



**Folk Punk and
Global
Indigenous
Philosophies**

Folk Punk and Global Indigenous Philosophies

Punk is like hardcore porn. It's raw. Also, even if we can't define it, there's no mistaking it. Post-punk is different. It's an impure form that mixes many elements, so that it's not only hard to define, but also can be difficult to know whether we are hearing it. This is likely more the case for folk punk, which originated in the late 70s.

Now in a sense, all music is impure. Punk is an outgrowth of rock, in turn developed from American blues, which made heavy use of the guitar, itself arising in Spain, probably during the Muslim period there, as an evolution of the Middle Eastern oud. But folk punk takes it to the next level. It openly draws on contrastingly musical styles, such as contemporary metal and old-fashioned acoustic. It also sometimes mixes in local Indigenous instruments, singing techniques and wisdom traditions. This is fitting because few Indigenous cultures have worried much about purity—historically more of a concern for colonial rulers. The same holds for philosophy itself. Until fairly recently, “philosophy” was a catch-all for virtually every enterprise involving serious thinking.

In these senses, folk punk is an analogue to philosophy, both in its general and Indigenous forms. This kinship is strengthened by the fact that many folk punkers and philosophers have engaged in political protest. But whereas older performers risked alienating large numbers of potential customers because of the stances they took, recent musicians (or their producers) have tended to water down political messages and even convert “authenticity” into a brand. Without these merchandising strategies, we'd probably miss out on hearing some decent bands in an increasingly crowded global market, but this raises questions about whether the anti-corporate punk ethos is dying.

Adulterated Punk

Post-punk—and thus folk punk too—often has a comparatively layered and hence impure sound. This is at least compared to the power trio of guitar, bass and drums plus vocals that we associate with classic punk bands like the Sex Pistols.

Songs like The Pogues' “Lorca's Novena” and the Levellers' “Sell Out”—while retaining a relentless punk drive—are much more textured and polished. The first of these has eerie backing vocals and a sample of dogs howling in the background. There's additionally Spanish guitar, harmonica, keyboards, bell sounds and drums played in an almost military marching style. The lead vocals are sung in the pronounced, unabashed working-class UK accent that's become a mainstay of punk. The vocals in “Sell Out” are similar. However, this song likewise breaks with standard punk conventions by including a synthesizer and Celtic-style fiddle, along with electric bass and guitar. Other performers, such as South Africa's National Wake, Siberia's Otyken, Mongolia's The Hu and Taiwan's Nini, not only mix acoustic and electric sounds, but blend Western and non-Western cultural styles of music.

The fact that folk punk aggressively abandons purity fits the history of philosophy, which has merged cultures. Indeed, the further one goes back in the Western canon, the less identifiably Western it is. Ancient

Greece and Rome traded goods and ideas through North Africa and into the East, with Augustine living in North Africa. The Islamic world preserved Greek literature, and Muslims from regions bordering India deeply influenced Christian theologians, such as Aquinas. One author, Victor Mair, even speculates that the Chinese word *dao* has extremely old roots that spread into ancient languages around the world, including European ones.

Therefore, it's not surprising that medieval and ancient European outlooks often mirror non-Western ones stressing public customs as foundations for human psychology. Such ideas appear in Confucianism, African ubuntu and Islam, despite their differences in other regards. Islamic Sufism also overlaps Indian Vedic works like the Bhagavad Gita because both suggest enlightenment entails the oceanic surrender of self to the divine. Although Confucians and Daoists disagree on certain things, they share common vocabulary, and elements from both seeped into Buddhism after it entered China from India. All three traditions adhere in different ways (along with Brahmanism and Sufism) to the notion that reality—whether social or cosmological—exists as an integrated network and not a collection of separate things.

This last idea is important in the social philosophies that some folk punkers advance, which in turn echoes philosophers such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in fact read Brahminical, Buddhist, Confucian and possibly Daoist texts. While stressing freedom, Emerson and especially Thoreau departed from standard libertarian individualism because they stressed inescapable social interconnectivity, so that we're often responsible for events happening far away from us. The Levellers' song "Sell Out" makes the same point. It opens by saying that freedom is "dead and gone," but goes on to suggest that this relates to things like South American forests being cut down. From Thoreau's interconnectionist perspective, this makes sense: destruction elsewhere takes away others' freedom, and if we're participating in economies leading to this outcome, then we're morally guilty.

