

## Reflections on Capitalism: Insights from Modern Music

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**ABSTRACT** As with other cultural artifacts, music (apart from being a form of recreation) contains a message. Very often this message is a form of social commentary. Using this premise as a point of departure, this conceptual paper dialectically tries to assert whether modern music engages with capitalist ideology and the effect thereof on society. An understanding of how music, as social mouthpiece, engages with this issue can increase our understanding of how capitalist ideology affects people which, in turn, can shed new light on the discourse surrounding ethical conduct of business organisations within a capitalist society. The paper shows that modern music does provide critique on the capitalist ideology and even provides critique on business organisations as instruments of capitalism. This critique explores the negative, societal effects of capitalism, showing that the notions of success and prosperity come at the expense of the very society it wishes to serve.

### INTRODUCTION

It might not be very scientific or academically correct, but the impetus for this conceptual paper was derived from a song. More specifically, from Midnight Oil's 1988 release *The Dead Heart*. A very strong lyric stands out in the sedgeway before the final refrain:

*Mining companies,  
Pastoral companies,  
Uranium companies,  
Collected companies...  
Got more right than people,  
Got more say than people,  
More say than the people,  
More say than ever.*

Although those who might be familiar with this song will, quite rightly, point out that the song actually deals with the exploitation of the Aboriginal people of Australia through colonialism, the lyric quoted above is rather thought provoking, as it reflects a thinking that the business enterprises, as an embodiment of the capitalist mindset, has a vast span of influence and can determine the fate of individuals and societies.

But what has popular music got to do with our understanding of the dynamics of capitalism? At first reflection, seemingly nothing. Until one starts to interrogate the nature of music and the role it plays in our make-up as human beings. The objective of this paper is not to profess that, in music, we will be able to find answers to the social effects of the capitalist mindset. Quite the contrary. The aim of this research is to delve into music as a social artifact, a mouthpiece that reflects the thinking of the society from which it originates, and to indicate how issues concerning capitalism and its' social effects have filtered into this realm. As such, this research wishes to ascertain the views that persist in modern music on capitalism and the effect it has on society, what expectations exist and what the perceptions are concerning consequences of capitalist driven actions and decisions.

This research will rely on literature drawn from multiple perspectives, from music studies, popular music, economics, sociology and organisation theory in an effort to, through critical and dialectical engagement shed light on how music, as a societal mouthpiece, can inform and enlighten our discourse on certain burning issues within the larger realm of organisation theory.

### PEOPLE AND MUSIC

Over time, many scholars have been perplexed by the effect music has on people. Plato and Aristotle were among the first to ponder

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upon the role of music in our lives the effect it has on us as human beings (Eldred 2011). For them, music was more than mere composition and melody, it portrayed meaning. Indeed, Aristotle views music in the same light as language: a representation (in whatever form) of the sufferings of the psyche insofar as whatever matters to it (Eldred 2011). In other words, language or spoken sound (and music, for that matter) represents an action of giving outing to those things that are topical in, or that occupy, the minds of people.

Similarly, Schopenhauer viewed music as slightly different from other arts. For Schopenhauer, art represented a copy of ideas, but he viewed music differently, purporting that music represented a copy of will (Schopenhauer 1977). Furthermore, Schopenhauer is of the opinion that music is more powerful and more penetrating than the other arts, suggesting that other arts “speak only of shadows, but [music] speaks of the thing itself” (Schopenhauer 1977). Music is thus an embodiment of human emotions and feelings.

