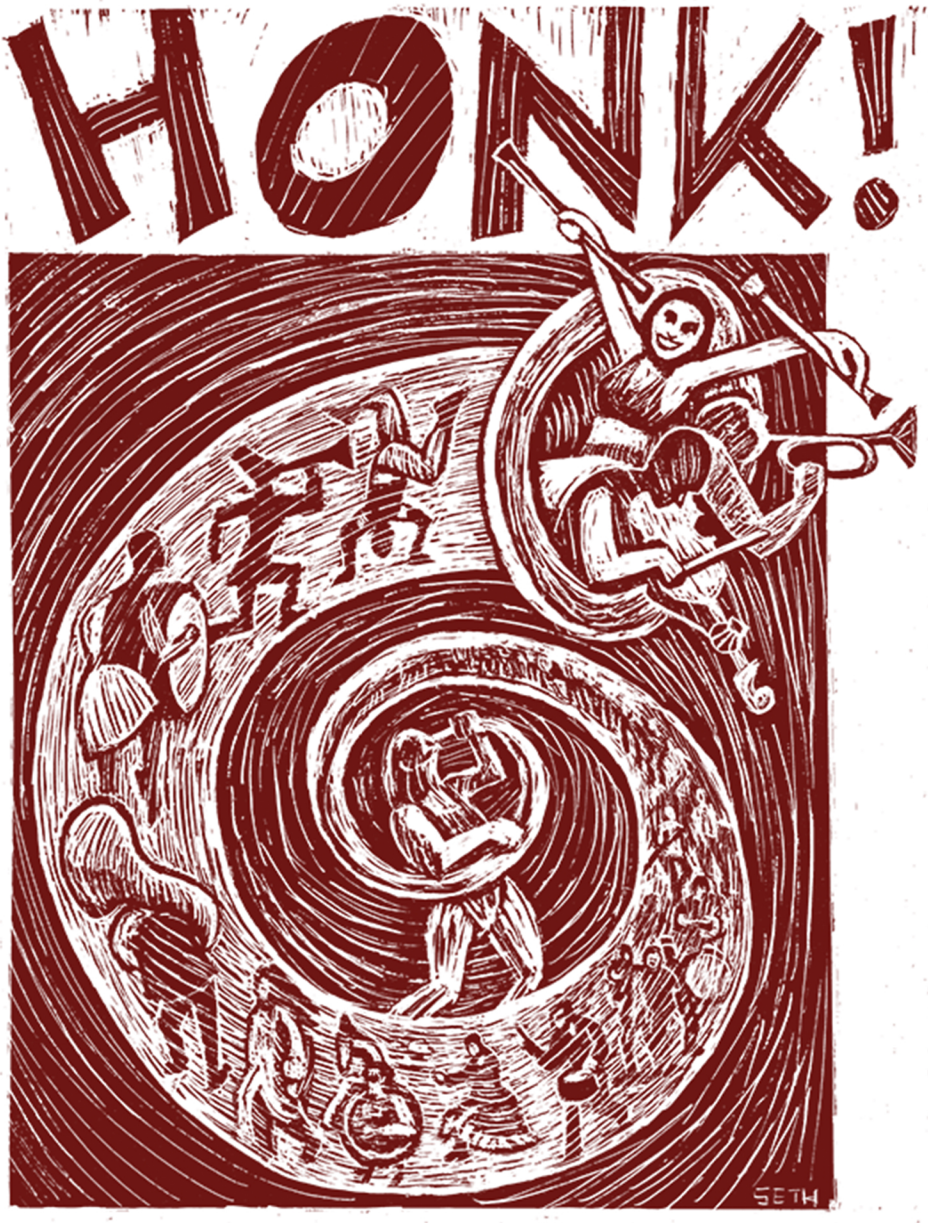

HONK!

A Street Band Renaissance of Music and Activism

Edited by Reebee Garofalo, Erin T. Allen, and Andrew Snyder

ROUTLEDGE

HONK!

HONK! A Street Band Renaissance of Music and Activism explores a fast-growing and transnational movement of street bands—particularly brass and percussion ensembles—and examines how this exciting phenomenon mobilizes communities to reimagine public spaces, protest injustice, and assert their activism. Through the joy of participatory music making, HONK! bands foster active musical engagement in street protests while encouraging grassroots organization, representing a manifestation of cultural activity that exists at the intersections of community, activism, and music. This collection of twenty essays considers the parallels between the diversity of these movements and the diversity of the musical repertoire these bands play and share.

