

The Aesthetics of Hate Music

By Keith Kahn-Harris

Introduction

The expression of hatred in music is, for many people, something intrinsically worrisome. From Nazi skinhead music to homophobic reggae, hate music seems to demand close watching at least and direct censorship at most. This is perfectly understandable given contemporary concerns about  hate speech  and in many ways the desire not to let hate-filled music pass without comment is a laudable one. However, I want to argue that the terms of the debate about hate and music are all too frequently rooted in certain, very questionable, ideas about musical aesthetics and that as a consequence some of the complexities surrounding issues regarding hatred and music tend to be ignored. In particular I wish to question the tacit assumption behind much writing on music and hate that it is *a priori* a problem. That is, that hatred and music simply do not go together and when they do come together the consequences can only be worrying. In fact, this assumption is historically specific and open to question and contestation, with important consequences for our understanding of music and hate

The legitimacy of hatred

In western societies at least, the development in the nineteenth century of a particular musical aesthetic has had far-reaching consequences ([Chanan 1994](#)). That is, the resurrection of the Platonic idea that music should ideally represent a form of transcendental perfection. In an impure world of lust, conflict and hatred, music should ideally represent the world as it *ought* to be, a world that is whole, perfect, free of messy bodily imperfections and antagonism. This is the prism through which  classical  music came to be seen and often continues to be seen  as an attempt to embody perfection and the divine. Any reminder of music's social character, as the product of human interaction, is therefore problematic and potentially debasing. Thus the connection of music with dance, with politics and with the messiness of everyday life is often erased when we think about classical music.

Such ideas about music have come under persistent challenge, not simply by intellectuals but by the very example of contemporary music. Twentieth century western popular music in particular has flaunted its social, bodily nature. Rock and roll, jazz, their predecessors and

antecedents, are very evidently dance musics, dealing with very earthly concerns. Twentieth and twenty-first century popular music is produced via a complicated web of commercial institutions and frequently consumed in the context of equally complicated (sub)cultures ([Frith 1983](#)). Contemporary music is evidently of this world, in all its imperfections.

But nineteenth century musical aesthetics still have a resonance today in certain respects. Even if the social character of music is perhaps more evident today than it ever was, there is still a widespread ambivalence about. One way in which this is demonstrated is in the concern that is shown towards hate music. Hate in music may make us uneasy because it seems to undermine the perfection that music should represent. Hate music flagrantly does not represent a transcendence of earthly passions, but a very worldly desire to express and perhaps revel in them. Hate music is often not seen as music at all, but simply as hate. Furthermore, if hate music is not really music, then it becomes easier to conflate it with the consequences of hate, such as oppression and violence. Hate music often comes to be seen not as an object for aesthetic judgment, but as a mere cloak for very worldly acts of domination.

There are indeed too many examples of music being used as an agent of oppression and domination for us to ignore the potency of music in this matter. It is clear that Nazi skinhead music, for example, plays an important role in the maintenance of Nazi skinhead culture and of the violence to which it is inextricably connected. Yet the fact that there are clear examples of music being connected to politically motivated hate and to hate-filled violence does not necessarily delegitimise the expression of hatred in music *per se*. Rather, if one rejects the nineteenth century rooted musical aesthetics of transcendence in favour of a more socially rooted aesthetic, then the whole issue of hate and music becomes considerably more complicated. Music should be seen as inextricably a social production, the product of human desires as expressed in a particular space and time. The value of music does not lie therefore in its supposed ability to escape its social character, but in its ability to reflect, discuss, contest, reshape or re-imagine what it means to be human at a particular time and place. Hatred, as part of the range of elements that make us human, should be seen as *potentially* as valid a musical resource as love, sex, alienation, beauty and whatever else.

Asserting the potential validity of hate as a form of musical expression does not imply that all musical hatred is equally worthy or valid. Rather it raises a whole set of tricky aesthetic and social problems that need serious discussion. Most importantly: what sort of hate should be expressed? How should it be expressed? What are the limits to the musical expression of hatred? The remainder of this essay is concerned with these questions.

Issues in the music of hatred

- *Words and music*

When we think about hate music, we usually think about hate *lyrics*. Is the issue of hatred and music really just an issue about hateful words accompanied by music? Can you hate with music sounds alone? There is a temptation to think of music as opaque, unknowable when compared to the eloquence of language.

