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## Songs of the Factory: Pop Music, Culture, and Resistance

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## Songs of the Factory: Pop Music, Culture, and Resistance

### Abstract

Having made the case for an ethnographic study of how workers hear and use music, I now turn to connect the topic to bigger questions within industrial sociology, musicology, and cultural studies—questions regarding the nature of popular music in contemporary society, and questions regarding the links between workplace cultures and workplace resistance. In examining these questions, I use Small's (1998) term "musicking" to denote social practices that involve music. For Small, whenever we are playing music, singing, listening to it, dancing to it, or writing it, we are musicking. Despite the broadness of this concept, so far most writers who have used the concept have tended to follow Small's lead in focusing on performance as the "primary process" of musicking (113). But there is also a rich potential in seeing musicking in how music is received. Musicking is a term that opens a door into better seeing "music as social life," to use the phrase of Turino (2008). Musicking as a conceptual lens leads us to focus on the situated meanings of the people who are musicking. As Small puts it (1998, 13), "the act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies." It is a term that emphasizes the active role of the person who is musicking. It sits well with John Cage's argument that "most people mistakenly think that when they hear a piece of music that they're not doing anything but that something's being done to them. Now this is not true and we must arrange our music, our art, everything ... so that people realize that they themselves are doing it and not that something is being done to them" (quoted in DeNora 2003, 157).

### Keywords

ethnography, popular music, factory workers, worker rights

### Disciplines

Organizational Behavior and Theory | Other Music | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Unions | Work, Economy and Organizations

### Comments

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# SONGS OF THE FACTORY

*Pop Music, Culture, and Resistance*

MAREK KORCZYNSKI

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## REACH OUT I'LL BE THERE

*Pop Music, Work, and Society*

It's 8.30 in the morning. The shift is just starting. Lana walks up the stairs, says hello to Anna and Evelyn as she walks past them toward her worktable. She puts her creasing rod, scissors, and marker pen down on the table and reaches out for the roll of fabric to begin her work of creasing hem-shapes at the bottom of this fabric. She leans forward to the fabric but then pauses and pulls herself back. She turns around and walks toward the radio, which is placed on a shelf against the wall, and turns it on. She is greeted by The Four Tops *Reach Out I'll Be There*. She smiles, turns the volume up, and walks with a little dance step back to her work station, smiles at Shirley, and pulls the fabric toward her.

This book is written to dignify this small moment at the start of the working day in a blinds factory. It is written as an analytical celebration of the beauty, strengths, and limitations of the musically informed "Stayin' Alive" culture that workers in this factory created. It asks, as Small (1998) enjoins us to ask when considering the playing out of music: What is going

on here? What does it mean that this person, in this work role, in this factory, in this epoch of the structuring of work organization, turns around and turns on this particular form of broadcasting technology, to play this particular style of popular music, common to the chosen channel? What looked like the most straightforward of questions ends up being a potentially demanding and profound question. And by addressing this specific question, I hope to generate understandings that allow us wider insights about the relationship between popular music and society, and between working cultures and resistance. It is a book about music and work in a specific blinds factory, but it is also a book about the nature of popular music and the nature of working cultures, more generally.

It is a book motivated by the belief that we learn most when we allow ourselves the opportunity to look for the meanings in the everyday, to look for depth when it is more common to see the superficial. And it has been common, at least among sociologists of work, to regard music playing in workplaces as the domain of the trivial. We can certainly see a casual disdain for this topic in the following quote in Pollert's (1981, 132) otherwise exemplary ethnography of working in a cigarette factory: "Twice a day there was a reprieve from the grey sameness of a working day: Muzac . . . it was . . . keenly looked forward to: Val: It's the best part of the day when the records come on. Stella: 12 o'clock! Jimmy Young! They missed him twice last week!" If there is condescension here from the sociologist toward music at work, there is something rather different from the workers, Val and Stella, whose words we hear. From them, we sense a deep attachment to music at work. This is music that means something to them.

It becomes harder to keep to the assumption that music at work is a trivial issue when we hear the voices of industrial workers, from different time periods and in different workplaces in different countries, expressing the same depth of attachment to music. I begin this brief tour of workers' voices regarding music by giving some of the lyrical words of William Thom (1847, 14–15), also known as the weaver poet. He outlines the soul-destroying nature of work between 1814 and 1831 in a Scottish weaving factory and describes how workers there found solace in their expression of humanity through music (in this case, singing): "Let me again proclaim the debt we owe those Song Spirits, as they walked in melody from loom to loom, ministering to the low-hearted. . . . Song was the dew drops that gathered during the long dark night of despondency, and were sure to

glitter in the very first blink of the sun. . . . We had nothing to give but a kind look and a song . . . the better features of humanity could not be utterly defaced where song and melody were permitted to exist." Hamper (1992, xvii) wrote *Rivethead*, an account of working in a Detroit car factory in the 1980s, and he starts with a description of music at work, from which the reader may intuit a desperate attachment of the workers to the music: "Dead Rock Stars are singin' for me and the boys on the Rivet Line tonight. Hendrix, Morrison. Zeppelin. The Dead Rock Stars' catalogue churnin' outta Hogjaw's homemade boom box. . . . Tonight and every night they bawl. . . . We've come back once again to tussle with our parts and to hear the Dead Rock Stars harmonize above the industrial din." The words of Tricia, who worked at the blinds factory studied in this book, end this short tour: "That bloody thing [the radio] keeps me alive; that's why it's glued up there. Nobody's going to take it away from me."

