

Ghost Dance Generation: Musical Responsibility in Periapocalyptic Times
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Discussions of musical (or any other kind of artistic) responsibility are encrusted with thorns. Questions of who draws the line between the responsible and the less so are compounded by what to do with the two piles once the lines dividing them have been drawn: rebuke versus accolade, censorship versus subsidy.

Typically, music is not considered in the class of things for which responsibility is a primary positive asset. Irresponsibility factors in almost exclusively in controversies manufactured around musical lyrics and their presumed social or psychological consequence. You know, "Judas Priest made my kid suicidal" or "Cop Killa made my kid a gangsta". But strictly speaking, such controversies attached to the textual component of music are disputes over literature and not the music that supports it.

Consequently, we lack standards and language by which to communicate the criteria for assessing the responsibility of that part of music that is really just music. *Responsibility* sounds nice, but, of course, is a concept that is itself contingent upon some frame of reference for meaning. Responsible drivers, teachers, and politicians are each being evaluated against a different contextual standard. In each case the sense of responsibility is shaped by an understanding of how the actor's specific behaviors impact other human beings. Scenarios can be imagined for each set of actors (drivers, teachers, and politicians) for which the line between responsible and irresponsible behavior is unambiguous. Responsible politicians, for example, don't take bribes. Responsible teachers don't skip class. Responsible drivers don't run red lights.

What of music, as an activity concerned chiefly with the creation and delivery of non-narrative sound. What contextual factors might be determinative of what I have here called musical responsibility? There is a familiar sense in which music is a historical tradition of practice and theory; responsibility is assumed to entail a carefully considered combination of conserving and expanding this theory and practice. This approach does not problematize the social value of music and leaves the question of whether any particular component of this tradition needs to be maintained or modified as the hermetic concern of musicians. But what if we consider music as a practice involving a world of human listeners only a minute percentage of whom are makers of music? Does music have any value in this world other than its function as distraction and past time, i.e., sonic backdrop to the presumably more substantial and consequential activities that make up our lives?

I have lived my life in and around music that is grounded in a searching and sustained exploration of matters of responsibility. While any avant garde may be birthed out of an internal critique of form, convention, progress and retention, eventually, almost all such discussions and the experimentalisms they create will develop into discourses that seek to reevaluate and retool the social function of their craft. Certainly, the musical

communities that I have been the closest to have sought to create music that is neither merely entertaining, nor purely academic. They have attempted to offer a socially necessary music that has at times sought to express repressed identity, catalyze social struggle, and/or embody spiritual truth. If the agenda of this musical responsibility has been outsized, the heroic figures that have taken on its weight have arrived scaled to the task. As bassist William Parker has written: "Music will save the day. Music must save the day. Music is the mother to the motherless, father to the fatherless. Music is home to the homeless." These musicians have succeeded to the extent that they have anchored the legitimacy of their lofty aims in a breathing, organic connection to the vicissitudes of historical flow.

As such, to talk about musical responsibility in the second decade of the 21st century will not yield the same set of standards or evaluative vocabulary as this responsibility conceived in previous times. Our *now* belongs to us exclusively and its unique challenges are necessarily the constraints on the responsibility of music or any other cultural product. 2012 is a very bad movie and whatever sense of impending doom that has slipped into popular culture at the expense of the Mayan calendar is symptomatic and late. But the facts of the matter are revealing themselves in starkly cinematic realism: Human-caused climate change is underway and already threatening the survival of the planet's poorest inhabitants. Planetary de-speciation (i.e., mass extinction) is so pronounced that our era's die-off now has its own name – the Holocene Extinction. War has matured from a regrettable, episodic and regionally limited project into a perpetual transnational norm; grinding conflict seeps through borders, undergoing constant transformation without hint of abatement. Having beaten the Communists, the Capitalists seem powerless to rescue their own monetary system without appealing to the Communists (i.e., the Chinese) to bail them out and avoid total collapse. In short, we're pretty well fucked and at this point, only the really stupid or the really unscrupulous would try to deny that. Prognostications about when or if the end will come are dwarfed by the realization that a holistic reset is already very much in process [*peri-* apocalyptic] and is by all appearances irreversible.

From here we can segue to a scene in the movie *Titanic* in which a chamber ensemble bows away to "Nearer my God to Thee" as the sinking ship heaves beneath them. Through this metaphorical lens, music can be seen as at best a noble frivolity in the face of catastrophic disaster.