In five parts, musicians, activists, and scholars voiced in various local contexts cover a range of themes and topics:

- History and Scope
- Repertoire, Pedagogy, and Performance
- Inclusion and Organization
- Festival Organization and Politics
- On the Front Lines of Protest

The HONK! Festival of Activist Street Bands began in Somerville, Massachusetts in 2006 as an independent, non-commercial street festival. It has since spread to four continents. *HONK! A Street Band Renaissance of Music and Activism* explores the phenomenon that inspires street bands and musicians to change the world and provide musical, social, and political alternatives in contemporary times.

Reebee Garofalo is a member of the Organizing Committee for the Somerville HONK! Festival and a longtime scholar of popular music studies. He is Professor Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2020
by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this title has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-367-03070-4 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-367-03071-1 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-0-429-02020-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Swales & Willis, Exeter, Devon, UK

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PREFACE

HONK! A Street Band Renaissance of Music and Activism presents reflections on the recent, transnational movement of street bands, especially brass and percussion ensembles, that are taking over public spaces in cities from Massachusetts to Australia to Brazil. We focus on the HONK! festival network of street band festivals that began in Somerville, Massachusetts in 2006 and quickly spread to other cities in the US and around the world. We explore these bands and festivals and also use them as windows for considering related and tangential street music networks and traditions, including European brass band festivals, West African brass bands, and carnival traditions.

The contributors tackle a diverse range of themes, including circulation of repertoire, innovative musical pedagogies, strategies of musical engagement within protest, and a variety of theories of sonic and musical activisms. We have organized the book thematically, and it can be read either selectively or cover to cover. The authors write in an accessible and informed tone that should appeal to all interested readers.

Across the chapters, readers will observe a rich debate about the use of instrumental, mobile, and participatory music as a crucial element in building alternative socio-political worlds. Important to all the authors is the question of how participatory music making in the streets, especially in urban centers, might remake senses of the public sphere in an era of entrenched neoliberalism, privatization, and encroaching authoritarianism. Together, we argue that HONK! provides musical, social, and political alternatives in our contemporary world.

This book includes a companion website (www.honkrenaissance.net), which offers further media from the chapters as well as more writing and links about HONK! and other alternative brass movements. Some authors have chosen to reference links and figures that can be found on their individual pages on the website.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the contributors to the volume, Constance Ditzel at Routledge, the anonymous reviewers, Elyse Allen for figure formatting, the photographers who have contributed their work to this book, and all those making the HONK! movement happen. We dedicate this book to everyone around the world takin' it to the streets.

Reebee Garofalo, Erin T. Allen, and Andrew Snyder
June 30, 2019

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INTRODUCTION

Reebee Garofalo, Erin T. Allen, and Andrew Snyder

It's June of 2018. The Second Line Social Aid and Pleasure Society Brass Band, the Massachusetts band that founded the first HONK! Festival in the US in 2006, has been invited, for the second time, to play at Sbandata – an Italian street band festival that happens in Rome every five years or so. The organizers have taken over a suburban municipal park and an adjacent school to stage the festival. One of the first items we receive upon arriving is a plastic Sbandata wine cup with a belt clip, which will get plenty of use over the course of the weekend. We enjoy tune-shares, performances, and parades – scheduled and unscheduled – and band talk and political discussions – formal and informal. A good deal of the festival takes place in the various performance spaces in the park's sprawling greenery. We also venture out.

On day two of the festival, we get wind that a group of American ex-patriots living in Rome is planning a demonstration at the American Embassy to protest the Trump administration's immigration policies. They are thrilled to hear that a US brass band is in town, ready to join the fray. At first, we don't know whether leaving the festival will be disruptive or what kind of support we can expect for an "American" demonstration, but once we put the word out, there is widespread enthusiasm for joining us. We descend on the American Embassy with about 100 members of at least a half dozen bands from all over Europe and play for about an hour as one band, united and strong. Still reeling from the power and spirit of our Roman outing, we continue to play … all the way back to the subway, through the terminal, on the train, up the escalators to the street, and back to the festival. In the burgeoning activist street band movement, displays of international musical solidarity like this are not in short supply. HONK! is a part of this.

