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Setting the Night to Music¹

Do we experience music differently at night than in the daytime? The answer reveals how important the musical night has become in Mexican and world urban life, where the rhythms of rest and festivities are in constant tension.

One of the particularities of what is called night studies is that they are carried out by experts trained in popular music studies,² as can be seen in the recent publication of *Nocturnes: Popular Music and the Night*.³ This book is a collective effort coordinated by Geoff Stahl, known for his work on the musical scene in Montreal, Berlin, and Wellington, and Giacomo Bottà, a specialist in European punk and post-punk, especially in de-industrialized cities like Manchester, Düsseldorf, Turin, Bologna, and Tampere.

Another scholar of the music scene, Will Straw, underlines in this work that historically, studies on urban nightlife often use music as either a crosscutting theme or a point of departure for shedding light on this hidden part of social life. In the case of Mexico, one example could be *Vivir la noche. Historias de la Ciudad de México* (Experiencing the Night. Stories of Mexico City).⁴

In fact, bars, cabarets, clubs, or even concert halls are essentially nocturnal. They are part of that collective, in-person culture that Stahl and Bottà counterposed to individualistic and/or pragmatic uses of music in the daylight hours (the music listened to in earphones on buses, the Muzak that filters through the air in malls, etc.). Venues destined for music have this ability to congregate groups of people in the middle of the night around an emotional and corporeal principle that goes beyond or dilutes other classical identity categories.⁵

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In addition, in the best of cases, research about popular music takes this nocturnal dimension as a given, and in the worst, ignores it completely. Actually, for a very long time, the history of that kind of musical production has focused exclusively on the works, leaving to one side the venues where they are created and executed (rehearsal and recording studios) and performed (festivals, concerts, public spaces, etc.). Using cases from around the world as a starting point, Stahl and Bottà's book aims to fill this vacuum around the intimate, complex link between the night and popular music.

The Musical Night, A New Avatar Of the City as a Creative Entity

Nocturnal musical activity in the great European and North American urban centers has become one of the avatars of the modern city, as shown by government authorities' interest in promoting it, but also in instrumentalizing it, as brilliantly revealed in the article by Myrtille Picaud, who uses Paris and Berlin as examples. The attraction of clubs and the re-appropriation of spaces abandoned due to deindustrialization have put the musical night at the center of strategies to make these capitals "creative cities." Berlin's transformation dates from many years before and has been used as a model for what has been happening in the French capital, where short-lived "warehouses" abound, a product of the synergy between authorities and big companies. The protagonists of nocturnal musical life have been ambivalent about this transformation since it both affects them negatively and benefits them. In addition to the advantage of being easily dismantled, these spaces provide a certain glamour to previously marginalized areas, and even makes it possible, at the end of the day, to carry out important real estate projects. This can be observed in North America, above all in Toronto and Montreal,⁶ but also —and perhaps even more ambivalently— in Mexico City, in abandoned venues like a former flour mill in its northeastern Azcapotzalco industrial neighborhood, while more and more independent venues are closing in the city's downtown area (such as Caradura, El Imperial, and Japan, among others). This city adds another specific problem: the epidemic of the extortion of nighttime establishments and the authorities' lack of response.

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Nevertheless, according to Straw, public policies regarding nightlife have distanced themselves from music and certain activities that could be perceived as subversive. In contrast, they have diversified the nocturnal palette of activities (museums, sports arenas, libraries, etc.), even directly attacking venues dedicated to music. This is the case in Mexico City, where administrative control is used to bring pressure to bear, turning into yet another obstacle for musical activity at night. These nocturnal developments are part of a general trend in expanding urban spaces: rent hikes, privatization of public spaces, the emergence of settings for standardized consumption, and residents who see nighttime musical activity as a bother.

These trends pose the issue of modes of governance and the regulation of nightlife,⁷ as well as the measurement of musical venues' impact on the quality of life of a neighborhood or city. Mexico's capital does not as yet have these mechanisms, although consultations are being carried out in certain neighborhoods, and a proposed bill about independent cultural spaces recognizes the specificity of music-focused nighttime venues.⁸

The Wellington case Stahl describes is paradigmatic with regard to the traps that should be avoided. The same company is responsible for noise control for the city government and provides most of the bouncers who work in the city's clubs. Aside from these kinds of conflicts of interest, quite typical on a local level, local regulations in urban areas are frequently incompatible with any kind of nighttime musical activity in the public space. Jhessica Reia shows this in her article about street musicians in Rio de Janeiro and Montreal, who are the first to be affected by the power structures designed to set the rules about —and even neutralize— nightlife, above all due to the stigma attached to it, often associated with begging and poverty. The existence of a nocturnal musical life accessible to all requires a constant struggle, even in places with an au-

thentic street music culture, as is the case with the samba in Rio or Mexico City's *sonidero* street music and dances.