The words used by workers given here have become less florid and more condensed, but the overall message has remained remarkably consistent. For these workers, music at work has real, and often deeply intense, meaning. We can sense some of the value of music at work, even when music is absent. This observation comes from an ethnography of an assembly-line plant in which there is no music playing: "The monotony of the line was almost unbearable. . . . It was not unusual to look up or down the line and see workers at various stations singing to themselves, tapping their feet to imaginary music" (Thompson 1983, 225). Here is a reflection on the absence of music at work by an African American mechanic whose radio has been taken away by his boss: "They allowed us to have radios. We'd put us on some music, and we'd step through any project that we had on the job. They took the music away and it was just like putting us out on the field again, you know" (Crafts, Cavicchi, and Keil 1993, 175).

Lemert and Willis have argued, appositely, that the subtle everyday activities of people are often freighted with great meaning and wisdom. Lemert (2005, 3) has written that people should be regarded as "everyday sociologists" for the way they exhibit "this quality of human resilience, this competence that sustains and enriches human life, even against the odds." Willis (2000, 3) regards people as "everyday artists" who enact "art as a living, not textual thing and as inherently social and democratic. Art as an elegant and compressed practice of meaning-making is a defining and irreducible quality at the heart of everyday human practices and interactions."

If we agree with Lemert and Willis, if we see the value in exploring how people enact “working philosophies” in their everyday lives and how they bring “spontaneous wisdom . . . to bear upon the concrete problem of living” (Cohen and Taylor 1992, 31), then we cannot keep ignoring the attachment of industrial workers to music. Even if a song appears to us as banal, it is not necessarily the song itself that is important but the way it is heard and used by workers as everyday artists. Leonard Cohen expresses this with typical poetic clarity:

There are always meaningful songs for somebody. People are doing their courting, people are finding their wives, people are making babies, people are washing their dishes. People are getting through the day, with songs we may find insignificant. But their significance is affirmed by others. There's always someone affirming the significance of a song by taking a woman into his arms or by getting through the night. That's what dignifies the song. Songs don't dignify human activity. Human activity dignifies the song. (quoted in Zollo 2003, 331)

Until now there has been no ethnographic study of music in the workplace. There have been some notable historical studies of workers' use of music. Most famously, there are the studies of the role of music in the labor of African American slaves and convicts (Epstein 1977; Abrahams 1992; Jackson 1999). There are some important insights into the musical cultures at work in preindustrial occupations (Hugill 1961; Campbell and Collinson 1969; Porter 1992), but studies become rare when the setting is the industrialized workplace (Morgan 1975; Messenger 1980; Jones 2005). There are quite a range of industrial psychological studies of the impact on music in factories on output variables such as production and tiredness (see Oldham et al. 1995), but this scholarship does not so much dignify the attachment of workers to music as instrumentalize this attachment. These studies certainly do not seek to open up the “black box” of the meanings of music to workers, and of the social practices around music that they have adopted. With colleagues (Korczynski, Pickering, and Robertson 2013), I have written an overview of the social history of music in British workplaces, covering the journey from preindustrial occupations to the introduction of broadcast music into factories in the middle of the twentieth century. That overview followed the thread of music in the workplace

against the dimensions of fancy (i.e., scope for the imagination and play) and function, voice, and community. It showed that while singing at work for many preindustrial occupations involved a strong intermingling of the playful with the functional (e.g., coordinating labor), industrial workers turned to broadcast more for survival than for play. For many preindustrial workers, singing was a crucial mode of raising their voice in terms of airing interests and grievances. By contrast, industrial workers tended to have extremely limited scope for using broadcast pop music as a mode for the raising of their voice. The strongest continuity between preindustrial work and contemporary industrial work is in the way music has been crucial for workers in both periods to express and create community at work. These insights are chiseled from oral histories and scattered written accounts.

What has remained missing is an ethnography that can access the subterranean and embodied meanings and practices that are likely to be crucial for understanding the deep fabric of music at work but that are elusive to other modes of research. Ethnography is a well-suited method for examining how people see, hear, know, and experience their social world, particularly when people's knowledge of their social world is tacit rather than explicit in nature. Explicit knowledge, or discursive knowledge (Lemert 2005), is knowledge that people know they have and that they are able to articulate verbally. Tacit knowledge, or practical or embodied knowledge, is knowledge that people have within them and that they may express through their actions but that they are not able to explicitly articulate. Much research privileges explicit discursive knowledge. But as Bendix (2000, 1) argues, this privileging of the explicit word can be impoverishing: "The nineteenth century's unreflected preference for writing and print as media of learning and communicating knowledge almost automatically impoverished our understanding of the sensory and sensual totality of experience." Cultures are often seen as holding tacit knowledge. Willis (1977, 125) puts the case for examining the embodied knowledge of cultures in this way: "The cultural forms may not say what they know, nor know what they say, but they mean what they do." Many research methods are able to examine people's explicit knowledge, but ethnography is particularly suited to unearthing people's tacit knowledge. Musical knowledge is often tacit knowledge: music may be able to speak to us and for us in ways

that other forms of communication cannot. Given that musical cultures are likely to be rich in tacit knowledge, this means that ethnography becomes the best way to find out “what is going on here.”

Having made the case for an ethnographic study of how workers hear and use music, I now turn to connect the topic to bigger questions within industrial sociology, musicology, and cultural studies—questions regarding the nature of popular music in contemporary society, and questions regarding the links between workplace cultures and workplace resistance. In examining these questions, I use Small’s (1998) term “musicking” to denote social practices that involve music. For Small, whenever we are playing music, singing, listening to it, dancing to it, or writing it, we are musicking. Despite the broadness of this concept, so far most writers who have used the concept have tended to follow Small’s lead in focusing on performance as the “primary process” of musicking (113). But there is also a rich potential in seeing musicking in how music is received. Musicking is a term that opens a door into better seeing “music as social life,” to use the phrase of Turino (2008). Musicking as a conceptual lens leads us to focus on the situated meanings of the people who are musicking. As Small puts it (1998, 13), “the act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies.” It is a term that emphasizes the active role of the person who is musicking. It sits well with John Cage’s argument that “most people mistakenly think that when they hear a piece of music that they’re not doing anything but that something’s being done to them. Now this is not true and we must arrange our music, our art, everything . . . so that people realize that they themselves are doing it and not that something is being done to them” (quoted in DeNora 2003, 157).