According to the Eldred (2011) two main theories pervade on the meaning of music:

- ♦ **Referentialism**, referring to meaning that lies outside the music itself. As such music becomes to mean what we want it to mean. The example of *Every Breathe You Take* by The Police (1983) comes to mind. In this song, the lyrics purport, *inter alia*:

*Oh can't you see  
You belong to me  
My poor heart aches  
With every step you take*

For the majority of people familiar with the song, *Every Breathe You Take* is a ballad, a love song expressing undying love and commitment. In its' time, it used to be played at dances as the “slow song” and newly-wed couples still use it as the opening song at their wedding receptions. However, bass player and vocalist of The Police, Sting (aka Gordon Sumner), who wrote *Every Breathe You Take* has noted that the song was actually written to be dark and twisted, that it speaks of obsession and an inability to let go after a failed relationship. He further notes, jokingly, that it is scary to think that people actually get married to that song. The referentialist perspective thus purports that music is personalized and that the original intention of the composer is not always primary when people ascribe meaning to music

- ♦ **Formalism**, which refers to music as being autonomous and thus only possessing meaning in itself (Tagg 2000). In this regard, the efforts of Band Aid at the end of 1985 with their release *Do They Know Its Christmas?* Comes to mind. From the onset, Sir Bob Geldof wanted to embark on a project to raise money for the plight of those ravished by famine in Africa. The song is a plea for people to spare a thought for those less fortunate than ourselves, and to help these people in making their lives a little better. Although one can argue that this initiative rode on the back of the popular culture industry to achieve its objectives, the argument here is not about the agenda, it is about the meaning in the music. In the case of *Do They Know Its Christmas*, there is only meaning in the music. It is clear and unambiguous; the intention of the composer cannot be implied.

Many studies on (particularly popular) music tend to take a formalist stance to analysis of music (Middleton 2000). It could be argued that where lyric is present in a piece of music it is easier to identify with formalist thinking as the lyric almost acts as an agenda for ascribing meaning. However, it would be incorrect to extrapolate meaning from one element of music only. Although lyric is a powerful inducer of meaning, it cannot (and should not) be separated from the ‘total package’ of the piece of music. Lyric, rhythm, melody and arrangement all contribute to meaning (Middleton 2000; Cloonan 2005; Vannini and Waskul 2006).

For the purpose of this probing inquiry, a formalist stance to ascribing meaning to music will be followed. Wherever a piece of music is referred to in substantiation of claims made, meaning will be drawn literally from the lyric, with due cognisance of the other elements of the composition. No meaning shall be implied from the composition, as it is felt that such an approach would be far too subjective to form the basis of any credible claims.

However, irrespective of the stance one takes concerning where meaning is derived from, the question of the emotional affinity people form with music remains an issue to be dealt with. This issue perplexes scholars and there is seemingly no clear cut, rational argument presented on the issue (Hennion 2003; Vannini and Waskul 2006). Some, such as Swiss conductor Ernest

Ansermet, purport that tonal vibrations are perceived and received by the bodies' sense organs. These vibrations are subsequently represented in consciousness as a feeling (Ansermet 1965). For Ansermet, therefore, the psychological feelings evoked by music are the result of a physiological process. Heidegger, seeking a more psychological explanation on the issue, purports that the act of producing music (music-making) produces articulated, structured sounds which are the bearers of meanings (Heidegger 1959). By meanings, Heidegger points to both experience and understanding (*verstehen und erfahrung*); which in turn leads to an [emotional] affinity with these articulated, structured sounds.

At this juncture it might be prudent to point out that the exact origin of emotional affinity ascribed to musical composition is somewhat of a moot point. The cited viewpoints of both Ansermet and Heidegger illustrate the diversity of explanations offered on the issue, but where emotional attachment with music emanates from does not lie within the scope of this discussion. The point of the matter is that it exists, and should be recognised as such. This emotional attachment the listener of music forms with a particular composition is inescapable and results in music being a very powerful and omnipresent medium.

### MUSIC AS A MOUTPIECE OF SOCIETY

Although music is an expression of the composers' feelings and emotions, it does not necessarily represent the worldview of the composer alone. If that were the case, the listener would not feel an affinity with a particular message conveyed and the only party that would feel an attachment with a particular composition would be the composer. Just as is the case with other expressive art forms, music conveys views that are representative of groups of people and, ultimately, of society itself (Hennion 2003; Green 2006; Neiger et al. 2011; Mason 2012).

