

FOURTEEN



“MUSIC IS LIBERATION” THE BRASS LIBERATION ORCHESTRA AND DIRECT ACTION

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“DIRECT ACTION IS ACTING AS if you’re already free.” A poster with these words hung in downtown Oakland’s Unite Here union building, where the Brass Liberation Orchestra (BLO) used to hold weekly rehearsals across from the main city plaza, lovingly remembered by local activist communities as the site of Occupy Oakland in 2011. The BLO is a political brass band with a range of active participants from generally ten to twenty-five. The band was founded in 2002 to support leftist cultures in the San Francisco Bay Area. Sarah Norr, a former BLO drummer and union organizer with Unite Here (a national union that organizes hospitality workers), coordinated the band’s use of the building. Norr is one of many BLO activists, professional and otherwise, who help the BLO network with leftist organizations and further the pursuit of its mission to use music to sustain and support direct actions, marches, and social justice organizations.¹

In a *San Francisco Chronicle* article on the BLO, Megan Swoboda, former BLO trumpet player and comanager of the direct action training nonprofit Ruckus Society, claimed, “We’re a political organization; we’re not [just] a band. . . . I see the Brass Liberation Orchestra as our own direct action affinity group that focuses on using music as a tactical action element” (Kuperberg 2013). As a “direct action affinity group,” the BLO works both autonomously as a band and together with many other action organizers in collective pursuit of common political goals, and it offers a range of creative interventions to activists and organizers. Since its inception, the band has participated in numerous major national and local campaigns, including antiwar, anti–corporate globalization, immigrant rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, antigentrification, Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and antifascist movements, among others.

In my conversations with participants in the Bay Area's activist communities, the band's presence at direct actions throughout the region has often been noted as a tangible contribution to social justice movements. In this chapter, I examine some of the ways that the BLO deploys music as a strategy of direct action. I explore two BLO direct actions in the LGBTQIA+ rights and Occupy movements to show how both presentational and participatory music making (Turino 2008) are used as effective action strategies. I refer to the process of "acting as if you're already free" as *the performance of freedom*, which I define as an affective strategy of protest and revolution. Through this performative lens, I consider the BLO both *in* and *as* direct action. I show that the BLO's actions serve as representative models of increasingly transnational forms of global protest cultures that use instrumental music to materially transform protest settings.

A GLOBALIZING NETWORK OF MUSIC AND ACTIVISM

I came to the BLO through engagement with the Bay Area Occupy Movement in late 2011. The group had been keeping the beat at the numerous protests, marches, and other actions of what became known as "American Fall" in solidarity with the Arab Spring. I became an active member on trumpet, leading, composing, improvising, arranging, and participating musically in at least one action per week until embarking on dissertation fieldwork in 2014, and I have remained a less active member until I left the Bay Area in 2020. My involvement with the BLO quickly introduced me to a larger transnational network of political brass bands that has grown increasingly connected in the United States, Europe, and Latin America in the past twenty years or so. This network has quickly consolidated since the founding of the HONK! Festival of Activist Street Bands in 2006 in Boston as the HONK! movement.

HONK! represents a network of brass bands with histories of participation in protest as far back as the 1960s, with roots in Vermont's Bread and Puppet Theater, which used brass bands in the Vietnam War protests. Part of the festival's original intent was to forge a space for connecting and networking for bands that defined themselves in some way as political. Many bands that have come to frequent the HONK! network do define themselves as explicitly political, but the festival's activist label has long been a subject of controversy as it is also a countercultural affair with limited activist manifestations. Subsequent versions of the HONK! Festival spread first to other cities in the United States—Seattle and Austin, among others—before later sprouting up in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, and the UK, with a current total of twenty-two HONK! festivals around the globe. In the face of the pandemic

in 2020, the HONK! festivals held a HONK!United virtual festival, which showcased activist bands around the globe and further increased the growing self-consciousness of the movement as such.²