The HONK! festivals, did not, of course, invent such musical transgressions or festivals of brass bands playing in the street. Comparable celebrations – carnival in

FIGURE 0.1 Multi-band demonstration at the American Embassy in Rome during the Sbandata festival, supporting a protest against the Trump Administration's immigration policies, June, 2018

Photograph by Reebee Garofalo.

South America and the Caribbean, the fanfare tradition throughout Europe, and many others – have long existed in many parts of the world. HONK! is not the center of this universe; rather, it is one significant node in an ever-expanding and unpredictable global network of brass and percussion bands that have taken to the streets. While pre-existing musical communities are latching onto the HONK! moniker, HONK! is also influenced by like-minded contemporary festivals such as Rome's Sbandata and others that have gone before. In this sense, we view HONK! as both the particular constellation of bands and festivals that we explore in this volume and as a window to understanding "alternative" brass and percussion bands and their music more broadly.

Since 2006, festivals using the term HONK! and others inspired by its example have sprung up across the globe, with some 22 festivals in the US, Canada, Brazil, Costa Rica, Australia, and England. The spirit of these festivals is captured to some extent by the wording on the "About" page of the Somerville HONK! Festival website:

> Throughout the country and across the globe, a new type of street band movement is emerging – outrageous and inclusive, brass and brash, percussive and persuasive – reclaiming public space with a sound that is in your face and out of this world.

We suggest that this expanding musical network constitutes a street band "renaissance," not only in the sense of rediscovery – though many communities are reviving community music groups that play in public space – but also in the sense that this network represents an outburst of creativity deserving of the term "renaissance."

As the HONK! model of engaged, public, and non-commercial street performances has expanded, it has been adapted to local circumstances and/or incorporated into local brass band traditions, such as the HONK! festival in Rio de Janeiro which grew out of the city's famed carnival. These HONK!-related festivals exist, therefore, in a continuing and increasingly complex dialogue with other festival and brass traditions that pre-date HONK!. We consider this emerging network, therefore, as a potentially limitless series of overlapping musical movements around the world, or – to borrow from Deleuze and Guattari as Garofalo does in Chapter 1 – a "HONK! rhizome" that is distinct from a family tree model which traces disparate phenomena to a common root. Accordingly, this book explores these developing global movements which make use of loud, mobile, acoustic, participatory brass and percussion ensembles to mobilize communities around the world.

Each year since the first HONK! Festival in 2006, John Bell, Trudi Cohen, and Somerville's Second Line Social Aid and Pleasure Society Brass Band open the festival with a *cantastoria*, a sung theatrical performance that introduces HONK! and encourages the audience to actively question the meaning of the festival. This theatrical form was popularized by the Bread and Puppet Theater, a radical performing arts group founded in the 1960s and one of the formative influences on HONK!. Accompanied by the band, Bell and Cohen ask the audience a series of questions, including: "What is Honk?," "Why do we Honk?," "How do we Honk?," and "When do we Honk?"[1]

FIGURE 0.2 John Bell and Trudi Cohen perform the Cantastoria with the Second Line Social Aid and Pleasure Society Brass Band at the Somerville HONK! Festival, October, 2016

Photograph by Erin T. Allen.

These questions frame the observations, analyses, and debates that are taken up in the chapters of this volume, which for the authors, are more than academic. While many work in academia – as well as a variety of other fields – this is a book written by actors in the HONK! movement and the broader musical networks the book considers. All of the contributors have experienced HONK! or something like it firsthand – as organizers, educators, performing musicians, volunteers, and audience members, as well as researchers. The depth and scope of these movements is captured here by putting in dialogue the diverse voices of people actively engaged in making this music happen. As such, this compilation represents a collaborative auto-ethnography of the HONK! movement.

For all the book's global diversity – including authors from the US, Brazil, Italy, Israel-Palestine, and Japan – its editors are based in the US with a deep understanding of the US HONK! movement, as well as a developing appreciation for its growing transnationality. The book, therefore, looks out onto the global HONK! landscape from a somewhat North American perspective, in part because that is where this particular network of festivals originated. Still, we recognize that a book assembled elsewhere would approach the topic from different angles, and we encourage further research from a multiplicity of new perspectives.