The 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon of the culture industry brings a new dynamic to the notion that music (as an expressive art form) transmit pertinent messages that people identify with, thereby transforming it into a social mouthpiece (Vannini and Waskul 2006; Neiger et al. 2011). The culture industry dynamic (or popular cul-

ture, as most people know it) is one that is dichotomous by nature (Adorno 1973; Mason 2012). It witnesses a constant tension between avant-garde and mainstream, between bourgeois and non-conformist and between capitalism and counter-capitalism. These roles are not merely in constant tension, they are very often blurred and even reversed.

Art will, at some point in time (or is it at any given point in time?), produce avant-garde critique against what is perceived to be mainstream (Fiske 1989; Driscoll 2010). In this sense, "mainstream" refers to the accepted norms and behaviors of a particular society and at a specific point in time (Fiske 1989; Hennion 2003). It is also this "mainstream" thinking that becomes the feeding ground for the capitalist mechanism as it searches for commodification of cultural artifacts (Adorno 1973; Hennion 2003; Neiger et al. 2011). The avant-garde critique that now emerges in protest to the mainstream, capitalist mass-consumerism is representative of issues the mainstream, bourgeois discourse cannot provide answers for (Goldman 1995; Hennion 2003). This reminds strongly of the origins of a Kuhnian paradigm shift (Kuhn 1970). As the anti-establishment critique grows over time, it gains momentum and support from a wider audience.

Eventually, even the establishment, represented by the capitalist culture industry, adopts the avant-garde. Big business pumps a lot of money into it and through the mechanism of the culture industry, the avant-garde eventually gets assimilated (and to an extent, even vulgarized) by the establishment. Reflect for a moment on the following lyric by A-ha from their 2000 release, *The Company Man*:

*Andy was the company man  
Responsible for signing the band  
Songs came out of our mouths  
And into his hands*

*Legal help...yes we had plenty  
Bank accounts are easy to empty  
Everybody's trying to help  
Everyone is so friendly*

*And we all fall down  
Don't make a sound as we hit the ground...  
Yes, we all fall down  
Don't make a sound as we hit the ground...*

*Give us something easy to sing to  
Give us something simple to cling to  
Something we can all understand  
Said the company man*

It is quite obvious that *The Company Man* is lashing out at the mechanics of the culture industry. The second verse cited above is indicative of riding the crest of the wave, that acts have all the backing big business can give them when they are selling albums and generating money (Goldman 1995; Neiger et al. 2011). However, the refrain (And we all fall down, etc.) acts as a sinister reminder that musical acts in the pop industry come and go, and when they are no longer popular, they just fade away into obscurity.

The third verse of *The Company Man* attests to the superfluous nature of the pop culture industry. In this regard, simplicity sells. The culture industry needs to give the audience something they can easily relate to; as the lyric says, something they can all understand (Cloonan 2005; Neiger et al. 2011).

Following from this, then, what becomes of the anti-establishment avant-garde message once it becomes assimilated into the mainstream? If a Kuhnian view is adopted, one would equate this to a paradigm shift in which the mainstream is usurped and replaced by that which rose in critique against it in the first place (Kuhn 1970). But is that necessarily the case with popular culture? Granted, norms, tastes and preferences do change over time, but that does not necessarily mean that what was popular is now rejected and replaced by something new. One could conceivably have a scenario where the freshly assimilated avant-garde co-exists with other worldviews in an ever expanding mainstream. If this were not possible, why does one find different genres of film, literature and music? Does jazz not co-exist with metal? They certainly both assert shelf space in music stores. Berger (1992) states on this matter:

*The very essence of popular culture is the ability to provide its' audience with a sense of the familiar, while at the same time also infusing this with enough variety to ensure continued interest.*

However, the agenda of the avant-garde gets manipulated, vulgarized and watered down by the culture industry machine once assimilated (Brackett 2000). Whereas unconventional expression in cultural artifacts creates a new discourse on topical issues that perplex society (Whiteley 2000; Williams 2001), assimilation into

the mainstream implies a shift away from the controversial and the confrontational to a more conformist agenda (Adorno 1975; Adorno 1982; Driscoll 2010; Neiger et al. 2011).

