

“Circle A: Making Eurodance a Threat Again.” –

Practice-Based Autoethnographic Reflections on Political Musicking

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Version

This is the revised and expanded script of an autoethnographic performance presented on April 11, 2024, at the symposium “[“Sounds of Dissent’: A Practice-Based Research Symposium on Music, Sounds, and the Political,”](#) hosted by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dublin City University, Ireland.

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Abstract

tina and Malik are excited to be invited to talk about their music project Circle A at a practice-based research symposium on music, sounds, and the political. They founded Circle A in 2014 as the first Radical Eurodance act ever, with the self-declared mission of “making Eurodance a threat again” and framing it as “a four-to-the-floor declaration of war against any kind of injustice and oppression that haunts the world we live in.” Over the past few years, they have only occasionally performed or recorded, due to their time being taken up by kids, other bands, and a pandemic. In early 2024, they meet over a beer to revisit their joint work and think about the topics they would like to discuss at the symposium. They reminisce about when, how, and why they founded Circle A; how the band and its music developed; what the future may hold for it; how and to what ends they mixed Eurodance and politics; and what all of this has to do with their shared background in musicology. In the process, tina and Malik also engage in discussions about fundamental questions regarding the relationship between music and the political, such as: What makes music political? Who are the audiences of political music, and how do they influence musicians’ practices? What are criteria for deciding whether a piece of political music is “good,” or maybe rather: “successful”? Can (political) music change the world? If so, how and to what extent? How can the seriousness of social struggles be squared with humorous modes of artistic expression? – As the conversation unfolds, tina and Malik switch back and

forth between spoken language and song. In the end, they fail to produce notes for their symposium presentation, but they certainly enjoyed the intellectually stimulating – and sometimes controversial – exchange.

Introductory Remarks

The dialogue “‘Circle A: Making Eurodance a Threat Again.’ – Practice-Based Autoethnographic Reflections on Political Musicking” was performed by us, the authors and members of the Radical Eurodance act Circle A,¹ on April 11, 2024, in the Helen Roe Theatre at the Society House of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland (Dublin). It was presented as part of the symposium “‘Sounds of Dissent’: A Practice-Based Research Symposium on Music, Sounds, and the Political.”² The presentation took the form of a staged reading (see Figure 1). We read our respective parts of the dialogue and wore outfits that we would also wear during a Circle A concert performance. However, there was no theatrical acting in the strict sense. We sang the song extracts in the dialogue were sung live, some with instrumental playback tracks and some a cappella. PowerPoint slides containing photos, screenshots, and texts illustrating the contents of the dialogue were projected behind us during the presentation.

The script of the performance was written collaboratively. We agreed on an outline for the content, style, setting, and course of the dialogue beforehand. This outline drew inspiration from our actual conversations, but also included invented elements. We then divided up the task of creating drafts of the different sections among us. A first draft of the script was created by merging these sections, and it underwent several revisions by both of us and test readings, until

¹ Relevant online resources on Circle A are:

<https://circle-a.bandcamp.com/>,
<https://www.youtube.com/@circlea4754>,
<https://www.instagram.com/circleaeurodance/>,
<https://www.facebook.com/circleaeurodance>.

(all links in this preprint were last accessed October 4, 2025).

² For the symposium program, see <https://www.dcu.ie/theologyphilosophymusic/news/2024/mar/symposium-sounds-dissent>. See, furthermore, the documentation of the symposium at <https://www.brexitmusic-culture.co.uk/work/symposium>. The symposium also included a poster exhibition, for which we created a contribution (see <https://osf.io/wpx8v>), and a screening of the symposium participants’ artistic audiovisual work, for which we submitted the music video for our song “Dump the Bosses off Your Back!” (see footnote 37 for details).



Figure 1. Circle A presenting at the symposium “‘Sounds of Dissent’: A Practice-Based Research Symposium on Music, Sounds, and the Political,” Dublin, April 11, 2024 (photo by Jelena Gligorijević, with kind permission).

we agreed on a final version to be used in the performance. Thus, the individual parts of the *dramatis personae* tina and Malik cannot and should not be considered authored exclusively by the respective co-author tina or Malik. Nor can these dialogue parts consistently be said to represent exclusively one or the other co-author’s thoughts, though this may sometimes be the case, especially when concerning accounts of individual experiences. The levels of authors and *dramatis personae* do not correspond to each other in a straightforward way, and readers should not confuse one with the other.

The current version of the script differs from the version read at the symposium in several respects. While some passages of the dialogue parts have been revised and expanded slightly, there are no fundamental changes to the structure or content. Additionally, more detailed stage instructions have been added, as well as footnotes containing explanatory comments and references.

We characterize our approach in this dialogue as practice-based research on music,³ employing retrospective evocative autoethnography as our primary methodological framework for analysis, interpretation, and representation. The dialogue is practice-based in that it is fundamentally grounded in and reflects upon our own artistic practice and experience, “with all the rigour and focus of the research mentality but from an interior, experientially-informed perspective.”⁴ It is largely based on a post hoc examination of practices and experiences that occurred outside an explicit research framework.⁵ It is also not directly linked to a systematically planned, concrete, and methodical development of our artistic practice based on these reflections. For this reason, we are reluctant to categorize our work, in terms of Henk Borgdorff’s typology, as research *for* or *in* the arts, but rather situate it in the domain of research *on* the arts.⁶ However, it is probably advisable to understand these types of research not as categorically different, but rather as ideal points on a wider, multi-dimensional spectrum of research practices.

