

Strangers among Sounds

IT ALL STARTED WITH A RECORD store and the Rock Island Line.

When I was growing up in West Los Angeles, my parents gave me a weekly allowance for doing things I should have been doing anyway: cleaning my room, washing the dishes, taking out the garbage. I was supposed to spend the money on weekend food, movies, and arcade games, but I never did. Instead, I would get on my silver BMX street bike, ride down streets that I knew I would see later that night in episodes of *CHiPs*, *Starsky and Hutch*, and *Charlie's Angels* (we lived blocks from the original 20th Century Fox studios backlot), and raid the bins at a used record store that kept its vinyl in musty standing crates too close to the street windows, its cassettes stacked in locked Plexiglas display cases.

The store was my refuge, and I knew its stock from front to back. I knew when a promotional copy of a new album dropped off by a local record exec or music journalist had come in, and I knew when someone had finally bought one of the three weathered copies of *Nugent Live* or the still-sealed pressing of Al Green's *Greatest Hits*. It's where I heard Tracy Chapman a month before her first record came out, where I could find the new Love and Rockets 12-inch, where I bought my J. Geils Band, Musical Youth, and Kool and the Gang tapes, and because you could listen to anything on the in-store turntable and cassette deck and because I was the store owner's most regular prepubescent customer, it was where I could listen to anything

I wanted for as long as I wanted. It was where musical knowledge was just waiting to reveal itself, a living archive of sound, a four-hundred-square-foot library that was made entirely, infinitely, of music. It was the first place I heard jazz and blues, the first place I heard punk and salsa, the first place I heard Jimmie Rodgers and Laurie Anderson and The Clash. There was no artist I couldn't try out, no genre I couldn't sample, no era that was off-limits. As early as fifth grade, music had become my entryway into a boundless social world of difference and possibility, and the best part was that there was no end to it. There was always more to hear, more to dislike, more to admire and covet. It's what, to this day, makes me anxious if I go for too long without a visit to the record store—only two ears, only so many hours in the day, so much more that I could be listening to.

My attachments to the music were so strong precisely because I felt—unquestionably, unflinchingly—that the music was mine, “loud yet so confidential,” as the poet Billy Collins has written¹. Building my record collection was my way of building my own world, creating an alternate set of cultural spaces that, through the private act of listening, could deliver me to different places and different times and allow me to try out different versions of my self. My parents soon caught on, and they began restricting the amount of money I could spend on albums and tapes. I still kept up my habit, but now instead of throwing my purchases into a conspicuous backpack, I transported them as illicit contraband. Albums were slid down the back of my pants, cassettes stuffed into my pockets or wrapped into a folded-up sweatshirt. Once safely in my room, I couldn't put them on fast enough—my fix doing its job, feeding me, taking me away, taking me closer and closer to who I wanted to be in the privacy of a child's bedroom with a red rug, a ceiling light masquerading as a glass basketball swished through a metal rim, and a cabinet full of stereo components.

Later in this introduction, I'll try to convince you that songs can be understood as audiotopias. It's a fancy word that I didn't have access to as a kid, but the concept—that music functions like a possible utopia for the listener, that music is experienced not only as sound that goes into our ears and vibrates through our bones but as a space that we can enter into, encounter, move around in, inhabit, be safe in, learn from—was one I knew intimately. I lived inside the music I bought and to which I listened. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that what defines a utopia is that it has “no known location,” that it exists nowhere.² Which is precisely why music and songs are different. They are almost-places of cultural encounter that may not be physical places but nevertheless exist in their own auditory some-

where. The places music offers may not be material or tangible, but I know where I want to go when I want to get there. I can put on a song and live it, hear it, get inside its notes and chords, get inside its narratives and follow its journeys and paths. Dropping the needle or pressing the play button was the equivalent of walking into a building, entering into an architecture of sound, a space that can be seen and experienced only if it is heard.