The BLO has been at the heart of the HONK! movement since its inception. Organizers of the original Boston HONK! have recounted to me that they knew the first edition of the festival would be successful once they had secured the BLO's participation, making the festival more than a regional northeastern affair. The band was founded by two sisters, Jamie and Alli Spector, who had been inspired by their experience with radical Italian brass bands that have since networked with American HONK! bands. An important American predecessor, of which early BLO members soon became aware, was Seattle's Infernal Noise Brigade, founded in 1999 to support the militant disruption of the World Trade Organization's meeting and combat corporate globalization (Whitney 2003). As the BLO's activities grew precipitously to support the anti-Iraq War protests in 2002, the group likewise inspired new bands, such as its “sister band,” New York's Rude Mechanical Orchestra (RMO). The RMO's first major “gig” at the Republican National Convention in 2004 resulted in arrests of many musicians, including BLO musicians who had come to play in solidarity. The BLO has freely shared online its diverse repertoire—including New Orleans, Balkan, Latin American, Afrobeat music, and much more—helping promote an unofficial standard repertoire for HONK! festivals as many brass bands around the world have adapted BLO's arrangements.³

This is all to say that the BLO has been in active conversation for two decades with these and other bands from around the world who have appeared at HONK! festivals about the strategic effectiveness of instrumental music in social movements. Though this chapter focuses on the BLO's actions in its local Bay Area setting, my argument that the BLO's tactics reflect emergent translocal strategies of musical and political engagement should be understood in the context of the global connections I have briefly traced here. This musical networking correlates to the increasing translocalism of contemporary leftist activism (Castells 2012), and the BLO's actions reverberate far beyond their local settings. Indeed, Amelia Mason (2017) asserts that “the giant musical block party that is HONK! is a celebration of what is probably the most vibrant incarnation of the protest music tradition in America today.”

DIRECT ACTION AND PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS

Movement organizers generally speak of the tactics of protest and direct action in relation to the achievement of a particular goal. For the BLO too, music is a goal-oriented activity—in some of the actions I have performed in, participants

credited the BLO with “making” the action, that is, with determining its success. How can music be evaluated as successful, not in terms of popularity or aesthetic excellence, but in its capacity to affect tangible change in the act of protest?

While many studies have examined music in social movements, these are generally limited to analyzing lyrics, music industries, style, or the political work of musicians (for example, Rosenthal and Flacks 2011; Roy 2010; Eyerman and Jamison 1998). Lyrics especially are often studied as a window for understanding what Eyerman and Jamison (1998) call the “cognitive praxis” of a social movement, or how music diffuses interpretive frames and ideas to incite participation in social movements. These are essentially semiotic approaches; relatively little work has been done to understand how music is used as part of a direct action strategy and even less regarding how instrumental music expresses politics and interacts with protest and direct action, with exceptions (for example, Snyder 2020; Abe 2018; Manabe 2015; McKay 2007). In contrast to protest music based on critical lyrics, HONK! festival organizer Reebee Garofalo suggests that “we might think of HONK! bands as the ground game of progressive music” (forthcoming). Recent work in sound studies focusing on the transformative capacities of sound can lead us to more affective methods of interpreting musical activism.

When instrumental musicians use music strategically to achieve an explicit political change and confront hegemonic power to do so, they engage in what I call *instrumental protest*. I use this term not only to call attention to the particular musical efficacies of instrumental ensembles but also to evaluate their instrumentality in activating and pushing forward political struggles. Instrumental musicians deploy their musical and expressive repertoires to be effective in political struggles. Social movement scholar Charles Tilly (2010) has used the term *repertoire of contention* to refer to a given set of protest tools available to social movement actors. But despite the musical resonance of the term *repertoire*, the musical choices of protesters have rarely been interpreted as repertoires of contention. Here, I expand on Tilly’s concept by examining the strategic musical choices of the BLO, what I call the band’s *musical repertoires of contention* (see also Snyder 2020).

The term *direct action* commonly refers to political action that goes beyond sanctioned political processes to change policy, such as approved marches, electoral campaigns, and petitions of elected officials. It usually refers to non-violent or violent protest actions in which protesters defy legal restrictions and take matters into their own hands. Examples include sit-ins, workplace occupations, property destruction, and putting one’s body on the line, sometimes with the risk of great bodily harm. Even if an action’s goal is to petition a target with

the power of addressing demands, the mode of the action is “free” and direct if unmediated and undetermined by sanctioned channels of the political process. The popular guide *Organizing for Social Change* defines direct action as when “The people directly affected by the problem take action to solve it” in ways that alter power relationships and give them a sense of their own power defined on their own terms (Bobo 2003, 11). While members of the BLO are not always directly affected by the problem of a given action, the group acts as an affinity group to organizers and communities that plan such actions, and members let themselves be instruments for diverse social movements.