There is a palpable affinity between the field of practice-based arts research and the method of autoethnography that is most likely because the researcher’s/artist’s lived experience plays a key role in practice-based research and is also central to autoethnography. Accordingly, autoethnography has been widely embraced by practice-based arts researchers as “a means to

³ The term “practice-based” (part of the conceptual framework of the symposium for which the dialogue was originally created) seems to appropriately and non-controversially describe the nature of our research represented in the dialogue. Arguably, our work could also be described as “artistic research”; see, for example, the conceptual exploration of this field in Kathleen Coessens, Darla Crispin, and Anne Douglas, *The Artistic Turn: A Manifesto* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), which suggests various intersections between our work and artistic research practices and attitudes. Categorizing our work as artistic research would be possible not least because there is no generally accepted definition of artistic research. Some authors even argue against any attempt to find such consensus, see, for example, Søren Kjørup, “Pleading for Plurality: Artistic and Other Kinds of Research,” in *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, ed. Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 24–43. However, applying more specific definitions and models of artistic research, such as those proposed by Henk Borgdorff or Darla Crispin, may reveal that our work does not meet all criteria; see Henk Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2012), 145–149; Darla Crispin, “Artistic Research and Music Scholarship: Musings and Models from a Continental European Perspective,” in *Artistic Practice as Research in Music: Theory, Criticism, Practice*, ed. Mine Doğanatan-Dack (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 56–59.

⁴ Coessens, Crispin, and Douglas, *The Artistic Turn*, 91.

⁵ See below.

⁶ See Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 37–39.

understand, contextualize, and communicate the personal stories behind their artistic experiences.”⁷ We also leverage this fruitful and synergistic relationship in our dialogue.

Autoethnography has been defined as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*),”⁸ and this definition appropriately describes the work presented in this dialogue: We analyze and interpret data consisting of embodied knowledge of our artistic practices, our memories (not only of our time in Circle A, but also from earlier periods), analog and digital materials from our personal archives related to our artistic work, and publicly available media (for example, studio recordings of songs and concert videos) and other content from Circle A’s web presences. We do this to further understanding of the relationship between pop-musical and political practices as part of cultural experience in Austria during the second and third decades of the twenty-first century – and potentially also beyond this particular socio-cultural and historical frame of reference.⁹

Autoethnography is a method (or family of methods) of empirical data collection, analysis, and representation that is usually decided upon *before* embarking on a particular research endeavor, resulting in a deliberate and purposeful documentation of personal experiences and collection of supporting sources. In our case, however, the situation is different. As we also discuss in the dialogue itself, Circle A was not intended to be a research project, autoethnographic or otherwise. Although we continue our artistic work as Circle A (indeed, this dialogue

⁷ Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, “Artistic Autoethnography: Exploring the Interface Between Autoethnography and Artistic Research,” in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge 2022), 133.

⁸ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011): para. 1, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1101108>; emphasis in original. See also Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (London: Routledge, 2016), 48–49.

⁹ For a pioneering collection of autoethnographic work in the field of music, see Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Carolyn Ellis, eds., *Music Autoethnographies: Making Autoethnography Sing / Making Music Personal* (Bowden Hills: Australian Academic Press, 2009). For a methodological discussion of autoethnography in the context of music studies, see Christopher Wiley, “Autoethnography, Autobiography, and Creative Art as Academic Research in Music Studies: A Fugal Ethnodrama,” *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 8, no. 2: 72–115, <https://doi.org/10.22176/act18.1.73>.

is as much a part of our artistic work as it is of our scholarly work), the experiences and diverse sources that provide the core data for this dialogue stem from a time before we started working on the script. We only decided to use them as data for an autoethnographic study after the fact. Accordingly, our work here is *retrospective* autoethnography, as theorized in particular by Sasha Roseneil.¹⁰

Autoethnographic writing comes in various forms, but one prominent style is so-called *evocative* autoethnography, which was pioneered by Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, among others.¹¹ This dialogue draws inspiration from that tradition of autoethnography, which has been characterized “as a transgressive research practice that challenge[s], resist[s], or extend[s] the boundaries of conventional ethnographic writing practices” and “as a humanizing, moral, aesthetic, emotion-centered, political, and personal form of representation.”¹² According to Ellis and Bochner, evocative autoethnographers “compose stories that fuse[] social science and literature by merging the methods of the interpretive human sciences with the aesthetics of the arts and humanities,” creating texts that “combine the systematic, ‘scientific’ methodologies of ethnography with the evocative, creative, and artistic elements and forms of storytelling.”¹³ This inspiration is evident in our use of dramatization and fictionalization methods and in our use of dialogue to convey understanding beyond conventional modes of rational scholarly discourse, although such discourse is also woven into the dramatized text.¹⁴

¹⁰ See Sasha Roseneil, *Disarming Patriarchy: Feminism and Political Action at Greenham* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995), 7–8.

¹¹ See, for example, Carolyn Ellis, “Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Emotionally About Our Lives,” in *Representation and the Text: Re-Framing the Narrative Voice*, ed. William G. Tierney and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 115–140; Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

¹² Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*, 47.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁴ Fictionalized dialogues are a common form in evocative autoethnographic literature. An early example is Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, “Telling and Performing Personal Stories: The Constraints of Choice in Abortion,” in *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience*, ed. Carolyn Ellis and Michael G. Flaherty (Newbury Park: Sage, 1992), 79–101. Of course, dialogue as a form and genre of scholarly literature has a history reaching back until Greek antiquity; see Albert William Levi, “Philosophy as Literature: The Dialogue,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 9, no. 1 (1976): 1–20; Andrew Ford, “The Beginnings of Dialogue: Socratic Discourses and Fourth-Century Prose,” in *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, ed. Simon Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 29–44. Dialogue is also present in texts from traditions beyond the so-called Western

The creative and artistic nature of evocative autoethnography is another point of affinity between autoethnography and practice-based arts research. This suggests that performance is an appropriate and powerful mode of dissemination that can incorporate non-textual elements crucial to music.¹⁵ This option seemed attractive and adequate to us in the context of the “Sounds of Dissent” symposium. Given our dual identities as musicologists and musicians, creating an autoethnographic performance seemed a natural way “to write so that our creative identity can be fulfilled through the autoethnographic writing process rather than be restrained by it.”¹⁶

A live performance like ours at the “Sounds of Dissent” symposium is essentially an ephemeral event. There is not even a documentary video recording of our presentation at the symposium. If one did exist, it would still be a derivative media object. Even more so, this revised script should not be considered equivalent to the performance or even a deficient surrogate. Instead, we find it more fruitful to view it as a related yet independent work that illuminates our theme in its own right, by its own means, and, because of its text-based form, from its own particular angle.

