

Prison Music: Containment, Escape, and the Sound of America

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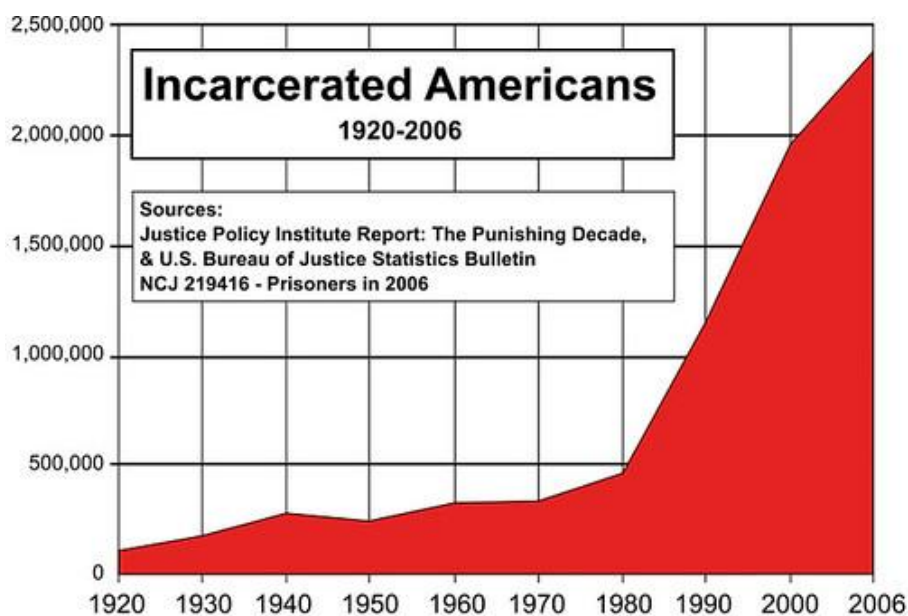
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Abstract

Activists outside Metro Corrections Center, NYC, 7/8/11 Noise demonstrations, like the one described above, occurred outside jails, detention centers, and prisons in cities like New York City, St. Louis, Oakland, Los Angeles, Montreal and Kitchener, Ontario throughout the weekend following July 4th, 2011.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, History, Music, Noise



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We used our voices, whistles, and blow horns to make contact with those on the inside... Prisoners flickered the lights in their cells on and off throughout the building, banged on windows, and we could see the shadows of many of those on the inside waving and pumping fists. — Activists outside the Metropolitan Corrections Center, NYC, July 8, 2011



Activists outside Metro Corrections Center, NYC, 7/8/11

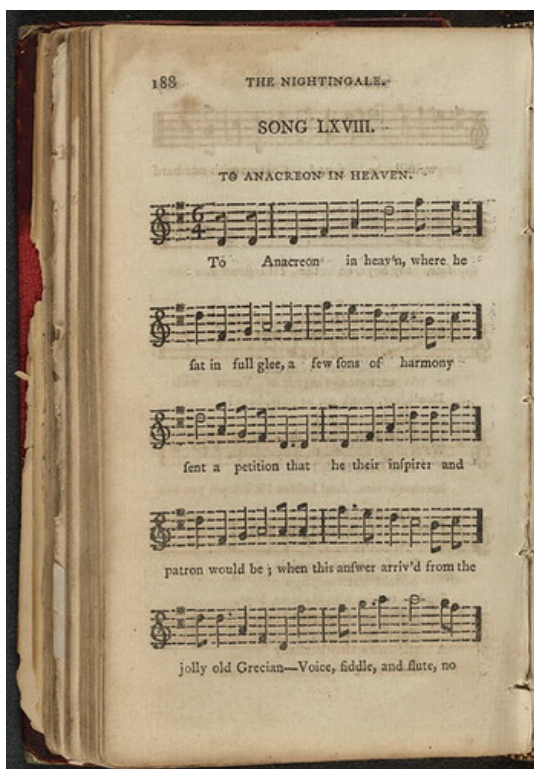
Noise demonstrations, like the one described above, occurred outside jails, detention centers, and prisons in cities like New York City, St. Louis, Oakland, Los Angeles, Montreal and Kitchener, Ontario throughout the weekend following July 4th, 2011. Activists rallied by playing music, chanting, launching flares and fireworks, and banging pots and pans– communicating their solidarity with the [Pelican Bay Hunger Strike](#), and their demand for justice for prisoners in each city. The noisy international demonstrations “connected local struggles against dehumanization to the California hunger strike and the conditions of the Pelican Bay Security Housing Unit, as well as both the U.S. and Canada’s prioritization of policing and imprisonment over social welfare.” ([San Francisco Bayview](#), 2011).

