

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Where's The Music of Our Times?

Adam Leipzig · Monday, August 9th, 2010

Unemployment's at 9.5%. 133,000 people lost their jobs last month. Has there ever been a time more in need of songs to channel our collective anxiety and call us to action? Has there ever been a time when music has been less about what people are going through?

Our last Great Depression gave us singers like Woody Guthrie and songs like "This Land Is Your Land." We've largely forgotten these lines, which was the most popular verse in the early 1940s:

*In the squares of the city, In the shadow of a steeple;
By the relief office, I'd seen my people.
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking,
Is this land made for you and me?*

In the 1960s we had Bob Dylan and his cohort.

I don't expect to find this kind of social response in today's movies or TV. We need laughter and diversion in hard times. If you haven't seen [Sullivan's Travels](#) recently, you should.

But music is another matter. There are almost no barriers to entry for songwriters these days. Anybody can record a song and upload it for pennies. In contrast, it takes at least a few thousand dollars to make a movie-length video.

So it's not a matter of money, or of access to distribution. If Affirmation Girl can go viral, so can a great song.

Where's the music of our times? It's not on the KCRW playlist, which mainly features men and women singing about their neuroses. It's not coming from metal, in any of its varieties. Metal and today's punk are more about shock and awe, and while I agree we need to be shocked out of complacency, we need the music to tell us what's next. It's not coming from the trance-dancefloor, even though electronica is all about bringing people together.

Not Ani DiFranco, not Bruce Springsteen, not Rage Against the Machine – all feel people's pain, none write galvanizing anthems that call to action and show the way forward. Steve Earle's politically committed, but when he laments, "Come back Woody Guthrie" he's revealing today's lack of musical leadership and charisma.

Do our songwriters simply lack ambition or creativity?

Here's my theory: They're writing what they think will sell rather than what they want to express or feel needs to be heard. Surely songwriters feel the pain. Who doesn't know an unemployed musician?

The analogy that keeps coming to mind is what happened during the Writers Guild strike of 2008-2009. During the 100 days of the strike, writers could not write anything for studios or producers. But writers do write, and during the strike they had no choice but to write for themselves. What a great opportunity!

When the strike was over, I and many other producers braced for what we were sure would be a flood of spec scripts. We talked it over, and many of us were excited – writers had had three months unfettered by studio notes, high concept ideas and star vehicles. They had three months to write what they wanted. Three months, at last, to break out of the conventional and write something different.

Did they? Most didn't. My producer friends and I exhaled a disappointed sigh.

I understand why the writers wrote what they wrote. They were writing to sell. And writers and their allies, before you unleash your emails at me (writers unleash the best emails) let me acknowledge that you're correct when you decry the hegemony of media giants and the corporate homogenization of creative work. But machines are machines and executives are executives. They do what they do. They won't do a better job until artists do a better job themselves.

I'm listening. We all are. Send your MP3s.

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