Finally, note that the dramatized and fictionalized account presented in our dialogue is not merely a means of disseminating previously acquired knowledge. Rather, the joint process of creatively co-authoring the script and designing the performance served as a method of collaborative knowledge production. This process facilitated lively and critical inquiry, discussion, reflection, and synthesis between the two of us in a way that co-authoring a conventional scholarly conference paper with its rather standardized form and style, most likely would not have. Thus, to the extent that this process and its product possess both scholarly and artistic qualities,

philosophical tradition; see, for example, Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2023).

¹⁵ See Bartleet, “Artistic Autoethnography,” 139–141. See also the debates surrounding adequate modes of publishing artistic research that move beyond mere text and the notion of “exposition,” for example, in Michael Schwab and Henk Borgdorff, eds., *The Exposition of Artistic Research: Publishing Art in Academia* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2014).

¹⁶ Bartleet, “Artistic Autoethnography,” 140.

our work can also be considered research *in art*, as defined by Borgdorff, where “artistic practice itself is an essential component of both the research process and the research results.”¹⁷

Acknowledgements

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A Wednesday night in late February 2024 at the Tick Tack, a dimly lit metal/rock pub located in the semi-basement of a late-nineteenth century residential building in Graz, Austria. About half of the tables are occupied, with a few customers sitting at the bar. The room is filled with the buzz of voices, and metal music plays at a moderate volume in the background. Tina and Malik sit together at a table in the back of the pub. They have beers in front of them and are engaged in animated conversation.

MALIK: . . .and then on Sunday I was *so* hungover. But I tell you: it was worth the fun. – Anyway, that was my weekend, but we have to talk about our presentation at the Dublin symposium.

TINA: Yeah, I already thought a bit about this.

M: (*Leaning in.*) Okay, cool, tell me!

¹⁷ Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 38.

T: Well, I guess – since we are not super-famous – we will have to start with some background on our history and music.

M: Of course! So, what are your memories of our beginnings?

T: First of all, can you believe the fact that Circle A started ten years ago? Our lives were so different back then. We had much more time for music, friends, partying. . .

M: Yes, we really went out all the time – and still had the energy to finish our Master degrees in musicology.

T: Yes, and I think that is how Circle A started. Us going out, drinking beer, dancing, and discussing a wide range of topics, from everyday life to politics. And this happened on many occasions at SUB. And SUB was perfect for that!

M: How would you describe what SUB is? The people in Dublin will not know.

T: Well, we should mention that SUB is a left-wing community project at its core; that it is a self-managed and non-profit venue in Graz, a space for concerts, parties, readings, lectures, discussions, workshops, and so on.¹⁸

M: Yeah, and that they try to offer a community and a space that is critical of hierarchical and oppressive social structures.

T: Of course, we shouldn't give the impression that everything is or was perfect there. But it was a space I really enjoyed going to.

M: I still enjoy SUB – if I find the time to go there.

T: (*Enthusiastically.*) Right, me too. . . So, what I'm getting at is that we were discussing political issues there, of course. And we would discuss them while or after dancing to 80s and 90s pop music, like Eurodance music.

¹⁸ See Figures 2–4. For further background on SUB, see the venue's website: <https://subsubsub.at/>.



Figure 2. Malik and tina partying at SUB, September 3, 2010, around midnight (photos by It-Grrrl Görsch, with kind permission).

M: Yeah, first there would be something like a concert by a no wave hardcore punk post-everything band. And afterwards everyone would dance to “Coco Jamboo” by Mr. President or “How Much is the Fish?” by Scooter.¹⁹

T: And a lot of the, let’s say, “politically conscious” people there danced too. But most of those songs were apolitical or had terrible lyrics.

M: Or they were from really questionable musicians, bands, or producers.

T: Exactly! And I remember us realizing that there was not a lot of political music out there that we could dance to. Which is a pity, because, in the words of the Vengaboys: “We – like – to

¹⁹ “Coco Jamboo,” track 2 on Mr. President, *We See the Same Sun*, WEA 0630-14946-2, 1996, compact disc; available on YouTube, uploaded on December 6, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jl-QpJNKiQ>; “How Much is the Fish?”, track 2 on Scooter, *No Time to Chill*, Edel 0064892CLU, 1998, compact disc; available on YouTube, uploaded on October 31, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbB3iGRHtqA>.



Figure 3. Circle A in front of the entrance to SUB (still from the “SUB bleibt!” music video, see footnote 38).

party!”²⁰ And at some point, I remember you saying “I have a proposal for you: We should form a eurodance band. . .”

M: (*With emphasis.*) “. . .but with political lyrics!”

T: And I was thrilled about the idea! What I cannot recall is how we came up with the name Circle A, can you?

M: I think the name was suggested when we were in Berlin with the whole “gang” from the musicology program. . .

T: Oh, you mean when we celebrated the thirtieth birthday of Jonas,²¹ who had moved from Graz to Berlin to do his PhD?

M: Yes, that must have been in May 2014 or so.

T: What should I say? Only good things happen when musicologists come together.

²⁰ “We Like to Party!”, track 1 on Vengaboys, *The Party Album!*, Breakin’ Records 559 792-2, 1998, compact disc; available on YouTube, uploaded on November 13, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Zbi0XmGtMw>.

²¹ We are referring to Jonas Traudes; see, for example, his book *Musizierende Wunderkinder: Adoration und Observation in der Öffentlichkeit um 1800* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2018).



Figure 4. Circle A in the backstage room of SUB (still from the “SUB bleibt!” music video, see footnote 38).

M: But it was your then-boyfriend Tamás²² who initially suggested the band name – who was not a musicologist.