HONK! festivals generally aspire to support progressive values and causes, to provide a convergence for community-engaged and/or politically active brass and percussion bands, and to contribute to network development, movement building, and advancing the state of the art of street music. As such, these festivals often espouse a litany of principles – among them, inclusion, diversity, community-engagement, activism, democratic leadership, participatory music-making, improvisation, creativity, fun, and spectacle. These are some of the themes that occur repeatedly throughout the book. The degree to which some combination of these principles are met can serve informally as measures of success and is likely to produce lively debate and discussion, in which answers are not always clear or agreed upon.

Despite bands' and festivals' spirit of inclusiveness, diversity, for example, continues to be an elusive goal. The HONK! community is predominantly, though not exclusively, white and middle class, with considerable diversity along the dimensions of age, gender, and sexuality. Even with a combination of flexible membership requirements, participatory music-making, and democratic leadership styles, the goal of inclusion, particularly of people of color and other marginalized groups, remains to some extent aspirational and has yet to be fully achieved to anyone's satisfaction.

The question of what constitutes activism – or, perhaps more accurately, what kinds of activism are acceptable – has also been controversial in HONK! circles since the first HONK! festival was dubbed the "HONK! Festival of Activist Street Bands." This question forms one of the central debates of the book. Intrinsic to HONK!'s framing of activism has been the celebration of free, non-commercial, and accessible art in public space; radically inclusive musical pedagogies; and the

promotion of brass and percussion ensembles on the front lines of protest. The festivals have provided a meeting ground for bands that are actively engaged with these questions and have formed a network that promotes what Andrew Snyder (2018) calls "instrumental activism." By this, he refers to the uses of instrumental music to mobilize communities in the pursuit of social justice, as opposed to many studies focused on activism through lyrics and semantics. With this term, we also argue that these musical engagements are indeed instrumental to the realization of new, and more equitable, social relations.

While most HONK! bands are politically engaged in their communities in some way, many are hesitant to refer to themselves as "activist." It is telling that in the US, the original Somerville HONK! Festival remains the only festival to use the phrase "activist street bands" in its title. Other US HONK! festivals and bands, due to either restrictive local circumstances or shared political preferences, are more comfortable using terms like "alternative" or "community." The HONK! festivals that have developed in Latin America and certain festivals in Europe have been more likely to embrace an activist label. While the more radical brass bands have been crucial in moving the festival(s) in an activist direction, some, like Lang/Levitsky and Hardesty in Chapter 14, view the movement as largely "antipolitical," or primarily neutral in its stances and thus reinforcing hegemonic power. The prizing of activism, therefore, deserves scrutiny as do the other values espoused in this network.

Likewise, all HONK! bands extol the value of "fun," whether in the service of learning a song or pushing for social change. Rude Mechanical Orchestra's Meredith Slopen maintains that "having politics be fun [is] incredibly useful to people's ability to sustain their involvement in the movement."[2] In these instances, fun is a pedagogical and political strategy. Still, the question of whether "fun is a political project," as School of HONK founder Kevin Leppmann asserts, or one contributing factor on the road to larger political ends remains controversial.[3]

The activation of public space is another HONK! mantra that bears scrutiny. It is well known in the field of urban planning that truly public spaces are disappearing. Those that remain are often highly regulated, tightly controlled areas, with circumscribed spaces for artists and audiences, enforced by the power of law (Mitchell 2003). Increasingly there are also spaces where public discourse often takes place that are privately owned public spaces (or "POPS"), which can often be exclusionary in practice (Schindler 2018). Given this situation, small acts that test the limits of control in places where the public gathers – public or private – propel members of the HONK! community to think of "reclaiming public space" as a progressive political act. At the same time, the question has to be asked: reclaiming public space for whom? HONK! is perceived as "hip," white, and middle class and can contribute to the kinds of development that lead to gentrification and, ultimately, displacement. The challenge for HONK! bands and festivals is how to reclaim public space in a way that protects the existing populations from displacement and promotes their own agency.

As editors, we see these tensions as leading to productive debates about what is and is not "instrumental activism" broadly conceived. To illuminate these debates, we have organized this book into the following five sections.

