Sound, Society and the Geography of Popular Music

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ASHGATE
Chapter 9
The City She Loves Me: The Los Angeles of the Red Hot Chili Peppers

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Let me play with your emotions / For nothing is good unless you play with it
Yeah / Fly on / Fly on, baby (“Mommy, What’s a Funkadelic,” Funkadelic 1970)

Introduction

In the 1980s, the Los Angeles music scene had its share of “hair bands,” but it also had a growing number of bands that resisted “glam” and began something new. Jane’s Addiction, Fishbone, fIREHOSE, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers all borrowed from rock n’ roll, punk rock, funk, country, jazz, and more to help launch an “alternative” sound. Their work differed from Seattle’s “grunge,” but both sounds contributed to a new movement in popular music (see Bell 1998 for a discussion of alternative music and the Seattle contribution). Gill states “the various trends and styles of rock derive initially from conditions specific to particular regions, with local dance and bar bands often being the principal sources of innovation and change” (1995, 17). This is the case with 1980s Los Angeles, but I would argue that the Red Hot Chili Peppers were not only a part of a regional sound, but that the place itself became a central presence in their music.

The Red Hot Chili Peppers have never hidden their relationship with Los Angeles. Bassist Michael “Flea” Balzary puts it bluntly in the band’s 1999 VH1 Behind the Music episode, “We’re L.A. to the bone.” Throughout over twenty years of existence, the band has woven the physical and cultural geography of L.A. into their songs, videos, and mythos. Be it an irreverent party anthem or biting social commentary, a Red Hot Chili Pepper’s song relies on Los Angeles to create context. The band uses postmodern techniques of playfulness, pastiche (that is, a compilation of influences and ideas), and acknowledges coexisting and/or competing realities. In doing so, the Red Hot Chili Peppers have produced a unique Los Angeles. At the same time, the postmodern structure (Dear and Flusty 1998) and essence (Soja 1996a) of Los Angeles (e.g. resisting traditional urban form) has, in turn, informed their music. The two are in constant dialectical tension and the result for the band has been an inherently geographic artistry.
Music, literature, and film geographies

A reoccurring theme in the study of music from a geographic perspective is that not enough has been done to advance this perspective, or that it needs to advance in a new direction (Kong 1995, Leyshon et al. 1995, Zelinsky 1999, and recently Hudson 2006). Especially popular American music seems to be an untapped source of geographic analysis. While there is a growing amount of literature on postcolonial “world music” and the use of hybridized music for tourist consumption (Connell and Gibson 2004; Gibson and Dunbar-Hall 2000; Greene 2001), human geography has paid little attention to popular American music since the 1970s (Ford 1971; Gill 1995). Some work exists on the genesis and diffusion of particular sounds in American music (Bell 1998; Gill 1995; Graves 1999; Stump 1998). Evoking place through popular music is of interest to geographers, as is the thematic analysis of lyrics through a geographic lens (Kong 1995). Very little has been written on the role place plays as an influence, and even as a protagonist, not simply a setting, in American popular music (however, see Moss 1992; Forman 2000). This is surprising as “landscape … provides a context, a stage, within and upon which humans continue to work, and it provides the boundaries, quite complexly, within which people remake themselves” (Mitchell 2000, 102). Furthermore, landscape is “an ongoing relationship between people and place” (Mitchell 2000, 102, emphasis in original).

A few exceptions are Ford and Henderson (1978) who explored how images of a place were shaped by music:

The perceived qualities of places and types of places may change with their changing appropriateness for popular music themes. The hypothesis is made that songs both reflect and influence the images people have of places and that these songs have changed people’s attitudes significantly toward places is one important step toward understanding the “geography of the mind” (Ford and Henderson 1978, 292). Gumprecht also studied the relationship between place and the musician in popular American music in his analysis of the West Texas landscape’s influence on Joe Ely, Butch Hancock, and Terry Allen. “Geographers who want to better understand the cultural landscape and how humans react to it … would be wise not only to look, to attempt to read that landscape, but to listen, to try to hear what sound, including music, can tell us about place” (Gumprecht 1998, 78, original emphasis). Related but different work addresses the production of musical spaces or “soundscapes” (Aitken and Craine 2002; Valentine 1995). The sounds we hear out of our car stereo, over a supermarket loudspeaker, or at a concert can alter our perceptions of the material landscape. These musical ‘scapes have been explored in terms of affect and emotion, but specific and fixed places are rarely discussed (admittedly so in Aitken and Craine 2002) in such studies. This chapter will attempt to explore both...
mental perceptions of the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ music as well as its references to concrete places. Just as popular American music is rarely explored in geographic terms, when it comes to using sensory consumption and production of place in human geography in general, the sonic takes a backseat to the visual (Valentine 1995). Sight plays a key role in how we interpret our world, yet without sound, “space itself contracts, for our experience of space is greatly extended by the auditory sense which provides information of the world beyond the visual field” (Tuan 1974, 9). As I write this, I hear a bird singing outside my office, though I cannot see it. I hear cars in the distance, the rumble of the central heating unit, the ticking of the clock. Without sound, my world is much smaller. I look at the computer screen, but I hear lyrics about crashing surf (from the song “Road Trippin’,” Californication 1999) or untouchable basketball skill (the song “Magic Johnson,” Mother’s Milk 1989). These lyrics and the echoing electric guitar, underlying funk bass, and almost tribal drums extend my space from my desk located in the San Joaquin Valley to the Los Angeles of the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

As visual elements are often the focus of media geographies, it is useful to explore studies of literature and place and film and place in an attempt to transfer these theories to the music of the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Los Angeles. For example, Tuan speaks of the permanence and power of the literary text as producing images of place. London’s literary history has managed to evoke both real and unreal feelings in tourists (1991, 690-691). Is Los Angeles much different? While literature may not always spring to mind (although fans of noir writers Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James Ellroy may disagree), Los Angeles has appeared in countless forms of popular culture. The quintessential L.A. diner plays a major role in the bookend scenes of Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction. Steve Martin’s L.A. Story shows the surreal and absurd sides of the city (e.g. driving to your mailbox). Popular music also utilizes Los Angeles as setting, from the Beach Boys’ coastline to N.W.A’s inner city. As these examples reveal, the same city can be envisioned as two completely different places based on not only the lyrics, but also the sonic presentations. “Straight Outta Compton” would not have had the same effect without the layering of Dr. Dre and Easy-E harmonizing behind Ice Cube’s lead vocals.1

It is worth mentioning at this point that the Red Hot Chili Peppers are well known for their nonsensical lyrics. When Anthony Kiedis raps, “Oh … ticky ticky tickita tic tac toe / I know … everybody’s Eskimo” (“Warlocks,” Stadium 37)

1 For those not familiar with the music referenced, in the 1960s, the Beach Boys used lyrics about Southern California’s young beach culture (surfing, fast cars, and attractive girls) and tightly layered harmonies from the production studio for a polished sound. In the late 1980s, N.W.A popularized the West Coast rap scene with Straight Outta Compton. Their lyrics reflected the poverty, racism, and violence of L.A.’s inner city and the beats matched the rappers’ rawness. See also Chapter 7 for an analysis of California imagery in popular music.
the geographer may leap out of his or her chair with the urge to slap an “air bass guitar,” but his or her discursive analytical powers are rendered useless. Some of the band’s ballads contain a loose narrative structure (e.g. “Dani California,” *Stadium Arcadium* 2006), but, in general, the group has maintained a sense of ambiguity with regards to the meaning of their work. This ambiguity provides, perhaps, a challenge to the cultural geographer. On the other hand, it could be viewed as more help than hindrance. Some geographic studies of popular music have conducted discursive analyses based primarily on the lyrics of an artist, such as Moss’s exploration of Bruce Springsteen’s landscapes (1992). While Moss does an excellent job bringing both a materialist and feminist lens to a male rock legend’s work, she does not utilize a dialectical framework to investigate both the object (e.g. “Born to Run”) and the processes that lead to its creation and, in turn, the objects reproduction (Harvey 1996). Moss incorporates Springsteen’s life into her analysis of his lyrics, but popular songs are more than just lyrics. Regardless of the presence or absence of a narrative structure, the sonic choices used by the artist contribute to the work. Using the aforementioned Beach Boys meet N.W.A example, instrument choice, vocal style, and the very notes and rhythm chosen produce the totality of the song. Whether or not Springsteen’s guitar or Clarence Clemons’s saxophone would alter Moss’s findings is not the issue; she likely would have come to a similar conclusion. It should be kept in mind, however, that these choices, along with the social processes that brought Bruce Springsteen to the recording studio, as well as the processes that bring the listener to the songs, music videos, and concerts together produce the landscapes of Bruce Springsteen. All of these parts constitute the totality of the spaces and places of music (Harvey 1996).