T: (*Surprised.*) Really? Oh, I didn’t remember this. Of course, *he* suggests “Circle A.”

M: Because he identified as an anarchist.

T: And then you added our slogan “Making Eurodance a Threat Again.” How did you get the idea for that?

M: Well, “Making Punk a Threat Again.” has been around for a while. For example, it was the slogan of the anarcho-punk zine *Profane Existence* – though I don’t know if they invented it. This slogan was then turned into “Making Disco a Threat Again.” in an article in the German hyper-intellectual pop culture magazine *Spex*. In turn, the German punk band . . .but alive made fun of *Spex* in a song in which they also quoted the disco version of the slogan.²³ So that song was actually the original source of the slogan for me. And then I simply replaced disco with eurodance. That’s it.

²² Pseudonymized.

²³ “Ein sozialkritisches Schlagzeugsolo später,” track 6 on . . .but alive, *Hallo Endorphin*, B.A. Records B.A.008, 1999, compact disc; available on YouTube, uploaded July 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnmMhGawo30>. The *Spex* quotation is heard at 3:11. For further information on the *Spex* reference in the song,



Figure 5. Circle A presenting the Circle Aid donation check to members of AMSEL at the anarchist community center Schwarzes Radieschen, Graz, February 19, 2015 (photo private, with kind permission).

T: Ah, I didn’t know that. – You know, I was browsing through Circle A’s Facebook page to prepare for our meeting – are you aware that we made quite a few things “a threat again”?

M: Art exhibitions, poetry, feminism, academia, drinking, home recording. . .

T: And fundraising! I almost forgot about that. We did a fundraiser in December 2014 and called it Circle Aid.

M: Yes, our Band Aid spoof!

T: We donated money to AMSEL, this grassroots initiative in Graz by unemployed people for unemployed people.²⁴

see singer Markus Wiebusch’s comments in Michael Will, “. . .but alive – Interview,” *Plastic Bomb*, winter 1999/2000, 9.

²⁴ See Figure 5. For further background on AMSEL, see their website: <http://www.amsel-org.info/>.

M: Oh, yeah, every time our song “Hallelujah! I’m a Bum” was streamed, we added 10 cents to our donation.

T: Yes. “Hallelujah! I’m a Bum” – which was our very first song! I actually looked in my mailbox and found this historical email from July 2014, in which you suggested that we use lyrics from the Wobblies’ *Little Red Songbook*.²⁵

M: There we found “Hallelujah! I’m a Bum”!²⁶

T: I remember sitting on my *little red couch* with my acoustic guitar and trying to come up with something catchy and just using some lines from the original song. . .

M: And then I tried to build a backing track on my old laptop with typical Eurodance characteristics. Four-to-the floor bass drum, synthie arpeggiator, certain rhythms, and things like that.

T: (*Mock-serious tone.*) So, you conducted a thorough style analysis like Guido Adler!²⁷

M: Well, the music analytical attitude from our musicology studies was certainly helpful, although it was no systematic attempt at creating a full-blown style copy. But it turned out to be a really catchy song that people loved to dance and sing to.

²⁵ We used this edition of the song collection: Industrial Workers of the World, ed., *Songs to Fan the Flames of Discontent: The Little Red Song Book. International Edition*, 36th ed. (Ypsilanti: IWW, 1995). For background on the *Little Red Songbook*, see Archie Green, David Roediger, Franklin Rosemont, and Salvatore Salerno, eds., *The Big Red Songbook: 250+ IWW Songs!* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016).

²⁶ The original lyrics of “Hallelujah! I’m a Bum” were most likely written around 1898 by Harry “Haywire Mac” McClintock “and possibly others, now unknown” (Green et al, *The Big Red Songbook*, 64). For more information, see McClintock’s own account of the song’s genesis, “On ‘Hallelujah on the Bum’,” in *The Big Red Songbook: 250+ IWW Songs!*, ed. Archie Green, David Roediger, Franklin Rosemont, and Salvatore Salerno (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 353–356. The version of the lyrics from the 36th edition of the *Little Red Songbook* that we used includes a few verses that were added later. The other *Little Red Songbook* lyrics that we have used in Circle A songs are “Dump the Bosses off Your Back!” (lyrics by John Brill; <https://circle-a.bandcamp.com/track/dump-the-bosses-off-your-back>) and “The Preacher and the Slave” (lyrics by Joe Hill; <https://circle-a.bandcamp.com/track/the-preacher-and-the-slave>), tracks 1 and 3, respectively, on the EP *Dump the Bosses!!* (2015), and “Joe Hill’s Last Will” (lyrics by Joe Hill; <https://circle-a.bandcamp.com/track/joe-hills-last-will>), track 2 on the 2017 EP *Saying No to Status Quo!* (2017). We composed new vocal melodies for our versions of these songs. For “The Preacher and the Slave,” we kept the original melodic contour and main metric and rhythmic characteristics of the traditional melody (borrowed from the Christian hymn “The Sweet By-and-By,” composed by Joseph P. Webster), but we made harmonic adjustments that lent the melody a more minor character, particularly during the verses. Our version of “The Preacher and the Slave” has been called “the most unique recent Hill rendering” by Bucky Halker, “Tramp, Tramp, Tramp: The Songs of Joe Hill Around the World,” in *Wobblies of the World: A Global History of the IWW*, edited by Peter Cole, David Struthers, and Kenyon Zimmer (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 296.

²⁷ See, for example, Guido Adler, *Methode der Musikgeschichte* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1919), 110–191.

(tina spontaneously starts to sing an excerpt from “Hallelujah! I’m a Bum.”

*Malik follows her cue.)*²⁸

T: Why don’t you work like other folks do?

M: How the hell can I work when there’s no work to do?

T: Why do you work eight hours or more

There’d be jobs for two, if you’d only work four

T AND M: Hallelujah, I’m a bum,

Hallelujah, bum again,

Hallelujah, I’m a bum,

Hallelujah, bum again,

Hallelujah, I’m a bum,

Hallelujah, bum again,

Hallelujah, I’m a bum,

Hallelujah, bum again.