History and Scope

While there have long been carnivalesque festivals that repurpose the originally militaristic intent of brass bands for the pleasure of local populations, HONK! represents a contemporary manifestation of expansion and inversion across continents that warrants closer scrutiny. In "The Many Roads to HONK! and the Power of Brass and Percussion," Reebee Garofalo positions HONK! in a broader history of indigenizations and localizations of the hegemonic military ensemble that spread throughout the world through conquest and colonialism. Proceeding to a more contemporary history of the birth of HONK! in the US and its global expansion, he describes the development of the HONK! network and its intersections with current and pre-existing musical traditions and movements as "rhizomatic" – having no one point of origin but rather limitless horizontal points of connection. The following chapters show the extent of this globality and interconnectedness among alternative brass band movements.

In "Autonomous Street Carnival Blocos and Reinventing Citizenship in Rio de Janeiro," Laurine Sézérat explores the world of autonomous carnival brass ensembles in Rio de Janeiro out of which the HONK! Rio festival eventually emerged. These groups have resisted inscribing themselves in the city's official carnival in an effort to preserve what they view as the subversive and spontaneous essence of carnival.

Gregg Moore explores protest brass bands in post-WWII England, Holland, and Germany in "Jericho's Harvest: A Short History of Brass Bands as a Voice for Political Opposition in Europe." Situating these bands in the context of the leftist movements of the 1950s–70s, he argues that their histories provide a precedent for and influence on the eventual rise of the HONK! movement in the US.

In "Protest, Polyvalence, and Indirection in Benin's Brass Band Music," Sarah Politz examines the political strategies of the professional West African Gangbe Brass Band, a band that could be understood as a tangent to HONK!'s expansive global network. In contrast to the explicit political intents of many HONK! bands, Gangbe, while pursuing "strategies of polyvalence and indirection in an effort to avoid being pinned down to a single political message, philosophy, or position," sends subtle anti-hegemonic musical messages especially about African autonomy and diasporic solidarity.

Marié Abe portrays the experience of a visit to Seattle's HONK! Fest West by a Japanese band that has mobilized the *chindon-ya* tradition of street bands used for advertising in public space towards participation in street demonstrations, including in the recent antinuclear movement. In "Japanese Perspective on HONK! Fest West: A Conversation with Ōkuma Wataru of Jinta-la-Mvta,"

Abe conducts an interview with the band's leader, discussing his internationally comparative reflections on street music, nostalgia, public space, activism, and other topics. Together these chapters show the broad histories and scope of the HONK! movement and the impossibility of understanding the expanding network as simply beginning in Somerville, Massacusetts in 2006 and spreading outward.

Repertoire, Pedagogy, and Performance

As the original HONK! festival's website describes, HONK! bands

> draw from sources as diverse as Klezmer, Balkan and Romani music, Brazilian Samba, Afrobeat and Highlife, Punk, Funk, and Hip Hop, as well as the New Orleans second line tradition, and deliver it with all the passion and spirit of Mardi Gras and Carnival.

Andrew Snyder, in "Musical Eclecticism, Cultural Appropriation, and Whiteness in Mission Delirium and HONK!," contends with the cultural politics of playing such a diversity of genres within a predominantly white and middle class movement, using his own work as a composer and arranger in San Francisco's Mission Delirium as a case study. Arguing that musical choices are also ethical choices, he examines the rationales behind both the celebratory and critical reactions regarding the question of cultural appropriation.

While Mission Delirium and other alternative brass bands aim for a high professional performance level, many HONK! bands celebrate multi-level music making and inclusive pedagogies for learning such a wide variety of musical traditions. In "Learning on Parade with the School of HONK," Kevin Leppmann details his work as founder and leader of a weekly brass and percussion class that welcomes musicians of all levels for free to learn and play in a mass ensemble numbering into the hundreds. In contrast to the formalized pedagogies of conventional music education, Leppmann argues that the School of HONK's pedagogical approach – based in learning by rote, a tolerance for mistakes, and having fun – constitutes a crucial element of HONK!'s musical activism.