Thus, when an emergent avant-garde style gets capitalist backing, the confrontational 'edge' is removed. The controversial messages contained therein are toned down and they, once again, become something simple to cling to. In the realm of the culture industry, there is not much room for critique against the establishment. This remains the realm of the avant-garde. In practice, therefore, music, as a cultural artifact, gives the audience what it wants and it dares not bite the hand that feeds it. Therefore, the establishment is not criticized, or if it is, it is done in such a way that only the most enlightened will recognize it (Hawkins 2000).

This could provide an explanation why the overwhelming majority of music deals with love, happiness and joy. For Karl Marx, religion was the opium of the masses (Marx 1843). But Marx's era was one before the advent of mass consumerism. Had Marx lived today, he might have agreed that popular culture is the cocaine of the masses. It is consumed in large quantities, creating an insatiable appetite for even greater quantities (Fiske 1989; Williams 2001).

The greater audience is not aware of (or not attuned to) the burning issues conveyed in a lot of music because this discourse lies outside the mainstream mechanisms of the culture industry and, as such, do not have a wide audience. However, this does not mean that social expression and social commentary does not exist in music (Cloonan 2005; Leard and Lashua 2006). It does, but one just has to search widely to find evidence thereof.

This discussion does not aim to try and ascertain where particular messages originate from in music, nor is implying that messages in music represent a false reality through the intervention of the pop-culture mechanism. However, the constant tension between the avant-garde and the capitalist establishment does compound the issue when one refers to music as a medium that is reflective of the discourse within society. One merely has to dig deeper than the surface to uncover these issues.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE CAPITALIST SOCIETY

Evidence of opinions on how the capitalist mindset effects society can be found in modern

music. However, it is not a theme that is widely encountered, as the pop-culture machine might find it exceedingly difficult to sell. It must be mentioned that this evidence forthcoming from modern music on the influence of capitalism on society is relatively genre specific. After scrutinizing in the region of 5000 songs over a four year period, no evidence was found in the genres of mainstream pop, rave/dance, jazz, folk or hip-hop. The genres that did provide evidence of the object of investigation was found in the musical genres of rock and alternative, although this should not be deemed an absolute indicator. Furthermore, the evidence found in the music do not emanate from tracks that received much radio play either. The pertinent messages are contained in so-called “album tracks”, those not earmarked (in most instances by the music companies) as the “hits”.

The following discussion will focus on evidence of the object under investigation encountered in eight modern songs. The discussion will commence from a broad perspective and look at commentary on the capitalist society. The discussion will then narrow down to commentary on the business organisation (as an embodiment of the capitalist mindset) in particular. As stated previously, only explicit evidence of the object under investigation is included here. One can find numerous other cases where this commentary is masked or implied. However, it was felt that for a dialectical approach, one should rather stay clear of what is implied and work with what is explicit as, as Heidegger so adamantly reminds us that language is all we have to work with (Solomon 2009), in this case, lyric is all we have to work with.

A suitable point of departure for this discussion is *Synchronicity II* written in 1983 by The Police. Consider the following extract from the lyric of the song:

*Another industrial ugly morning  
The factory belches filth into the sky  
He walks unhindered through the picket  
lines today  
He doesn't think to wonder why  
The secretaries pout and preen like cheap  
tarts in a red light street  
But all he ever thinks to do is watch  
And every so called meeting with his so  
called superior  
Is a humiliating kick in the crotch  
Many miles away*

*Something crawls to the surface  
Of a dark Scottish loch*

*Another working day has ended  
Only the rush hour hell to face  
Packed like lemmings into shiny metal  
boxes  
Contestants in a suicidal race  
Daddy grips the wheel and stares alone into  
the distance  
He knows that something somewhere has to  
break  
He sees the family home now looming in his  
headlights  
The pain upstairs that makes his eyeballs  
ache  
Many miles away  
There's a shadow on the door  
Of a cottage on the shore  
Of a dark Scottish lake*

*Synchronicity II* speaks of monotony of the working class existence, an existence that is basically dictated to by the individuals' employer. At closer scrutiny, *Synchronicity II* contains a very repetitive, almost irritating, guitar arrangement behind the vocals that only employs two chords, thereby complementing the feeling of monotony portrayed in the lyric. Furthermore, the lyrics suggest that corporations have stripped people of a sense of purpose and have basically reduced them to cogs in a mechanism.