Additionally, in a post MTV age, where a band can provide songs, music videos, documentaries, artwork, and journal entries to the fan’s home computer, simply relying on the songs or albums would limit one’s understanding of the overall work of art. The “webs of symbols” must be plucked not only from the songs, but from the totality of the albums, videos, and overall mythos of the band itself.²

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² In addition to how we experience professionally produced music, new technology also seems to be changing who we listen to. New and (somewhat) affordable software are used to create a recording studio on one’s desktop computer and internet forums like *YouTube* and *MySpace* are producing entirely new ways to consume music. Will music scenes change? Do artists still need to live in L.A., Seattle, or Nashville? What does this mean for future spaces and places of music? See Chapter 12 for insights to this question.
thus countering its sunny image (Hausladen and Starrs 2005). Using noir as a stylistic framework allowed these films to express a “collective national unease” (Hausladen and Starrs 2005, 43). Additionally, McClung (1988) has discussed how literature (including noir) contrast images of utopia and Arcadia against dystopia and the city. He uses Los Angeles to show the dialectical nature of such literary cities as they relate to our reading of the built landscape. Helen Hunt Jackson’s 1884 novel *Ramona* managed to both challenge the treatment of Native Americans as well as shape the natural image of Southern California (DeLyser 2005). The city’s Mediterranean climate and later its imported “natural” landscape (orange and palm trees as opposed to desert scrub) give it a tangible sense of an Arcadian city. Yet, literary work has typically presented the city as a “betrayed arcadia” or a “pathetic dystopia” (McClung 1988, 34). McClung uses this dialectic as a way to show how the real and the imagined are in tension in the making of a city such as Los Angeles. This idea of contextualizing art and architecture to understand how the city is imagined is relevant to this chapter. The trick, however, is to move past the notion of the utopian/dystopian binary and embrace the multiple imaginings and realities of the city.

It is my argument that the Red Hot Chili Peppers express not a national unease, nor a straightforward critique of utopia, but rather a struggle to accept the multiple realities of postmodern existence, which I would argue is a logical progression of L.A. noir. Rather than simply point out “paradise with a seamy side” (Hausladen and Starrs 2005, 60), the band embraces both worlds to show how they are not mutually exclusive. This is not a form of hypocrisy, but rather the acknowledgement of coexisting and competing realities. In turn, the band’s lyrical and sonic choices are influenced by the postmodern nature of the city where they live. In other words, the Red Hot Chili Peppers are a band presenting both a “paradise” and a “seamy side” of the city. The band continues to show the underbelly of society through their openness about drug addiction, death, and despair in a noir fashion, but also addresses the global networks originating in “a Hollywood basement” (“Californication,” *Californication* 1999). Rather than dwelling on the darker side of Los Angeles, the band embraces it as a necessity for the existence of the city’s good side. This is not about exposing Hollywood’s “lies,” but about coming to terms with them and incorporating them into daily life.

Los Angeles is a city that defies modern notions of urbanism (Dear and Flusty 1998). In geographic discourse, it has been described as postmodern (Dear and Flusty 1998; Soja 1989) or even deviant (Davidson and Entrikin 2005). Los Angeles is “a peculiar composite metropolis that resembles an articulated assemblage of many different patterns of change affecting major cities in the United States and elsewhere in the world—a Houston, a Detroit, a Lower Manhattan, and a Singapore amalgamated in one urban region” (Soja et al. 1983, 195-196). This image of nontraditional urban form takes Tuan’s ideas of literary London (1991) in a different direction. Not only can popular culture construct an unreal experience.
of the city, but also the absence of traditional urban centers and public spaces seem to produce the need for this very popular culture. This materialist dialectic of music/place production should not, however, mask the postmodern nature of the city and the music. While Soja’s socio-spatial dialectic (1980) is at work, the following analysis equally stress the importance of Soja’s work on Los Angeles as a heterogeneous city (see, for example, Soja 1996a). Soja has attempted to transcend the binary constraints of the dialectic, even proposing a “trialectic” approach while still encouraging geographers to move beyond three-part frameworks (Soja 1996b). So, while I am suggesting that the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Los Angeles are linked in a dialectic fashion, the band and the city as beings, places, and spaces transcend proposed meta-narratives in true postmodern fashion. As I will show, both are the amalgamation of competing and coexisting realities.