<https://youtu.be/AgvVM1fmQU>

If music can be understood as “the organization of noise” ([Attali, 1977](#)), these audible signs of solidarity across prison walls would certainly be considered a form of music: *prison music*, perhaps. Prison has been a form of political organization for the United States, at least since the beginning of the 19th century; music (or organized noise) from or about prisons helps trace this

history of containment sonically. Prison music also points to the possibilities of sonic and political escape from this carceral state.

The beginnings of the history of prison music in the United States can be traced to the War of 1812. A poet named Francis Scott Key met with British officers aboard a ship off the coast of Maryland to negotiate the release of American prisoners. He was detained overnight, having gained knowledge of the position of British military units and their plan to soon attack Baltimore. From detention in a ship floating on the Atlantic, Key watched the [Battle of Baltimore](#) at Fort McHenry and reported at dawn to the prisoners below deck that he was still able to see the American flag waving.



"To Anacreon in Heaven" by J.S. Smith

He chronicled the experience in a poem titled, "In Defence of Fort McHenry," and later put it to music with John Stafford Smith's ["To Anacreon in Heaven."](#) The title of Key's poem changed in October of 1814 when a Baltimore actor performed the song in public and called it "The Star-Spangled Banner." In 1889, the Secretary of the Navy designated "The Star Spangled Banner" as the official tune to be played at the raising of the U.S. flag, and in 1916 the song was declared the national anthem of the United States. Key's experience in detention along with other American prisoners in the middle of the Atlantic was memorialized as the U.S. anthem, but it is rare, if ever, that the country's ode to freedom is understood as its opposite – as an ode to *unfreedom*, as prison music. Set against contemporary examples of organized noise across prison walls, as well as examples of prison themes in U.S. popular music and culture, the U.S. national anthem can be understood as a beginning point for an American tradition of prison music.

Jimi Hendrix's guitar version of "The Star Spangled Banner" allows us to see this dimension of the American anthem. Offering a scathing and raucous rendition of the national anthem at the [1969 Woodstock Festival](#) off the heels of his song "Purple Haze," Hendrix blurred the lines between a drug-induced delirium and the reality of U.S. containment, at home and abroad. Hendrix improvised on Smith and Key's tune, allowing the notes and sounds to escape the page, and signified on the sonic and political constraints the song represented: major chords, patriotic lyrics, "American freedom." In riffing on the national anthem, Hendrix perhaps released what was being held behind these classic American "bars": the pain, the chaos, the *possibility*. Note the intervals bending from major to minor to major (harmony to disharmony and back again); the (song) structure being destroyed, re-formed, rebuilt anew; the reduction of the refrain to organized noise — sonic escapes in the forms of cries, screams, explosions. Here Hendrix's performance fits into a trajectory of U.S. prison music by retooling the U.S. national anthem as a song of *unfreedom*, or perhaps, a different kind of freedom.