*Synchronicity II* adds a sinister twist at the end of each verse with the reference to the “thing” crawling out of the Scottish loch and seemingly making its way to the cottage. At first glance this lyric seems totally out of place, but is it? Maybe it is the person referred to in the song (“he”) that is reaching the end of his tether, that this tedious, almost purposeless existence is causing a dark part of this person's psyche to well up to breaking point.

Some years before *Synchronicity II*, John Lennon, with his 1971 release *Working Class Hero*, takes a broader, societal view on the dictum of western civilization, when he angrily expresses:

*When they've tortured and scared you for  
twenty odd years  
Then they expect you to pick a career  
When you can't really function you're so  
full of fear  
A working class hero is something to be  
A working class hero is something to be*

*Keep you doped with religion and sex and TV  
And you think you're so clever and class  
less and free  
But you're still fucking peasants as far as I  
can see  
A working class hero is something to be  
A working class hero is something to be*

*There's room at the top they are telling you  
still  
But first you must learn how to smile as you  
kill*

*If you want to be like the folks on the hill  
A working class hero is something to be  
A working class hero is something to be*

It is well known that John Lennon was a critic of most spheres of Western society and that he felt quite strongly about the universality that had encroached upon people in the modern era. So, for Lennon, *Working Class Hero* criticises society at large and the effect it has on the individual; the universal maxims of the media, education, religion and vocational success are all criticised by Lennon as stripping people of real meaning in life; as the sarcastic repetition at the end of each verse (A working class hero is something to be) clearly reminds us.

The last cited verse of *Working Class Hero* above is particularly interesting as it speaks to society's expectation that we as individuals need to stand out from the crowd, to be all we can be. For Lennon this goes hand in hand with being 'destroying the competition' as it were, that it is something society expects as to aspire to at all cost. The notion of defeating the competition is, of course, deeply entrenched in capitalist society, as the only way to prosperity is to outperform the competition.

*Working Class Hero* is, however, not the only example of modern music bearing testament to the notion of 'beating the competition'. Consider the following lyrics from Bruce Springsteen's *Man At The Top*:

**Translation in progress. Please wait...**

*Here comes a fireman, here comes a cop  
Here comes a wrench, here comes a car hop  
Been going on forever, it ain't ever gonna  
stop  
Everybody wants to be the man at the top  
Everybody wants to be the man at the top*

*Everybody wants to be the man at the top  
Aim your gun, son, and shoot your shot  
Everybody wants to be the man at the top*

*Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief  
Doctor, lawyer, Indian chief  
One thing in common they all got  
Everybody wants to be the man at the top*

*Man at the top says it's lonely up there  
If it is man, I don't care  
From the big white house to the parking lot  
Everybody wants to be the man at the top*

*Here comes a banker, here comes a busi-  
nessman  
Here comes a kid with a guitar in his hand  
Dreaming of his record in number-one spot  
Everybody wants to be the man at the top*

*Man At The Top*, as the title suggests, reflects the dog-eat-dog nature of western, capitalist society in the same way *Working Class Hero* does, although Springsteen seems to address the issue somewhat more subtly than John Lennon does.

Alphaville's *To Germany With Love* (released in 1984) also presents a picture of the western, capitalist condition to rise above the rest. However, in this instance it is coupled with the awakening of a new Germany after World War II:

*I am an émigré, I write to Germany  
In foreign words, a tongue of actuality  
Coated in grey gloves, to Germany with love  
A war between the wars, to Germany with  
love*

*I am an émigré, I write to Germany  
In foreign words, a tongue of actuality  
Coated in grey gloves...to Germany with  
love  
A war between the wars, a war between the  
wars*

