



## Protest Music in France: Production, Identity and Audiences

Barbara Lebrun

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It is tempting sometimes to think of the notion of 'authenticity' in popular music as being perhaps a bit passé when trying to understand the meanings of music today. After all, it is a concept that has been discussed extensively in popular music studies, along with its nemesis, the 'mainstream'. However, Barbara Lebrun's work on protest music in France shows that these concepts still have a great deal of traction in discourses around popular music and are often still central to audience understandings of music. Her analysis of various aspects of music making in France shows that the notion of the mainstream still functions very strongly as something that those involved in 'alternative' music scenes see themselves as opposed to, and that this sense of opposition is tied up closely with notions of authenticity.

Lebrun does a thorough job of problematising the concepts she is examining, noting the inherent contradiction in popular music where all (or almost all) musicians want to make money from what they do. However, a strong divide still exists in discourses around musicians between those who are seen as being 'commercialised' and those who are less concerned with money or success, and who are therefore framed as more authentic. Early in the book Lebrun provides an excellent example of the problematic nature of this dynamic, describing how serious chanson artist Brassens and *yéyé* (pop) singer Johnny Hallyday were "produced by the same multinational conglomerate throughout the 1960s and 1970s" (2009, p. 9) despite Brassens being seen as upholding certain oppositional qualities and therefore being the 'better' artist. The examination of these ideas in French contexts allows Lebrun to also demonstrate how the specifics of place will change the effects that popular music have, and how it can influence the culture that grows around it. While noting that the way audiences privilege protest (or opposition to the mainstream) is something that is found in other western countries, Lebrun notes that "the notion of authenticity is particularly fierce, enduring and prestigious in France" (2009, p. 161). This is due to the place that political protest holds in French culture, but also the relationship that exists between the state and music producers, and the economic and social positions of the audience for this music.

In the three sections of the book, Lebrun sets out to explore these themes. The case studies that she draws upon are mostly from the 1980s onwards, although she gives enough historical context for the origins of the trends she identifies to be well

understood. In Part One, “Serious Business: the Production of Protest in the French Music Industry”, she shows how the genre of rock *alternatif* came to be seen as possessing some of the authentic qualities that had previously accrued mainly to more traditional French chanson artists. This authenticity stems in part from the protest messages of the groups involved, and is connected to a certain type of French identity rooted in left-wing political thought and opposition to mass media. Lebrun skilfully illustrates the rise of this genre, locating it within economic, political and social structures that influenced its form and reception, as well as mapping out the contradictions that then arose when rock *alternatif* acts began to achieve commercial success.

Part Two, “Protest Identities: Nostalgia, Multiculturalism and Success Abroad”, examines further aspects of French identity, including multicultural and globalised identities, and how they play out in protest music. Lebrun firstly looks at how the genre of chanson *néo-réaliste* draws on a nostalgia-laden representation of French authenticity with its reliance on instruments such as the accordion and its re-invention of the chanson style of the interwar period. She then contrasts this with the genre of rock *métis* and the work of the artist Manu Chau. Rock *métis* “showcas[ed] ethnic difference and cultural diversity in post-colonial France” (2009, p. 69) by incorporating the musical traditions of other countries, particularly the French colonies that had provided France with sizeable numbers of immigrants. Manu Chau is a proponent of this style who has achieved considerable commercial success, both within France and internationally. Lebrun explores how these musical expressions of changing French identity and multiculturalism have been framed as forms of protest music, but at times can also be seen as reinforcing some of the social structures they may have set out to challenge. Chao’s international success also allows issues of globalisation and what being French means in a globalised world to be explored, alongside the sustained inquiry into how success creates problems for ‘authentic’ protest music.

The final section of the book, “Participation, Audiences and Festivals”, looks at audiences and their reception of and relationship with protest music. Lebrun uses (and also critiques) Bourdieu’s theories about the sociology of taste to examine how social position influences who listens to protest music and how they respond to it. She finds that the audience tends to be lower middle-class and of the Left, and that some of the contradictions of their social positions were reflected in their responses to the music. She also makes some particularly insightful comments on the way that ‘alternative’ identities can be constructed around musical forms such as rock *alternatif*, which do not always contain messages of meaningful resistance and can even be quite conservative in nature.

Lebrun’s work is particularly thoughtful for attempting to show the interactions between so many different, but important aspects of music, from musicians through to producers and their audiences. Her willingness to consider the ways protest music does not necessarily lead to resistant identities or significant challenges to the status quo also gives her work a well-rounded quality. The insights she provides through her multi-faceted approach will be useful not only within French contexts. Those studying the cultural and sociological aspects of music should find this a useful addition to the studies on popular music that have stepped outside the Anglo-speaking world.