The Search for Nighttime Spaces for Emancipation

Murray Melbin's classic article is a window onto the nighttime scene,⁹ in particular with regard to two complementary aspects for night-dwellers and musicians: risk and opportunity. On the one hand, the nocturnal functions as a space of confinement and repression, where music is considered a vector of disorder and risky behavior (drug consumption, unbridled sexuality, etc.). Michael Drewett's article about black musicians under South African apartheid reports that, in addition to the legal obstacles for nighttime concerts, such as curfews, others of a symbolic nature existed, since the apparent calm of the South African nights covered up acts of extreme violence, often committed by the police. Musicians' songs from that period speak to those dangers. In Mexico, we would have to mention the recent murder of ten members of the *Sensación Musical* group by a local cartel in the state of Guerrero as they returned home at night.

On the other hand, the hidden dimension of the night is of capital importance for the expression of cultural minorities, openly marginalized during the day. For example, using archival material, Jarek Paul Ervin explains the point to which the nighttime is a foundational element in New York's queer culture, a space for experimentation and emancipation. Analyzing it in the light of Lou Reed's song *Walk on the Wild Side* and his characteristic self-assured vocal style, Ervin also underlines part of the queer community's fatalism regarding the idea of their real recognition by day-time society. In Mexico City, high-energy culture has performed similar functions.¹⁰

A great deal of research has been done on alternative nighttime practices, frequently with the aim of overcoming

the division between security and commercial entertainment embodied in the concept of the nighttime economy. While this alludes to a design of nocturnal rhythms that benefit the famous "creative class" that Richard Florida talks about,¹¹ based on the exploitation of cheap, sleep-deprived labor—as can easily be observed in Mexico City—the urban night includes non-commercial, community, and emancipatory activities. In addition to the aforementioned street musicians and the queer community, we can include Australian amateur breakdancing aficionados, studied by Rachael Gunn, a very similar case to the different nocturnal groups that appropriate Mexico City, like cyclists.¹² One of this volume's greatest contributions is to direct the reader's attention to dynamics that, while geographically far-flung, are close by because of the anthropological ambivalence to the urban night: between violence and solidarity, dispersion and homogeneity, interests and creativity.

However, it is not a matter of idealizing every kind of nocturnal behavior. Jorfi Nofre and Daniel Malet Calvo explain, for example, how Lisbon's *laissez-faire* authorities have fostered the development of a misogynist, negative nocturnal tourism centered on alcohol consumption, in which, in addition, the local musical culture occupies a very marginal place. Therefore, the Portuguese capital seems to be only a stage, a soundscape for a cheap redeployment of an alcohol culture where rape culture dominates. That problem exists elsewhere and in other musical contexts, such as concerts or festivals, although it is only now becoming a topic for university research.¹³ In Mexico, we can mention the sexual tourism in nighttime festive, musical districts, above all along the U.S. border.

Therefore, nocturnal musical and artistic activities cannot be reduced to being simple bastions against the alienating, colonizing trends of urban society and contemporary capitalism. In fact, their relationship with new technologies marks the nocturnal experience to a great extent with these tendencies. The current make-up of urban societies has made it possible for an "eternal night" to emerge through the offering of continual, automated services, as well as an increasingly blurred border between leisure and work, the real and the virtual.

One example of this is DeepDream. As Christopher M. Cox explains in his contribution to the book, this Google algorithm supposedly provides a virtual substitute for our dreams. It acts as a kind of numerical, musical spec-

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ter of Internet's playful cannibalization of our sleep time. Yolanda Macías develops another more concrete example of this trend involving young, middle-class, Mexico City youths' nocturnal leisure.¹⁴ She demonstrates that the existence and popularization of certain technologies that change domestic musical and cultural consumption do not necessarily make it more democratic and may maintain certain gender inequalities.