It is certainly true that the same style of music can be used to express both love and hate and any other number of emotions. Consider the style of **Gangsta Rap** developed in the early 1990s in the West Coast of the USA by artists and producers such as Dr Dre. Part of its startling impact was due to its extraordinary combination of the most vicious misogyny and interpersonal rivalry with the incredibly mellow **G Funk** sound. It is also true though that one style of music may become so inextricably linked to one set of lyrical themes that it may make the music as eloquent as the words. Nazi skinhead music developed out of the **Oi!** punk sub genre in the 1970s and became so linked to it that non-Nazi Oi! bands such as Sham 69 had endless problems in dissociating themselves from it. Musicians may also deliberately set out to make musical sounds express hatred. In **Extreme Metal** genres such as Death Metal and Black Metal, lyrics are often unintelligible without a lyric sheet, the ferocity of the fast heavy guitars taking precedent. Musicians often talk about their music as an expression of hatred and it would be inconceivable to think of Extreme Metal lyrics being accompanied by any other kind of music. Musical sounds are thus not **innocent** in the expression of hatred. Music is not a neutral medium but one that effects lyrical expression in complex ways.

- *Hatred and explicitness*

Carly Simon's **You're so vain** is hardly what one thinks of when considering hate music, yet it is undoubtedly a song fuelled by hate-like emotions. Famously, Simon vituperatively criticizes her (nameless) former lover to the point of accusing him of vanity because **you probably think this song is about you**. Few, other than the subject of the song himself, would consider the song to be inherently objectionable. Compare this to Eminem's **Kim** where the rapper fantasizes about killing his wife, calls her a **bitch** and accuses her of infidelity. This controversial song is shocking in the explicitness of its hatred. It seems light years away from the coy and subtle lyrics in the Carly Simon song. The difference lies in the explicitness of the hatred on show. By explicitness I mean not simply a

use of obscenities but also a willingness to share the more extreme fantasies with which his hate is wrapped up.

It is explicit hate music that tends to become notorious, as in the case with Eminem. Debates about hate and music often become conflated with debates about obscenity and music. Perhaps it is not hatred per se that is shocking when expressed in music, but hatred that is expressed explicitly. Perhaps explicitness in hate attacks the poetry and subtlety that we assume to be part of the language of music

- *Targets of hatred*

◆Kim◆ targets a particular person for Eminem◆s ire. Eminem◆s obsession with his ex-wife and also his mother has often lead him to be called a misogynist. This raises an important question: when does hatred towards *an* other become hatred towards *the* other? Expressions of hurt and anger at ill-treatment by a loved one are mainstays of popular song, but when does such music turn into hatred at a class of persons? Furthermore, even if hate songs are directed at a specific individual, the likelihood is that that individual will not be known to the audience of the song. It makes little difference if◆to take one example◆the subject of Cliff Richard◆s ◆Devil Woman◆ were a real person capable of appalling behavior as even if she were the song would appear to most listeners as a diatribe against a generic ◆everywoman◆.

In theory there is a much better case for defending music attacking specific individuals personally known to the writer or performer than there is with regard to other hate songs. If, as I have argued, music◆s ability to represent everyday emotions can be a source of musical value, than the everyday experience of hate is a valid musical topic. The problem is that control over interpretation is lost as soon as a song is performed and we cannot know in advance whether, for example, a justifiable diatribe against a specific woman might be heard as a diatribe against women in general.

- *Hate, music and society*

The above point leads us to one of the most serious problems with hate music, that is the link between music and oppression. The most serious charge leveled against forms of gangsta rap, to take an important example, is that in giving voice to extreme misogyny, it contributes to the oppression of women. In this argument the question of whether or not hatred is a valid musical resource is not relevant. What is relevant is that musical hate leads to hatred in

everyday life and concomitantly to the oppressive practices directed against the targets of that hate.

This is a highly complex issue that raises important questions about the role music plays in everyday life. As with debates about screen violence, there is fierce controversy about how and whether music can inspire particular sorts of behavior. Sometimes it is argued that there is a direct, causal link. At the other extreme it is sometimes argued that music is *just* music and not a major motivator of social practice. Artists themselves often argue that music *just* reflects society. Sociological studies of music have produced a much more complex picture of the relationship of music and society. What emerges out of such research is that music is never either simply a cause nor simply an effect of social processes. As a social creation, music is part of the web of practices through which social life is reproduced. This neither lets hate music *off the hook* nor does it regard hate music as in itself a cause of negative social effects.