In "From Page to Performance: Learning a Song in an Italian Multi-Level Activist Brass Band," Mario Giuseppe Camporeale explores the inclusive strategies of Rome's Titubanda through following the band's entire process of learning an arrangement of Sun Ra's "Love in Outer Space." Arguing that acceptance of "imperfections" in interpreting a musical part is crucial for a band to remain open and inclusive, he suggests that multi-level, open bands manifest an aesthetic of "conscious and unconscious heterophony," or divergent and simultaneous interpretations of a musical part. Together, these chapters show the complex dynamics of learning a diverse range of repertoires by a wide variety of communities with often wildly uneven skill levels.

Inclusion and Organization

Among HONK!'s many celebratory discourses is the belief that many HONK! bands are organized in order to be "inclusive" and thus contrast with a musical culture of elitism, specialization, and individualism. In "Leadership, Inclusion, and Group Decision-Making in HONK! Bands," Meghan E. Kallman considers how the focus of many HONK! bands on inclusion, democratic decision-making, and reclaiming public space can prefigure, in microcosm, the ways Henri Lefebvre's "right to the city" might be "enacted in practice." These internal organizational processes are fraught with challenges and contradictions, such as "leadership within leaderlessness," but they can provide a way of imagining – indeed, experiencing – the world as it might be.

Meditating on the challenges of inclusion, Naomi Podber, in "Building Connections While Maintaining the Band: The Challenging Politics of Inclusion in Activist Work," explores what she calls "generous, or widening, inclusion," the impulse to incorporate an ever-widening community of participants in the quest for equality and social justice. This value can conflict with "provisional inclusion," which can actually narrow a group's boundaries as members develop their own internal norms and points of unity to which others must adhere in order to safeguard the coherence of the group.

Becky Liebman takes on the inclusion of women in HONK! and their challenging of gender norms in "Horns and Hers: The Subversion of Gendered Instrumentation in the HONK! Movement." She argues that the inclusive and unorthodox spirit of HONK! tends to create safer spaces for women and gender non-binary musicians to feel empowered to join activist street bands, choose to play low brass instruments, and/or form all-female and gender non-binary bands.

In "Collective Effervescence and the Political Ethos of the HONK! Movement," Geoffrey Lee acknowledges that it is tempting to see an obvious fit between the communitarian ethos of HONK! and what Émile Durkheim calls "collective effervescence." He also sees, however, an expression in HONK! of a form of individualism that recognizes "a freedom to pursue one's own vision of living well." In this optimistic portrait, HONK! and the larger progressive culture of which it is a part combine, therefore, "the more appealing elements of individualism with a more egalitarian and communitarian ethos than exists in the political mainstream." Together these reflections show that "inclusion" is far from a simple concept and one that must account for the needs of marginalized communities, the mission of a particular project, and individual expression.

Festival Politics

What does it mean for a festival or a band to call itself "activist?" Perhaps no debate in the HONK! movement has garnered as much controversy as this one. For John Bell in "HONK! and the Politics of Performance in Public Space," HONK!'s focus on live, acoustic music in public space "often in the context of larger social

and political activities" is rooted in diverse countercultural traditions, including African American brass band performances, avant-garde political theater, and the Situationist view of public space as a site "to redefine modern life." Holding the HONK! festival in Somerville is an undertaking that juggles these legacies with "the practical concerns of producing a free outdoor festival" and the aspirational goal of creating "a temporary festive fiction in real time and real space."

By contrast, in "Why Do We Honk? How Do We Honk? Politics, Antipolitics, and Activist Street Bands," Rosza Daniel Lang/Levitsky and Michele Hardesty offer a poignant but sympathetic critique and nuanced analysis of HONK! activism. Defining activism narrowly as participation in "justice movement work," they adopt a view of Somerville's HONK! Festival as largely "antipolitical" – often not necessarily hostile to the contestation involved in political work, but not clearly taking a side.

Richard Randall's "Pittonkatonk and Valuing Music as a Public Good" portrays a festival that was founded "as a public alternative to commercialized live music in Pittsburgh" to rescue participatory music-making from capitalist divisions of musical labor where such functions as "performing, listening, and providing are estranged from each other and interact under strict market conditions."

Lastly, in "The Key of Rest: HONK! Hospitality as Community Activism," Mike★Antares explores one of the most crucial elements of HONK! festivals that allow musicians to participate despite the budgetary limitations of many festivals: a tradition of hospitality that commits to housing and feeding all traveling musicians. Antares argues that HONK!'s "hospitality activism" stands in contrast to the contemporary market-based "share economy" that commodifies hospitality. Embedded in these chapters is a debate about the relationship of HONK! to commercialism, activism, political engagement, and ultimately, transformative change.