When I listened I could see and hear what parts went into the building of that space—a melody from an African American spiritual, a guitar solo cribbed from Zeppelin, a rhythm from the Caribbean. Listening to a song's whole was always listening to its parts, to the crossings and exchanges and collaborations that went into its making. Music can offer maps in this way, and when I was younger the maps I heard were not just the maps of the song's cultural and historical genesis, but the map of my own life, a musical "You Are Here" that positioned me within the larger social world. "Add music, and you can instantly transport yourself, through inner-experience, into a different world," the African American poet Jean Toomer wrote back in 1937. "Music, however, though able to transport you into a different world, cannot keep you in that different world. . . . Once it is over for the time being, you slide back into this world."³ Toomer was right, up until that last part. We always slide back into this world, but, each time, we slide back in forever changed.

The folksinger Pete Seeger probably would have said that my run-in with music's social mapping skills was just another example of what he once dubbed "the world that music lives in."⁴ That was, indeed, what music gave me, access to the worlds it lived in. A song is never just a song, but a connection, a ticket, a pass, an invitation, a node in a complex network. But I was also aware of the other side of it, the worlds that live in music, the worlds that music—or, fast-forwarding again, the audiotopias of music—contains.

Beginning in 1948, Seeger played with The Weavers, a button-down folk quartet with radical race and labor politics who first made it big singing the songs of black folk-blues singer Leadbelly, translating their accounts of black life into musical languages accessible to socially conscious, protest-oriented whites. My father was one of them (he owned all The Weavers albums, none of Leadbelly's), and I was taught that The Weavers were as good as it gets, four lefty white folksingers belting Israeli folk songs, picket-line odes, and prison blues in harmonies that inspired people my parents' age to sing along in unison. Once I got over the sing-along tendency (sure, it happened at Thompson Twins concerts, but it's different when you're wear-

ing fluorescent socks and acid-washed Guess jeans), I heard the true importance of the group: their People's Movement approach to music was not only a way of understanding how culture can work, but a way of resisting the way culture can work. With *The Weavers*, it was impossible not to hear music as a tool of social change and a vehicle for community-building across proscribed social lines.

So there I was, the son of a Bronx-born, Jewish, L.A. doctor being raised on a steady diet of protest songs and sea shanties performed by the gospel-loving union activist son of a Southern Methodist preacher (Lee Hayes), the Paul Robeson–idolizing daughter of a Brooklyn Jewish mother active in the Ladies Garment Workers Union (Ronnie Gilbert), a guitar-plucking Coast Guard vet whose father was a ragman (Fred Hellerman), and Seeger, the Manhattan-born son of a violin-teaching mother and a radical folk-song-collecting musicologist father who got at least some of his inspiration from the family's black housekeeper, folksinger Elizabeth "Libba" Cotton.

I'd listen to Duran Duran with my friends, but at home I'd sing along to the tongue-twisting rhymes of "The Rock Island Line" (especially because its rollercoaster lyrics were more challenging to get right than Duran Duran's "Rio").⁵ Before I began my private elementary school that would get me into my private high school (with the sons of Hollywood elite and home-in-Aspen, home-in-Maui venture capitalists), this was the music I was exposed to. It came from singers who took their name from a German play about rebellious medieval weavers, who mediated between African American life and white folk fans, who, while selling over four million records between 1950 and 1951 on Decca, were advocating antiwar politics and racial justice. Unbeknownst to me then, I was fed the post–World War II era's most popular recorded voices of dissent. *The Weavers* were a four-part harmonic response to the social anxieties, race tensions, and frenetic leftist political suppressions that followed the end of the war, as black servicemen returned to a racially segregated domestic life with a new sense of entitlement and justice, and as paranoid anti-communist patriotism fueled Red Scare witch hunts. The suspect politics of *The Weavers'* music attracted the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee, and they were soon dropped from Decca and made taboo to booking agents and record store shelf-stockers.