Celebrating Impurity

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, National Wake breached Africa's racial purity rules—which were part of the country's colonialist legacy—since the group was mixed race. This alone was a political statement. And it cost them commercial success until long after the end of the apartheid era.

Musically too, National Wake fuses styles. They have a sparse, driving, electric and Lo-Fi sound in the punk vein. Simultaneously, their most famous song—"International News"—incorporates Afro-style playing. For starters, the guitar work has ska elements, which originate in Black Jamaican culture. Closer to home, it subtly mirrors the bright, repetitive and circular melodies of instruments like the Mbira (aka thumb piano), which is traditional to sub-Saharan tribes. More recent bands, like Zimbabwe's Evicted, are also mixed raced and incorporate the same Mbira-like guitar riffs into their punk compositions, in fact doing so much more explicitly.

In a similar spirit, the Siberian Indigenous group Otyken employs a mix of electric and acoustic instruments as well as scream-drive singing techniques. This style resembles the throat singing that occurs just across the Bering Strait, among the Inuit, who are ancestrally related to Indigenous Siberians. But the ethnicity of

Otyken simultaneously bridges various Turkic, Russian and East Asian lineages that mix in that part of the world, and also illustrate that Indigenous cultures, by their very nature, are usually wonderfully impure.

A mirroring commonality that's shared by Indigenous communities and folk punkers from around the globe is a tendency to pull on multiple resources, regardless of whether or not they have a longstanding history within local traditions. Otyken plays Asian folk instruments but also electronic keyboards. Analogously, the Great Plains tribes of North America adopted non-native horses into their practical and cultural lives. Because of this, individuals took names like Crazy Horse, and the month of May became the Moon of shedding ponies. The Lakota tribesman Black Elk likewise adopted Catholicism without abandoning his Indigenous beliefs.

The thing is, there's a tendency to want Indigenous people to retain their "traditional" ways, as judged from an outside perspective. People sometimes get offended if Indigenous individuals use plastic beads at a Pow Wow, as if they're supposed to reside in the past, while the rest of us are permitted to live in the contemporary world. Or likewise, some Celtic musicians have ejected electronic keyboardists from open mic nights, claiming that including such instruments breaks tradition. But the fact is that Celtic mainstays like mandolins and fiddles are probably evolutions of instruments that worked their way from Asia through the Middle East and into Italy, so are not purely traditional. Additionally, the Celts themselves invaded the British Isles from mainland Europe. So, Celtic culture is not native to places it's most associated with.

An analogue of this confused way of thinking in the musical world occurred when folk icon Bob Dylan first introduced electric guitar in his song that appropriately begins with the line, "I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more." Some fans saw this breach of acoustic purity as treasonous. The song might be seen as a proto-punk entry, and it was later covered by the punk-inspired band Rage Against the Machine.

As if protesting purist tendencies and artificial barriers, the Levellers played in 2012 at the A38 venue. This is a mobile boat stage floating on the Danube, constructed partly with the idea of rejecting borders. There, the Levellers laid down what's possibly the most punk version of their song "Sell Out" and also one of their best performances of it. Not incidentally, this rendering fused funk and ska into Celtic punk, bridging boundaries.

Shredded Societies

We tend to associate acoustic sounds with older folk traditions, and Folk punkers' lyrics tend to reference the past. These artists often sing about ancient places and heroes. But this is typically counterpointed with electric sounds and occasionally dissonant harmonies and arrhythmic beats, evoking grinding gears and misfiring cylinders—aural metaphors for social breakdown in the contemporary world. We hear this in "International News," with the musical style reinforcing the lyrics, which have to do with news blackouts in Africa that were legally imposed, particularly in relation to violence and military crackdowns.

Another tune that has aural metaphors for social breakdown is Neil Young's "Rockin' in the Free World," from 1991. Two versions of it bookend the album it's on, *Freedom*, one of them acoustic, the other electric, and the combination of the two standing as something close to folk punk. The song takes advantage of the

fact that rock music culturally associates with America and freedom. Yet its lyrics describe a society falling apart, and they twist George H. Bush's Thousand Points of Light speech, changing the original reference to a kinder, gentler conservatism to "a kinder, gentler machine gun hand." The song's course, which is the same as its title, is accordingly sarcastic. All of these sentiments are amplified by the screeching guitar work and rough drumming that resembles a broken belt on an engine that is running in an off-time way.