### **Popular Music and Contemporary Society**

Understanding the meaning of popular music in the factory can help develop our knowledge about the nature of the use and role of popular music in contemporary advanced capitalism. At present, there are two rather well-established schools that offer differing interpretations of the role of popular music in society—one that emphasizes the role of popular music in upholding the social order and one that emphasizes the resistive and

emancipatory in popular music. The writings of Adorno, a key member of the Frankfurt school of critical social theory, are the focal point for the literature indicting popular music's essence as conservative. Adorno (1976, 270) argued that popular music primarily operates as a tool for social control, creating "one-dimensional," passive, uncritical listeners: "Music for entertainment . . . seems to complement the reduction of people to silence, the dying out of speech as expression, the inability to communicate at all. It inhabits the pockets of silence that develop between people molded by anxiety, work and undemanding docility." Adorno and Attali (1977, 111) argued that popular music takes the place of real sociality between people, leaving behind a sham of false fraternization. Adorno's work has been widely criticized as overly pessimistic, with the pessimism seen as emanating from his emphasis on abstract structuring forces of capitalism and his neglect of the agency of those who receive popular music (e.g., Middleton 1990). DeNora (2003) argues that it is perhaps too easy to dismiss Adorno on this basis. She argues for a more nuanced approach in which Adorno's abstractions can be assessed by grounding them in more concrete empirical settings, given that "music acts . . . only in concert with the material, cultural and social environments in which it is located" (156). It may be that in the factory the scope for critique offered by popular music to workers is so small that the worker-listener becomes as "unfree" as Adorno assumes the listener to be (Middleton 1990, 57). The factory may be the setting in which some of Adorno's claims about music as a medium of social control can be redeemed. For instance, Adorno (1941, 1976) argued that popular music is essentially standardized in form—in the same way that industrial production is standardized. Adorno's ideas about congruence between repetitive labor and repetitive music suggest that in the factory popular music may help lubricate the functioning of the labor process. Indeed, scholars within this tradition can point to industrial psychological research that has shown that in repetitive low-skilled work, the productivity of workers tends to increase slightly if music is played in the workplace (Oldham et al. 1995).

An alternative tradition highlights the potential for music to be used as a resistive cultural resource. Particularly important here is the tradition of British cultural studies. Within this tradition, there have been a number of studies that have shown how relatively powerless groups have appropriated forms of popular music to reinforce and articulate a sense of resistance. For instance, Hall and Jefferson (1975) argued that many forms

of music consumption by young people represent a class-conscious form of rebelliousness or “resistance through rituals.” Research in this tradition has also developed in North America. Rupp and Taylor (2003, 217–18), for instance, show how drag queens “appropriate mainstream popular music that has one set of meanings, drawing upon hegemonic and counterhegemonic gender and sexual symbols to inflect these songs with new meaning.” Space for such appropriation of forms of popular music is suggested by active-audience theory (Negus 1996), in which the value of music lies in what it sets in motion for listeners rather than what it is as an artifact (Buchanan 1997). The rich polysemic nature of music opens space for listeners to frame new, and potentially resistive, meanings around popular songs, almost regardless of any socially conservative origins it may have.

Whereas the Adorno approach posits popular music as creating false sociality, there is a strong tradition in sociomusicology that highlights the role of music in creating community. Notably, Eyerman and Jamison (1998) have shown how a range of social movements of protest have drawn on music to build and sustain collective identities. Roscigno and Danaher’s (2004) study of the role of music during the wave of labor activism in the Southern textile industry in the 1920s and 1930s offers similar conclusions. More generally, McNeil (1995) and Turino (2008) have argued that music has played a key role in different historical periods in creating and sustaining a sense of the collective. Turino, in particular, gives an in-depth sense of the social bonding that occurs through the process of participatory dance practices. These are all important studies, but it can be countered that the community that music has helped to create has articulated with musical forms outside of the mainstream popular song. Ehrenreich’s (2006) fine overview of the history of collective joy is important, therefore, for it highlights the strong, empowering, collective sense that young women created together in their sustained euphoria over the Beatles—notably, during their early “pop” period. Ehrenreich is clear that such a collective sense was resistive to the strong prevailing norms constraining the female body.

This rich literature shows the potential for popular music to be heard and used in emancipatory and resistive ways. But potential does not mean inevitable, or even usual. As Grossberg (1992, 2) notes: “To argue that people are often ‘empowered’ by their relations to popular culture, that . . . such empowerment sometimes enables people to resist their subordination is not the same as arguing that all of our relations to popular culture

constitute acts of resistance, or that such relations are, by themselves, sufficient bases for an oppositional politics." This suggests the importance of seeing how music is heard and used in specific contexts. One important critique of the debate between those who emphasize popular music as implicated in modes of social control and those who see it as a resistive resource is that it has been undertaken in too absolutist a manner. We can see the turn toward studying music "in everyday life" as in large part driven by the desire to move beyond the increasingly hollow absolutes of the debate. One of the key things to take from DeNora's (2000) groundbreaking study of the minutiae of music use in *Music in Everyday Life* is the idea that people's sense and use of music is intimately tied to their understandings of specific social contexts. At the same time, it is necessary to move beyond the agenda of music in everyday life. While the ethnomusicological impulse behind this approach is to be welcomed, there remains a lack of analytical edge in the key category of "everyday life." As sociologists have labored for many decades to highlight, our everyday lives are made up of a number of social arenas that each have their own distinct pattern of social relations. Work is one of the most important of these. As an important step in moving the theorizing of music forward, we can seek to conceptualize how people use music in the specific structures of their *working lives*. As noted, we know too little about what is going on in that small moment when Lana paused to turn on the radio. This is not a trivial gap in our knowledge, for as I and my colleagues (2013) have shown, the relaying of popular music to workers in industrial contexts has been extremely common in advanced Western economies since the middle of the twentieth century. Contextualizing the study of how popular music is heard is one way of moving forward our understandings of popular music. We also need to move the debate beyond the dichotomous view of popular as either simply "with" or "against" the social order. We need a way of hearing both the with and the against in popular music. We require an understanding of the *dialectics of the use of popular music*. A dialectical approach sensitizes us to see within one social practice both a thesis and an antithesis, both a proposition and its negation. An approach to analyzing the dialectics of the uses of popular music foregrounds the way in which people hear and use popular music in ways that are simultaneously both with the social order and against the social order. Indeed, if we appreciate that music has different layers of text, there is greater space for understanding how there may be both a "with" and