The BLO’s reluctance to support political campaigns of any kind, for example, is indicative of the band’s rejection of the mediated forum of electoral politics, which it believes involves a negotiation with status quo interests beyond redemption, at least as far as their project is concerned. BLO members themselves do not necessarily reject strategic participation in electoral politics or other conventional vehicles of political transformation, though some do. The BLO, as a band, can be understood as anarchist in its dismissal of working within institutional channels, which presumes a concession of freedom to the state. In his book *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (2009), on the global anarchist movements that emerged at the turn of the millennium and certainly influenced the BLO, David Graeber echoes Unite Here’s poster mentioned previously in his definition of the term: “Direct action is the insistence, when faced with structures of unjust authority, on acting as if one is already free” (203). Further distinguishing protest from direct action, for Graeber, “Protest is like begging the powers that be to dig a well. Direct action is digging the well and daring them to stop you” (Trey 2014). Similarly, Bernard Harcourt (2013) notes that the politics of Occupy and other recent movements that have been influenced by contemporary anarchist thinking have promoted “political disobedience,” as opposed to civil disobedience: “Civil disobedience aims not to displace the lawmaking institutions or the structure of legal governance, but rather to change the existing laws by demonstrating their injustice. Political disobedience, by contrast, resists the very way in which we are governed. It resists the structure of partisan politics, the demand for policy reforms, the call for party identification” (47). Linking this rejection of sanctioned channels of political expression to movement, performance, and freedom, André Lepecki suggests that direct action protesters embrace “choreopolitics,” which invites “a redistribution and reinvention of bodies, affects, and senses through which one may learn how to move politically, how to invent, activate, seek, or experiment with a movement whose only sense (meaning and direction) is the experimental exercise of freedom” (2013, 20; quoted in Silverstein 2019, 4).

Building on these insights, I understand direct action to be a performance that actively counters hegemonic power by acting on the premise that the state has no legitimate authority to determine the mode of dissent.

Direct action is not only resistance, however; it also performatively offers positive, constructive alternatives through its enactment. Graeber writes that, ideally, direct action is “a way of actively engaging with the world to bring about change, in which the form of the action—or at least the organization of the action—is itself a model for the change one wishes to bring about” (2009, 206). For example, “the direct actionist does not just refuse to pay taxes to support a militarized school system, she combines with others to try to create a new school system” (203). In this sense, direct action is a form of “prefigurative politics,” in which the action is a performative manifestation of new social and political relations as well as an explicit and targeted petitioning of power. The performance of freedom is not only the freedom *to* enact change on one’s own terms but also freedom *from* conventional social and political relations that would inhibit such action. Building on Judith Butler’s (2015) insight that action is performative and enacts new realities, I consider direct action to be the performative enactment of utopia (Dolan 2001), in which freedom from the state is experienced, if only temporarily, and can thereby be imagined and worked toward more completely.

For the BLO, the idea that musically supported direct action is tied in with an experience of freedom is clear from the very first point of unity in its mission statement: “Music is liberation.” Indeed, instrumental music has a particular role to play in and as direct action, not in telling a story about injustice as much protest music does, but in working to directly enact utopia.

THE BLO AS DIRECT ACTION

The BLO’s political values are operative not only in *what* the group supports but in *how* it operates and organizes itself. In a radio show made about the BLO and other political brass bands, “Marching for Change,” the narrator suggests, “The BLO is itself a political project. What they play, how and when they play it, and how the group operates: it’s all based on their desire for social justice” (Making Contact 2010).

The BLO’s mission statement, written at the beginning of the group’s formation and posted on its website, reveals the self-consciousness of its pursuits as a political project: “The Brass Liberation Orchestra makes loud on the streets to inspire, instigate, agitate, mourn, celebrate, and communicate. We stand in solidarity with groups and movements who are working for a more just and

equitable world. We are a work in progress. We work to build a multigender/multiracial/multigenerational group that enhances and strengthens the culture of the Left” (Brass Liberation Orchestra 2013). The band organizes itself around five points of unity, published on the group’s website and used to present a coherent political platform for members, prospective members, and political organizations interested in collaborating. Since they are crucial for understanding the band’s project, I quote them in full:

1. Music is liberation: Culture is a celebration of life and human creativity. We use music as a response to oppressive society, to sustain and build our movements, and as expression of the world that we want to live in. BLO is a group of musicians (of all levels) and cultural workers who use culture to support causes of a broadly left nature.
2. Racial and social justice: We work to challenge and eliminate all forms of domination (racism, class oppression, sexism, hetero-sexism, ageism, ableism, etc.) both within our group and within the broader society. We pay particular attention to racism and White supremacy as we see these forms of oppression as a primary obstacle to building the just society that we all want to live in.
3. Diversity of political strategies: We agree that we will work together, making political art to contribute to leftist struggles without promoting any ideological tendency on the Left over another. We work in the spirit of left unity to overcome the fragmentation of the Left in the United States.
4. Respect for culture: We work for a society that respects all cultures and work to promote cross-cultural understanding, social justice, and human solidarity. We attempt to do this in a manner that avoids exploitation, stealing or ignorance of the world’s cultures.
5. Respect for the earth: We work to reverse the trend of domination and misuse of the world’s natural resources. Many of us are against capitalism because the destruction of the world’s environment has reached the level of ecocide. (Ibid.)

Notwithstanding the often-overlooked fact that music can be just as much a vehicle for domination and division as for freedom and unity, the BLO’s declaration that “music is liberation” expresses the belief that music is spiritually and politically emancipatory and embodies what I am calling the “performance of freedom.” For this band, music provides a vehicle for political disobedience to oppressive regimes and helps musicians and protesters performatively act as though they are already free, hence allowing them to become more free. Animated by these goals, the BLO aims to operate differently from conventional

bands and provide a resource and example to others. Bands formed afterward credit the BLO with inspiring its internal organization as well as what I call its musical repertoires of contention.

While the BLO's membership is diverse in terms of occupation—it counts union organizers, professors, the unemployed, students, activists, artists, tech workers, and teachers among its members—the group is majority White, its most active members are generally between the ages of twenty-five and forty, and membership generally shows a majority from relatively privileged backgrounds. The band addresses structural inequalities within the group by trying to maintain roughly equal gender balance and diversity in participation levels and leadership roles—important, if not entirely met, goals. Good faith attempts to broaden membership to include people of color, women, working class, and queer-identifying musicians have had varying success throughout the group's history, and the band has become notably more diverse in all respects in the decade I have been a part of it. The BLO actively rotates responsibilities—such as conducting, tactical organization, and rehearsal facilitation—in order to inhibit the solidification of firm roles and the emergence of hierarchy, though, in practice, differences in expertise and experience means members tend to maintain many roles.

The group operates as an ostensibly leaderless, horizontal collective, making decisions through a consensus model in which any proposal can be blocked by a single member. While I have seen the consensus method produce tension among members, my experience with the band has led me to conclude that consensus culture can promote a conciliatory decision process in which single-person blocks are highly discouraged but respected when they occur. According to members, the benefits of this horizontal model include active engagement in the decision-making process and rigorous critique of any proposal, while they also admit that the process can be slow and fraught with disagreement. In my experience, however, seniority, particular expertise, and entrenched social hierarchies do lead to certain members' opinions being given more weight than others.⁴

The BLO's consensus-based membership process weighs many factors discussed during a prospective member's interview, including experience in activism, experience in music and the arts, and ideological agreement with the points of unity. As point one makes clear, being a multilevel band is integral to the BLO's history and identity as a political project, and political experience, commitment, and savvy might count more than musical experience in some cases. The BLO has rejected musically solid White, male musicians due to perceptions of lack of political commitment and has imposed affirmative action

strategies for membership, and members often argue that the band is “not a political education project.” While the group has sometimes been perceived as exclusionary, members understand such sacrifices to be necessary for maintaining the ideological coherence of the band and its openness to musicians of color, as well as female, working-class, and queer-identifying musicians. Naomi Podber (2020), in her study of the Rude Mechanical Orchestra, refers to this dynamic as a tension between “wide inclusion,” which seeks to build diverse, populist movements, and “provisional inclusion,” which sets conditions on inclusion that can lead to demographic homogenization.

The result is a multilevel band in which participation of less experienced musicians and historically underrepresented populations is a priority. The meeting of differing musical skill levels can present challenges that other bands do not face, as musicians of all levels—professionals to beginners—seek common musical ground. The BLO prioritizes songs based on unchallenging melodies, simple chord structures, and repetitive grooves, though complexity varies widely. Within this context of simplicity, more musically advanced players fill in spaces with improvisation, polyrhythms, harmonies, countermelodies, and extended solo sections, while less experienced musicians are encouraged to learn these skills gradually. Still, more advanced musicians may have to check their authority on the way to the street, promoting the skills and leadership capacities of less experienced musicians rather than leading in a hierarchical manner, or risk complaints from other members of taking up space.

