

# Introduction

A SPECIAL ISSUE on music. For this particular quarterly, given that “public affairs” is the kicker to our moniker, the first reaction of readers might well be, “Why?” Certainly if you think of music as entertainment, as remedy or therapy, you might not see such a theme as urgent. And yet what social movement, what new political formation, hasn’t had its unforgettable soundtrack? Where, after all, do those in the struggle find the force and inspiration to keep moving forward, to get up, stand up, in this world full of tunnels and only occasional light? What brings them together, what lifts their voices, what beats the drum?

Granted, it isn’t easy to put into words the power of music, especially where rhythm and melody occur in combination with words. Yet whatever happens surely takes place at the level of nerve fibers, probably even before perception, much less knowledge. Two historians of world history, John and William McNeill, have even speculated that human society itself may have begun in song and dance—that music may be the foundation that first gathered us into tribes, as a people. For this magazine, then, the measure of music must be taken according to the manner it serves to shake things up, to move us forward. Otherwise it is distraction.

No one should be surprised we’ve chosen to bring you over three dozen poets: a number of languages on this planet have only a single word for both poem and song, and surely all poetry aspires to the condition of music. Here too, however, one should never assume that the abstractions of measure, melody, and rhythm leave behind the tensions or fault lines of the world as it is. A chorus of cultural studies critics have argued, in effect, that all music in this country of ours derives, in one form or another, from the evidently homegrown spectacle of minstrel theater, and thus that U.S. musical culture, and perhaps even U.S. culture itself, began in and still carries that burden. From minstrelsy to blues and jazz, then onto the crossroads of rock and rap: this magazine would not be true to its history if, in a music issue, it failed to honor this legacy.

Given the plethora of possibilities offered here, including art, fiction, and non-, along with our passel of poets, it would be presumptuous in this introduction to attempt a road map for readers. From the cornucopia assembled here, we trust you’ll find your fill.

As *pars pro toto*, however, I can tell you a bit more about the music of one man, and why we want you know his work. The singer-songwriter Gianmaria Testa died this past year, at the age of fifty-seven. Having

worked for the Italian state railroad system for most of his adult life, as a stationmaster in a provincial capital, Testa could be called, with no exaggeration, the Woody Guthrie of Italy's Piedmont region. In his final years, the *cantautore* also became his nation's Leadbelly: the two essays published here tell the backstory to a pair of songs chronicling the contemporary migration crisis in Europe, in a period when racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia are even more telling there than they are here at home.

These words and music, on the other hand, make it impossible to see today's African immigrants as anything other than Italian and European: no one can hear Testa's stories as belonging to people who are in any way other. After all, as Testa reminds us, *lo sapevamo anche noi* ("we used to know it too"). After all, what part of the world today doesn't have a history of migration from country to city, or from homeland to new world, over the last few centuries, if not the past couple of decades? The loss of the land of our birth, along with the loss of traditions and language, is perhaps the most common experience shared across the globe today. Such are the stories that Gianmaria Testa has put to music.

As the philosopher Jonathan Glover recalls, "George Orwell fought against the fascists in the Spanish Civil War. He later described how a fascist soldier came in sight, half-dressed and running, holding up his trousers with both hands." Orwell commented, "I had come here to shoot at 'Fascists'; but a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a 'Fascist,' he is visibly a fellow creature, similar to yourself, and you don't feel like shooting at him." Woody Guthrie, in 1941, famously placed on his guitar the slogan "This Machine Kills Fascists." In our own day and age, it would no doubt be too simple, and overly reassuring, to suggest that any sort of music inevitably has any such redemptive effects. And yet we might still claim for music that which Jiko, the grandmother and Buddhist monk from Ruth Ozeki's wondrous *Tale for the Time Being*, claims for Zen meditation—that it is a *superpawa*. The focus, energy, and collective solidarity of music might just be the one force on earth, from the beginning of human society to the days of slaughter at Pulse and Bataclan, that does change fascists into fellow creatures. And even on our worst days, with their horror beyond belief, the music doesn't die.

*Jim Hicks*  
*for the editors*