



Crafty Bastards[®] Spotlight

March 17, 2015

Crafty Bastards[®] Spotlights are occasional products of Kiernan Group Holdings (KGH) that provide clients analysis and insights on new developments and key topics of interest as they relate to the emerging analytic lines of the Crafty Bastards[®] Workshops.

Cultural Resonance - The Cacophony of Extremist Narratives

Music is a universal, psycho-sociologically effective medium through which to convey narratives, assign the roles of protagonist and antagonist, transfer cultural norms, and organize subcultures. Both Red and Blue have been able to utilize music with varying degrees of success—sometimes to promote membership, sometimes to counter existing narratives, and sometimes to affect group behavior. Understanding the way in which music affects behavior may enable the identification of warning signs (emerging threats or drivers) in Green, but also may enable Blue to dissuade individuals from organizing with Red.

Music as a Unifying, Influencing Medium

Music is a ubiquitous component of human society that contributes to both group and individual identities. The medium contains many psychological and sociological properties that make it a powerful tool for communicating narratives, and the consumption of music itself is a symbolic and socio-psychological practice in itself. Music can create subcultures and express the identity of people, groups, and regions; these effects often are organic, but once created can be utilized by Blue or Red agents to affect change.

Music has many neuro-physiological effects, such as creating neural pathways in listeners. These neural pathways predispose individuals to appreciating music with similar types of sound¹. Songs also can promote the production of brain chemicals—including dopamine—hormones, and other mood-altering agents such as serotonin^{2,3}. Studies suggest that even single notes can convey emotional meaning, suggesting that isolated notes or chords can influence a listener's perception⁴. In this way, music is effective at altering the thoughts of individuals as well as organizing groups by communicating powerful narratives.

¹ As an example, studies suggest that the simple bass beat of many electronic songs is so effective because it most closely resembles the first thing a human hears - the mother's heartbeat in utero.

² Evers, S., & Suhr, B. (2000). "Changes of the neurotransmitter serotonin but not of hormones during short time music perception," *Eur Arch Psychiatry Clin Neurosci*, 250, pp. 144-147.

³ Chlan, L., & Halm, M. A. (2013, Nov). "Does Music Ease Pain and Anxiety in the Critically III?" , *American Journal of Critical Care*, 22 (6), pp. 528-532.

⁴ Koelsh, S., & Painter, J. G. (2011). "Can out-of-context musical sounds convey meaning? An ERP study on the processing of meaning in music," *Psychophysiology*, Vol. 48, 645-655.



Music Conveys Messages and Cultural Norms

Much has been written about the “symbolic consumption of music:” the consumption of music for the sake of associating one’s self with the music’s message, the artist’s image, or the communal subculture associated with the music. Several subcultures, catalyzed around music, expressed an ideology and charter to its members and communicated an auditory and physical aesthetic frequently depicted by how members of the subgenre dressed. In this way, music provides identity to people looking to discover belonging or for an opportunity to project an identity (rebelliousness, coolness, sexuality) vicariously through the symbolic consumption of the music itself. Examples include:

1. *Participants in the “rave” scene:* people who listen to electronic music in clubs or large, outdoor gatherings, frequently while taking psychoactive drugs and dressing in childish uniforms;
2. *British skinheads who attended punk rock, or “Oi,” music performances in the 1970s:* nationalist and often anti-immigrant punk rock music that would later take off in Germany and become neo-Nazi rock; and,
3. *Jazz artists and the “beatnik” crowd in post-World War II America:* black artists actively rebelled against the traditional rules of jazz music by using cymbals to keep rhythm as opposed to the bass drum, for instance, to create a distinct and definitively African-American genre.

The consumption of music is not a Western phenomenon. Though the genres, instruments, and forms often change from culture to culture, music exists among virtually every civilization on Earth⁵. As the Internet quickens the conveyance of new sounds and subcultures, the properties of music in many countries change just as rapidly.

- In Africa, for instance, poetry historically served as a means of communicating folklore and passing down tribal lore from generation to generation.⁶
- Today, American hip-hop music, which ostensibly is sung poetry with instrumental “beats,” is a key influence in the African music scene. As hip-hop is consumed by people in countries like Nigeria, so, too, the musical subculture—celebrating excess, “bling,” and an idealized macho identity—also is consumed and internalized⁷. This is an example of how music transfers both narratives (what it is to be a hip-hop artist) and the *cultural norms* associated with a musical subculture.

⁵ Higgins, K. (2012). *The Music Between Us: Is Music a Universal Language?* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

⁶ Howard, K. (2014). “Traditional Music of East Africa: Experiencing ‘Ngoma’ in Tanzania,” *General Music Today*, 27 (3), 44-46.

⁷ Hirsch, A. (2012). “African hip-hop is recreating America,” *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/03/african-hip-hop-america>.



Identifying and Using Music as an Influencer

The identification of prevalent artists and songs can provide insight into indicators of unrest in vulnerable communities that subsequently can be used to promote Blue's values. Even in areas where normal means of penetration and intelligence gathering are difficult, widely-disseminated and consumed media can demonstrate to Blue the struggles within Green that may be pushing people toward Red or that may be leveraged to incentivize an opposition to Red (either by aligning with Blue or otherwise). Examples of these forms of music can be found even in the West—as American protest music in the 1960s illuminated the struggles of the civil rights demanded and how the music of Judith Reyes during the student revolutions in Mexico served essentially as musical journalism reports.

Omar Hammami, a member of the Somali-based extremist group al-Shabaab, is one of several terrorists who has utilized music as a means of communicating the grievances and charter of his organization to listeners. With songs like "Drone Me," Hammami used music to express the narrative that the Islamic world was being oppressed by Western nations, and that America in particular was an oppressive force committing violent crimes (specifically drone strikes) for which reciprocal action was required. Hammami utilized the popular hip-hop genre and spread his music through social media and websites like YouTube. Interestingly, other rap groups like Waayaha Cusub produced their own music in an attempt to refute al-Shabaab's narrative and convince other Somalis to resist the group. By following the trends in Somali music, Blue could have gleaned considerable insight into the actions of the extremist group and the region's reaction to it.

Blue also can leverage music to express the narratives of disenfranchised members of Green to affect change. An example of this comes from a relationship established in 2014 between US Customs and Border Patrol and an ad agency, which was established to produce music that would dissuade South American immigrants from utilizing "La Bestia," a cargo train used by immigrants to travel into the United States but was frequently targeted by criminals, rapist, and murderers.

- The music had no USG fingerprint and was disseminated to several countries in South and Central America. It became very popular, even being requested on many radio stations, and the music communicated the true stories of several immigrants who had been victimized by crime while traveling on "La Bestia."
- These types of efforts may be worth exploring as a means to counter extremist narratives.

As one CBW participant, a former record executive, said at the CBW Green workshop, "The most complicated part of the music business can be identifying trending artists and what music will capture or speak for a community." To identify these songs or artists, major record labels ensure



that their talent agents maintain relationships with club owners and other purveyors of local talent in a tactical and sustainable fashion similar to traditional HUMINT analyst-informant relationships.

- This philosophy can be translated to the BGR conflict by focusing Blue on identifying the influencers in insular communities: the people who influence what music is played, “pushed” to audiences, or shared.
- This can be accomplished by spending time in that community or by mining social media data to see what music users are most effectively pushing and, more importantly, what media they are pushing. The CBW participant spoke of how one record company introduced their new music through popular people on college campuses to ensure the success of those albums.