

A Place in the Buzz

study time

15 minutes

- Excerpt from "Nobro@w: The Culture of Marketing The Marketing of Culture." New York: Alfred A. Knopf. (2000).

SHHHsss sighed the subway doors as I stepped on the train at Franklin Street. Almost eleven a.m. and the car was half empty. I stuck my legs out into the passageway and started reading the *New York Post* according to my usual formula: one stop for gossip, two stops for media news, and four stops for sports, although on this day I was allowing myself five stops to bone up on the upcoming Knicks-Pacers game. I wore expensive black headphones for the Discman over a black nylon convict-style cap, a fashion I picked up from the homeys in the rap videos.

Biggie Smallz, *Ready to Die*, was on the Discman.

*I get swift with the lyrical gift
bit you with the dick
make your kidneys shift
Here we go, here we go
But I'm not Domino
I got the funk flow
To make your drawers drop slow
So
Recognize
The dick size
In these Kari Kani jeans
I wear thirteens know what I mean*

Over the top of the newspaper, I looked down the train at the other passengers. Mostly people coming in from Brooklyn, a few also wearing rap in their ears. The outward face of civic urban blankness, nodding along with the inward roil and extremity of the music. It was the same weird, disconnected feeling you got walking around the newly cleaned-up, barricaded, Giuliani-time streets of New York City. On the surface things couldn't be better—a time of great economic prosperity for the few, money everywhere, a paradise of consumables in the shops. But underneath that was the world of desperate people with their heads pinned down onto filthy carpets while the police cuffed them from behind, that other life that Americans like me only ever saw on TV shows like *Cops*. Rap, especially gangsta rap, connected the materialism and the racism: the unreal spectacle of wealth and happiness in Manhattan and the real social relations between the people in the street. At least in the '80s there were lots of homeless people around to remind you of the massive inequity in this society, but now most of them had been cleaned up, too.

Lowering my eyes to the *Post* again, I let the gangsta style play down into my whiteboy identity, thinking to myself, *Man, you are the illest, you are sitting here on this subway and none of these people are going to FUCK with you, and if they do FUCK with you, you are going to FUCK them up. What's MY muthafuckin' name?*

Coming up out of the subway into Times Square, I stuffed the Discman into the pocket of my leather coat, stabilizing the right side with my hand so that the swinging of the coat didn't make the CD skip. I started walking uptown. No snow was on the ground, but the city pavement had the brittle chalky finish of frost it gets in January that makes heels sound especially hard on landing. The air was fuzzy with the weird yellow tornado light of Times Square by day, a blend of sunlight and wattage, the real and the mediated-the color of Buzz. Buzz is the collective stream of consciousness, William James's "buzzing confusion," objectified, a shapeless substance into which politics and gossip, art and pornography, virtue and money, the fame of heroes and the celebrity of murderers, all bleed. In Times Square you could see the Buzz that you felt going through your mind. I found it soothing just to stand there on my way to and from work and let the yellow light run into my synapses. In that moment the worlds outside and inside my skull became one.

As I was walking I noticed everyone coming toward me was looking up at the big Panasonic Astrovision TV screen, fixed high on the side of One Times Square, behind me. I looked around, and there on the screen was a live picture of President Clinton—hand raised, breath frosting, swearing solemnly to uphold the Constitution of the United States. It was Inauguration Day. Jesus, I'd sort of forgot today was the big day. Taking shelter from the cold wind behind a bank of pay phones at Broadway and Forty-third, I watched the swearing-in, reading the words of the oath on the closed captions at the bottom of the screen.

Directly under the president's huge image, the Dow Jones electronic zipper on One Times Square was bubbling along with more good news from the stock market. Above the president's head was a thirty-foot-high bottle of Budweiser, and, above that, a giant steaming cup of noodles. A nice juxtaposition of signs: money at the bottom, the rich soil in which the culture grows; presidential politics in the middle, where the job is not so much to lead as to entertain and divert; and at the apex-product. Clinton seemed to fit into this system seamlessly, and here in the new Times Square, in the boundaryless overbleed of images and brands, all thrusting into Las Vegas proximity with one another—Coke, Disney, MTV, Star Wars, Calvin Klein—our leader was doing very well at the moment. Virtually everyone had been distracted from whatever other distraction they had come to Times Square for, and was momentarily transfixed by the immense image of the newly reelected president on the big Astrovision screen.