(tina and Malik stop singing.)

M: Do you remember our first performance?

T: Yeah, we did “Hallelujah! I’m a Bum” as a gimmick at a concert of all our friends’ bands at

SUB.²⁹ But we did not sing live.

M: Right! We did lip-sync at the time.

T: And we continued to do so for a couple of shows, because we thought it would fit in with the overall concept.

²⁸ “Hallelujah! I’m a Bum (Long Version),” track 1 on *Hallelujah! I’m a Bum*, Bandcamp, 2014, <https://circle-a.bandcamp.com/track/hallelujah-im-a-bum-long-version>.

²⁹ The concert took place on November 15, 2014 and featured four bands from Graz covering each other’s songs. The participating bands were maneki nekoč (in which tina was also the singer), Robotra, Hidden by the Grapes, and Franz Strøsuk. Circle A contributed a studio-recorded medley of cover versions of songs by the four bands, which was played during the after-show party; see “Our Tribute to Magrapi Strohbotra,” Bandcamp, 2014, <https://circle-a.bandcamp.com/track/our-tribute-to-magrapi-strohbotra>.

M: Like Milli Vanilli. But we soon realized that we wanted to sing live, because it would just work better. . .

T: . . .and be more fun.

M: And soon, we also started to write our own lyrics, right?

T: Yes, we used a number of other songs from the *Little Red Songbook*. But then, step-by-step, we moved on to original lyrics.

M: What was our first song with self-authored lyrics? “No One is Illegal”?

T: Technically yes, but then it was basically a collage of various anti-racist demonstration slogans.

(tina starts to sing the chorus of “No One is Illegal,” snapping her fingers on 2 and 4.

*Malik joins in.)*³⁰

T: No one is illegal!

M: No border, no Nation – stop deportation!

T: No one is illegal!

M: No nation, no border – fight law and order!

(Malik and tina stop singing.)

T: So, I would say, the lyrics for “F-E-M-I-N-I-S-M” from the *Saying NO to Status Quo!* EP were the first original ones.

(Malik claps in four beats, then he and tina start singing the first lines of “F-E-M-I-N-I-S-M

*(Saying No to Status Quo)”)*³¹

T and M: F to the E to the M to the I to the N to the I to the S to the M

F to the E to the M to the I to the N to the I to the S to the M

³⁰ “No One is Illegal,” track 1 on *Refugees Welcome*, Bandcamp, 2014, <https://circle-a.bandcamp.com/track/no-one-is-illegal>.

³¹ “F-E-M-I-N-I-S-M (Saying No to Status Quo),” track 1 on *Saying No to Status Quo!*, Bandcamp, 2017, <https://circle-a.bandcamp.com/track/f-e-m-i-n-i-s-m-saying-no-to-status-quo-2>. The song was first published as track 15 on side A of Magdalena Gasser, Christian Sundl, and Lina Maria Gärtner (ed.), *Wilhelmine show me the No No No*, Wilhem Show Me the Major Label wmtml44, 2017; available on Bandcamp: <https://wilhelminshowmethemajorlabel.bandcamp.com/track/f-e-m-i-n-i-s-m-saying-no-to-status-quo>.

T: No! We don’t need you

To tell us what to do

We need the right to choose

No! No one wants you

To claim the truth

We wanna live like we want to

(Malik and tina stop singing.)

M: But on this song, we asked people to send us lines or texts that we could use for a song, right?

T: Yes, it was a collaborative effort to some extent, but all material was original.³² “Hopeless Optimists,” on the same EP, was fully written by us alone.

M: And then the third song on *Saying NO to Status Quo!* was “Joe Hill’s Last Will,”³³ again from the *Little Red Songbook*. But afterwards, we only used our own lyrics.

T: What I just realized is that we tried to involve other people a couple of times, not only in the case of the lyrics of “F-E-M-I-N-I-S-M.” Remember, that we had our own protest choir on “No One is Illegal” and “Alerta antifascista”?³⁴

M: Yeah, the Erste Grazer Demochor!³⁵

T: Also the roller derby choir on “Eat My Dust,” various women contributing to the song “Stolzlippen,” background dancers on stage. . .³⁶

³² In particular, Katharina Pressl and Lisi Pressl contributed lines.

³³ See footnote 26.

³⁴ Regarding “No One is Illegal,” see footnote 30; “Alerta Antifascista,” track 3 on *Refugees Welcome*, Bandcamp, 2015, <https://circle-a.bandcamp.com/track/alerta-antifascista>.

³⁵ “First Demonstration Choir of Graz,” see Figure 6.

³⁶ “Eat My Dust!”, featuring Dust City Rollers, track 1 on *Eat My Dust*, Bandcamp, 2017, <https://circle-a.bandcamp.com/track/eat-my-dust-feat-dust-city-rollers>; “Stolzlippen,” featuring b_schwestis, Edie Calie, It-Grrrl Görsch, Shiftstick Dana, and Susi Sacchettino, track 1 on *Stolzlippen*, Bandcamp, 2020, <https://circle-a.bandcamp.com/track/stolzlippen-feat-b-schwestis-edie-calie-it-grrrl-g-rsch-shiftstick-dana-susi-sacchettino>. “Stolzlippen” is a play on the German term for labia, “Schamlippen,” which literally translates to “shame lips,” whereas “Stolzlippen” translates to “pride lips.”

M: That’s right! Or the “Dump the Bosses off Your Back!” video together with the Isodance crew from Salzburg.³⁷

T: Of course, it would be an exaggeration to say that we were a participatory community project.

But looking back, I wonder if our musical practice itself was perhaps also political. Also, think about our song “SUB bleibt!”, which we recorded in support of SUB when it was under attack by right-wing politicians of Graz.³⁸

M: Okay, this thought might be a good transition from our band history to the question of the political in our musical practice.