The actual way in which hate music relates to social context cannot be decided in advance, rather it depends on the music in question and how it is used within a particular social context. This varies from genre to genre. In some genres such as Heavy Metal, music has a fantastic quality that tends to obscure the conditions under which it is made. In others such as rap, there is a much closer relationship between musical text and everyday social practice. What we cannot do is to decide on the basis of a reading of a particular musical text how it will relate to the social conditions of its use. There is no automatic procedure for judging which example of hate music is dangerous and which is benign.

What we can do is acknowledge how hate music can cause hurt by causing offence. This is particularly common when hate music is taken out of the social context within which it usually resides. Audiences and critics unused to encountering a particular kind of hatred expressed in music may recoil in horror when they encounter it. It is this offense that is the most quantifiable effect of hate music. The way that Eminem's music, for example, is used by his fans is a complicated question. But it is clear that some people *generally not fans* do find the idea of a hugely popular artist singing such hate-filled, explicit lyrics about women to be deeply unsettling and perhaps personally threatening. In this respect the complex sociological and aesthetic questions surrounding hate music are beside the point. It may be that musical explorations of hate are artistically legitimate and that hate music may be harmless within the social contexts of its consumption *but* hate music can genuinely hurt.

- The politics of hate music

The politics of hate music are wrapped up in the politics of the hurt that hate music can cause. Can it really be acceptable to cause people hurt through musical expression? One way of answering this question is to look at *who* is hurt. It is possible to argue that there is a difference between hatred directed at the powerful and hatred directed at the powerless. For example, one could differentiate between the Sex Pistols' vituperative *God Save The Queen*, directed at a rich monarch and Nazi punk directed at minorities vulnerable to violent attack. This is not an entirely satisfactory solution though. It is not easy to divide the world into powerful and powerless. Much of the debate surrounding, for example, homophobic Jamaican ragga music concerns the fact that the artists concerned, while they may have oppressive attitudes towards homosexuals, hardly represent a powerful group in global terms. Indeed, the criticism of black musicians for homophobia and misogyny is bedeviled by these musics' importance in the lives of an often oppressed minority.

Another way of approaching the politics of hate music is to look at politics in a more conventional way, as the concerted attempt to produce certain social ends. From this perspective, there is a clear differentiation between Nazi music that is part of a clearly articulated political goal and musics such as ragga that are not. This distinction has been particularly important in my own research on Black Metal music. Black Metal, an openly Satanic offshoot of Heavy Metal, has produced a minority of artists who have expressed openly racist and fascist views. What is striking though is that in most cases these artists have vehemently denied any political intent and have retreated to maintaining a low profile when challenged on their views ([Kahn-Harris in press](#)). Within the Black Metal scene, music is much more important than any political intent. Compare this with the Nazi music scene where politics is as important if not more important than music.

All that said, we still have to consider the micro politics of hate music within the contexts of its production and consumption. To take the example of Black Metal again, although Black Metal musicians have rarely been involved in openly racist activity directed outside the scene in which they are involved, they have effected relations within the scene. For instance, some Israeli Black Metal musicians have faced racist abuse within the global scene. That is not to say though the effect that hate music has within the contexts of its production and consumption is necessarily oppressive. In the Black Metal scene, some Israeli musicians have responded by flaunting their Jewish heritage in their music ([Kahn-Harris 2002](#)). Similarly, some female rap musicians have responded to sexism within the scene by challenging it directly.

It is also worth reminding ourselves that it is not only hate music that is implicated in the

politics of oppression. All kinds of music can potentially be used in oppressive acts ([Cloonan 2002](#)). When loud music is played to cow kidnap victims for instance, it matters little what the music is. Furthermore, there is oppression and hatred within music scenes that produce seemingly innocuous music. Women are often excluded from the production of a wide range of musics.

- *Hate music, play and provocation*

Another difficult problem in the interpretation of hate music concerns how we are to deal with ambivalence, irony and humour in the expression of hatred. Eminem's work again provides an example of this. In 'Kim' the singer continually shifts between his perspective and his wife's, the latter making the singer seem like an inadequate bully. There is a similar self-awareness throughout Eminem's work, in which his own hate is frequently ironised, sometimes humorously, although it is always him who has the last word. Eminem's work, whilst hate-filled, is also *playful* in that he tries to avoid the possibility of simple interpretations, constantly shifting perspective and playing tricks with his words.