an “against” in musicking with popular music. Turino (2008, 108) notes that songs have much greater semiotic density than the spoken word, because beyond words there are melody, rhythm, instrumentation, harmonic settings, vocal style, and sometimes even choreography, and that different layers of text can be linked with different meaning frames.

This argument can be connected with Turino’s (2008) thesis that music is structured within an interplay between “the possible” and “the actual.” The “actual” refers to everyday life in which “we have our routine and act out of habit.” The “possible” refers to “those things we might be able to do, hope, think, know and experience” (16–17). Turino argues that one of the special qualities of the arts, and particularly of music, is that they allow us to feel the dynamic interplay between the possible and the actual. If we see the existing social order as the actual, and the resistance to the social order as implying the possible, then it is clear that there is a great deal of compatibility between the dialectical understanding of music developed in this book and Turino’s understanding of music as located within the dynamic interplay between the actual and the possible.

There are two other writers whose insightful work on popular music forms can be drawn on to help develop the idea of the dialectics of popular music being put forward here—Dinerstein and Grossberg. They are particularly useful, because they take us toward the specific context of this study—popular music practices within the rationalized alienating structures of Taylorism, or Fordism, in which jobs are structured as highly repetitive and low skilled. Dinerstein (2003) argues that 1930s swing music existed as a vamp simultaneously with and against the rationalized rhythms and structures of Fordist modernity. Swing music and its associated dances created a humanization and aestheticization of the pace and rhythms of Fordism—they incorporated the pace and strict timing of machines but also swung against them. Dinerstein argues that “big band swing made sense of factory noise, and the lindy-hop [dance] gave the opportunity to get with the noise” (6) and that “swing musicians and dancers created a genuine pop art that mediated the need for both accommodation and resistance to the technological society” (18). Such an aesthetic should be seen as distinct from the aesthetic that simply celebrated Fordist modernity (Van Delinder 2005). We can see Dinerstein’s analysis of swing as a specific example of Turino’s more abstracts ideas, in which the rational structures of Fordism are the (dominating) actual, and the humanized

aesthetics of swing music expression are the possible. Although his analysis may come too close to suggesting a straightforward homology between music and societal form, Dinerstein's analysis emphasizes how an interplay of the possible and the actual within musicking can be one that involves simultaneous accommodation and resistance (to a rationalized social order).

Grossberg's (1992) analysis of rock music offers another way of examining the possibilities of simultaneous with and against within contemporary musicking. On the one hand, Grossberg argues that one of the key qualities of rock music is its ability to generate "affective empowerment" that can be a key resource for generation of cultures resistive to the social order. On the other hand, he locates rock music as accommodative in that its (framing) origins are connected to the status quo of the liberal consensus. He argues that it is no accident that rock music is rarely directly linked to forms of resistive social mobilization. He argues that rock music is primarily constituted "outside of everyday life" (150). Rock music's accent on the transcendent is such that it is barely able to articulate with everyday life, and it is everyday life that is the stuff around which resistive collective mobilizations occur. Grossberg is here moving us toward a nuanced understanding of social practices of rock music as involving a with and an against in which the gesture of the "against" tends to lack substantive meaning.

Having a readiness to see the simultaneous with and against is but the starting point. The question for analysts is to see how this with and against is played out in practice in specific contexts, with an understanding of how important limits to the "against" may be embedded within the social structure of the context and the social framing of the music.

It is in relation to the social practices of hearing and using contemporary popular music in monotonous social structures that I develop in this book the concept of *multitonous musicking*. Here, I will give a brief overview of the concept. Multitonous musicking involves a way of using music to be both with and against a monotonous social structure. It is a dialectical form of musical practice that is rooted in the context of the monotonous social structure. It is a form of musicking that allows the enactment of the social order within the monotonous while also allowing the expression of a spirit of resistance to that social order. In multitonous musicking people tend not to have a deep immersion of their senses in music. Rather, music is used as a way of preventing the senses from being dominated by the monotonous.

Multitonus musicking accents nonrepetitive cultural practices as a critical response to structural repetition within the monotonous. It also opens up space for the adoption of more “agentic” rather than structured movements within the monotonous setting. Agentic movements are those that involve excess or surplus movement of the body, often enacted in a nonrepetitive way. Structured movements involve no such excess movement and tend to be robotically, repetitively enacted. A swagger is a typical example of an agentic movement. Further, multitonus musicking involves people reappropriating lyrics in pop songs (often in choruses) to express critical understandings of the monotonous social setting. Although this book spends some time examining the collective form of multitonus musicking that was played out on the floor of the factory that I studied, I do not see the collective element as a necessary part of multitonus musicking.