The band’s union of “high culture” and the vernacular into their work positions them as postmodern artists (Urry 2002, 79-80). By layering an orchestra with a distorted electric guitar (“Midnight,” By the Way 2002), the band can appeal to those with more cultural capital than economic capital (Urry 2002). By embracing juxtaposition while rejecting a meta-narrative, the band works from a postmodernist point of departure (Harvey 1990). Harvey (1990, referencing McHale 1987) describes the shift from the epistemological to the ontological in postmodernism; that is, interpreting and representing how we know the truth gives way to a world of many intersecting and diverging truths. Leaving an idealized reality out of their music, the Red Hot Chili Peppers can seamlessly attack the spread of a homogenized Western culture, while touring around the world to promote the same Western culture.

Blood Sugar Sex Magik and “Suck My Kiss”

The 1989 cover of Stevie Wonder’s “Higher Ground” (Mother’s Milk) gave the band mainstream recognition, but it was with the 1991 album Blood Sugar Sex Magik that the Red Hot Chili Peppers became a powerful music presence, and I would argue, a clear postmodern turn for the band. Los Angeles was always present in earlier work (e.g. “Out in L.A.” and “True Men Don’t Kill Coyotes,” Red Hot Chili Peppers 1984), but Blood Sugar Sex Magik more fully embraced the band’s home town. The album was created in a rented Hollywood mansion where the band lived until the recording was complete. The process was captured in a documentary about the album, Funky Monks. This was the first time acclaimed producer Rick Rubin worked with the band (who continued to work with them on four subsequent albums), and a certain sense of maturity is evident when comparing Blood Sugar Sex Magik to previous efforts. While their early albums did reference the city, deliberate and tangible connections to the many realities of Los Angeles is first present on this album and the associated artwork and music videos. It is the starting point for the postmodern geographies of the Red Hot Chili
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1 Peppers. Previous albums used pastiche to a certain extent, but at this point in their
discography, postmodern play becomes tangible and appears purposeful.

youtube.com/watch?v=Joqf55pn2cI) is a sexually charged funk anthem, although
its sonic values alone do not necessarily produce the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ Los
Angeles. The video, however, is a mix of footage from the Funky Monks film
and shots from a military parade in Los Angeles. The opening shot is a black
and white view of the classic “Hollywood” sign, instantly invoking geography.
Next is a red duotone shot of airplanes flying in formation above festive balloons.
A black and white Los Angeles of the vernacular is played against the “red and
white” Los Angeles of state power. Drummer Chad Smith rides his Harley sans
helmet through the Hollywood Hills, while uniformed soldiers march in a parade
honoring the military; two separate images showing both disobedience and order.
Next, shirtless bassist Flea and guitarist John Frusciante record this very song,
bouncing and moving to the music, almost sexually; yet, almost simultaneously
a tank rolls through Los Angeles behind a marching band. The American flag
is waving throughout the red-hued scenes, while the only overt symbols in the
vernacular shots are tribally inspired tattoos. A hint of dissent arrives at the end,
when a protester in sad clown makeup holds up an out-of-shot sign. Then, several
green-hued shots of Los Angeles appear.