Duly sworn, Clinton moved toward the lectern to give his acceptance speech. I stayed where I was, next to a black man wearing an Oakland Raiders jacket. I read the closed captions on the screen with the sexy and murderous funk of the Bee Eye Gee bouncing along in my ears, seeing in my mind's eye (overlaid on the image of our president) the stylized gang finger signals that the rappers flashed one another in the rap videos, while the president issued his morning wake-up call to personal responsibility.

Each and every one of us, in our own way, must assume personal responsibility, not only for ourselves and our families but for our neighbors and our nation....

*Fuck the past,
Let's dwell
On the 500 SL,
The E and J and ginger ale
The way my pockets swell
To the rim
With Benjamins*

Though I was trying to concentrate on the president's message, I could not stop myself from playing the mental cryptic I always played with rap. The 500 SL was a Mercedes, obviously, and Benjamins were Benjamin Franklins- \$100 bills. "E and J" . . . hmm ... oh, Ernest and Julio Gallo.

But let us never forget: The greatest progress we have made and the greatest progress we have yet to make is in the human heart. In the end, all the world's wealth and a thousand armies are no match for the strength and decency of the human spirit.

Ronald Reagan's handlers had manipulated his image, but in hindsight Reagan seemed to me like an old-fashioned tastemaker. Moral authority, based on Reagan's personal convictions, was still an important quality in his leadership. The Clinton presidency was showing that it was possible to lead without moral authority, if you had good enough spin. Clinton relied on opinion polls to an extent that had never been seen before in any White House. His surveys of public opinion were not so much polls as market research. The same project going on in the White House was also going on in the offices of the media executives around Times Square, and in the culture at large. It was an attempt to match consumption to production: to figure out what the public wanted and then give it to them. Polls, focus groups, and other forms of market research had made it possible to replace the old gut-based value judgments, for which the individual himself was responsible, with judgments beholden only to "the numbers"—to assign a kind of Q Rating to cultural experience that had never been quantified or measured numerically before. Clinton was the perfect steward of this society.

I started walking up Seventh Avenue. Times Square was changing. As the peep shows disappeared from Times Square, the art movie houses disappeared from the Upper West Side, and for the same reason—the loss of the distinction between pornography and art. Gone were the Flame Steak places where the pimps and prostitutes used to hang out; gone too were the video arcades where I spent many hours playing Missile Command in 1983. Gone too Missile Command itself, where the object was to try to save the world; in the "first person shooter" games like Doom and Quake the best you could hope for was to save yourself. In place of the arcades were the sneaker stores and the Gap and Starbucks and the Virgin Megastore, selling the kind of merchandise you could buy in every other commercial space in Brand USA, soon to be Brand World. The new Times Square had been widely hailed as an improvement over the funky old square (the *New York Times*, the leading organ of opinion on this matter, owned a big chunk of Times Square), but insofar as the new place meant the destruction of a unique local culture and the substitution of a generic market culture, this Times Square did not seem like an improvement to me. It was a fucking disaster.

Crossing Forty-fifth Street, I passed the All Star Cafe and went into the Virgin Megastore. The random experience of the street clicked and grooved pleasantly into the controlled environment of the megastore. My fellow consumers glided through the aural and visual cacophony, oblivious to the virtual event going on outside, hips cocked coolly, eyeing one another as they rode the escalator, slowly sinking or rising into the vast tepid bath of popular culture. Music videos were flashing on small monitors everywhere, as well as on two huge multi-TV screens overhead. All the light and action seemed to have an irresistible effect on the old reptilian brain, still, after all these centuries of evolution, unable to ignore movement (still looking for flies? predators?), a phenomenon that Andy Warhol made into his principle of cinesthetics: "If it moves, they will watch it."