When I was a teenager, my father took me to see Pete Seeger play at a local high school auditorium. It was a benefit for the legendary Sunset Hall, a feisty retirement home for aging leftist activists. It was one of my first concerts, and I watched a skinny white man with a gray beard sing the civil

rights anthem he helped popularize, “We Shall Overcome.” Seeger was a late addition to the song’s evolution from its beginnings as “I’ll Overcome Some Day,” a black spiritual written by a black reverend, Charles Tindley, and first published in 1901. In the early 1940s, Tindley’s version was reinvented by the black Tobacco Workers Union—who sang it as part of their Southern labor struggles—as “We Will Overcome.” Seeger was active at a labor and civil rights movement headquarters, the Highlander Folk Center, when in 1947 the “will” became “shall” and the song became synonymous with social transformation and political struggle.⁶

I wish I could make it easy and say that all this was actually my parents’ scene, that they were hard-core activists, that they actually hung out with black people, that they were ex-union leaders from the Lower East Side who became socialists and who cast write-in votes for Jesse Jackson each election until they went Green Party. But they weren’t. In fact, save for my father’s brief high school stint as a member of a communist youth league, I’ve never seen either of them be overtly political or socially dissenting (my mother is too generous and sensitive not to be a Democrat and my father can’t help being defensive when he admits to becoming a “social liberal, but a fiscal conservative”). But they did play me *The Weavers*, folk music that by then everyone knew was dangerous, and gave me the gift of understanding that, indeed, worlds do live in music and music does live in the world, even when those worlds aren’t necessarily yours.

Having *The Weavers* as a musical blueprint meant that from the beginning I got the message—however subconsciously—that music was about cultural exchange, internationalist interpretation, and radical politics. The *Weavers* were white, English-speaking, highly educated Americans, and yet some of their songs were in Spanish and Hebrew, some of their songs were written by Latin American revolutionaries, South African poets, and African American laborers. They identified as “American folksingers” and yet their America was different from McCarthy’s, different from Jim Crow’s, and different from suburbia’s. Their America was a provisional, ideal America where racial difference did not mean racial persecution, where rights and social welfare were not selective, where, as their partner-in-folk-crime Woody Guthrie would sing, the land belonged to everyone, from the Native Americans it was taken from to the poor black, white, and Mexican farmers who now worked its fields. But their America was also not exceptionalist or isolationist. Their America was part of a series of international flows, where melodies from one country woke up as different melodies in another. Even when *The Weavers* recorded an album to sing the

praises of the American folk song, their nationalism couldn't help but be internationalist: they named it *Folk Songs of America and Other Lands*.

One of the results of this commitment to coupling "America" with "Other Lands" was that years before I would read the revolutionary Cuban poetics of Jose Martí's *Versos sencillos* on my own, I would know how they went because of Seeger's version of "Guantanamera," a song originally composed by Cuban pianist and composer Julian Orbosón and based on a popular 1920 Cuban melody. Orbosón's choice of melody makes the transnational America–Latin America connection even more dense: a song that originally poked fun at Cuban women who fraternized with American soldiers stationed at Guantanamo. Seeger would urge that people sing "Guantanamera"—an exile's ode to an island homeland littered with lynched black Cubans and palm trees—in its original Spanish to "hasten the day [that] the USA . . . is some sort of bilingual country."⁷

As a child, I remember hearing Seeger's 1965 ode to heterogeneity, "All Mixed Up"—where he sings "No race of man is completely pure . . . The winds mix the dust of every land and so will man"—and realizing that it was the first time I had ever heard a musician talk explicitly about the politics of American race and, more to the point, about the impossibilities of racial purity. Seeger's America was a "mixed up" country, a land where hybridity is the cultural norm (and multilingualism ought to be), no matter what illusions racial purists attempt to pass off as fact. "One of America's claims to fame has been the ability to form hybrids," he wrote, "the ability to exploit the ideas given us by others." Seeger should know. His career was fueled by his knack for hybridizing traditions not his own, for "exploiting" ideas that belonged to others in order to create something of his own. "Wimoweh." "Guantanamera." "We Shall Overcome." "Roll Down the Wind." Hybrids and exploitations all.