But the end of the world is like many things not absolute, but relative, and that means survivable. The native people from whom this land was wrested saw the end of their world in much the same way. Ecological degradation precipitated the collapse of native economy, while native politics was unable to either accommodate or stave off aggressive foreign terrorists. The resulting change can only be seen as a world-ending scenario – a collapse of the very ontology through which native people were able to recognize themselves. By the end of the 19th century, the final solution to the native problem was all but complete. Enter the Ghost Dance. Much more than a single

ceremony or ritual, the Ghost Dance was a revivalist movement first articulated by a Northern Paiute medicine man and prophet named Wovoka who preached universal love and warned of the dangers of white civilization. The Ghost Dance promised to reunite the living with the recently dead and in its most messianic forms to roll up the world of the whites like a vast buffalo robe, revealing beneath the hordes of settlers, telegraph wires, and railroad tracks, the lost world of the Native Americans, intact. The movement spread across the plains like wildfire inspiring the battered spirit of native people with much needed hope. The dance itself (which is still performed today) is a marathon round dance. The locations in which it was performed became closely guarded secrets after the Federal authorities banned the dance for fear of its negative impact on efforts to pacify and reservationize the Indians. Participants would dance for days to the point of exhaustion, collapsing into a state of vision and reverie.

We, too, are like the aboriginal Americans, a proud people once free, who have been told that things will only work well if we willingly confine ourselves to the reservation. In this case, the reservation is the desolate badlands of a mediated consumer culture in which our only necessary function as consumer-citizens is to faithfully consume. Just as the Ghost Dance erupted out of an obscure and localized starting point to capture the desperate imaginations of a people teetering on the verge of extinction, what started as a march to occupy New York City's financial district has become a broad-based effort to resist our own pacification. Like the Ghost Dance, the Occupation Movement is a marathon uniting its followers under a broad canopy of concerns. Environmental salvation, economic justice, demilitarization, and even a renewed sense of *communitas* are some of the key aspirations that have found their way under the Occupation umbrella.

What then are we to do, as musical artists, while our brothers and sisters are dancing themselves into the pavement assisted by tear gas, pepper spray, and flash grenades? And, to be clear, this question is not directed at the movement's bards, its musical poets, who will and must write the lyrical anthems that will inspire and chronicle this historic social process, but at those of us whose product is composed chiefly of tones, rhythms, timbres, and the hollow spaces surrounding each of these. Is our work mute because it carries no alarm, resounds without instruction or explanation? In short can instrumental music played at the end of the world be responsible without being ideological or didactic?

Late in the summer of 2011, I was on the twelfth floor of a high-rise apartment building when my afternoon was rattled by an earthquake centered a couple of hundred miles away in Virginia. We don't get many earthquakes on the east coast. Our response is probably overly poetic when compared to the nonchalance of our friends living along the fault lines in the west. A low infrasonic rumbling was the first hint that something was up. Then the building lurched sideways and then it undulated vertically. Only after most of the movement had subsided, did I get the bright idea to remove my ass from that building. All of this happened in the course of a few disturbingly salient seconds.

Our trauma was momentary and mostly emotional. In the days that followed, we nervously and excitedly recounted our personal stories of "survival". What became clear to me in this exchange of experience was that "our" quake could be very nicely conceptualized as an extremely brief piece of music to which almost everyone was simultaneously and intently listening. Like a bubbly snippet from a Bootsy Collins bass solo that had been amplified through the bedrock, this music demanded our attention with an unquestionably existential imperative. Up and down the eastern seaboard, people were temporarily united in our focus on a vibration, a note, a crescendo of seismic force. In the wake of Gaia's space bass, the Washington area was mostly spared from harm; only the National Cathedral and Washington Monument suffered serious damage, and this, of course, is in itself, quite poetic.

Maybe our responsible music must be something like that quake, loud and pervasive, neither particularly long, nor elaborately structured, riveting in its implications, but only damaging to the most-calcified structures of religious and political hegemony. This is, of course, a hyperbolic response to a question that I originally raised in the most serious and practical terms. The newly responsible music is more a sonic force than a musical treatise. It does not present itself as a cultural product to be critiqued within a discourse about music or art or anything else. It is incapable of communicating much in the way of a message. It is an impingement upon the body and everything attached to and dependent upon the body. And, like the Ghost Dance, this responsible music promises to roll up civilization and restore something that we need to be healthy again, to be whole once more. You see, the music that I make seeks to assemble itself outside of capitalism, outside of Americanism. Only in the coarsest geographical sense would I allow you to say that my music is made in America. On the contrary, my sound product, my intentional vibration is created in large part to establish something authentically exterior to the great sucking vortex of American exceptionalism. I would unapologetically encourage my listeners to feel that they have participated in some great (if private) insurrectionary exodus across the psychological border defining the limits of the state's tenacious grip on the human spirit.

In truth, like the Indians, we have all been tricked by the white man, even white people. The Occupation Movement is just the beginning of an awakening to the degree to which we have been swindled out of that which is most valuable (the integrity of our connection to Mother Earth and the fruits of our own labor) by a rather vague idea called "civilization" that has left us vagabonds and paupers in our so-called homeland.

As I suspend my rumination on responsibility, it is clear that we must leave the sacred Ghost Dance to those to whom it was given. But we can be inspired by its example of fearlessness in the face of a dissolving world and the profound renewal towards which it aspires. So, bring me my ghost shirt, wire up my oscillators, effects pedals and mixing board, and crank up the volume to 11. A new world is buried under this one and together we must pull it out. My music at its most responsible is the sound of millions of shovels scraping away at the last sands of history. Dig? Won't you please help me dig?