Playful hatred poses considerable interpretative problems. Does play undercut hate or does it simply make it more sophisticated and protect the artist from criticism? An extreme example of this is provided by the Extreme Metal band Anal Cunt. The band's music, consisting of huge numbers of near-identical, short, fast, tuneless songs consists almost exclusively of insults and hatred. The targets of that hatred range from the bizarre ('You Live On A Houseboat', 'You Are An Interior Decorator') to the shockingly offensive ('You were pregnant so I kicked you in the stomach'). The clear aim of the band is to hate and annoy everyone. Does this pointless, total hatred simply make the band a joke? How are we to see songs such as 'I sent concentration camp footage to America's funniest home videos' or 'Hitler was a sensitive man' which are both incredibly unpleasant but equally not meant purely seriously?

Artists such as Anal Cunt knowingly put listeners in a difficult position: if you don't join in and enjoy the playfulness then you are positioned as humourless, po-faced and over-serious. If you do find the play amusing, can you really simply ignore the violence and nastiness of the hatred?

- *Provocation and publicity*

This raises another difficult problem: how to deal with hate music that is designed to provoke?

In a mass-mediated society, contemporary artists know that they can always be guaranteed publicity if they provoke shock and anger. Artists from the Sex Pistols to Eminem owe much of their success to criticism and attempts at censorship directed against them. Can we therefore dismiss much of hate music as simply a routine attempt to provoke anger? This may be true in some cases but there is a huge amount of hate music that is produced and consumed with minimal publicity. Anal Cunt, like most Extreme Metal, sells in very small quantities and provokes minimal publicity. There is an irony in the fact that mainstream Heavy Metal in the 1980s provoked a huge amount of controversy whilst producing far less extreme material than the Extreme Metal scene produces almost unnoticed today. Furthermore, it is an open question whether Nazi music, the most directly political hate music, is intended to provoke controversy or to serve as a resource to hardcore Nazis. Hate music may therefore thrive *both* on publicity and on silence.

Conclusion

In this essay I have deliberately avoided coming to any firm conclusions regarding either the interpretation of hate music or what to do about it. Rather, I have attempted to demonstrate the complexity of the topic and the dilemmas of responding to it. Are there any conclusions that can be reached concerning the issue of hate and music? I would argue that the complexity of the issue demonstrates the necessity of a sophisticated approach to musical interpretation on the part of critics, musicians and fans. The expression of hate in music is a delicate matter. It is, as I have argued, not illegitimate in and of itself, but there are inherent problems and dangers involved. Responding to those dangers requires a recognition that music is never *only music* but is a serious and important form of expression. Perhaps most importantly, it requires an acknowledgement that thinking about hate music is crucial to any attempt to imagine a form of musical expression that is simultaneously challenging, rooted in everyday life and non-oppressive.

The development of a more sophisticated vocabulary of musical aesthetics *amongst* musicians as well as consumers of music *is* necessarily a long-term project. This does not solve the immediate questions that are raised by certain forms of hate music such as Nazi music or misogynist ragga. Yet any attempt to address such questions in isolation from questions of aesthetics is likely to create as many problems as it solves. Those who wish to confront hate music *even* of the most obviously oppressive kind *need* to think through the wider issues involved. If this is not done then the debate about hate music will continue to be an intellectually impoverished series of responses to a phenomenon that resists easy solutions.

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About the author

Keith Kahn-Harris received his doctorate from Goldsmiths' College in 2001. His thesis was entitled 'Transgression and Mundanity: The Global Extreme Metal Music Scene', and was based on fieldwork conducted in Sweden, Israel and the UK. He has published on issues surrounding transgression, music, racism and globalisation. He is the co-editor of the collection *After Subculture* (Palgrave, 2003). He has been a Fellow at the Mandel School for Advanced Educational Leadership, Jerusalem, and a visiting scholar at Monash University Australian Centre for Jewish Civilization, Melbourne. He currently works as an independent research consultant, specialising in the field of Jewish communal and educational development. Visit his website at: www.kahn-harris.org



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