Even though I never heard him say so, I can't help but think that my father started taking banjo lessons because of how much he liked what Seeger could pull off on his long-necked five-string. Though it has long been associated with white American folk and bluegrass music, Seeger never hid the banjo's roots in Africa. It is an instrument that has become synonymous with American vernacular music precisely because it was unwittingly imported here along with boats full of displaced Africans who woke up as enslaved property for sale on the auction blocks of New Canaan. And, for Seeger, there was nothing indigenous about the banjo's music, either. A search for American roots only led him outside of America, outside of the West. "The American folk style of playing seems to me to be basically non-

European,” he wrote in the early 1950s. “As more Americans take hold again of their traditions of folk music, many also become acquainted with different kinds of songs from various corners of the world.”⁸ This is the America I grew up hearing about, Seeger’s America, a land of the free founded on slavery and disenfranchisement and inequality, a country of slaves, exiles, refugees, and immigrants, a motley conglomerate he described on the pages of the *Daily World* in 1968 as “uprooted people.”⁹

My father’s parents—modern Orthodox Jews—came to the South Bronx in the early 1940s from Paris. They had been running a small Hungarian restaurant in Montmartre ever since they left Hungary, on the run from Hitler’s march across Europe. Maybe my father heard some of that in Seeger, too—music of his uprooted parents, melodies of the legacy he had been handed, songs that were his own private worlds, his own spaces, his own sing-along audiotopias, where he could figure out, just like I would decades later, how to be himself.

“Congratulations, you are all now American citizens,” the U.S. judge performing the naturalization ceremony proclaims. At the close of the service, that most fundamental public ritual of obligatory American civic and political belonging that converts the illegal into the legal, the undocumented into the documented, the national stranger into the national citizen, something unexpected happens, something that Seeger probably could have predicted would have happened.

A song begins.

The song, “Mis dos patrias,” comes from Los Tigres del Norte, the living legends of modern-day *norteño* music who themselves came to California as “uprooted people,” undocumented immigrants, back in 1968, from the Mexican state of Sinaloa. Their song asks us to imagine that on that day, Los Tigres themselves are in that courtroom, just another group of *mexicanos* being inducted into the legal rituals of American nationalism. The song begins when their citizenship begins; the music is their first act of public expression as new U.S. citizens.

That Los Tigres would make such public spectacle of their new citizenship might at first seem surprising. For the past three decades, the band members have proudly asserted themselves as unassimilated Spanish-speaking *indocumentados*, living a Mexican reality that is in, but not of, America. On their album covers, the self-proclaimed “autenticos idolos del pueblo,” have mostly presented themselves in two different guises: down-home, cowboy-hat and leather-vest-wearing immigrant farm workers rest-

ing on top of horses, combines, and broken-down wagons, or slick urban *vaqueros* stepping out in matching tiger-striped and tasseled suits.

Without any help from any of the “big five” U.S.-based multinational record companies, Los Tigres have averaged at least an album a year (half of which have gone gold in the United States) on Fonovisa (the profitable recording arm of Mexican television conglomerate Televisa); starred in twenty films produced and distributed in Mexico, most of them based on the plots of their most successful songs; and won a 1988 Grammy for their *Gracias America . . . sin fronteras, a norteco* first.¹⁰ That album’s lead song, “America,” is a direct attack on assertions of U.S. chauvinism and imperialist national identity claims that conflate, and subsequently erase, the entire American continent in the name of the “America” that is the United States. “I am from America,” Los Tigres state with pride, but their America is the America of the Americas. “In the North they call me Latino,” they continue, “they don’t want to call me American.” Los Tigres call themselves American—American in the spirit not of Jefferson or Washington, but of the Puerto Rican *jibaro*, the Cuban *guajiro*, and the Mexican *charro*. The song begins by quoting the bass line from Richie Valens’s “La Bamba,” a song raised in a Pacoima garage in L.A.’s San Fernando Valley, but originally born decades before across the border in Veracruz as a traditional *son jarocho*.¹¹

