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Revolutions of Rhythm: Music and Politics

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Table of Contents

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Introduction

This book asks a deceptively simple question: how do rhythms become revolutions? In South America, the answer lives not only in the lyrics of protest or the charisma of leaders, but in the everyday sounds that organize feeling, shape belonging, and mobilize publics. From the smoky milongas of early-twentieth-century Buenos Aires to the open-air carnival avenues of Rio, from Andean plazas to coastal dance halls and digital platforms, music has served as a language of identity and a technique of politics. By tracing cumbia, tango, samba, and Nueva Canción across changing regimes and markets, we hear how sound becomes a force in resistance, memory, and nation-building.

Ethnomusicology meets political history in these pages. I treat songs as archives of collective life and performances as sites where power is made and contested. Listening closely—to timbre, rhythm, instrumentation, and the social worlds that sustain them—reveals dynamics often missed in conventional political narratives: how a cadence can naturalize authority, how a groove can open space for dissent, how a chorus can knit strangers into publics. At stake is not merely whether music “reflects” politics, but how it actively composes political possibilities.

The chapters move across the region and the long twentieth century into the present. Tango narrates modernity, masculinity, and class in Argentina, entangling itself with populism and urban transformation. Samba emerges in Brazil as both a project of national unity and a terrain of racialized struggle under the Vargas state, later reinvented within MPB and Tropicália to challenge authoritarianism. Cumbia, migrating from Colombia through the Andes and Southern Cone, becomes the soundtrack of working-class neighborhoods and new urban margins, transforming stigma into solidarity and presence. Nueva Canción amplifies poets and activists, fusing folk traditions with leftist imaginaries, and endures as a repertoire of memory in the aftermath of repression.

While these movements illuminate heroic moments of defiance, they also reveal ambivalences. States appropriate popular forms to choreograph loyalty; industries package dissent for consumption; artists navigate censorship, surveillance, and self-censorship. Protest songs can harden into ritual, and revolutionary aesthetics can be commodified. Attending to these tensions keeps us from romanticizing music’s power while still acknowledging its singular capacity to bind emotion to action.

Memory is another protagonist of this story. After dictatorships and civil conflicts, communities have turned to sound to mourn the disappeared, to demand truth, and to reassemble a sense of the common. Lullabies sung at vigils, reworked folk anthems at

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commemorations, and the resonant clatter of cacerolazos in the streets demonstrate how sonic practices sustain public memory when official narratives falter. Music does not simply recall the past; it re-times it, making history audible in the present.

Methodologically, this book blends archival research, close listening, and ethnographic encounters with musicians, producers, activists, and audiences. It follows songs through studios and stages, streets and squares, state offices and clandestine gatherings. It also listens to infrastructures—radios, record labels, festivals, algorithms—that shape what can be heard, by whom, and with what political effect. Translation, both linguistic and cultural, is treated as a creative, ethical practice: I foreground the voices of artists and communities and reflect on the limits of representation.

The argument that unfolds is straightforward: music is not a backdrop to South American politics; it is one of its constitutive media. Rhythms coordinate bodies; choruses rehearse citizenship; repertoires transmit counter-histories; and performances stage competing visions of the nation. By historicizing these processes across cumbia, tango, samba, and Nueva Canción—and by placing them in conversation with newer digital forms—we see how sound organizes collective life and opens political horizons.

Revolutions of Rhythm invites you to read with your ears. As you move through the chapters, consider how a bass line rearranges a crowd, how a drum cadence recalibrates a march, how a melody conjures a homeland or a future yet unmade. The claim here is modest and bold at once: if we learn to listen politically, we might also learn to imagine differently—and, perhaps, to move together in new ways.

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CHAPTER ONE: Listening to Power: A Framework for Music and Politics

To truly understand how music shapes social change, we must first learn how to listen. Not just to the catchy melody or the stirring lyrics, but to the deeper currents of power embedded within the sound itself. This isn't always as straightforward as identifying a protest anthem. Sometimes, the most potent political statements are found in the subtle shifts of rhythm, the unexpected instrumentation, or even the deliberate absence of sound. Music, in its essence, is a form of organized sound, and organization, even seemingly innocuous, is a political act.

Consider the very act of collective listening. When people gather to share a musical experience, whether at a concert, a dance hall, or a street performance, they are engaging in a shared ritual. This shared experience can forge bonds, reinforce identities, and create a sense of collective purpose. The rhythmic synchronicity of dancing together, for instance, can generate a powerful feeling of unity, subtly eroding individual differences in favor of a shared, embodied experience. This isn't just about entertainment; it's about the forging of a temporary, yet potent, collective.

Ethnomusicologists often talk about "soundscapes"—the characteristic sounds of a particular place and time, much like a landscape is characterized by its visual features. These soundscapes are rarely neutral. They are shaped by technological advancements, economic forces, and cultural hierarchies. The insistent clang of a factory, the rhythmic chanting of a religious ceremony, the blare of a political rally – each contributes to a sonic environment that can both reflect and influence the social order. Music, then, doesn't just exist within these soundscapes; it actively constructs and deconstructs them.