The “Suck My Kiss” video echoes Lefebvre (1991); a (perhaps) materialist
approach for a postmodern band. The state shots are “representations of space,”
i.e. the dominant space of order, while the vernacular shots are “representational
space,” i.e. “the loci of passion of action, of lived situations” (Lefebvre 1991,
42). The video, however, departs from Marxism in that it is not an obvious attack
on state order and hegemony, nor is it a pure celebration of artistic emotion and
humanistic freedom. Instead, it plays the two narratives off one another. They are
two inherently different social scenes, and yet both rooted in the same city. The
streets of L.A. exist for a long-haired drummer to ride his motorcycle as well as
a venue to pledge allegiance to the state. The place is a product of both (or more)
spaces, and these spaces could not exist without such a place. In many ways the
video expresses the conflicting use of the postwar American road. While designed
for military purposes and constructed from the engineer’s pragmatic vision (Brown
2005), it has been used in subversive ways as a means for subcultural (often male)
escape (Cresswell 1993).

“Under the Bridge”

Arguably the band’s most recognized song, “Under the Bridge” (*Blood Sugar Sex
Magik* 1991; video at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eHeGhmvDICY) is not
only set in Los Angeles, but uses the city as a driving character. The song deals
with lead singer Anthony Kiedis’s addiction to heroin, and was “discovered” in
his stack of poems by producer Rick Rubin (see the Funky Monks documentary).
It is a dark song, opening with the emptiness and solitude Kiedis felt at the depth of his addiction:

Sometimes I feel
Like I don’t have a partner
Sometimes I feel
Like my only friend
Is the city I live in
The city of Angels
Lonely as I am
Together we cry
(“Under the Bridge” *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* 1991)

The city is the only “person” in his life that understands who he truly is, who can see through his demons to his true soul. “I walk through her hills/’cause she knows who I am/She sees my good deeds/ and she kisses me windy (“Under the Bridge,” *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* 1991).”

The video furthers the concept of the personified city. The downtown skyline is played against the floating bodies of the band members, almost making it the fifth ‘Chili Pepper. As Kiedis walks through downtown Los Angeles, weaving through citizens and streets, he sings the lyrics to the camera, as if he is introducing the viewer to his friend L.A. He interacts with local merchants to show a connection with the bodies that make up the city. The fact that this is downtown, and not Santa Monica or Pasadena, embraces the vernacular side of the band’s tastes. Graffiti, non-Anglo Angelinos, and modest architecture help to highlight both the despair that runs throughout the city, as well as the urban “survivors” that occupy the city. While pastiche is not a driving force of the song or video, it is a testament to the role Los Angeles has played for the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

“By the Way”

The video for “By the Way” (*By The Way* 2002; video at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdagH15ZEwQ) is more obviously Los Angeles than the song itself. It opens with a shot of an Echo Park Avenue street sign, then tilts down to Anthony Kiedis hailing a cab. This video is the most interesting of the band’s video catalog as it does not revolve around a musical performance, a collection of images, or a fantastic premise. While the video content is centered on a fictional event, the viewer follows a narrative of the band as one might actually see them at home in Los Angeles. The video has a voyeuristic style, which gives it a more “authentic” feel than the interactions seen in “Under the Bridge.”

The Echo Park and Silverlake neighborhoods of Los Angeles are known for their bohemian vibe as well as recent gentrification efforts.
An obsessed fan drives a cab that Kiedis hails. The driver slides a Red Hot Chili Peppers CD (the “By the Way” single) into the stereo, which Kiedis politely acknowledges. As the song’s intensity progresses, so too does the driver’s excitement. The cab begins racing through L.A., the cabbie pounding on his steering wheel along with the funk, and Kiedis grows uncomfortable. He pulls out his phone to call for help, but the crazed driver slams on the brakes to knock it out of his hands. The driver pulls into a deserted tunnel and stops the cab. While he pulls out flares from the trunk, Kiedis takes out a PDA (personal digital assistant) (two phones—how L.A. is that?).

Sitting at a sidewalk café somewhere in the city, Flea and John Frusciante receive a text message from the now abducted Kiedis. Flea’s hair is electric blue: a punk rock juxtaposition with the bourgeois setting. They laugh at the apparent kidnapping joke, and go back to their drinks. Meanwhile, Kiedis is subjected to the cabbie dancing in front of the cab with lit flares in hand, performing what can best be described as a “white-trash island dance.” He sends another text and this one is taken seriously.

