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Reclaiming the Streets One Honk at a Time

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The Honk Festival, now in its second year, is intended to be the exact opposite. The flyers describe it simply as a "Festival of Activist Street Bands," but this is no average performance. Yes, there is music, lots of music, and there's theater too, but there are no stages, no DJ's, no cart-wielding vendors, and yeah, it's free.



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Besides the companies that are in position to profit from these events, the residents of the area rarely benefit from the use of public space by more than a few tax dollars. The vendors drive away in their carts, the performers break down their stages, the athlete's walk off the field, and what are we left with, besides the prospect of another predetermined public festival in the future?

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A total of seventeen street bands from all over the US, as well as a couple of international acts, converged in Davis Square in Somerville during the first weekend of October, 2007. The two-day festival started on Saturday, as the bands performed in and around Davis Square to wildly dancing crowds. Then, on Sunday was the first ever Honk Parade, a theatrical spectacle that marched from Davis to Harvard Square, with the message being, "Reclaim the Streets, for horns, bikes and feet."

But you ask what is an "activist street band?" Truly, there is no single definition. Each band combines multiple styles from all over the world, but all the instruments they use are acoustic. This gives the bands the ability to play just about anywhere. Each member only has to bring their instrument, creating an elasticity in the actual size and abilities of the group.

The Honk experience doesn't require "venues," such as clubs or bars or stadiums, but rather the point is for the music to be played on the streets and for people to use the space to dance. It is this element of the bands that unites them. While some bands are specifically tied to progressive or radical causes, others don't express any specific politics. Anarchism is another common belief shared from the members of many bands, but it would be a mistake to classify a band this way. Their biggest socio-political contribution is showing the public an alternative, capitalism-free, way to celebrate in public space.

The writer Charlie Keil, in his speech at the Honk Symposium, a preliminary talk at Tufts University a day before the festivities began, stressed the importance of the event's use of public space. "A honk is a short burst of sound," said Keil. "It announces a presence." It was simply this presence that is the most important to Honk. Whether through noise, speech, or dancing, the success of Honk was in its ability to bring people together in the streets and experience a celebration together without trying to sell them anything.

John Bell, whose band Second Line Social Aid and Pleasure Society, from Somerville, were paramount in organizing the festival, was the closest thing to a "conductor" of the activities for the weekend. "After last year's festival, there was a lot of encouragement to do a second one," said Bell. He helped organize and fund the whole festival along with the other seven members of the Honk Committee. "This year was somewhat more complex," said Bell. There were over 250 musicians that needed housing for the weekend, and it was up to the Committee to house them locally. "It's not like we got a huge grant and started hiring people," said Bell. "It's really community based, grassroots."

The Honk Festival was truly authentic in that it was organized by local residents and intended for local residents, without the prospect of profiting at all from it. It is this authenticity that drew me in from the start and completely changed my view of street performance. I felt like I was a part of something, rather than just a spectator in an unresponsive crowd as I danced alongside the various acts and unexpectedly participated in the parade on Sunday.

"So much of our culture now says 'don't go in the streets, stay home, go on the internet'" said Bell. This mentality has kept theater as a tool for the bourgeoisie, and has crippled live music's effects on the human psyche. "Live music is threatened as a species," said Keil. "If we can't connect with our rites of passage, then we're not going to be around much longer."

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