriated and synthesized confluence of external impacts and influences' that, in most crucial respects, shape their making and working within the particular socio-cultural and political milieu. In other words, it means to decipher the trans-local trajectories of their 'book of genesis'.

So what are the most important trans-local trajectories generative of the substantive turn and the rise of the music of commitment? In a philosophical-cultural sense, the first source of impact and influence was Yugoslavia's ideological commitment to socialist humanism — a derivative of Western Marxism — which inspired not only the country's official cultural platform but also provided a crucial philosophical-cultural grounding for the music of commitment. In a socio-cultural sense, the rise of the music of commitment was very much influenced by the local appropriation of the British punk ethos and its belief that rock music ought to be thought of as a form of socio-cultural praxis whose primary task was to speak 'truth to power' and provide a popular-cultural outlet for an active transformative engagement with the world. Finally, on a philosophical-social plane music of commitment drew its inspiration from the Sartrean existentialist notion of 'engaged art' and its assumptions of an artistic commitment to society and a responsibility to audiences. Thus it is an understanding of the locally appropriated and synthesized confluence of these three sources of impact and influence that, in the final score, renders the music of commitment's 'book of genesis' decipherable and meaningful. Let us examine this proposition in a bit more detail.
From its very inception, the cultural process of Yugoslav society was grounded in a particular form of socialist ideology whose central idea was building the community 'in the true measure of humanity' — i.e. a society of fundamental liberty, equality and fraternity for all of its constitutive nations and nationalities. This ideological vision was predicated on the political leadership's commitment to socialist humanism and one of its foundational assumptions that true society is human society, i.e. the form of social life and organization that provides the political, economic and cultural resources conducive to the full realization of one's freedom and, therefore, humanity (see Fromm 1966). Thus the ultimate vision of Yugoslavia was a vision of fundamentally human society and a community of voluntarily associated free nations and nationalities, organized by the principle of socialist democracy, that would enable the full realization of one's humanity and provide the necessary social and cultural resources for its continuous development (see Kremer 1985: 17; unsigned 1984: 13). This prevailing socialist-humanist ethos had significant impact not only on the workings of the country's dominant culture but also on the cultural forms that emerged as a critical reaction to the cultural practices of the national cultural apparatus. In terms of dominant culture, its commitment to the socialist ideal resulted in the construction of the dominant cultural model of a 'new socialist culture' whose strategic purpose in propagating 'progressive-in-outlook/socialist-in-content' cultural parameters was to bolster up the particular form of conscience collectif of Yugoslav society as an 'imagined ideological community'. The rise of the non-dominant cultural forms, in this context, was by and large a reaction to the shortcomings of the dominant cultural model, and an attempt to provide the necessary cultural corrective that would aid in the realization of a Yugoslav socialist ideal that fueled the new socialist culture. Thus both dominant and non-dominant cultural forms were fundamentally animated by the same ideological — or, better yet, utopian — imaginary, with each form working towards the latter's realization in a manner construed as most appropriate and/or effective.

Within this framework, the substantive turn of Yugoslav rock music and the emergence of the music of commitment can be best understood as the cultural reaction to the imperfections of the new socialist culture. The cultural praxis of the three embodiments of music of commitment — the music movements of New Wave, New Primitives and New Partisans — was posited as a social critique of the national cultural apparatus whose strategic purpose was to help eliminate the slippage, or disconnect, between what the Yugoslav socialist community ostensibly strived for and how it actually was. The critique of the parameters and practices of the country's official new socialist culture aimed at revealing this slippage and, implicitly, at illuminating potential ways for overcoming it. For each music movement the source of the disconnect was perceived in different terms — for the New Wave it was the dominant culture's neglect of youth as a meaningful agency in society; for the New Primitives it was the dominant culture's hypocrisy of privileging non-local cultural experiences as the national cultural foundation; and for the New Partisans it was the dominant culture's 'nationalist turn'.

However, all three movements shared the same belief that the social critique of these sources of disconnect was the first necessary, if not necessarily sufficient, step for pushing things in the right direction and bringing them closer to the ideal of socialist Yugoslavia as a community 'in the true measure of humanity'. In this sense, the socio-cultural praxis of all three music movements was anchored in the commitment to socialist humanism and its vision of (the possibility of) a genuine human society.