Conclusion

The vitality of the studies about the night of this period and its link to musical practices is clear. Nevertheless, Stahl and Bottà's work shows that they are still initial, still developing. Several of the articles display a weak, complex theoretical link between the night and music and even with other aspects of social life. Since the night is something natural, abstract, and fleeting in our surroundings, it is difficult to grasp. It is similar to a "hyperobject," that is, something massively propagated in time and space in relation to humans, as Morton says, and that can be experienced concretely although without being easily delimited and requires a particular style of thinking and writing.¹⁵ In my opinion, that style has yet to be invented. In the articles included in this book, the concept of the night is almost always presented as something volatile, with only slight theoretical underpinnings, when what is required is precisely a solid framework in order to deal with it thoroughly.

On the methodological level, we know how difficult it is to do research in the nocturnal space, to gather data, and get everything out of the object of study productively and ethically.¹⁶ The articles are also vague in that sense: it is not possible to know how much time the researchers spent on site, what kind of interaction they had with night-dwellers, etc. In more general terms, the massive, boundless nature of the nocturnal leads to an explosion of topics and approaches that are not always fruitful, above all in the case of analyzing works that refer, perhaps rather tangentially, to the night. I have no objection in principle to bringing together different approaches to the topic and diverse focuses for the analysis of the matter, but they are never juxtaposed, and they create the sensation of an unproductive disciplinary compartmentalization. Even though we know that this book could not

resolve all the intellectual challenges associated with the study of such a vast object as the night, I think that those disciplinary and methodological questions are a priority for developing night studies, particularly in Mexican academia. ■■■

Notes

- 1 Translated from the original French to Spanish by María Cristina Hernández Escobar, and from Spanish to English by Heather Dashner.
- 2 S. Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously* (London: Routledge, 2007).
- 3 All authors or works mentioned in this article without a specific footnote are chapters in this book.
- 4 Iván Restrepo et al., *Vivir la noche. Historias de la Ciudad de México* (Mexico City: Tintable, 2014).
- 5 Luis-Manuel Garcia, "Crowd Solidarity on the Dance Floor in Paris and Berlin," in Fabian Holt and Carsten Wergin, eds., *Musical Performance and the Changing City: Post-industrial Contexts in Europe and the United States* (London: Routledge, 2013).
- 6 S. G. Ross, "Development versus Preservation Interests in the Making of a Music City: A Case Study of Select Iconic Toronto Music Venues and the Treatment of Their Intangible Cultural Heritage Value," *IJCP* vol. 24, no. 31 (2017); M. Lussier, "Scène, permanence et travail d'alliance: Le cas de la scène musicale émergente de Montréal," *Cahiers de Recherche Sociologique* vol. 57 (2014), pp. 61-78.
- 7 M. Spanu and Y. Mokhnachi, "La gouvernance de la vie nocturne au prisme du territoire : une approche exploratoire des conseils de la noche à Paris et à Nantes," *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana* vol. 1, no.2, 2018, pp. 241-251; A. Seijas y M. M. Gelders, "Governing the Night-time City: The Rise of Night Mayors as a New Form of Urban Governance after Dark," *Urban Studies*, 2019.
- 8 This bill was introduced by Deputy Gabriela Osorio (Morena Party), the president of the Mexico City Congressional Cultural Rights Commission.
- 9 Murray Melbin, "Night as Frontier," *American Sociological Review* vol. 43, no. 1 (1978), pp. 3-22.
- 10 J. R. Ramirez Paredes, *De colores la música: lo que bien se baila... jamás se olvida: identidades sociomusicales en la ciudad de México: el caso de la música high energy* (Mexico City: Posgrado de Estudios Latinoamericanos, UNAM, 2009).
- 11 R. Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (Philadelphia: Routledge, 2005).
- 12 A. Trejo Poo, "Rodando la noche: la ciudad nocturna desde la experiencia de los paseos nocturnos de los ciclistas," paper presented at the CISAN, December 9, 2019.
- 13 R. L. Hill, D. Hesmondhalgh, and M. Megson, "Sexual Violence at Live Music Events: Experiences, Responses and Prevention," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* vol. 23, no. 3 (December 2019), pp. 368-384.
- 14 Y. Macías, "Las vicisitudes de la noche doméstica: afectos y desigualdades," paper presented at the congress of the Institute of the Americas, Paris (October 2019).
- 15 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
- 16 L. M. Garcia, "Doing Nightlife and EDMC Fieldwork," *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 3-17.