*Triumph over by-gone sorrow can in unity  
be won  
Let them all pursue this purpose 'till reality  
is gone  
I am an unexpected spy... from the outside of  
my eye  
Translate it first then comprehend  
I'm here indeed but there I stand...*

*I write to Germany, I write to Germany  
To Germany with love... Germany with love*

*This is the turn of colours, all real but still  
unseen  
There is no more decision 'cause there's too  
much in between  
Let us build a nightmare-nation, learn and  
work as never yet  
That this cold new generation faith in it's  
own fears beget*

*Here comes the modern rat, here comes the  
terror-squad  
Ours is the salt of wisdom, here we come all  
dressed in black  
Form the ruins risen slowly,,, to the future  
turned we stand  
Flourish in the blessing glory, flourish Ger  
man fatherland...*

*I write to Germany, I write to Germany  
To Germany with love... Germany with love  
All quiet in Germany, all quiet in Germany  
To Germany With Love* is clearly a call for  
German unity (remember, the song was written  
in 1984, five years before the fall of the Berlin  
Wall). However, the lyric (from verse 3)

*Let them all pursue this purpose 'till reality  
is gone  
acts as warning that this telos of unifica  
tion could come at a price.*

In the fourth and fifth verses, Alphaville paint a bleak picture of the rise of (West) Germany as an industrial force after World War II. Interestingly, they refer to the modern (1980's) generation as nightmarish, like rats, cold... One could ask the question how this differs from the conception of the "older" generation prevalent during the reign of the Nazi regime? This lyric is dark and conjures up images of a generation devoid of emotion; slaving away to build an economically strong nation, but losing their identity in the process. The melody and instrumental arrangement backs the lyric up perfectly, the melody takes on an eerie, almost ghostly quality. The arrangement has an industrial feel to it and at times sounds almost like a military march.

Although Alphaville are commenting on (West) Germany as a whole, the massification of a new German identity can be interpreted as an effect of building an industrialised nation, and that the "cold new generation", the "modern rat"

is a product of their own doing, a product of industrialisation, brought about by this unwavering ambition to rise up beyond mediocrity, especially in the wake of the devastation of World War II which, for Germans of the 1980's, is not even two generations removed.

Commentary from modern music also extends to the nature of business and the corporation as a mechanism of the capitalist system. Consider *Everything Counts*, by Depeche Mode, released in 1983:

*The handshake seals the contract  
From the contract there's no turning back  
The turning point of a career  
In Korea, being insincere  
The holiday was fun packed  
The contract still intact*

*The grabbing hands grab all they can  
All for themselves after all  
The grabbing hands grab all they can  
All for themselves after all  
It's a competitive world  
Everything counts in large amounts*

*The graph on the wall  
Tells the story of it all  
Picture it now, see just how  
The lies and deceit gained a little more  
power  
Confidence taken in  
By a sun tan and a grin*

*The grabbing hands grab all they can  
All for themselves after all  
The grabbing hands grab all they can  
All for themselves after all  
It's a competitive world  
Everything counts in large amounts*

*Everything Counts*, at first hearing, sounds like an up-beat 'chirpy' type of song. This is in strong contrast to the lyric. Maybe this irony was the composers' intention. The lyric itself also masks an irony, between the good times dealmakers/businessmen are having (the holiday..., suntan and a grin...) as their business dealings bear dividends, and the deceit and treachery that takes place in the name of business. One can't help but to think of the case of Enron when listening to this song! *Everything Counts* reminds us of the notion that many success stories in business ride on the back of winning at all cost, of unethical and unscrupulous

business practices, that many dubious acts are justified by business organisations in the name of doing business.