Also from a 1991 album called *Levelling the Land*, "Sell Out" repeats this pattern, with its bridge having the rhythm of a broken lawn mower, especially in the A38 venue version. The lyrics speak about not believing in modern ways and policies that have "failed the test of time" and of wishing to "walk in ancient places." Reinforcing this, the band's name is itself a reference to a 17th century political movement that aimed at extending suffrage and promoting equality and tolerance.

The lyrics of "Sell Out" further suggest that people are tranquilized by mass media, echoing Thoreau who said the same of newspapers and other popular forms of communication. In a way, this is the reverse of the problem highlighted in "International News." Yet the result is largely the same since business interests end up censoring what we're exposed to, as the filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky discovered upon defecting from the USSR to the West in the 1980s, only to still have his artistic freedom limited by economic factors. *Levelling the Land* has another folk punk song, "The Game." It suggests that political leaders treat international conflict and war with the gravity mere of card games. This point is buttressed by a slower ballad on the album—"Another Man's Cause"—that talks about the Falklands War and soldiers dying for purposes that have nothing to do with them.

The Pogues "Lorca's Novena," released one year earlier in 1990, is about the assassination of the poet Federico García Lorca by right-wing nationalist forces at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, likely because he was socialist and gay. Recorded near the end of Margaret Thatcher's era, this period was not kind to leftists and saw public services dismantled. The AIDs epidemic, which disproportionately affected gay men, was at its height. Thatcher's administration introduced legislation (Clause 28) that limited the extent to which teachers could discuss homosexuality, also deploying ads suggesting Labour politicians, who were more supportive of the gay community, were trying to pervert children. And the Falklands War was prosecuted under Thatcher's watch, and was a late stage of colonialist conflict.

A commonality between all these songs is that they deal with societies in crisis. The case of South Africa is of course most serious. The albums from the 1990s are nonetheless addressing consequences that follow from rapid rise of neoliberal and neoconservative political philosophies, which often amount to the same thing. Among other outcomes, these political programs increased wealth disparity in industrialized countries and further entrenched plutocracy—or as "Sell Out" puts it, fueled a situation where "the power of the rich is held by few."

Saving Place

In addition to stripping ethnic identity, global colonial and neo-colonial orders have contributed to what some have called "placelessness," a concern highlighted in Otyken's name, meaning "sacred land" and also in the album title, *Levelling the Land*.

As Afro-oriented scholars Kenneth Amaeshi and Uwafiokun Idemudia observe, globalization trivializes place and promotes what they call “placelessness.” So in the same way that “homes” have become “houses” to be flipped on the market, place becomes an exchangeable good. As Martin Heidegger elaborated decades ago, economic and technological modern arrangements strip the uniqueness out of things, converting them into undifferentiated commodities to be stockpiled, as when trees become a woodlot, measured in BTUs or as exportable units of trade. (It’s no small irony that Heidegger supported the Nazi regime, which imposed conformity and used industrial systems to liquidate people).

On the face of it, many folk punkers are reacting against the erasure of place. But just how this gets expressed depends on national identity. The Levellers are predominantly anti-patriotic, objecting to UK meddling in other countries. The same in some ways holds for National Wake in that its members rejected entrenched Afrikaner values that enforced apartheid.

The ethno-patriotism of Otyken, The Hu and Nini is also anti-colonial. It is because it is an affirmation of local culture and thus a rejection of imperialist interference (or something close to it) under which the peoples of Northern, Central and Eastern Asia have historically suffered. Otyken shoots many of their music videos in wild-looking and sometimes snow-covered outdoor areas. They dress in what appear to be traditional Siberian outfits. They play instruments like the komuz and igil. They additionally paint their faces. They accordingly seem to celebrate both their land and culture.

These patterns repeat in The Hu’s music videos. One of them, “Wolf Totem,” is set in Mongolian grasslands with tents in the background and motorcycles in place of the horses that would have been used in the past. According to the bands’ website, the group employs instruments like the morin khuur (aka the horsehead fiddle), the tovshuur (aka the Mongolian guitar) and the tumur khuur (aka the jaw harp) as well as techniques like throat singing. The vocal rhythms of the song are like galloping horses—driving, heavy and repetitive—backed by drone harmonies. The lyrics catalogue a range of mighty animals and make mention of Genghis Khan, who is more of a folk hero in Mongolia than the villain that the West portrays him as.