T: Yeah, that could work. What should we talk about in the remainder of our paper?

M: (*Looks at his phone.*) Well, in our abstract we mention the following questions: What makes music political? Who are the audiences of political music, and how do they influence musicians’ practices? What are criteria for deciding whether a piece of political music is “good,” or maybe rather: “successful”? Can (political) music change the world? If so, how and to what extent? How can the seriousness of social struggles be squared with humorous modes of artistic expression?

T: I’d say we promised quite a lot. . .

M: Thank goodness we didn’t also mention the issue of “authenticity”! (*Both laugh.*)

T: I mean, we will address some of these questions already in the account of our band history – at least implicitly. And maybe we can leave some of the other questions “for the discussion and coffee break.”

³⁷ “Dump the Bosses off Your Back!”, music video, produced by Felicitas Biller and Thomas Pfertner, 5:38, uploaded to YouTube on September 3, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dI1K-DrPw5Y>.

³⁸ “SUB bleibt!” is available in several versions. The “Eurodance Version” and the “Reggae Version” were created for SUB’s online solidarity music campaign and published on Bandcamp in June 2018 (<https://subbleibt.bandcamp.com/album/circle-a-sub-bleibt>). The “Once More with Eurodance Remix” was created a few months later and published as track 2 on *Once More with Eurodance*, Bandcamp, 2018, <https://circle-a.bandcamp.com/track/sub-bleibt-once-more-with-eurodance-remix>. There is also a self-produced music video for the “Eurodance Version,” 3:04, uploaded to YouTube on July 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpCAkETfpSU>.



Figure 6. *The Erste Grazer Demochor recording the chants on “Alerta antifascista,” Wuthe Rehearsal Space, Graz, March 1, 2015 (photo by Christina Fischer-Lessiak).*

M: That’s right. (*Chuckles.*) Now, I think one point that we should mention in our presentation

is that we didn’t think a lot about such issues in the beginning and that Circle A was definitely not intended to be a practice-based research project in political musicking.

T: This is something that we do now by reflecting more systematically on our practice in retrospect. And yes, I also think that we simply “did our thing,” so to speak. Somehow it made sense for us to use left-wing lyrics on cheesy dance tracks.

M: And it was a lot of fun creating the songs!

T: Indeed! And we expected that at least some people in our surrounding would also enjoy it.

M: Regarding the question of “What makes music political?” – I think this was certainly an issue we considered to some extent in our practice, even if we didn’t theorize it back then. After all, we intended to create political music – and to accomplish this, we drew on the most obvious vehicle: the song lyrics.

T: And not just any lyrics, but by drawing on the *Little Red Songbook* we positioned ourselves in a “grand historical tradition” of activist songwriting.

M: At some point we also included a cover version of “Macht kaputt, was euch kaputt macht” by Ton Steine Scherben in our live set –³⁹

T: (*Dramatic.*) “Destroy what destroys you!”

M: – which can be considered the epitome of a political rock song and a political rock band in the German-speaking world.

T: But I think it is not only the lyrics that make our music political, there are also occasional melodic quotations without any lyrics built into the songs. For example, the melody of “Die Arbeiter von Wien” in our concert intro –

M: Which some people in Dublin may rather know from the Soviet song “White Army, Black Baron.”⁴⁰

T: – or the “Internationale” in the concert outro.

M: And there is also the “Bella ciao!” quotation in “Alerta antifascista.” – The lyrics and the melodic quotations were certainly intentional – to make our music political. But another important factor are our performance contexts, in many cases at least: the SUB, which inspired us in the first place and where we did a lot of our shows, with its explicitly emancipatory and radical agenda.

³⁹ Ton Steine Scherben, “Macht kaputt, was euch kaputt macht,” track 4 on *Warum geht es mir so dreckig?*, David Volksmund Produktion SST 13, 1971, vinyl LP; available on YouTube, uploaded on December 5, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTE28YU_FrY. For discussion of Ton Steine Scherben in historical context during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when “Macht kaputt, was euch kaputt macht” was created, see Timothy S. Brown, “Music as a Weapon? Ton Steine Scherben and the Politics of Rock in Cold War Berlin,” *German Studies Review* 32, no.1 (2009): 1–22. An unofficial live recording of our cover, performed at a concert on November 2, 2017, at Volkshaus Graz, as part of the queerograd 2017 festival in Graz, can be found in this video, beginning at 37:25: “Circle A live at queerograd 2017,” uploaded to YouTube by Agent Coop on December 20, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1o-HQzRarY&t=2245s>.

⁴⁰ Fritz Brügel wrote the lyrics of “Die Arbeiter von Wien” (“The Workers of Vienna”) at some point in the 1920s. The song borrows its melody from the Soviet march song “The Red Army is the Strongest” (“Красная Армия всех сильнее”), commonly known as “White Army, Black Baron” (“Белая Армия, Чёрный Барон”), which was composed by Samuel Pokrass; see *dasrotewien.at: Weblexikon der Wiener Sozialdemokratie*, s.v. “Die Arbeiter von Wien,” <https://www.dasrotewien.at/seite/die-arbeiter-von-wien>.

T: Or all those places in other cities that are a bit like SUB, such as Café DeCentral in Innsbruck, where we also had great shows, or EKH in Vienna.⁴¹

M: Our shows there were often also in the context of “solidarity parties,” to gather money for some political cause, like anti-repression work.

T: Also, we shouldn’t forget the protest song contests in Graz and Vienna in which we competed – and won, at least once!⁴²

M: And there were the shows at these rural communes, that had really taken us to their hearts, like the Wieserhoisl agricultural collective in Styria or the queer-feminist project GemSe in Carinthia.⁴³

T: There were also a lot of queer-feminist contexts, like the queerograd and the Queerriot festival.⁴⁴

M: Even when we wrote “Eat My Dust” as the anthem for the Dust City Rollers and performed at their matches, this positioned us in a queer-feminist context due to the political ideology of the roller derby scene.⁴⁵ – This strong queer-feminist aspect is slightly ironic, given the rather cis and hetero lives that we now lead.

