A Legacy Of Hope

Critical Songs Of The GDR 1960 - 1989

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Abstract

Critical songs in the former German Democratic Republic are less about theories and ideologies than about how the execution of these affects the people who are exposed to them. They question socio-political measures and widespread attitudes to actually existing socialism, often giving voice to opinions which people have been cautious to verbalise.

There has always been interaction been popular music and politics. History has shown however that the importance of political and/or critical songs has depended largely on the role given to them by the government or regime under which they emerge. The critical songs written and performed in the GDR made possible both a presentation of ideas, opinions and perspectives, and an awareness of emotions, conscious and subconscious.

People listen to music and specifically songs, with a certain expectation. In societies like the former GDR, where repression became a common method for dealing with socio-political problems, those expectations went beyond the need for entertainment, relaxation and academic interest to include more underlying psychological expectations.

While there is no theory which defines exactly how emotions are expressed in music, a differentiation can be made between how people's emotions are aroused and what emotional qualities are present in musical works. This is especially true when the music is accompanied by a text, as the text extends the possibility of emotions being evoked in listeners because it signifies a particular situation. Naturally, reactions to songs, critical and otherwise, will be varied. However, in a society like the former GDR, where ideology and its interpretation and practical manifestation are paramount, those reactions, a mingling of the intellectual and the experiential, became important in urging people to take a position, whether it was to affirm the ideology and how the state chose to interpret it, to criticise the interpretation while affirming the ideology or to criticise both. For whether people
consciously made a choice or not, is not the question. How they reacted to and found means of surviving within the system indicates their choice.

It is my intention to trace briefly the development of the critical song movement in the GDR and to show how it formed a mode of resistance to the GDR government's interpretation of socialism and yet maintained a very powerful element of hope that socialism could become a reality in the GDR. In line with the GDR government's attitude to art in its various forms, the critical songs chosen will be examined and analysed, taking into consideration the most obvious influences on their development and tracing the importance of this genre to the state as a form of political opposition.