In socio-cultural terms, the substantive turn of Yugoslav rock music was grounded in symbolic-cultural and socio-political interpretations of the British punk phenomenon, and the subsequent transplanting of punk ethos onto a Yugoslav popular-cultural terrain. On the symbolic-cultural plane, British punk was understood as a
'systematic demystification' (Rajin 1980: 26) of the 'post-hippy travesty' whose aim was to re-democratize rock music and youth culture through "re-valorization of many of the original hippy ideas" (Rajin 1980: 36) and to return them both to the ideals of purity, simplicity and immediacy of music expression, and unison and egalitarianism of human interrelations. According to this line of reasoning, the rise of punk music and punk culture was best understood as a reaction and response to the elitization and corporatization of rock 'n' roll after the demise of the hippy movement in the late 1960s, which turned rock music and youth culture into a corporate money-making machine and, in the process, radically transformed the egalitarian relationship between the performers and the listeners into a one-way relationship between the idols and the admirers, coupled with an increased emphasis on the virtuosity and theatrics of a rock-spectacle (see, for example, Rajin 1980). The essence of punk's 'filth and fury', from this viewpoint, was seen as an assault on the post-hippy autocracy of the gifted over the ordinary and a head-on confrontation with the chokehold of the 'rock 'n' roll show-business swindle'.

The social-political interpretation of British punk cast the phenomenon as a popular-cultural revolt by the disenfranchised youth against the growing social polarization of British society and the condition of "political and economic non-privilege of an army of unemployed young English proletarians" (Laib 1985: 22). Punk music and its 'there's-no-future' attitude were thus understood as a radical response to the pervasive feeling that there were two Englands — one for the rich minority and the other for the poor majority — and that the official England simply did not care about the conditions of life in the lumpenproletariat England or about doing anything to bridge the gap between the haves and have-nots. In this context, British punk provided a popular-cultural outlet for the marginalized and voiceless youth to express their dissatisfaction with British society and to rebel against the non-responsive British establishment. In a socio-political sense, therefore, the importance of British punk in being the 'voice of the invisible' was in offering a means of authenticating a particular form of social experience, reclaiming a specific type of individual and collective identity grounded in a radicalized form of political consciousness, and "demonstrating and unmasking the cynicism and false sheen of 'the state of welfare' while building its own system of values" (Laib 1985: 24).

Transplanted onto the Yugoslav socio-cultural terrain, the punk ethos of radical cultural egalitarianism and socio-political radicalism took the form of a 'radically constructive critical engagement' with the cultural and socio-political realities of socialist Yugoslavia. This had to do with the fact that (1) British punk spoke for the disenfranchised and marginalized working-class youth, while the Yugoslav music of commitment articulated the condition of 'absent presence' of alienated middle-class youth; and that (2) British punk was openly hostile and destructive towards the official England, while the Yugoslav music of commitment — because of its socialist humanist grounding — operated as a non-adversarial critical questioning of socio-cultural and political practices of the official Yugoslavia. Thus, instead of channelling the radical 'there's-no-future' attitude, the music of commitment echoed the sentiments of boredom and emptiness caused by the lack of appropriate cultural initiatives to which urban youth could meaningfully relate and respond to (not surprisingly, some of the first songs of Yugoslav music of commitment, such as 'Lubljana je bulana' ('Lubljana is sick'), 'Plastika' ('Plastic') and 'Dokolica' ('Idleness'), reflected this sense of estrangement, or passive emptiness, on the part of youth). This culminated in a pro-active attitude to 'do something' about one's condition of paralysing estrangement and, consequently, in a critique of Yugoslav society's organizational and institutional frameworks (perceived as) generative of this paralysis. The essence of this critique was to point to a discrepancy between the proclaimed socio-cultural and political ideals of socialist Yugoslavia and the country's actual realities on the ground in order to, ultimately, help bridge the gap between 'the ideal' and 'the real'. Thus, whereas British punk was 'despisingly against', the Yugoslav music of commitment was
'qualifyingly for' the official society. Despite this important difference, however, both shared the crucial commonality of understanding and employing rock music as a substantive socio-cultural praxis — i.e. as a popular-cultural outlet for channeling transformative change grounded in a 'critical consciousness'.

Finally, on a philosophical-social plane, the substantive turn of Yugoslav rock’n’roll meant embracing a new philosophical attitude about Yugoslav rock music as music of commitment, or engaged music, and a new type of artistic self-awareness about the engaged musician as a fundamentally public intellectual. Both were — via the new punk ethos — inspired by the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and, specifically, his notion of a 'literature of commitment' (litérature engagée) and the idea of an artist’s serious responsibility to society (see Sartre 2002). In Sartre’s view, the literature of commitment was predicated on the artist adapting freely made choices to socially useful ends, and defining himself by consciously engaging in willed action. ‘Engaged art’, thus, was a freely chosen artistic endeavor predicated on a serious commitment to society and a responsibility to audiences, ultimately oriented towards social usefulness rather than ‘artistic self-involvement’. As such, it was the polar opposite of the bourgeois form of ‘art for art’s sake’.