⁴¹ Following disputes and changes among the collective running the venue, Café DeCentral was renamed Café Lotta. Further information on the Café DeCentral era, during which the Circle A concerts took place, can be found on the old website: <https://radar.squat.net/en/innsbruck/decentral>. For further background on the Ernst-Kirchweiger-Haus (EKH), see its website: <https://med-user.net/~ekh/>.

⁴² See Figures 7 and 8. The Vienna Protestsongcontest, initiated by the Rabenhof Theater in 2004, commemorates the so-called February Fights between Social Democrats and Fascists in Austria in 1934. This annual event honors the best protest song submitted to the competition, based on a multi-stage selection process that encompasses short-listing of submitted tracks and subsequent live performances that are evaluated by a jury and by the audience. The Grazer Protestsongcontest, partly modeled on the Vienna event, relies fully on audience voting and has been organized since 2010 by the Styrian branch of the Communist Youth of Austria (KJÖ). Circle A participated in and won the Fifth Grazer Protestsongcontest (November 14, 2015, Volkshaus Graz) with “No One is Illegal.” We also performed the same song at the 2016 Vienna Protestsongcontest (January 22, 2016, Haus der Begegnung Rudolfsheim), “F-E-M-I-N-I-S-M (Saying No to Status Quo)” at the Sixth Grazer Protestsongcontest (December 2, 2016, Volkshaus Graz), and “SUB bleibt!” at the eighth Grazer Protestsongcontest (November 23, 2018, Volkshaus Graz).

⁴³ For further information on Wieserhoisl and GemSe, see the two projects’ websites: <https://www.wieserhoisl.at/>; <https://gemse.org/>.

⁴⁴ Circle A performed at the queerograd 2017 festival (for details, see footnote 39) and at the 4th QUEERIoT festival (May 18, 2018, Forum Stadtpark).

⁴⁵ For a concise review of queer gender politics in contemporary WFTDA (Women’s Flat Track Derby Association) roller derby, see Hannah Kettley-Linsell, Janine K. Coates, and Gemma Witcomb, “‘It Doesn’t Matter How You Identify, You Can Still Skate with Us’: Gender Inclusivity in Women’s Flat Track Roller Derby,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 47, no. 5 (2024): 392–395, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01937235231223987>. See also the Dust City Roller’s self-description on their website: <https://www.dustcityrollers.com/who-we-are/>.



Figure 7. Circle A performing at the Fifth Grazer Protestsongcontest, Volkshaus Graz, November 14, 2015 (photo private, with kind permission).

T: (*Smirking.*) That’s what they call dialectics, I guess.

M: We never performed at demonstrations, right?

T: Not as far as I remember.

M: I guess we would have, if someone had asked us? But we never made any active efforts to be included.

T: Could it also be that not everyone really gets what we are doing? That we are too controversial, at least for some people?

M: What do you mean?

T: I mean, on the one hand, you could say that we have a populist approach – catchy hooklines, pop arrangements, simple structures, straightforward dance beats, etc. But at the same time, it’s obvious that the approach is somewhat tongue-in-cheek. And I think some people are not sure whether we are only ironic about the aesthetics or also about the political issues we address.

M: You’re right. Can you remember this one article in this obscure anarchist zine from Graz, *Yegussa*?⁴⁶

T: I have dim memories. . .

M: The anonymous authors made some disparaging remarks about the shallowness and self-centeredness of current left-wing politics in Graz. In this context, they criticized the inflationary and superficial use of political slogans, “which have recently even appeared in songs,”⁴⁷ as they wrote, suggesting that people use them without any consequences in terms of action, but rather to assure themselves of their affiliation with a left-wing scene. The only example of such a supposedly superficial slogan mentioned in the article is “Refugees are welcome here.”⁴⁸

T: (*Laughs loudly.*) Guilty as charged!

M: I don’t know who exactly wrote this article, but I believe there are good reasons to read this criticism of superficiality and self-referential celebration of the scene as directed against us as well. The article came out one or two months after we had released our *Refugees Welcome* EP with “No One is Illegal” on it. And we definitely had some visibility at that time within the Graz left-wing scene chided by the authors.

T: And there was also the incident with this one guy in the audience at our “It’s a Circle-A-Kinda Christmas” event at SUB.

M: (*Sarcastically.*) Ah, fond memories. . . You mean with Damian⁴⁹?

T: Yes! You remember, he got really angry and aggressive during our show about the fact that we are mixing left-wing contents with mainstream pop aesthetics.

M: Well, we also know that he was not quite in control of his senses on this night.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ “Was heißt ‘links sein’?”, *Yegussa*, April 2015, 10–12.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Pseudonymized.

⁵⁰ The confrontation with Damian at “It’s a Circle A Kinda Christmas” was artistically portrayed by the Graz-based author stoertebeker as a mini-drama titled “It’s an Untergrund Kinda Christmas”; see stoertebeker, *Taggen bitte Elsewhere: Szenen aus dem Untergrund III* (Graz: Risograd, 2019), 30–35.



Figure 8. Circle A performing at the Sixth Grazer Protestsongcontest, Volkshaus Graz, December 2, 2016 (photo private, with kind permission).

T: Yeah, who knows what drugs he was on. . .

M: But, of course, he is probably not the only person with these concerns. At the same time, it's not as if Damian was arguing that we should be more avant-gardist in our aesthetics. I think he had a rather conservative notion about which musical styles would fit an emancipatory political cause and which would not. Something like hardcore punk would have been alright, I suppose.

T: Also, most people at our shows seem to have a pretty good time, and they tell us so. Often, they may not even know us, but rather want to see one of the other bands. And then, they may be surprised at first about our performance.