Beyond its participation in protest, the BLO sees itself as positively embodying direct action and enacting the performance of freedom in its organization. If leftist critique can broadly be understood as informing aspirations toward a society in which unequal power relationships are equalized through active engagement and attention, the BLO’s attempts to promote diversity, equal powers of leadership, horizontal decision-making, and art as a vehicle of political and spiritual liberation can be understood as direct actions on the conventional notion of what a band is and what it is for—or music as direct action.

THE BLO IN DIRECT ACTION

A typical week in the BLO might include a nonprofit’s fundraising party, an immigrant rights march, and a workplace occupation, as the band embraces a “diversity of tactics” that includes but is not limited to direct action. In these diverse performances, the band employs a range of musical repertoires of contention that members practice in weekly rehearsals to stay strategically flexible and effective in the varied and often unpredictable contexts in which it plays.

While songs with more complex forms are used on more presentational occasions and party settings, cyclical and simple forms allow the group to interact flexibly with protesters and spaces of contention. A system of hand cues indicating various sections of a song, drum breaks, solos, and solo bass line allows the group to respond musically to what is happening around it by rearranging the song in real time. The band might cut at times to just drum clicks over which the group will lead protesters in a topical chant or song. The mobility of a brass band enables the group to lead or follow activists and to engage with unknown spaces with little preparation.

BLO members often assert that deploying music in political actions makes possible the audibility and visibility of an action that might otherwise be easily ignored. By creating or strengthening the sense of being part of a community, music can provide an affective opening for participation in political action and for pushing all kinds of boundaries. Housing activist and BLO member Deepa Varma claims that the band can provide emotional and social support for protesters transgressing legal limits. The BLO can offer observers the sense that such inversions of the social order are not sporadic and irrational but intentional and thoughtful. Varma suggests, "A band occupying public space gives an action legitimacy because it projects organization."⁵ Authorities have occasionally, if absurdly, noted the motivational power of marching bands in protests. In an article on the RMO, the *New York Times* claimed that "A police report prepared before the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York said that 'increases in beat are used to indicate an attack'" (Moynihan 2013).

The band receives gigs through its strong network within the Bay Area activist communities. Many band members are union organizers, food activists, direct action trainers, and social justice artists, and others are in frequent contact with other movement organizations that ask the BLO to perform. The band asks each organizer filling out a gig request to indicate whether the group has a permit, whether the event is arrestable, what the roles of people of color and relevant communities are, and what the BLO is expected to do during the action. Among the many parties and political events, direct actions tend to be unique performance experiences that are sometimes dangerous and arrestable but always adrenalin-producing and goal-directed.

The following two direct actions, a presentational intervention on a hotel with oppressive labor practices and the occupation of the Port of Oakland during the Occupy Movement in 2011, represent the more radical side of what the BLO engages. Drawing on Thomas Turino, I examine how the band strategically uses presentational and participatory forms of musical direct action. By presentational musical direct action, I mean that the transgression involved

in musicians’ performance is primarily an object of spectacle that is meant to change spectators’ political opinions, priorities, and actions. By participatory musical direct action, I mean that strategically involving the audience in performance is the musical mode through which the direct action is enacted. While I find this duality helpful to understand the band’s range of performance models, I recognize that often no clear lines exist between participatory and presentational modes of performances and that all “musicians” and “spectators” are always presenting, participating, and performing in myriad ways.⁶

A BAD HOTEL: PRESENTATIONAL INTERVENTION

Perhaps the BLO’s highest-profile action in media terms has been its collaboration with Pride at Work in 2010. Pride at Work is a contingent of the AFL-CIO and promotes labor rights and awareness within the LGBTQIA+ movement. As the LGBTQIA+ movement had been gaining considerable mainstream acceptance, many worried that much of the movement’s countercultural stance and resistant strategies may be lost in the process. The Pride parades, for example, are viewed by many of the more radical side to be commodified and commercialized spectacles, and some on the left actively avoid or protest them. In order to publicize labor issues within the LGBTQIA+ community, Pride at Work targeted certain hotels mired in labor disputes that many LGBTQIA+ tourists were known to stay in for Pride weekend. Workers in several hotels had already called for boycotts of the hotels for lack of fair contracts and health care. In preparation for an action supporting the worker campaign, Pride at Work and the BLO together rewrote Lady Gaga’s “A Bad Romance” to “A Bad Hotel,” arranged a brass band version, and created choreography.