One crucial aspect of listening to power in music involves understanding its performative nature. A musical performance is never just a performance of notes and melodies; it's also a performance of social roles, cultural values, and political ideologies. Who is allowed to perform, where they perform, and what they perform, all carry significant weight. Think of the elaborate court music of pre-republican societies, meticulously composed and performed to reinforce the authority and divine right of rulers. The grandeur, the precision, the sheer sonic spectacle – all served to awe and subjugate the listener.

Conversely, informal musical gatherings, often in defiance of official strictures, can become sites of covert political activity. A clandestine gathering where forbidden songs are sung or improvised, offers a space for communal expression and the

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articulation of grievances that cannot be voiced openly. The very act of sharing such music, often under threat of reprisal, strengthens solidarity and nurtures a sense of shared resistance. In these spaces, music isn't merely entertainment; it's a lifeline, a shared secret, a defiant whisper against the roar of authority.

The material conditions of music production and consumption also offer crucial insights into its political dimensions. Who owns the recording studios, the radio stations, the concert venues? What genres are promoted, and which are suppressed? Access to these infrastructures of sound directly influences what music reaches the ears of the public and, consequently, what narratives and ideologies gain traction. A state-controlled media apparatus, for example, can become a powerful tool for disseminating propaganda through carefully curated musical programming, framing national identity in a particular, often exclusionary, way.

Furthermore, the very instruments used in musical expression can carry political connotations. Certain instruments may be associated with specific ethnic groups, social classes, or historical periods. The appropriation or suppression of particular instruments can therefore be a symbolic act of dominance or resistance. Imagine a traditional indigenous instrument, once central to community rituals, being banned by colonial authorities. The act of continuing to play that instrument, even in secret, becomes an act of cultural and political defiance.

The relationship between music and language is another fertile ground for understanding its political leverage. Lyrics, of course, can convey explicit political messages, acting as direct calls to action or critiques of the status quo. However, even beyond the literal meaning of words, the way language is used within a song – the dialects employed, the poetic devices favored, the stories told – can reinforce or challenge existing power structures. A song that elevates a marginalized dialect, for instance, can be a powerful affirmation of cultural identity and a subtle act of linguistic rebellion.

Rhythm, often overlooked in favor of melody or lyrics, is perhaps the most fundamental political element of music. Rhythms compel movement, coordinate bodies, and, in doing so, can synchronize collective action. The steady beat of a marching drum, for example, is designed to unify and propel soldiers forward, instilling discipline and a sense of shared purpose. In a similar vein, the irresistible groove of a dance track can create a collective euphoria that, while seemingly apolitical, can foster a sense of shared liberation and communal agency.

The concept of "noise" also has a place in this framework. What constitutes "noise" is often a cultural and political construct. The sounds deemed disruptive or undesirable by those in power can, for marginalized groups, be vital forms of expression and protest. The cacophony of a cacerolazo, where ordinary citizens bang pots and pans to express dissent, transforms everyday objects into instruments of political noise,

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disrupting the established sonic order and demanding attention. This isn't music in a conventional sense, but it is undoubtedly a powerful, politically charged sound event.

Music's capacity for memory-making is another critical political function. Songs can act as mnemonic devices, preserving historical narratives, personal experiences, and collective traumas across generations. When official histories are suppressed or rewritten, music can become an unofficial archive, carrying alternative versions of the past into the present. A folk song recounting a forgotten rebellion, or a ballad mourning the victims of state violence, ensures that these stories are not erased, but continue to resonate within the collective consciousness.

Moreover, the act of collective singing itself is deeply political. When groups of people sing together, they are not just making music; they are performing solidarity, articulating shared beliefs, and reinforcing group identity. Whether it's a national anthem fostering civic allegiance or a union song mobilizing workers, the communal act of vocalizing together creates a powerful sense of belonging and collective agency. The very act of harmonizing, of blending individual voices into a unified sound, can be a microcosm of a desired social order.

The commercialization of music also presents a complex political landscape. While the music industry can provide platforms for diverse voices and artistic expression, it can also co-opt and dilute radical messages. A protest song, once a powerful tool of dissent, can be commodified and stripped of its revolutionary edge when repackaged for mass consumption. Understanding these dynamics of appropriation and resistance is crucial for a nuanced appreciation of music's political life.

Ultimately, listening to power in music requires an interdisciplinary ear. It demands attention not only to musical form and content but also to the social, historical, economic, and technological contexts in which music is created, performed, and consumed. It means recognizing that music is never simply a reflection of politics, but an active participant in its making, a vibrant and often subtle force that can both reinforce and challenge the existing order. This framework, then, is an invitation to tune our ears to the intricate interplay of rhythm and revolution in the vibrant tapestry of South American history.

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