For Latino audiences within the United States, the songs of Los Tigres are perhaps best known for their commitment to giving voice to the struggles of undocumented Mexican immigrants. When the band performs live, fans pile scraps of paper bearing song requests and dedications to family and loved ones back in Mexico on the edge of the stage. During their intermissions, band members take time to pose for family pictures and sign autographs. The identification between Los Tigres’ fans in the United States and the stories of hard-working, Mexico-proud immigrants that their songs tell runs deep. Partly, it’s because the protagonists of Los Tigres’ songs are not *agringado*. They come to “los United” to work, to earn a living, to forge what they imagine will be a better life. As they put it in one song, California is not the golden land of guaranteed opportunity—the California that, for all of my Weavers and Pete Seeger listenings, I never questioned between trips to the beach and house parties in Bel Air mansions. It is rather a *jaula de oro*, a cage of gold—a dangerous, often vicious trap that disguises crippling lies as bountiful promises.¹² To borrow a formulation from George Lipsitz, the California of Los Tigres del Norte is more “historical California”—the lived experience of California as a mediation zone between con-

flict and coalition—than “rhetorical California,” the California of media boosterism and Hollywood fantasy that promotes fictions of plenitude by ignoring realities of destruction and struggle.¹³ Los Tigres, who have repeatedly supported the idea of an America “without borders,” recorded “Jaula de oro” just one year before the 1986 approval of the Immigration Reform and Control Act, a “take back the border” initiative that increased U.S.–Mexico border policing, doubling the number of active Border Patrol agents and dedicating new funds to promote border clampdowns.

It should come as no surprise, then, that there was more to the presence of Los Tigres in a U.S. naturalization ceremony than newfound patriotism. Los Tigres recorded their citizenship song “Mis dos patrias” as a response to the 1994 passage of Proposition 187, the California measure that denied basic health and education benefits to undocumented immigrants.¹⁴ The protagonist in the song becomes a citizen not to publicly pledge allegiance to the dream of American possibility but to protect his undocumented children from a law that directly puts their lives at risk and renders their humanity insignificant and inconsequential (“187,” as Snoop Dogg and countless other L.A. hip-hop MCs like to remind us, is also police code for murder). Thus, unlike past Yankee Doodle, My-Country-’Tis-of-Thee popular music tributes to the glories of American citizenship I grew up hearing (think Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America” or Neil Diamond’s “America”), “Mis dos patrias” engages citizenship as a survival tactic against xenophobic terror, in which Mexicans pledge allegiance to their adopted country for fear of being killed by it.

The singer insists that his new status as a U.S. citizen does not signal his assimilation into American culture or a betrayal of his Mexican identity. He reminds us that he “arrived crying in the land of the Anglo-Saxon” and has since worked hard to take care of his family in a state that has now begun to strip away his rights. Even with his new citizenship, he is still as Mexican as “el pulque y el nopal.” “Don’t call me a traitor,” he urges. “I love both my countries. In mine, I left my dead. Here, my children were born. Defending their rights, I can’t be a traitor.” In “Mis dos patrias” Los Tigres refuse the assumed singularities and national unities of normative U.S. citizenship, insisting that Mexico and the United States might be “two countries,” but now they live “in the same heart.”¹⁵

By staging “Mis dos patrias” as the conclusion to a naturalization ceremony, Los Tigres refuse to accept the scripts of U.S. citizenship being handed them, scripts that urge singular national allegiance, singular national pride, and singular public participation in American national cul-

ture. Instead, Los Tigres approach their new citizenship as an open space of negotiation and they write their own musical script—one that flies two flags, with *pulque* and *nopal* for all—in which they imagine themselves as actors and agents who, as far from the reality of California political life as it might be, might actually have control of the future their new citizenship sets up.

This approach to citizenship, particularly one rooted in migratory communities directly involved with the transnational movements of capital and labor, has in recent years received many different names that add levels of complexity to Seeger’s “uprooted people” model. Among them are Aiwha Ong’s “flexible citizenship” and May Joseph’s “nomadic citizenship,” both of which leave room for voicings of patriotisms not grounded in any one specific, bounded geopolitical territory but instead dispersed across unpredictable cartographies. Both of these emergent models of citizenship get performed across and within national boundaries, rather than obeying the rules and demands of strictly mapped national formations.¹⁶ In Joseph’s formulation, the alternative or counter-citizenship that Los Tigres suggest is one that is both a condition imposed by the institutions and ideologies of the state and a strategy of negotiation with these very forces.