The rescue vehicle is absurd; a yellowish-orange 1960s vintage Ford Bronco, which is a perfect complement to the equally absurd rescue mission. Flea and Frusciante chase the cab, which is once again driving recklessly through Los Angeles. Kiedis breaks the rear window of his prison, climbs onto the roof of the cab and leaps into the Bronco. The two vehicles part ways, and the final shot is of the cab now picking up the unsuspecting ‘Chili Peppers drummer Chad Smith.

Beneath the sudden narrative structure in the band’s work, there are significant underlying images in the video. Once again, the streets of Los Angeles are used, but unlike the L.A. of “Under the Bridge,” this setting is not bound to the vernacular. The story begins in the gentrified Echo Park with Anthony Kiedis dressed in a hip blazer. This is quite the departure from strolling though downtown in a ratty T-shirt and long hair. While it might look like the band has forgotten its roots with this journey into elite Los Angeles, the Red Hot Chili Peppers have actually achieved a new level of pastiche. Refined Echo Park is matched with a wild car chase. Respectable citizens meet deviant cab drivers. Trendy rockstars drink tea at a sidewalk café then drive a monster truck. The video moves from clean streets to forgotten tunnels revealing an underworld of trash and graffiti. And while this dialectical Los Angeles is played with, the car chase event evokes Hollywood action hero machismo. All the while, the music shifts from the haunting high range of Keidis’s voice and steady, quiet drumming to the heavy bass and nonsensical lyrics, then back again. The song seamlessly shifts from “pretty” to “rockin’.” Whatever the influence, the content of this video is the sum of the city. The video further produces a Red Hot Chili Peppers vision of Los Angeles. Flea’s blue hair set against a luxurious café might look odd against the traditional milieus of Chicago or New York, but it actually makes sense in L.A. Images like those in the video construct the Los Angeles that allows and produces such juxtaposition.
"Tell Me Baby"

The Red Hot Chili Peppers’ latest work, _Stadium Arcadium_, is an attempt not to be confined to the boundaries of Earth, which is evident from the celestial theme of the double album. The band may have tried to produce a universal album, but it is still rooted in Los Angeles. “Tell Me Baby” (_Stadium Arcadium_ 2006; video at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsNcc2soDyY) is a song about migrating to Hollywood in the hope of making it big. It tells the story of every wannabe rockstar, actress, and model that has ever moved to the city:

They come from every state to find
Some dreams were meant to be declined
Tell the man what did you have in mind
What have you come to do
(“Tell Me Baby,” _Stadium Arcadium_ 2006)

The very subject of the song is a mixture of elites and commoners. After all, these worldly rockstars were once those trying to make it big themselves. The video furthers that concept, shot entirely in a small dingy room with a simple camcorder. Various musicians and singers are brought in front of the camera as if they are auditioning during the song’s intro. Flea appears on the tiny stage and launches into the music when the song picks up. Shots of the Red Hot Chili Peppers playing the song are mixed with the wannabes covering the same one. Some have potential, others are “meant to be declined.” As the video progresses, the band sneaks onto the stage with the auditioning musicians and begins playing with them. The elite rockstars and the lowly wannabes switch physical and social roles; nobodies sing with celebrities backing them up. The video culminates with everyone playing, dancing, and singing in a frenzied jam session. The energy and excitement of the wannabes merges with the sheer joy of the band to great effect.

Through the lyrics, the band acknowledges the palimpsest that is Los Angeles:

This town is made of many things
Just look at what the current brings
So high it’s only promising
This place was made on you
(“Tell Me Baby,” _Stadium Arcadium_ 2006)

By singing that L.A. is “made of many things,” the band brings together the different worlds of Los Angeles that they have lived and encountered throughout their career. It acknowledges the capitalist structures that draw artists from across the world, as well as the rebellious nature of the artists themselves. Through “Tell Me Baby” the listener/viewer learns that L.A. is hope, L.A. is despair, L.A. is good, L.A. is bad.
The importance of this particular video is stressed in the 4 June 2006 “Fleamail,” occasional open e-mails written by Flea to fans in a punctuation-free stream of consciousness, evocative of Jack Kerouac:

we made a video for the song ‘tell me baby’ and we just saw it yesterday i am so excited about it it is the best one we ever did, it was done by dayton and faris they made us the best video of our career and i cant say what it is and ruin the debut of it, not to sound so high and mighty like it is such an important thing but, i think it is the most beautiful piece of film that has ever represented us