In the video of the action, which received more than 400,000 YouTube hits, a lesbian couple, supposed tourists who are actually part of the action, are seen negotiating room rates at the front desk of the San Francisco Westin St. Francis. The next shot shows BLO and Pride at Work members quietly walking into the hotel with visible brass instruments. When one of the women sees the brass band, she loudly and theatrically exclaims, “Wait a second, honey! We can’t check in here—this hotel’s under boycott,” at which point a flash mob of singers, dancers, and the BLO launch into the rewritten version of Lady Gaga’s song. The band plays and sings with dancers performing elaborate choreography in the lobby.

Oh no, don’t get caught in a bad hotel (2x)
 Boycott, Boycott, Workers’ rights are hot!

Boycott, Boycott, Boycott this hotel!
 These workers need healthcare and a fair contract
 This is a bad, bad hotel!
 I want to party and let's do it in drag,
 But not in a bad hotel
 Want San Francisco and I want your gay ass
 But not in a bad hotel!

During the performance, spectators look bewildered but entertained as activists pass out fliers about the campaign. A small child is seen snapping his fingers to the music. At the end, a member of Pride at Work explains to them the context and intent of the action. Then the group marches outside to parade in a picket line to a New Orleans second line tune.

In the *Huffington Post* article on the action and YouTube sensation, Paul Hogarth (2010) asked whether these viral revolutionary spectacles could be considered the “future of protest.” While his insight may appear both prescient and dated with the proliferation of meme activism along with the explosive mass protests of 2020,⁷ respectively, Hogarth argues that mass rallies and marches can be tired tactics that produce few results because of their low public visibility. In this early manifestation of meme-driven activism, he suggests that the flash mob captured on video, shared on social media, and reposted on LGBTQIA+ rights blogs, independent weeklies, and other fora perhaps enables a much stronger awareness of the issue through its entertaining and easily accessible format. Activists had hoped to get the message out especially to LGBTQIA+ tourists that they should not reserve these hotels. For Hogarth, the video got its “bang for the buck,” considering that “they didn’t have to mobilize a large number of people, the whole action took five minutes and nobody got arrested. How many times can you say that—and get that amount of media coverage?” Without social media, the action’s impact would have been much smaller, as it’s much harder to impress “apolitical tourists who have already paid for their hotel” (ibid.).

This BLO flash mob action embodied what I have called the performance of freedom of direct action, as musicians and dancers went beyond social conventions and laws to perform against unfair labor practices. Playfully transgressing the social expectations of behavior in a hotel lobby with a political message could be understood as an expression of prefigurative politics regarding the uses to which such spaces can and should be put. As an organized performance intended for viral sharing, this action would be closer to the presentational end of the spectrum, though the values of participation in the action were

articulated in communal singing, dancing, and engagement with the audience. The BLO, acting as an action affinity group for Pride at Work and the hotel workers, used music to present the public with a political and moral choice.

OCCUPY OAKLAND PORT SHUTDOWN:
PARTICIPATORY INTERVENTION

On November 2, 2011, Occupy Oakland staged a “general strike” day of actions, in reaction to state violence when police one week earlier had invaded the Occupy Oakland camp, one of a global proliferation of urban encampments in solidarity with the Occupy Wall Street Protests in New York. The major action of the day was to shut down the Port of Oakland in solidarity with the International Longshoreman and Warehouse Union (ILWU) in Longview, Washington, which represents port workers. Occupy Oakland achieved the shutdown with a mass convergence of tens of thousands of bodies at the entries of the port. Supporting the action and the entire day’s events was the BLO, which played at Occupy Oakland’s invitation. Though the band’s participation was a small part of a much larger series of actions, the BLO imbued the volatile spaces with a sense of drama and carnivalesque transgression, as many protesters’ exultation—expressed in dance, chant and song—took the edge off fears of arrest, violence and retaliation.⁸ This was my first experience of the BLO, and I followed the band throughout the day as it supported the many actions of the general strike, prompting me to clean out my trumpet and initiate my own membership process.