Los Tigres treat citizenship as something they can use and shape, rather than a preordained set of demands that are put upon them. “Citizenship is a status whose definitions are always in process,” Lauren Berlant has written. “It is continually being produced out of a political, rhetorical, and economic struggle over who will count as ‘the people’ and how social membership will be measured and valued.”¹⁷ On that day in that California courtroom, Los Tigres told us exactly who counts as “the people,” and why and on what terms, and they did it in a way that, as we will see in the pages of this book, has been one of the primary means for articulating a public response to the racial and ethnic designations of nationalist U.S. political culture throughout the twentieth century: they did it with a song.

Put simply, Los Tigres know how nations work. Like Seeger, they know that it is the job of the nation to actively assimilate “foreign” elements into the cultural order of a juridically bounded state territory. It’s an argument Zygmunt Bauman has made well: citizenship, both legal and cultural, is the key point of conversion to the national religion, when outsiders become insiders, others become natives, all through the promotion and enforcement of a common culture. Citizenship and cultural conformity start to sound more and more like synonyms, two concepts which, in the context of the

nation, exist in a codependent relationship which no intellectual therapy can undo. Cultural conformity in the public sphere is both the condition of citizenship and the means of preserving it; in the eyes of the state, our cultural lives can be seen as our political lives. The means for the achievement of this conformity, this conversion, in Bauman's terms, into the church of the national state which requires submission of the flock, is assimilation—the process of making the unlike “like,” of dissolving difference into a constructed commonality of experience, history, and beliefs, of making family out of strangers, giving the uprooted the same set of new roots.¹⁸

So with “Mis dos patrias,” not unlike the black spiritual that begot the union song that begot “We Shall Overcome,” Los Tigres embrace political citizenship while trying to avert cultural conformity. They submit to political citizenship to a U.S. nation imagined in relation to a bounded territory and yet continue to identify as free national agents whose identities and lives move in and out of this territory, but whose cultural production works necessarily *sin fronteras*, without borders, and is dedicated to Latino audiences like themselves who approach their citizenship with caution and ambivalence. And as Bauman reminds us, ambivalence is powerful because it is an “undecidable,” both inside and outside, both yes and no, the threatening, evasive monkey wrench in the grinding gears of assimilation.¹⁹

I didn't hear Los Tigres' “Mis dos patrias” until I had finished writing the bulk of this book, but in many ways it encapsulates the reasons why I wanted to write it in the first place. And those reasons are rather simple. First, though you would hardly know it by the way it gets covered in the press and in the mainstream media, popular music is one of our most valuable tools for understanding the impact of nationalism and citizenship on the formation of our individual identities. And second, it is also one of our most valuable sites for witnessing the performance of racial and ethnic difference against the grain of national citizenships that work to silence and erase those differences.

As I heard in the music of The Weavers—a group, we should remember, that was branded as “un-American” in the blacklist 1950s—the histories of popular music in the United States cut straight to the heart of how “American” identities get made, making audible the extent to which the negotiation with citizenship always involves, at some level, a negotiation with strangeness from a pre-fab national norm. “Mis dos patrias” is a way for Los Tigres to articulate both their dual citizenship and their dual strangeness:

strangers to a U.S. nationalism threatened by their presence and strangers to a Mexican cultural nationalism threatened by their departure (a departure all too often figured as betrayal).

Strangeness is identity's uncomfortable, but required, double. To be a stranger to others or to oneself is to unsettle identities already in use, to force identity to look itself in the mirror, take stock, and really understand what it sees in the new light cast from the shadow of the stranger at the door. In his 1975 memoir *The Devil Finds Work*, James Baldwin wrote about the experience of watching movies as an experience of identity formation and identity confrontation, an experience in which the movie watcher watches the stranger and is forced to watch him or herself.