(Balzary 2006)

Conclusion

In Mike Davis’s less-than-flattering critique of the city (1990), he touches upon the fact that “Los Angeles is usually seen as peculiarly infertile cultural soil, unable to produce, to this day, any homegrown intelligentsia” (17). For a Marxist scholar, such an elite stance is surprising, as it seems to betray his apparent motives. He attacks Los Angeles for not mimicking “old world” urban life and for not breaking down the norms of class structure. At the end of his history of intellectual Los Angeles, Davis mentions gangsta rap as a conduit for the marginalized voice of the inner city, although he criticizes the West Coast’s rappers for “selling out.” They are not making music as an art form, but are instead focused on making money. No doubt this concerns a Marxist like Davis, yet he fails to remove his own bias towards the capital structures that rule Los Angeles. How can anyone truly criticize a person born into the poverty and violence of Compton who wants to make money to escape it? By accepting the juxtaposition inherent in being true to one’s art while making money, of fighting existing structures while utilizing them to create music, the Red Hot Chili Peppers have been able to prove that rejecting a meta-narrative in favor of accepting multiple narratives is possible.

Forman deftly discusses the territoriality of rap and its “strong local allegiances” (2000, 88) while avoiding ivory tower judgment. Rappers explicitly talk of the local through their lyrics, giving voice to the male aggression found in the ‘hoods. The Red Hot Chili Peppers, not born and raised in the ghetto, but by no means elite Angelinos, give voice to their locale. For the band, Los Angeles is a city of tension and hypocrisy. The band members are of a world that acknowledges the anger of Compton, while not discounting the opulence of the West side.

However, the Red Hot Chili Peppers depart from the localism of rap in that they weave multiple local identities into their artwork, video images, and music. It is rare to hear a straightforward critique of the city in the lyrics. It is through such subtlety that the band is able to create pastiche, interpretive artistry, and to address the totality of their city. Rather than limiting themselves to one neighborhood of the sprawling city, or to themes of male aggression and poverty, or fashion and leisure, that is, by rejecting ontology, they are actually able to produce a version of
L.A. that speaks to all classes and identities. Conversely, if we accept the idea of Los Angeles as a postmodern city (Dear and Flusty 1998; Soja 1996b) not fitting with classic models of urban life, it makes sense that L.A. would produce such a postmodern band. The Red Hot Chili Peppers have made a career out of pastiche; borrowing and blending elements of rap, rock n’ roll, funk, punk, country, and jazz. Songs from Hank Williams are skillfully reinterpreted with bass lines reminiscent of Bootsy Collins (“Why don’t you love me?” Red Hot Chili Peppers 1984). And while it is doubtful that this music could be made in any other city (keeping in mind that One Hot Minute, the band’s most criticized post-Blood Sugar Sex Magik album, was recorded in Hawaii), the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ sonic choices and images, like that of a blue-haired Flea sitting at a refined sidewalk café, have helped to produce an untraditional image of L.A.

This chapter is by no means the endpoint of studying the music of the Red Hot Chili Peppers. While preceding geographic work has focused on place, the spaces of love, lust, despair, addiction, machismo, and maturity are ripe for geographic analysis. Aitken and Craine (2002) have already begun to lay the foundation of such work. An analysis of both the places and spaces of the Red Hot Chili Peppers will be necessary to grasp the totality of the dialectical and postmodern relationships between the band and L.A. geography. And while Los Angeles has played an important role in the band’s work, who knows what places and spaces the band has yet to explore?

If you let go and let this music take you by the hand it will take you flying through skies of sound. It will zoom you up well above outer space and it will show you around planes of existence that do not share the laws and conditions of this reality. And when it brings you down to earth it will dig deep into that shit. It will also teach you to fall back without landing on your ass and to fall forward without falling on your face. Let go and you can be two places at once, you can be as big as the whole universe and as small as an atom simultaneously … In the words of one of the supreme gods of funk, “Nothing is good unless you play with it.” The Red Hot Chili Peppers … have played with light, darkness, sound, silence, form, air, and space to make music that plays with the listener (Frusciante 2006).

References


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Discography