Appropriated and transplanted as the notions of ‘engaged music’ and ‘engaged musician’, Sartre’s ideas were transformed into the new philosophical attitude that in order to be genuine, authentic and real rock music had to be about something, and about something that matters. Not only that, rock music also had to communicate something meaningful and it had to engage with the world as directly and as unabashedly as possible. Therefore, to think about rock’n’roll as engaged music meant embracing an outlook that rock music can and ought to be used as a cultural weapon in the struggle for self-affirmation, articulation of social presence, and critical engagement with society’s socio-cultural, political, and economic realities. The ‘final frontier’ of the music of commitment was thus defined and understood as the revolutionization of oneself, one’s surroundings, and the structures of one’s existence.

Coupled with this was a new self-awareness about engaged musicians as fundamentally public intellectuals who, through their personal attitudes and active relationships with their social surroundings, embodied the very same stance projected through their music of commitment. This new artistic-intellectual self-awareness had three aspects to it: (1) the notion that a music of commitment required (to borrow from Paulo Freire) a conscientized individual ‘armed’ with ‘critical conscience’ and capable of immersing in the world in an enlightened and intellectually astute manner; (2) the belief that active engagement with the world required a non-conformist attitude (i.e. unconventional forms of thought and perception) grounded in individuality, unburdened by social conventions and therefore capable of going beyond the given and articulating the notions of the ‘world to be’; and (3) the commitment to the idea that one’s artistic engagement defines who one is and what one is about, and that the nature of one’s engaged existence in the world is a matter of freely and consciously made choices, ultimately animated by a sense of social responsibility and usefulness. Put together, these three aspects brought to the fore the new type of artist-intellectual who understood the world, was immersed in it, and — armed with the music of commitment as an ‘artistic weapon of choice’ — acted actively and consciously upon it. For both engaged music and engaged musician, the fire that fuelled their socio-cultural praxis was the categorical imperative ‘I act, therefore I am’.

All considered, the music of commitment’s 'book of genesis' is, in the end, a narrative of the mélange of socialist humanism, British punk and Sartrean existentialism, and their interpretation, appropriation and incorporation into a specific socio-cultural — and, more to the point, popular-cultural — locale. The end result of this process...
was a creation of the socio-cultural hybrid whose essence, while resonating as authentically local, was crucially 'of the global' and 'in the global' — i.e. part of the perennial dynamic of ongoing mixing of cultural forms, ideas (l) and practices. What made the music of commitment resonate as so authentically local while at the same time being 'of the global' and 'in the global' was the fact that, while being deeply immersed in the local socio-cultural realities of a socialist Yugoslavia, its local engagement — i.e. its socio-cultural praxis — was grounded and cast trans-locally. It was precisely this interplay between the local and the trans-local that made the music of commitment appear 'worldly' without feeling 'foreign'.

In conclusion, the historical significance of the music of commitment rests in transforming Yugoslav rock-music into a 'communicative arena' for engaging with the country's dominant culture, and — figuring as the 'pulse of the present' (Wickie 1987: 80) — in producing alternative cultural narratives (or what Raymond Williams calls 'structures of feeling') which aim to communicate "a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically different from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or a period" (Williams 1977: 131). The end-point of its socio-cultural praxis was 'utopian transcendence', animated by the vision of Yugoslavia as a genuine socialist-humanist community, and fueled by the belief in the possibility of overcoming the present, so that, through revolutionizing itself, the present can finally become its real self. This is what, in the end, animated the music of commitment's 'outburst of utopian energy' (to paraphrase Habermas (1989)) and why the dissipation of Yugoslav socialist ideals in the late 1980s meant the end of the music of commitment and the 'exhaustion of its utopian energy'. Simply put, the breakup of Yugoslavia robbed the music of commitment of its socio-cultural and political grounding, leaving its utopian imaginary without a reference point in reality. Once this happened, the music of commitment lost its sense of meaning and purpose, and withered away. Not that there were no battles left to fight; in fact, one could argue that with the rise of ethnonationalism there were more battles to fight than ever before. But these were the battles foreign to the music of commitment, because — motivated by new cultural and political realities, and grounded in radically redrawn ideological vision(s) — they rendered the struggle for a Yugoslav socialist-humanist ideal meaningless. In these circumstances of 'being', having 'no one to side with, and no one to go against' (to borrow Branimir Šulić's personal statement (Radišić 1994)), the music of commitment receded into 'nothingness'.

References