The question of identity is a question involving the most profound panic—a terror as primary as the nightmare of the mortal fall. This question can scarcely be said to exist among the wretched, who know, merely, that they are wretched and who bear it day by day—it is a mistake to suppose that the wretched do not know that they are wretched; nor does this question exist among the splendid, who know, merely, that they are splendid, and who flaunt it, day by day: it is a mistake to suppose that the splendid have any intention of surrendering their splendor. An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to fall, or when the wretched begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter, to be a stranger: the stranger's presence making you the stranger, less the stranger than to yourself.²⁰

Baldwin watched movies in the dark of a theater. I listened to records in my bedroom, each tape and album I smuggled home its own world full of strangers. My obsessive, private listenings were, and continue to be, ways of approaching a self through the lives of strangers who I meet through sound. After all, every time we listen to a song, a stranger enters the gates, an identity is menaced, an identity is questioned. Even if we have heard the song before, even if the song is our favorite song, one to which we sing along, lip-sync, or air-guitar, each listening contains the newness of a new context—a different room, a different mood, a different volume, a different time of day. The world we encounter at the level of sound and acoustic experience is a new world of social experience and emotional possibility, but it is also, necessarily, a strange world that we negotiate through listening. I have always been drawn to popular music for precisely this power: its innate ability to refuse to stand still, to frustrate fixity, to confuse authority and baffle totality, to never be the same thing.

How could you not talk of identity when talking about music? When you hear it, music makes you immediately conscious of your identity precisely because something outside of you is entering your body—alien sounds emitted from strangers you sometimes cannot see that enter, via vibration and frequency, the very bones and tissues of your being. All musical listening is a form of confrontation, of encounter, of the meeting of worlds and meanings, when identity is made self-aware and is, therefore, menaced through its own interrogation.

In a synagogue in San Francisco, I felt like Kafka's dog.

Often a stranger to my own Jewishness, and usually a stranger to the tenets and practice of Judaism, I was, nonetheless, a graduate student sitting in synagogue during the High Holy Days with a yarmulke on my head and an open prayer book in my hands. I tell people that I mainly go to these services because I love their music, because nothing turns me inward like the deep, melancholic moan of the cantor, his voice flooding through a language I do not understand to conjure faraway faces and emotions: refrigerated leftover milk and hot cabbage on chipped dime-store porcelain plates, my grandfather's crisp, double-breasted wool suits and Orbach's ascots, my grandmother's baroque costume jewelry that overflowed out of vanity drawers in a bedroom that she rarely left.

My favorite has always been "Hine ma tov," an overwhelming ache of a song based on Psalm 133:1 and composed around a traditional Sufi motif. I only recently learned what its words meant: "How good it is / and how pleasant / when brothers and sisters dwell together / in harmony." Such a hopeful sentiment housed in such dark, crying beauty; such a blissful utopia clothed in such a mournful Old Testament blues. It is the only religious song for which I close my eyes. It is instinctual and automatic: my lids shut, my head tilts down toward my feet, and my body rocks back and forth, back and forth, in an uncontrollable *daven* from an unreliable worshiper, a stranger outside the Torah's gates.

That night the shofar was blown and, as usual, I marveled at the triumph and violence of its sound—a blast of human air sprayed through the horn of a dead ram. When you hear the blowing of the shofar, there is no way to feel at ease with it. It is always an affront, always uncomfortable, always aggressive in its volume and its frequency, in the sheer force of its howling, breathy noise. I had felt that way about it since I was a child, but that night the rabbi gave it a name. Quoting Torah, he called it "a stranger among sounds." The shofar is certainly a stranger among sounds, but it also makes

strangers out of all who hear it. We are strangers among its sounds, its blasts of bleating air confronting all of us in that room equally, forcing all of us to confront our identities as listeners.