M: Luckily, often pleasantly surprised –

T: Because they enjoy the break with conventional leftist aesthetics. But still, these controversial experiences – I think they led us to reflect more explicitly on the politics of our music, right?

M: That’s true.

T: And to be honest, before we started with Circle A, I always had a lot of respect for making political music. There are so many potential sources of misunderstanding, political sensitivities that can be offended, and pitfalls that you can step into.

M: I never really had these concerns with my earlier bands, but that was most likely because I was simply more naïve back then. – Should we go into this debate about the cultural industry and political pop music? For example, Adorno’s critique? This would seem to be relevant.⁵¹

T: Uh. . . I would suggest we leave this for the discussion – and hope that no one brings this topic up. Otherwise, I might be tempted to respond that Adorno was simply a bourgeois snob and major buzzkill.⁵²

M: (*In a mocking tone of professorial understatement.*) Which I think is a balanced and well-founded scholarly assessment.

T: Now, I think there is one really interesting question in our abstract that we should talk about: do you think that political music can change the world?

M: The funny thing is, I got asked this question by a fanzine writer about twenty years ago, when I still played with my punk band Cut My Skin.

T: And what did you say?

⁵¹ We have a specific comment by Adorno in mind that he made about anti-militarist/pacifist protest songs in a TV interview recorded during the Vietnam War. The passage can be found in this documentary at 37:13: *Adorno: Wer denkt, ist nicht wütend*, directed by Meinhard Prill and Kurt Schneider (arte/SWR, 2003), uploaded to YouTube by PhilosophieKanal on August 27, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1dbBpVlKi0&t=2233s>. This comment is discussed in more detail in Gwen Moore, “‘Bread and Roses’: A Song of Social Protest or Hollowed Out Resistance?”, in *Songs of Social Protest: International Perspectives*, ed. Aileen Dillane, Martin J. Power, Eoin Devereux, and Amanda Haynes (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 376–378.

⁵² Our remarks about Adorno’s stance on political pop music sparked a lively, but inconclusive, debate during the Q&A session. The debate focused on whether he had a generally valid point and, if so, whether our music and musical practice were subject to his criticism.

M: Something like: “I hope so.”⁵³ – Today, I would say that I am even less optimistic. I think music can’t make a change, at least not a political one, political in a narrower sense. Things like demonstrations, strikes, even bricks and guns – whether we like it or not – can make a political change, but songs don’t. I think 90% of the people at our shows are largely in agreement with what we are singing about.

T: Probably.

M: I mean, we are pretty much preaching to the converted – after all, we are performing songs with a simplified message and do not write profound essays in political analysis that can stimulate controversial debates and maybe contribute to the development of political consciousness or strategy.

T: (*Skeptically.*) Hmm. . .

M: Maybe sometimes, there are people in the audience who, let’s say, have a feminist and anti-racist stance but find capitalism not that bad. But I don’t believe they will start to critically reconsider capitalist society because they listened to a song like “Dump the Bosses off Your Back!”.

T: I am actually not that pessimistic in this regard. When I think about my teenage years, political songs by bands like the Clash or the Slits made me reflect on certain topics in the first place. For example, capitalism and feminism. Music can be a medium of self-politicization, I would argue.

M: That’s right.

T: Concerts by such bands can also be a place to meet like-minded people – politically and musically like-minded. Maybe they will become people with whom you will discuss political issues, go to demonstrations, or engage in other forms of activism.

⁵³ Malik remembers making this statement, but he could not find a copy of the respective interview in his – admittedly incomplete – personal archive of his time with Cut My Skin or online.

M: I totally agree. Also, now that I think about it, there is an aspect to political music, which I would like to call the “Bread and Roses” aspect. Like in this old feminist song,⁵⁴ where it says: “Yes, it is bread we fight for – but we fight for roses, too!” What I mean is that the main struggle is of course against oppression and exploitation and for freedom, food, shelter, healthcare, etc. for everyone.

T: (*Nods interestedly.*) Okay.

M: But if we want to “overthrow all relations in which” humans are “debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being[s]” – you know, like Marx said –,⁵⁵ then we must also make sure that the cultural needs of human life are satisfied: Will there be sufficient space for creative expression? And what kinds of music, literature, or other art forms would we like to have in such a liberated and more humane society? Even though food, shelter, and these things are, of course, fundamental to our existence, I would say that the cultural aspects are equally essential for a dignified life.

T: I agree. And I think this is very much a matter for the here and now: Even within the fiercest struggle there needs to be space for beauty and pleasure, or otherwise people may lose hope and confidence and give up. And in this regard, I think it is desirable to have music to enjoy and – in our case – party to that is in harmony with our political and ethical values.

M: It is certainly better than consuming songs that are affirmative of present society, or maybe even explicitly sexist or consumerist.

T: (*Checking her phone.*) Oh, it’s really late already! I have to get up early tomorrow for work.

M: Maybe you should consider – dumping your boss off your back?

⁵⁴ “Bread and Roses” is a poem written by James Oppenheim that was later set to music in several versions. It was first published in *The American Magazine*, December 1911, 214. In an epigraph to the poem, Oppenheim calls “‘Bread for all, and Roses, too’ . . . a slogan of the women in the West.” There is some speculation about specific sources of inspiration from the women’s suffrage and labor movement; see the overview in *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Bread and Roses,” last modified July 12, 2025, 18:51, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bread_and_Roses&oldid=1300201111.

⁵⁵ Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 3, 1843–44 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 182.

T: (*Sarcastically.*) Haha, very funny! Did you take any notes for our Dublin paper?

M: No, sorry, I didn't.

T: Me neither.

M: Never mind, we will figure it out until the eleventh of April! – Hurry home! I'll take care of the bill.

T: Thank you! See you soon!

M: Bye!

(tina gets up from the table and leaves the pub. Malik waves goodbye to her and then turns back to his drink, looking thoughtful. The chorus of “Dump the Bosses off Your Back!”⁵⁶ starts playing.)

— *Curtain* —

⁵⁶ See footnote 26.