<https://youtu.be/L3JbKimTdMg>

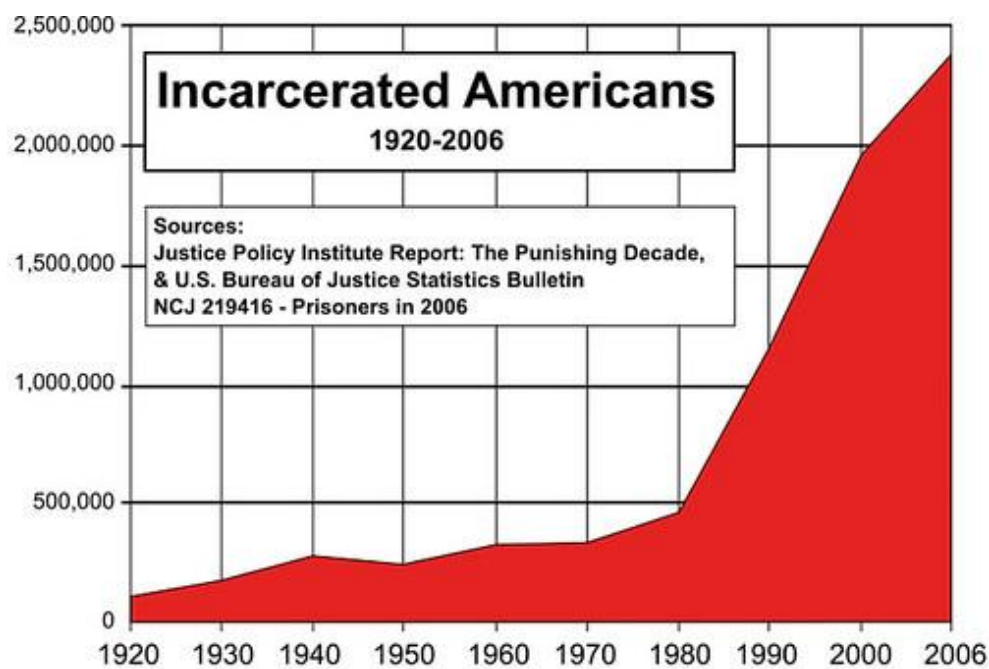
The relationship between prison and music in the United States can be heard most clearly through Black soundings of voice, tools, instruments, technology. Hendrix's music, for example, represented another transnational trajectory of prison music arriving on U.S. shores from ships in the Atlantic, the genealogy of Black music. What began as tribal African songs remixed over plantation work in slavery conditions became field hollers, gospel, chain gang songs, work songs, the blues, jazz, country, rock, hip-hop. It is here that "logics of U.S. white supremacy": slavery/capitalism, genocide/colonialism, Orientalism/war ([Andrea Smith, 2008](#)) coalesce and are rendered illogical, problematic, and questionable, simply (or not so simply) by their audibility. Take the following song, "Early in the Mornin'," sung by Black prisoners in a 1940's Mississippi work farm, as another example.



<https://youtu.be/lw6GFCupesl>

In this example of prison music, one hears sounds that confound the work that is being performed. The music makes the work illogical. It sounds like the work is not productive, at least

not for the bodies performing it. This is *destructive*, or more precisely *deconstructive*, physical and sonic work: breaking down (song) structures, bodies, minds in the process. It is a sonic protest against imprisonment, even as prison labor is being performed. This is the sound of prison music, *simultaneous containment and escape*, and helps explain why prison (music) is so popular in the United States. Prison is a necessary function of white supremacist patriarchal capitalism– a necessary warehousing of surplus (bodies) for exploitation or elimination. Prison music is a documentation of this process. Listening to, and perhaps playing, prison music is our attempt to hear ourselves survive within these dehumanizing systems.



Incarceration in the U.S., 1920-2006

Prisons are popular in the United States, and not just in music (from anthems to work songs to blues to country to rock to hip-hop, imbued with the sounds and sights of prison). It's the popularity and predominance of actual prisons, and the increasing rate of incarceration of U.S. residents, that undergirds the general public's simultaneous aversion to, and fascination with, these literal echo chambers. Prisons in the United States are hyper-inaudible/invisible, and simultaneously hyper-audible/visible. The location of U.S. prisons behind distant, opaque, and quiet walls, sits strangely against the reality of prison as an increasingly intimate, transparent, and loud source of entertainment for the general public– think [Cops](#) (23 seasons), [Law & Order](#) (20 seasons), [CSI](#) (12 seasons), and [Lockup](#) (11 seasons), below.



<https://youtu.be/y1SQvLg9uw4>

Regrettably, sounds (musical or otherwise) from those incarcerated are rarely audible above the din of the prison spectacle in popular music, culture and policy. Jacques Attali wrote, “Music is a herald, for change is inscribe in noise faster than it transforms society.... Listening to music is listening to all noise.” The question is: when prisoners make noise, will we hear their music?

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Jeb Middlebrook holds a Ph.D. in American Studies and Ethnicity from the University of Southern California, and is a Lecturer in Race, Social Movements, and Popular Culture at USC, University of Colorado–Colorado Springs, Loyola Marymount University, and [People’s University](#), an online, low-cost college for first-time and returning students. He can be reached at jeb@solidarityinstitute.org and on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