Multitonus musicking is likely to be most intense when the setting is not only monotonous but also alienating. Further, it will grow in intensity the longer that people spend time in that setting. Given that Taylorized workplaces are not only monotonous but also alienating, and given that working hours are long, *multitonus musicking is likely to be at its most intense within Taylorized workplaces*. Although, multitonus musicking will be at its most intense in Taylorized factories, the concept of the multitonus can have resonance in any social order that is perceived as monotonous. Advanced capitalist societies have many rationalized structures that can generate perceptions of monotony. The Taylorized workplace is the most important and easy to identify, but there are others in which the multitonus is played out—as I will argue in the concluding chapter.

### **Shop Floor Cultures and Resistance**

The study of pop music in a factory is also relevant to important questions within the field of industrial sociology. Specifically, an understanding of how pop music is heard and used in a factory as part of a deep-textured understanding of shop floor culture can also help us better understand the nature and dynamics of workplace resistance. There have been enough ethnographies of workplaces to allow scholars to draw up maps of the main patterns of workplace conflict and to point to key factors underpinning the main patterns identified. Particularly notable here is the writing

of Edwards, Belanger, and Wright (Edwards, Belanger, and Wright 2006; Belanger and Edwards 2007) as well as Hodson and Roscigno (Hodson 2001; Roscigno and Hodson 2004). Both of these approaches to the analysis of the material factors that structure forms of workplace cooperation and conflict represent important steps forward—and I look at this scholarship in more detail in chapter 8. At the same time, the focus on the “structuring” factors leaves large unanswered questions regarding the role of agency of the actors within these structures. Hodson (2001, 266) acknowledges that the agency of workers remains insufficiently explored: “Workers’ contributions are realized through both their individual and collective activities. The analysis of workers’ practical autonomy, its varieties, and its antecedents and consequences is a vast, little explored, and yet centrally important concern for a fully developed sociology of work.”

There is a clear analogy here with the development of the literature on social movements (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Tilly 2003). The first wave of social movement writing focused on the structures of political opportunities that opened space for social movements to emerge. This analysis was acknowledged as an important contribution, but critics subsequently argued that this approach tended to marginalize the agency of the actors involved. As Jasper (2010) put it bluntly, “there was no theory of action” (966) with its focus on macrostructuring factors. On the back of this critique, within the study of social movements “the intellectual pendulum has swung away from the great structural and historical paradigms and back toward creativity and agency, culture and meaning, emotion and morality” (970). Within this there is an understanding of the importance of seeing political agency develop out of everyday lived cultures of actors. The analysis of patterns of workplace cooperation and resistance can also be strengthened by taking a similar turn toward extending the analysis of material structuring factors to also examine the everyday lived culture of actors and the link of this to agency.

Such a turn is particularly important within the current moment of political economy in which strong union representation at the workplace level is increasingly rare in many major economies. When the union has not been taken to be the mode of agency for resistance, the alternative main focus, within industrial sociology, has been the work group. Indeed, perhaps one of the strongest contributions of industrial sociology (ethnographies) has been the way that acts of resistance, such as output restrictions,

have been described and understood as outcomes of work group norms and behaviors (e.g., Lupton 1963). Notably, this literature has served to correct the assumption that work group activity in limiting production was irrational, for it showed how this behavior often had an underlying rational economic logic (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999). Overall, however, these studies have done surprisingly little to address the issue of agency, for with their understanding of the economic factors underpinning action, they effectively position themselves as focusing on the material structuring factors of resistance (albeit, at a lower level of abstraction, the work group level).

Unfortunately, with their strong focus on showing the patterns of workplace resistance enacted by work groups, these studies have tended not to analyze the microcultural activities of workers and work groups. Even where attention has been paid to both elements—microcultural practices and acts of resistance—it has been rare for scholars to look for links between them. Donald Roy's famous studies are a case in point. Based on ethnographic research within a factory, Roy wrote two notable studies—"Efficiency and 'the Fix'" (1954) focused on the work group's economically rational limiting of output and "Banana Time" (1958) focused on the minutiae of cultural practices of a small work group. Both studies are important, but what Roy did not attempt was to try to understand the potential linkages between microcultural practices and the playing out of output restrictions. Roy's became the established way of studying the workplace, with a separation between those studying contours of control and resistance (e.g., Lupton 1963; Edwards and Scullion 1982) and those studying forms of cultural practices, most notably humor (e.g., Linstead 1985). There have been only a small number of studies which have sought to look for connections between microcultural practices and resistance. Both Pollert (1981) and Purcell (1982) argued that forms of gendered cultural practices of women workers tended to limit their ability to enact certain forms of resistance. Purcell, for instance, suggested that, in the workplace she studied, women's cultural practices, such as astrology, fortune-telling, and superstitions, tended to have a flavor of fatalism, which meant that they tended to accept rather than challenge workplace structures of domination. Collinson (1992) also looked at gendered cultural practices in terms of a masculine culture of joking and argued that this culture had an important resistive edge in terms of undermining management authority and

creating an overall "resistance through distance." (53) At the same time, however, these workers used humor to control other workers who were seen as not working hard enough under the collective-bonus scheme.