On the Front Lines of Protest

HONK!'s contested claim to activism is based on the efforts of many bands within the network to use the power and mobility of brass and percussion ensembles to support and sustain social justice movements, often "on the front lines" of tense and violent confrontations with hegemonic power. In "Infernal Noise: Sowing a Propaganda of Sound," Jennifer Whitney tells the story of one of the iconic bands that predated the birth of the HONK! festivals – Seattle's Infernal Noise Brigade, which employed music as an element of tactical and effective protest and helped shut down the World Trade Organization meetings in 1999. "Because humans have too long bleated slogans and carried signs," argues Whitney, "the aesthetic of the INB is entirely post-textual; we provide tactical psychological support through a 'propaganda of sound.'"

Drawing on work as a city planner in "Listening for Lefebvre: Chant Support, Sonic Disobedience, and the City as '*Oeuvre*,'" Abigail Ellman shows how New

York's Rude Mechanical Orchestra sonically confronts and remakes city spaces shaped by capitalist interests. Highlighting two tactical uses of music – chant support and sonic disobedience – Ellman argues that by promoting protestors' "right to the city," the RMO helps create what Henri Lefebvre calls the city as "oeuvre," or a socially just work of art.

Iris Arieli's "Syncopation Against the Occupation: Handling High-Risk Situations as an Activist Street Band in Israel-Palestine" offers an eminently practical set of techniques for playing in high-risk and violent situations. Drawing on her experience with Kasamba, an Israeli percussion ensemble in the Rhythms of Resistance global network that performs at protest rallies in the occupied territories, Arieli hopes musicians will use some of these tactics to more effectively and safely employ music to promote social justice.

Lastly, in "Sounding Solidarity at the Suffolk County ICE Immigration Detention Center," Erin T. Allen examines what has become an annual tradition at the HONK! festival in Somerville – coordinating festival musicians to play together outside a local immigration detention facility. She argues that through "sounding solidarity" with the detainees, musicians from around the globe produce "a lived (if ephemeral) space for those detained within an otherwise exclusive public sphere," thus challenging dominant (im)mobility regimes.

Parading Onwards

All of this debate is not for its own sake, and it has led to movements within the network to come to agreement on some fundamental "HONK! ethics." Recently, the organizers of the Somerville festival have taken steps to codify what is meant by the term "HONK! festival," not to impose a new disciplinary regime on existing festivals, but rather to achieve some shared sense of meaning and to protect the integrity of the festival as it moves into what appears to be an ever-expanding future. The draft of the "Shared HONK! Principles" document circulating for comment at the time of this writing reads:

> We, the organizers of HONK! festivals around the world, share the following vision of what we mean when we call our festival a "HONK!" festival. We encourage other festivals that want to designate themselves "HONK!" festivals to follow these principles to the best of their ability.
>
> - A HONK! festival is non-commercial.
> - A HONK! festival is mostly or entirely free of admission charges and is open to the public.
> - A HONK! festival focuses on non-commercial street and brass bands that are community-based and/or socially/politically active.
> - A HONK! festival presents events in accessible public spaces in the cheapest, most direct ways possible: without amplification, complicated staging, lighting, etc.

- A HONK! festival accepts business donations, as well as governmental and individual financial support, but does not categorize donors and in-kind supporters by how much they have given – all are listed together in a single group.
- A HONK! festival does not enter into sponsorship arrangements or allow corporate logos or names on festival stages, banners, programs, etc.

It remains to be seen whether HONK! can continue to develop and expand in the anarchic fashion that has characterized its growth to date, and still maintain its principles, manage its contradictions, and preserve the integrity of the model. But it has been an interesting ride thus far, and there does not yet seem to be an end in sight.

Notes

1 https://youtube.com/watch?v=q7-bA0UoCgM&feature=youtu.be. Link 0.1 on companion website honkrenaissance.net/introduction.html.
2 Garofalo, Reebee. 2015. *Telephone interview with Meredith Slopen*. October 23, 2015.
3 Garofalo, Reebee. 2015. *Interview with Kevin Leppmann*. Somerville, Massachusetts. November 25, 2015.

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