Right inside the door of the Virgin Megastore was a vast section of popular music labeled Rock/Soul, which ran the gamut from the Eagles to Al Green to Pere Ubu, with vast stretches of irony, allusiveness, camp, and boring stuff in between. This giant culture deposit was thick with association. Here were bands that were the pop cultural equivalent of the pencil marks parents put inside the closet door to show how much Junior has grown since last year. Jackson Browne, James Taylor, Neil Young, and the early '70s folk and country rockers, many of them on the Asylum label started by the young David Geffen, oozing that peaceful, easy feeling that was my first pop love, and that I listened to in my bedroom, a sullen and mopey twelve-year-old with the lights out. Punk rock rescued me from the Dan Fogelbergian miasma of folk rock: Iggy Pop, Patti Smith, the Sex Pistols, then the Talking Heads, who made punk mainstream. Although I did not understand it at the time, the shift from the California sound to British punk rock—from the "fake" mainstream California to the "real" British underground punk—was the decisive antithesis that would in one way or another determine all my subsequent pop musical experience. After Talking Heads came the bands like Duran Duran, the Cure, and the Cars, who marketed the "authentic" sound of punk into the "fake" New Wave and turned me off pop music in my early twenties. Then the big-hair bands of the '80s like Van Halen, Guns n' Roses, and the second coming of Aerosmith, which had kept me away from pop. And then Nirvana, the band that changed everything.

Before Nirvana my cultural experience had followed a more-or-less stately progress up the taste hierarchy from commercial culture to elite culture. But after I heard Nirvana, at the age of thirty-one, the stream of culture as it flowed through me slowed, stopped, and started moving in the other direction. After Nirvana, I began to pursue pop music with an energy I had never devoted to it as a teenager, when I was too worried about how my adult life was going to turn out to pay that much attention to pop. Pop became a way of hanging on to my teenage self, which had become a kind of touchstone for me as an adult. I got into hip-hop, and then the subgenres of hip-hop, like gangsta, and then techno, and now I was into the rich ground between techno and hip-hop-acid, trance, jungle, big beat, ambient—which seemed to be where the future of pop music lay.

As a kid I thought that becoming an adult would mean putting away pop music and moving on to classical, or at least intelligent jazz. The taste hierarchy was the ladder you climbed toward a grown-up identity. The day you found yourself putting on black tie and going to enjoy the opening night of Aida as a subscriber to the Metropolitan Opera was the day you crossed an invisible threshold into adulthood. But for the last five years, pop music had provided me with peaks of lyrical and musical transcendence that I long ago stopped feeling at the opera and the symphony, those moments when the music, the meaning, and the moment all flowed together and filled you with the "oceanic feeling" that Freud said characterizes powerful aesthetic experience.

A month earlier I had had an oceanic experience at a Chemical Brothers' show that my friend had taken me to hear at the Roxy. The Chemical Brothers were two young musician/programmers from the dance/Ecstasy subculture of Manchester, England, who had begun by deejaying in the clubs that flourished in the dark satanic mills left over from the nineteenth-century industrial revolution, and that were now dark satanic malls of late-twentieth-century street style.

We waited in a long line outside the Roxy for an hour, freezing, while scalpers in big down parkas cruised by murmuring "whosellingticketswhosellingticketswhosellingtickets." As usual when we went gigging, we were just about the oldest people there. Going out to hear hot new pop acts was one of the greatest cultural pleasures of our grown-up lives. These intense moments of ecstatic communion with youth stood out from our otherwise predictable diet of respectable culture interesting plays, the Rothko show, the opera, and, sometimes, downtown happenings at the Kitchen or the Knitting Factory. Afterward, we would go home to our wives and kids and our tasteful diet of highbrow and middlebrow and lowbrow culture, each in its proper place, but here in the uncategorizable present of pop music, we felt alive in a way we never felt when experiencing elite culture.