The port is an institution of transnational capitalism and commerce that has a long history in Oakland residents’ memory as an engine of displacement. West Oakland, once a vibrant immigrant and Black cultural center, has seen dramatic economic decline and high rates of poverty, urban violence, and food deserts. Recent gentrification, accelerated by the foreclosure crisis, has housing costs skyrocketing with long-term residents being pushed out of the community at alarming rates. The port has, in fact, been shut down many times since its massive expansion in the 1960s, including during the anti-Iraq War movement and many labor disputes. In shutting down the port, protesters enacted one of the central philosophies of the Occupy movement, the leftist view that communities should control the machinery that organizes their lives. Occupy Oakland’s targeting of the port reflected a strategy that reached further back into Oakland’s contested social histories and encouraged community members to assert their agency over institutions over which they have little control.

During the march to the port and its occupation, thousands of protesters were sonically saturated by the BLO as well as by sound trucks, drum groups, and overlapping chants scattered throughout the crowd. All these sounds contributed to the mobilization, heightening emotions among those involved and entraining participants to the rhythm of the march. The BLO helped enable the performance of collective ownership of the port through promoting musical participation. During the long hours of waiting to hear whether the port had been shut down, the band kept bodies on the site and buoyed the weariness of the protesters with syncopated beats and collective singing. Antiphonal chants such as “Whose port? Our port!” over BLO drumbeats rhetorically expressed the performance of collective ownership of the machinery of capitalism. Dancing at the port with exuberant transgression embodied the belief that the symbolic boundaries constructed by the state have no legitimate value. The entire general strike could be considered to be a performance of freedom, community, and the nonexistence of the state (see fig. 14.1).

At the port, the BLO kept protesters’ moods festive, fearless, and high with a long rendition of the New Orleans second line “We Got That Fire,” switching the refrain to “We shut the port down” and encouraging mass collective singing. The group created a mass dance party with Afrobeat classics, such as “No Agreement” and “JJD,” and well-known Balkan tunes, including “Bubamara.” The BLO actively engaged with the audience by encouraging other instrumentalists to join in, starting chants and songs and leading dances. Through instrumental protest, the band provided what George McKay (2007) calls “sonic territorialization,” helping enable the occupation of the port, as the BLO countered fear and fatigue with mass exuberance. For drummer Josh Cohen, “the BLO can bring joy to intense situations and help create a participatory environment even while maintaining an unwavering political position.”⁹

The BLO was well suited to support these actions because it rehearses music in order to be flexible and tactically effective. For example, in leading chants, the conductor of the BLO (a position that circulates song by song) will generally coordinate with organizers or others with megaphones. The conductor might cue the band so that horns drop out in order for a chant to be led under the drum section’s 4/4 beat. After a bit of chanting, the conductor will cue the horns to come back in, often with the chanting continuing over it. By the time the song ends, the marchers have become participants in the sonic expression of protest, fully involved in its joint creation.

BLO saxophonist and professional union organizer Josh Sperry, pointing to an important inversion in the conventional band/audience relationship, observes that “the band can make people feel loud and important; as the music



Fig. 14.1. Occupy Oakland Port shutdown with BLO (BLO Facebook).
 Courtesy of author.

swells underneath, we make them feel like they are the speaker, the star. They are not there for the band—the band is there for them.”¹⁰ I have since seen and used these methods of musically involving protesters countless times to draw people into participating in political actions, and they never seem to fail to entrain the audience into the political goals of the action. Drawing people into musical activity is a mode through which they can musically perform political resistance as a community of protesters and “act as if they are already free.”

As in the Pride at Work action, the BLO served as an action affinity group for Occupy Oakland, the ILWU, and the displaced peoples of West Oakland. In solidarity with ILWU, the shutdown represented a targeted action aimed

at changing policy, specifically regarding labor contracts. But the day's events also embodied longer-standing tensions between organized labor and anarchist activists, for the latter of whom the shutdown might have represented a manifestation of a temporary autonomous zone (TAZ), a moment and place in which one might imagine that such institutional machinery would not have the dominant control over our lives that it currently does (Bey 1991). More broadly, the Occupy movement aimed to establish TAZs around the world that would prefigure a new kind of politics that might one day become permanent. Occupy, in its refusal to make demands of political administrations and argue for explicit policies, placed itself in a lineage of the broader growth in popularity of anarchist philosophy, values, and organizing since the anti-corporate globalization movement. The BLO acted in both capacities in this direct action as freedom *to* and *from*, in solidarity with the ILWU with the intent of changing policy, and as an anarchistic performance of uninhibited freedom not restrained by laws, conventions, and the state. The multiple solidarities expressed are indicative of the BLO's commitment to support unity on the left with a diversity of tactics, including music in direct action.