In *We Work The Black Seem* by Sting, released in 1985, the following excerpt is particularly prominent:

*This place has changed for good  
Your economic theory said it would  
Its hard for us to understand  
We cant give up our jobs the way we should  
Our blood has stained the coal  
We tunneled deep inside the nations soul  
We matter more than pounds and pence  
Your economic theory makes no sense*

*One day in a nuclear age  
They may understand our rage  
They build machines that they cant control  
And bury the waste in a great big hole  
Power was to become cheap and clean  
Grimy faces were never seen  
But deadly for twelve thousand years is  
carbon fourteen  
We work the black seam together*

In this song, it is evident that coal miners are being retrenched as fossil-fuel power plants make way for more efficient nuclear power plants. The sentiment here is one of frustration, as much toward the system as toward the employer. It bears testament to the fact that, at the end of the day, the worker is reduced to nothing more than a number, a commodity who's fate is determined by impersonal business decisions

In *We Work the Black Seem*, Sting contests, here, that people are essentially being marginalised by corporations' strive to pursue lower costs and greater profit margins against the backdrop of ever dwindling resources. Much the same sentiment is encountered in *Blue Sky Mine* by Midnight Oil (1990). Consider the following extract from the lyric:

*But if I work all day at the blue sky mine  
(there'll be food on the table tonight)  
Still I walk up and down on the blue sky  
mine  
(there'll be pay in your pocket tonight)*

*The candy store paupers lie to the share  
holders  
They're crossing their fingers, they pay the  
truth makers  
The balance sheet is breaking up the sky  
So I'm caught at the junction still waiting  
for medicine*

*The sweat of my brow keeps on feeding the  
engine  
Hope the crumbs in my pocket can keep me  
for another night  
And if the blue sky mining company won't  
come to my rescue  
If the sugar refining company won't save me  
Who's gonna save me?*

Midnight Oil are very direct in their stance that corporations become fat and rich on the collective endeavors of their employees, but do little to recognise or reward these efforts, which has a dehumanising effect on the individual employee. The individual worker is at the mercy of the business organisation, not only for mere survival, but also for higher-order needs such as self-esteem needs. One gets the feeling that the person in *Blue Sky Mine* is powerless and entrapped by the employer, almost to the point of desperation, as the last three lines of the quoted lyric attest to.

However, the most poignant evidence found was that provided in *Factory* by Bruce Springsteen. The melody is somber and slow, reflecting the melancholy lyric:

*Early in the morning factory whistle blows,  
Man rises from bed and puts on his clothes,  
Man takes his lunch, walks out in the  
morning light,  
It's the working, the working, just the  
working life.*

*Through the mansions of fear, through the  
mansions of pain,  
I see my daddy walking through them  
factory gates in the rain,  
Factory takes his hearing, factory gives him  
life,  
The working, the working, just the working  
life.*

*End of the day factory whistle cries,  
Men walk through these gates with death  
in their eyes,  
And you just better believe boy,  
somebody's gonna get hurt tonight,  
It's the working, the working, just the  
working life.*

*Factory* reflects an element encountered in *Synchronicity II*, that of 'something's got to give' at some point as the working life – which is dictated by the business organisation – becomes increasingly more burdening and demands more



and more of people. In *Synchronicity II*, however, aspect of working life was merely mentioned, but in *Factory* it becomes a central theme of the song. *Factory* purports that the business organisation does not merely have an effect on its' employees, but also effects those people in the employees social sphere.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EPISTOME OF BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

At the end of the day, one has to ascertain what these opinions about a capitalist society emerging from modern music mean for the study of business management. More specifically, what does all of this equate to when one is reflects on what constitutes truthful knowledge as far as our understanding of management is concerned?

To address the issues raised above, it might be prudent to summarise the most salient points of the preceding discussion. *Synchronicity II* and *Factory* both conjured up images of the monotony and routine nature of work life. Both of them also suggest that this routine monotony leads to frustration and anger. This spills over into peoples' personal lives and milieu, suggesting that the span of influence of the modern business organisation extends into the home and social sphere of employees.