Further support for investigating the links between cultural practices and resistance comes from a parallel literature that has investigated the cultural activities linked to the trade union and labor movement (Reuss and Reuss 2000; Hall 2001; Roscigno and Danaher 2004). These cultural activities, such as music and art, are implicitly seen as sustaining the overall resistive project of the labor movement. Indeed, Roscigno and Danaher (2004) examine how the type of music textile workers listened to in the southern United States in the 1920s and 1930s influenced the likelihood of the workers taking part in strike action. If cultural activity is seen as important at this level, should not we also be focused on examining the microcultural practices enacted within the workplace and their link to forms of resistance? Willis certainly thinks so, for he wrote that on the shop floor, workers "thread through the dead experience of work a living culture which is far from a simple reflex of defeat" (1977, 52). His classic book, *Learning to Labour*, from which this quote is taken, is primarily a study of cultural practices around school, but he does offer a parenthesis in this book in which he follows this culture onto the factory floor (52–56). Intriguingly, he sketches some elements of a vibrant, living culture that is heavily based on joking and then immediately discusses forms of resistance, such as output restrictions and "fiddling," which are also enacted on the shop floor. Implicitly, Willis seeks to connect the cultural activity of the factory workers and their acts of resistance. But because the factory floor was not the main site of his ethnographic research, this remains an implicit idea within a sketch—a sketch that requires sustained ethnographic research on the shop floor for it to be developed into a picture. A final, but important, connection between culture and social action (including resistance) is suggested in DeNora's *Music in Everyday Life* (2000). A key argument that DeNora puts forward is that individuals use music as a facilitator of agency, such that music should be seen as affecting not just individual behavior but also social ordering at the collective level. For DeNora, the aesthetics of music should be seen, and studied, as a potential springboard for social action. If the social action being examined is collective resistance, the implications of DeNora's argument is that we should not assume music to be a peripheral presence,

but we should consider that it may play a key role in the processes of agency leading to the resistance.

In examining the links between cultural activity within the workplace and acts of resistance, I need to make three points of clarification and development. First, in analyzing the nature of cultural activity, I will examine it in terms of whether it expresses or embodies a *spirit of resistance*. Whereas acts of resistance involve workers acting in ways that are counter to the dominant actor's or dominant logic's aims, the spirit of resistance refers to workers holding or expressing values or meanings that are counter to those of the dominant actor or dominant logic. Note that the difference between acts of resistance and the spirit of resistance is not around actions per se. For it may be that one of the ways that a spirit of resistance is expressed is through actions holding embodied meaning. Rather, the difference is the effect of the actions. Acts of resistance adversely affect the aims of the dominant actor (usually management) or the dominant logic, whereas workers holding a spirit of resistance do not adversely affect these aims. Thus, actions that have an embodied resistive meaning but that do not counter the aims of management should be understood not as acts of resistance but as actions expressing a spirit of resistance.

The importance of considering the spirit of resistance is present in a number of important strands of literature. Scott, for instance, when he writes of the importance of social scientists properly considering symbolic resistance within the hidden transcripts of the weak is focusing on the same idea. In his seminal *Domination and Arts of Resistance* (1990) he emphasizes that scholars must move away from a simple focus on acts of resistance to also consider the ways the weak communicate with one another, creating value systems and meanings counter to the dominant, and that this "infrapolitics of subordinate groups . . . provides much of the cultural and structural underpinning of the more visible political action on which our attention has generally been focused" (184). Thus, acts of resistance, he argues, often need a spirit of resistance to underpin them. Similarly, cultural studies writers, when they have analyzed what they have understood as resistive cultures of subordinate groups, often focus not so much on the actions of these groups as harming the aims of the dominant but rather on the cultures as expressing values and meanings that run counter to those of the dominant. Musical culture is a good example. When Abrahams (1992) argues that the musical culture of African American slaves was resistive

in nature, this is a claim about the spirit of resistance expressed within this musical culture, rather the participants using music in actions that directly disrupted the aims of the dominant.

Among studies of workplace resistance, the prime focus has been on acts of resistance, and the space for examining resistive meanings and values rather than actions continues to be littered with some unnecessary and unfortunate baggage. Such baggage involves belittling hidden transcripts that express resistive meanings as “decaf” resistance that is not comparable to “real” acts of resistance (Contu 2008, 369). Of course, the spirit of resistance and acts of resistance are different from each other and need to be distinguished, but belittling activities that contain resistive values wholly misses Scott’s point that such resistive meanings and values may act as the underpinning for acts of resistance. Another form of baggage is that the workplace studies that do take resistive meanings seriously tend to focus on people’s identities. The primary problem with this approach is that it involves methodological individualism. By focusing on the individual’s identity, the resonance and meaning of socially created, potentially resistive lived cultures are marginalized, if not completely lost. If we are interested in examining agency that informs acts of resistance, then socially created and expressed meanings are crucial—as Hodson (2001, 267) puts it: “Definition of appropriate directions and levels of effort are . . . essentially collective in nature. An adequate model of worker agency will have to rely more on emergent collective meanings and behaviors than on free-floating individual attitudes.”

The second important way that the traditional literature on workplace resistance needs to be extended is through a consideration of the multiple levels at which resistance (whether spirit or actions) may be directed. The default approach of industrial sociologists has been to see worker resistance as actions that disrupt the aims of management or the employer. The focus is on actions that disrupt the aims of the immediate structuring dominant actor. Edwards (1986) put forward a more nuanced approach in terms of considering resistance vis-a-vis different levels at which management control operated. But a more radical approach than this is required. Such an approach is implicitly suggested in the literature on “institutional logics” (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012). A core idea of the institutional logics approach is that actors are often located in social locations involving multiple institutional logics, for example, the family, religion,

state, market, profession, and corporation. A given social situation is often a nesting of multiple social orders. Thus, a workplace may be thought of as nested within multiple institutional logics—not only a logic of capital accumulation but also a logic of patriarchy and a logic of rationalization, for instance. The implication of this understanding of the texture of workplace resistance is to see that resistance may be directed at the immediate management/employer and/or it may be directed at a key institutional logic that is commonly manifest within workplaces.