Though from Taiwan, Nini’s ethno-patriotism is broader than that country. Her videos for “Homeland” and “LongMa” have her playing Chinese folk instruments in ways reminiscent of punk and metal, even though her sound is largely acoustic. Her costuming mixes traditional Chinese elements with contemporary rock fashion. The visuals and lyrics for her videos are directed toward Chinese culture generally, though some scenes are of Taiwan landscapes specifically. This reiterates connections between culture and place, with the title “Homeland” reinforcing this.

A broader theme that connects the Levellers and their Asian counterparts is that all of them focus quite a bit on the past. A longma is a mythical horse with dragon scales and wings that associates with legendary Chinese rulers of bygone times. We’ve already seen that the Levellers dream of ancient places and also sing of belonging to ancient races. In these regards, these musicians resemble thinkers like Thoreau as well as older ones like Confucius. An obvious part of what motivated these philosophers to their views was their deep dissatisfaction with the present. But they were a little unusual in that they overtly looked to their predecessors for answers—Thoreau especially to ancient Asians and Confucius to earlier Sage Kings. A

second parallel is that Thoreau identifies deeply with the land, and Chinese philosophy is often said to be a product of patient thinking that occurs in bucolic settings.

Sell Out?

Folk punk—along with the broader punk movement—is generally seen as resisting commodification. This doesn't mean musicians in this oeuvre don't want to sell albums. Instead, it means that their artistic choices do not revolve around maximizing sales. When the Levellers and Pogues criticized Thatcher, patriotism and homophobia in the early 1990s, they immediately cut themselves off from a significant demographic. National Wake's predicament was more extreme. They split up after just one album, which was withdrawn because of government pressure, after selling only 700 copies, according to some accounts.

Thoreau likewise objected to commodification, especially of place, complaining in more than one of his writings that land is artificially carved up and parceled out. Thoreau also had near-total disrespect for the establishment, and like Friedrich Nietzsche, he might be regarded as a punk philosopher. And because he fused new and ancient ideas, he might be a folk punker. His influences likely included Indigenous American philosophies, which emphasize togetherness and place-based identity. These issues get repeated in the eco-themed justice orientation of folk punk and also songs about the land.

At the same time, Thoreau was cynical of pop movements. He complained that news media—the mass entertainment of his day—tranquilizes us, claims echoed by National Wake and The Levellers. He also said that we think we're solving a problem by merely petitioning it, and singing about a problem doesn't seem that different. It's not that we shouldn't have protest music. But thinkers like Herbert Marcuse observe it's hard not to buy back into an establishment that has a way of reabsorbing everything. Yoga entered the West as a protest movement but soon became a part-time job for students, a hobby for yuppies and a venue for sexual cruising. Soon after, we got retreats, Lululemon and a multibillion-dollar industry.

Otyken appears to be an analogue to the situation that Marcuse describes. Unlike earlier folk punkers, they clearly have costume designers and prop makers constructing instruments (e.g., with skull resonators) that are only for videos, along with makeup artists and more. In fact, the set up with this group is close to girl and boy bands in that the enterprise is operated by a producer who writes the music and makes image decisions, as well as deciding on the band's specific membership. This is a way to cash in on youthful beauty and new age mysticism and franchise identity. Otyken's music videos display the band's names in Western characters on their drums and at the beginning of videos as a marketing strategy, even though this is not the linguistic script of Siberia. Lyrically, Otyken doesn't sing about anything particularly political, just about the land, wind and things like this, as if to appeal to a maximum market base. Nini is similar to the extent that her lyrics, by not being Taiwan specific, keep her salable to the larger Chinese market.

Nothing forces Otyken's producer and members to adopt these self-commodifying approaches, even if band members don't want to take the blatant political risks that National Wake did in South Africa in the late 70s or Pussy Riot has more recently in Russia. To be fair, it's a saturated market, and without bands and producers using the techniques at their disposal, we'd likely not get to know what's after all decent music. At the same time, we have to ask whether today's commodifying climate makes genuine punk increasingly rare.