MUSIC AS LIBERATION

In performing the belief that “music is liberation,” BLO promotes a prefigurative politics in which musical engagement is considered an enactment of freedom with calculated tactics and targets. The group's creative interventions of instrumental protest, many of which surpass legal limits, occur along a spectrum of presentation and participation, performance modes that for the BLO are not fundamentally opposed. Indeed, in most cases, it is through the catalytic presentation that the BLO ignites that political participation is magnified in a given action. Part of broader transnational networks, emblemized by but larger than the global HONK! network, the BLO's tactics and musical repertoires of contention shape and are shaped by protest movements around the world. In framing music as a tactic—a nimble source of musical support—rather than a performance that is the ultimate object of engagement, such bands offer innovative practical and theoretical modes of musicking rarely accounted for by scholars.

Though the question of efficacy is important to instrumental protest bands like the BLO that use music strategically to promote change, Kallman observes that “many [HONK!] bands reject a distinction between social process and social outcome. . . . This very specific focus on *process* is a way of both altering and re-constructing the world” (2020, 118). That is, BLO's engagements both *as*

and *in* direct action constitute a means to an end and an end in itself, musically militating to enact utopia but not losing sight of realistic victories and strategic targets as well as the pursuit of a more just internal organization. Outside of “movement moments” when the tangible possibility of change is palpable, direct action and organizing remain part of a continuum of political engagement that makes larger flare-ups and progressive changes in the sociopolitical world possible. Music and other forms of play are a crucial part of what make these changes achievable, not only as chant-able slogans or lyrical critique, but also as performative and affective experiences that maintain enthusiasm and combat activist burnout through raucous celebration. Similarly, Rosenthal and Flacks argue that “music allows activists to carry their beliefs and loyalties with them in their everyday routines; it provides a bridge linking yesterday’s demonstration with today’s workday, between making history and making life. During times of movement inactivity, music serves as one way that the identities and ties essential to future movement activity are not lost in the press of daily routines” (2011, 127).

The BLO acts as if it is already free in order to become free. The band’s intentions for its members and the communities it mobilizes are well summed up by Augusto Boal in his famous book *The Theater of the Oppressed*: “The spectator . . . assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change—in short, trains themselves for real action. In this case perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution” (1979, 122). After all, rehearsal is not for rehearsal’s sake. Opening night is out there some day.

NOTES

1. Revised portions of this chapter appeared in French in a chapter by the author in *Politiques des musiques populaires au XXI^e siècle* (2015).

2. See Garofalo (2020) for a more complete history of the growth of the HONK! network and Snyder, Allen, and Garofalo (2022) for an account of the virtual festival. Studies of diverse manifestations of this alternative brass band network, including on its development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Snyder 2022) and a coedited volume on the global HONK! movement (Snyder, Allen, and Garofalo 2020), have occupied much of my academic and musical focus since my first chance encounter with the BLO.

3. See Brass Liberation Orchestra (2013).

4. See Kallman (2020) on the challenges of leaderless organization in HONK! bands.

5. Deepa Varma, interview by author, San Francisco, CA, January 18.

6. See Snyder (2019) for a critique of Turino’s dichotomy.

7. See Andrew Snyder, “BLO and Pride at Work, ‘Don’t Get Caught in a Bad Hotel,’” YouTube, May 19, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-FnqI5D8Uc&ab_channel=AndrewSnyder/.

8. See utopiaparkfilms, "Brass Liberation Orchestra: Occupy Oakland General Strike 11.02.11," YouTube, December 29, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJUBE8xpHVk>, and Tripleshack, "Oakland General Strike—Brass Liberation Orchestra (Bubamara song)," YouTube, November 4, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmbzwikZBgE/>.

9. Josh Cohen, interview by author, San Francisco, CA, November 4, 2013.

10. Josh Sperry, interview by author, Oakland, CA, April 3, 2013.

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