This broadens and enriches our understanding of workplace resistance. It allows us to see the nature of worker actions with considerably greater clarity. This approach allows us to see, for instance, that a piece of action may disrupt an institutional logic but that this may not necessarily disrupt the immediate aims of the employer. Here, we can say that resistance is played at the specific institutional logic level but not at the level of the particular employer. Indeed, such a scenario may often inform the important set of relations that have been known as an “indulgency” pattern of relations. The term was originally coined by Gouldner (1954) in a classic book about a gypsum mine in the United States. It has come to be used to refer to ways in which management allows informal patterns of behavior to exist that, although not strictly aligned to the systems of rules, are not seen as harming performance. In Gouldner’s original study, the indulgency pattern primarily involved worker actions that were resistive, not at the level of the immediate employer but at the level of the institutional logic, or social order, of rationalization. This nuanced understanding allows us to see that if the market or the financial context changes in a way so as to push the immediate management to embrace rationalization more tightly, then the same set of actions by the workforce will operate as resistance to both the immediate employer and to the social order of rationalization. Another important example of worker resistance to the logic of rationalization that did not constitute resistance to the immediate employer occurred within the “gang system” of production that operated in some engineering plants in Britain in decades after the Second World War (Friedman 1977). Here, management ceded organization of production to the workforce, organized as “gangs,” and these gangs tended to organize work in ways that differed significantly from the logic of rationalization.

These two points—the widening of the focus to include a consideration of the spirit of resistance as well as the acts of resistance and the

development of a consideration of the different levels at which resistance operates—are likely to be particularly important for consideration of the role of culture in workplace resistance. It will allow us to analyze cultures not in the narrow sense of whether they directly constitute acts of resistance, which they are unlikely to do except in relatively narrow cases such as workplace rituals and carnivalesque playing out of humor that can be seen as also reducing work effort. It will allow us to see cultures that may be at least partly resistive even if they do not constitute acts of resistance—for cultures may hold and express a spirit of resistance (that may operate at a number of levels).

This extension of the focus to examine the spirit of resistance and the different levels at which resistance might operate does not mean that I want to throw out consideration of acts of resistance that are directed at the immediate employer. Rather, the extensions allow a more nuanced consideration of how cultures may connect to acts of resistance. The third and final extension to the analysis of workplace resistance, then, is a call for an enquiry into the *dotted lines between culture and acts of resistance*. The lines connecting culture and acts of resistance are unlikely to be straight and clearly defined, for, as Grossberg (1992, 20) has persuasively argued, “understanding the articulation of culture and politics is a project that is always just beyond our reach.” Cultural activities very rarely directly and unambiguously inform political activity. For Stuart Hall (1992, 280), this is a “necessary displacement of culture,” for “there is something about culture . . . which always escapes and evades the attempt to link it directly and immediately with other structures.” It is little surprise, therefore, that Street, Hague, and Savigny’s (2008, 275) review concludes that existing studies “have established only a weak connection between music and public action.” If we are to think of lines running between cultural practices and acts of resistance, then we should see these lines as dotted ones. We should understand that there are spaces between the dots, and our attempts to conceptualize the links between cultural practices and acts of resistance should pay as much attention to these spaces as to the dots of the line. Many traditional industrial sociologists may consider the study of musical cultural practices within a workplace as trivial compared with a proper focus of enquiry on acts of resistance. However, it may be that a microfocus on cultural practices may lead to a richer and more nuanced understanding of workplace resistance and,

particularly in the absence of strong workplace unions, the processes of agency underpinning it.

## Overview

The main body of the book has three sections. The first section, chapter 2, sets the scene and deepens the questions developed in this opening chapter. It gives salient features of McTells, the firm in which this ethnography is situated, and the company's product-market strategy before detailing McTells management's overall approach to labor and music. The chapter also sketches the characteristics and background of the workers and outlines their overall feelings of alienation toward the work and antagonism toward the firm. The chapter features the first of four "side steps" in the book. Side steps are where I move away from the flow of the narrative to render a deeper exploration of a key element that has been touched on in the narrative. The chapter's side step on the film *Saturday Night Fever* draws a picture of how pop music is structured as primarily antithetical to work. This picture allows me to further contextualize, and in the process to deepen, the questions driving this book.

The second section, comprising chapters 3 through 6, details the textures and the processes of the "Stayin' Alive" culture, with a primary focus on the significant musicking elements of this culture. Chapter 3 draws out how workers' use of pop music was entwined with the creation of community on the shop floor. Workers needed to connect with one another to stop their senses being dominated by alienation, and they often used music to connect with one another. Chapter 4 turns to examine how workers heard and used music in relation to their sensing of alienation. Music was important for workers because it helped them fight against the sounds of alienation and to fight against the experience of the passing of slow, alienated time. The chapter also examines the fragility of music as a resource in this battle.

Chapter 5's primary focus is on how music was important for workers in terms of how they moved their bodies as they enacted the labor process. It afforded them the opportunity to enact the movements of work less in the structured alienated way of Chaplin in *Modern Times* and more in the swaggering agentic way of John Travolta's walk in the opening

scene of *Saturday Night Fever*. Workers at McTells used the song and also the joke, both central to the "Stayin' Alive" culture, to enact production even as they expressed a critique of the way it was structured. Chapter 6 examines the form of musical knowledge of the workplace held within the "Stayin' Alive" culture. It accesses this knowledge by analyzing the responses, given with energy, enthusiasm, and feeling, by workers to a simple question that I asked: "Is there a piece of music that speaks to you in any way about your working life at McTells?" The chapter gives a Top 10 rundown of the types of songs nominated by the workers at McTells. It shows that workers were able to appropriate Top 40 songs of heartbreak and hear them as articulating some of the hidden injuries (and joys) of class.

The third section of the book, given in chapters 7 and 8, examines the informal collective resistance at McTells, and the material and cultural underpinnings of these acts of resistance. Chapter 7 is concerned with outlining the extent and forms of the informal collective resistance. Although workers were not unionized, primarily due to management hostility to unions, workers enacted an extensive range of forms of collective resistance. If chapters 3 to 6 are primarily of interest to musicologists, and if chapter 7 is primarily of interest to industrial sociologists, chapter 8 is where, I hope, both sets of academics can meet in seeing the importance and relevance of both types of work. Chapter 8 first examines the material structuring of the informal collective resistance against the established industrial sociology literature before turning to see how we can understand worker agency better by understanding the connections between lived culture and resistance. The chapter outlines how crucial elements within the musicking "Stayin' Alive" culture at McTells served, in a "dotted line" kind of way, to support the agency of workers in enacting the resistance.