But while I was supposed to be taking in the rabbi's words and applying them to my own stake in that Jewish New Year, my mind was elsewhere. I was thinking of *The Weavers*, of Seeger, of *Los Tigres del Norte*, of California and America, of citizens and aliens. This idea of being a stranger among sounds immediately seemed a fitting way to understand how identity and listening work and, especially in the context of "American" music and "American" culture, a fitting way to approach the study of music's relationship to the production of listening subjects, citizens of pop music's myriad republics of sound. Popular music has always been my refuge because it is the refuge of strangers; because in the world of popular music, we are all strangers among sounds made by others.

The job of the listener, or at least one of them, is to register our experience of ourselves by confronting ourselves as strangers in the sounds that we make our own. In the United States, popular music has always offered accessible, everyday cultural spaces where strangeness and familiarity are actively negotiated, where difference and community are actively experienced and imagined, and where opposition and consensus actively butt heads. It hit me hard that night: music is a mode of relation, a point of contact. All of the people who I discuss in this book—all of the people who make and listen to this music of contact—are all strangers who listen and listeners who are strange. They are national strangers because they use music to make strangers of themselves, to hear themselves as different from the music all around them, and to audibly figure out their relationship to a national order they have little control over. They all embody the conflict that was apparent that very night in the San Francisco synagogue: the song's call for harmony, the shofar's call for dissonance; the song's call for unity, the shofar's insistence on difference.

I was reminded of something I read in high school that I barely understood: Franz Kafka's parable, "Investigations of a Dog." It's about a dog who has left "the canine community" but is still a dog, and who comes upon a group of other dogs. He visually recognizes them as dogs, but when they make music, the sounds they utter—which sound familiar, which he should recognize—are instead so inscrutably strange that he is sent into a dog identity crisis. "From the empty air they conjured music," the dog reports, and "everything was music. . . . I was profoundly confused by the sounds that accompanied them, yet they were dogs nevertheless, dogs like

you and me.” His confusion leads to a rejection of the dogs, his refusal and inability join in with their concert, “this blast of music which seemed to come from all sides, from the heights, from the deeps, from everywhere, surrounding the listener, overwhelming him, crushing him.”²¹

In his introduction to one of the first books I ever read in order to get acquainted with the field of American Studies, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Constructions of America*, Sacvan Bercovitch calls “Investigations of a Dog” a “model of cross-cultural criticism.” When the dog’s recognition of strange sounds turns him back inward to examine his own strangeness in a larger world of sound, he does not call for an erasure of that strangeness or the silencing of the differences he hears. Instead, the dog understands his listening as a way of confronting and living with difference and strangeness, his aim “not to harmonize ‘apparent’ differences (in the manner of pluralist consensus), but on the contrary to highlight conflicting appearances, so as to explore the substantive differences they imply.”

Positioning himself as a Canadian scholar who is himself a stranger confronting the alien sounds of American nationalism, Bercovitch hears the rhetoric of American consensus and cultural univocality, rhetoric that for so long characterized the trajectory of American Studies in the U.S. academy as “the music of America.” Yet, Kafka’s dog offers a way out. Kafka’s dog hears “the music of America,” the music that is supposed to collect him into its concert of dog oneness, and cannot recognize it. He understands his difference from it, his strangeness in its acoustic midst, and instead of discarding or ignoring that difference, he lives with it and uses it as the lens through which he interprets and describes the larger social world.²²

The “music of America” that Bercovitch hears—the ideology of American nationalism and consensus that *The Weavers* and *Los Tigres del Norte* had acknowledged and disputed for so long—and the way Kafka’s dog refuses to recognize it and attempts to find new ways of listening to a different music of America where strangers make sounds that are not incorporated into harmonious concert, is precisely the terrain in which this book is interested. Kafka’s dog never appears again in this book, but he shadows every chapter. He is one of my models of investigative, critical listening, a dog who is suspicious of harmony and concert precisely because of how threatening harmony and concert can be to the sustenance of difference. He is suspicious that the harmonies of dog music will define him, a dog who has left the dog fold, merely as a dog. He is suspicious that dog harmony will “overwhelm” his difference as a dog.