*Working Class Hero*, *To Germany With Love*, and *Man At The Top* all attest to an obsession with rising above the rest, to escape mediocrity. This obsession forms part of the capitalist mindset, as the basic premise of capitalism is one of achieving gains through thrift. However, as these three songs warn, there is a downside to this obsession. *Man At The Top* mentions that rising above the crowd is often an unscrupulous desire and that once this has been achieved, the only way is back down. This reminds strongly of the message portrayed in Depeche Modes' 1981 release *Get The Balance Right*. One particularly striking verse in the song professes:

*When you reach the top  
Get ready to drop  
Prepare yourself for the fall  
You're going to fall  
It's almost predictable*

*Working Class Hero* suggests that conforming to the expectations of the capitalist/western norm implies a loss of identity and actually means fading into obscurity rather than leaving a legacy, making whole ideology dichotomous, and in

the eyes of the composer, almost laughable. *To Germany With Love* also addresses the issue of striving to be the best and beating the competition at all cost, albeit more applicable to the rise of Germany after the Second World War. For Alphaville, this obsession with rising above the mediocre has been accompanied by a loss of identity and a cold, almost relentless demeanor.

*Everything Counts* attests to a deceitful side of business, that many wrong-doings are committed, and justified, in the name of conducting business. *Blue Sky Mine* and *We Work the Black Seam* both convey the message of helplessness and desperation felt by employees as they feel almost held at ransom by organized business, as if their fate lies in the hands of the capitalist employers.

Neiger et al. (2011) remind us that music is a social product and as such it is important to understand the power relations between different sectors in society. This paper attests to the notion that business organisations, as the embodiment of western capitalism, seem to possess the power over the ordinary 'man in the street'. Thus, the messages encountered in modern music concerning the impact capitalist orientated business organisations on society is overwhelmingly negative and at times even scathing. Organised business is viewed skeptically, fixated on achieving profit maximization without considering the effects on staff and society in general.

The commentary forthcoming from modern music reaffirms the seemingly incongruent nature of stakeholder demands. Whereas the shareholder demands increased bottom line earnings, the employee demands job security, a safe and secure working environment, good benefits and fair compensation. It is a product of our thinking about business organisations that we perceive these demands as opposing and incongruous. Maybe the message forthcoming from modern music is that we need to rethink what the business organisation is and how it functions within society. If we can conceive a state where the primary concern of the business is for the welfare of society, as opposed to the welfare of shareholders alone, many of the negative perceptions of business and its treatment of staff and society can be addressed.

Furthermore, the commentary forthcoming from music sheds light on how those affected by the capitalist system (and by business or-

ganisations as products of this system) perceive the system. The negative perception portrayed is something that especially business organisations and management scholars should pay attention to. Business Management as an academic discipline is often fixated on the aspirational, with what should be done to achieve results. Often the harsh reality of the situation, that which currently is, is overlooked. Maybe the message we need to take home from modern music is that our study (and practice) of organisation theory needs to be less aspirational and concern itself more with realist thinking.

It can be argued that the music referred to in this paper represents but a few songs which have not been disseminated widely (for example, *Man At The Top* does not appear on any Springsteen album, and has only been performed in front of an audience twice). Furthermore, the music that has been engaged with in this paper are all products of the 1970's and 1980's, an era before terms such as Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate Citizenship, Business Ethics, Triple Bottom Line and Sustainability become boardroom catch phrases and hot topics at academic conferences. Although these arguments have merit, the mere fact that these issues are engaged with in music bears testament to the fact that it forms part of the societal discourse on burning issues. Also, although the music interrogated here originated from the 1970's and 1980's, this does not mean that music from other era's do not deal with the issues. Indeed many songs by acts such as Linkin Park, Rammstein, U2, Coldplay, The Verve and others from the 1990's and 2000's contain messages where the reference to the object of investigation of this paper is implied. However, as stated previously, this paper is only concerned with explicit messages that deal with the object of investigation.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Music is a form of social commentary which is at times more explicit and direct than others. Often the message stares us in the face and at other times we have to read between the lines. This paper has tried to illustrate that music as social mouthpiece does reflect on the capitalist society (and the business organisation as a product thereof) and the effect it has had on society, albeit rather sparsely. Although the commentary is not always kind, it does give us some-

thing to consider in terms of what the study of business and management against the backdrop of capitalism is all about. To strive for a better understanding of the business organisation as an object of investigation, we need to search far wider than just business and management text, we need to incorporate insights from other disciplines to reach total illumination, however far removed it might seem on the surface.

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