Finally we got inside and worked our way down into the crush of kids on the dance floor. Most were trying to figure out the optimum time to drop the drugs they had brought along, so that they could peak when the music peaked. After a long time somebody walked out onto the darkened stage and a buzz rippled through the crowd. An evil-sounding pulse started to beat, pumping a black squishy liquid out of a computer and swirling it around the room. Then came a sampled sentence from a Blake Baxter song, repeated four times: dabrothersgonnaworkitout. With each set of four beats a new computer modulated drum sound entered the mix, and on the last set a distorted-sounding guitar made an appearance. Because the music was made on synthesizers it had the geometric regularity of code, and this made it possible to feel intuitively where the lines of sound were headed and when they would converge. It was like reading a sonnet: you anticipated the shape of the form before the content arrived. Such a sonic convergence was coming up. All the rhythmic variations and distortions that had previously been at counterpoint with one another were about to come together into what promised to be an amazing blast of unified sound.

My friend turned to me and yelled, "It's about to get REALLY loud ...!"

Then - THHHHRRRRUUUNKKK - enlightenment struck in the form of a solid cleaver chop of sound to the breastbone - from their hooooouuuuusse to our house—that knocked us backward like bowling pins. The flashing lights illuminated the flailing hair of the blond Chemical Brother as he worked his instrument board, catching him at the perfect moment - streaking upward from his subculture of clubs and drugs and computers, rushed into the mainstream by the music industry and MTV, which was hoping to consolidate the different small grids of techno and house music into a single big-grid category, "Electronica," in order to supplement the sagging sales of the "Alternative" marketing category that Nirvana's success had spawned. Within a month, the Brothers would be all over MTV. At one point in the frenzy of that night, I remember looking behind me and seeing Judy McGrath, the president of MTV, rocking out

in the VIP area.

Then another flash - POP! - revealing a new kind of icon: the information artist at his console, reeling with sounds, styles, light and insight, the jittery agonized struggle of the cerebral cortex trying to absorb the digital information pouring into it. The heat in the club, the frenzy of the crowd, the potency of the joint my friend and I were now passing, all produced an intense cultural experience, a Nobrow moment - neither high nor low, and not in the middle, a moment that existed outside the old taste hierarchy altogether. That moment was still fresh in my mind as I rode the megastore escalator down to Level B 1, gently sinking into the bath of Buzz, heading for the Imports section, where I hoped to find a compilation CD of the legendary Chemical Brothers shows at the Heavenly Social in London.

The megastore's Classical Music section was also down here, to the right of the escalator. Encased inside thick glass walls to keep out the raucous sounds of the World Music section, just outside, where salsa, Afro-Gallic drumming, reggae, and Portuguese fado mingled in a One World jambalaya, the Classical Music section was an underground bunker of the old elite culture, its last refuge here in Times Square. There were a few discreet videos, usually showing James Levine conducting or Vladimir Horowitz at the piano. Inside these thick glass walls of silence you could feel the sterility of the academy to which the modernists had condemned classical music, by coming to believe that popularity and commercial success meant compromise. All the most original innovations of the modernists, the electronics and the atonal variations and the abrupt yaws in pitch had long ago been spirited away from this room and found popular expression in the Jazz and Techno sections in other parts of the store. Meanwhile, by continuing to put out, year after year, recordings of the world's great orchestras performing the standards-in spite of the fact that the difference in performances was only interesting or even discernible to a very few people-the classical music industry had all but destroyed itself, imprisoning what might be a vibrant genre in the forbidding confines of a room like this. The classical music room in the megastore was almost always empty: a good place, I'd discovered, to ring up purchases of pop music when there was a line upstairs.

I didn't find what I was looking for in Imports, but I did find some other CDs I wanted—one by the "junglist" L. T. J. Bukem, as well as a compilation of rock/techno hybrid tracks called Big Beat Manifesto. (That was the trade-off in the megastore experience, refinement for breadth and unexpected synchronicity.) Also, back upstairs, I found a CD by an Essex based group, Underworld, Dubnobasswithmyheadman, which I'd heard was good. Twenty minutes later I was back in Times Square with \$59.49 worth of music in a red Plastic Virgin bag. At Forty-fifth I stopped, unwrapped the Underworld CD, cracked open the jewel box, extracted the precious polyurethane wafer, and popped it into my Discman....

Seabrook, John. (2000). *Nobr®w: The Culture of Marketing. The Marketing of Culture*. Chapter 1: A Place in the Buzz. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.