The concluding chapter returns to the main themes identified in this introductory chapter and reflects on what has been learned with regard to them from this ethnography of working and musicking. It shows key patterns of the "Stayin' Alive" culture that can be drawn out into the concept of *multitonous musicking*, and it points to the resonance of this concept for understanding musicking in other settings experienced as monotonous. It also suggests that some of the important dotted lines between shop floor culture and acts of resistance found at McTells are likely to have

significance for other workplaces. In the story of shop floor culture, pop music, and resistance in a blinds factory in the middle of England, there are also important stories about the meaning and role of pop music in contemporary society and about cultural practices and resistance in contemporary workplaces.

## STAYIN' ALIVE AT McTELLS

In the introductory chapter, I argued that we needed a grounded sense of context to be able to properly understand musical cultures. The aim of this chapter is to give exactly this sense of context. It is a scene-setting chapter in which I outline, first, the nature of McTells, the blinds firm. Next, I turn to give an overview of the people who worked at McTells, of the way in which they regarded their jobs, and of the nature of the “Stayin’ Alive” shop floor culture they created and in which their musical culture was nested. There are also two side steps in this chapter. The first focuses on the social history of the radio in the workplace, and the second examines the film *Saturday Night Fever* in which I see an important way of theorizing the relationship between pop music and work. This second side step develops the theoretical discussion begun in chapter 1.

### **McTells, the Social Order of Taylorism, and Music Policies**

McTells is a pseudonym for a blinds manufacturing and fitting firm, located in the Midlands region of England. As a condition of being granted

research access, I agreed to keep the firm anonymous. I initially chose to call it *McTells* simply because in the process of thinking of a name, my mind connected the keywords “blinds” and “music” and came to rest on the wonderful Bob Dylan song “Blind Willie *McTell*.” I held to this name because the key refrain in this aching song (Gray 2002)—“Nobody can sing the blues like Blind Willie *McTell*”—kept reverberating within my mind, asking me to keep probing deeper into the shop floor culture to where I supposed (and the song seemed to suggest) the deepest blues lay. Although my search for these deepest blues proved to be a misguided one (as will become clear), at least the desire to keep probing deeper was, I hope, an honorable one. It is the process of questioning that I want to obliquely reference through the use of the name *McTells*.

*McTells* employed 170 people in manual production, working in four product-specific workrooms—vertical blinds, roller blinds, soft furnishing, and pleated blinds. My research was undertaken in the two largest workrooms—those manufacturing “verticals” and “rollers.” *McTells* manufactured customized made-to-measure window blinds. It aimed to give a quick four-day turnaround from when a specific customer order was relayed to the firm. The size of customer orders could vary considerably between products, so management sought flexibility to allow a quick shifting of staff between workrooms as required. Its competitive strategy was centered on delivering quick low-cost blinds. It was exposed to a high degree of product-market variability in two senses. First, because production involved working on specific customer orders, there could be no buffer between demand and production. Second, a key generator of demand was the activity of agents in the field who sought individual customers and measured and installed the blinds. *McTells* did not directly employ these agents. Rather, they were self-employed. This meant that the activities of these agents, and hence the flow of demand, could not be easily controlled by *McTells*.

*McTells*'s overall competitive strategy informed the way in which work was organized. As mentioned in chapter 1, Frederick Taylor developed a system of organizing work in which conception and execution were separated. Conception was to be held by management, and workers were simply to execute. Further, workers' jobs were designed with the central motif of repetition: jobs should have a narrow task range, be low in complexity, and be easy to measure and monitor. These are the central principles of a

Taylorist system of work organization. In many advanced economies, from the 1920s onward, Taylorism became a key logic underpinning the design of jobs for many working-class people (Hodson and Sullivan 2001; Watson 2003). At McTells, the presence of a Taylorist logic was clear. The manufacturing of the blinds was broken down into a number of narrow discrete tasks, and people's jobs involved the repetition of one particular task (albeit with variations in parts of the substance of the task according to different customer orders—e.g., cutting different sizes of fabric). So, for instance, there were eleven job types in the manufacturing of roller blinds—rod cutting, fabric fetching, fabric cutting, hem folding, hem stitching, hem shaping, braiding, sticking, finishing, testing, and packing. Unlike many Taylorized jobs, these jobs were not closely driven by automated technology as in an assembly-line form of production. Rather, they primarily involved a hand-driven form of bench assembly, in which batches of the partly finished blinds were passed on to workers in the next stage of the production process. Each worker had a narrow range of low-skilled tasks to repeat, and their accomplishment was easily measured and monitored with target quotas of production set per hour for each job type. Supervisors monitored the amount of production by checking on each worker's output against the targets. Workers were reprimanded and disciplined if their productivity fell below target levels.

Taylorism is a form of social order in which there is a hierarchical imposition of a logic of rationalization. This idea of Taylorism as a form of social order relates back to the discussion in the opening chapter, in which I argued that forms of resistance need to be considered as relating to various layers of social reality. We can think of social reality at different levels of abstraction: at the most macro, we can talk of a capitalist logic, and at the most micro, we can talk of matters at the interactive level, where, for instance, intergenerational issues may become relevant. This idea of Taylorism as a form of social order is positioned at a high-level of abstraction, a level below where we can talk about a capitalist logic. Indeed, it is useful to think of Taylorism as one of the key forms of social order within developed capitalist societies. The logic of the Taylorist social order was a central element in the social reality of the factory floor at McTells.

A Taylorist social order has implications, but not determinate ones, for the forms of wage and employment-relations policies pursued by specific employers. In the case of McTells, this link was followed through.