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PART I
INTERACTIONIST TAKES ON POPULAR MUSIC

INTRODUCTION: THE IMPACT OF POPULAR MUSIC ON SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

Joseph A. Kotarba

The coeditors of this special issue – Christopher Schneider, Bryce Merrill, and Robert Gardner – have done a wonderful job updating the growing interest in popular music among symbolic interactionists. Their good work is largely a result of their own status as promising junior scholars – as major players in the bright future of symbolic interaction. They bring three key ingredients to the creative mix before you. First, they are themselves researchers and writers in the area of popular music, with interests ranging from the role of technology in shaping the meaning of popular music to the interplay of community and identity in the popular music experience. Second, they are close to ever-evolving trends and fashions in popular music. This analytical stance fits well with the interactionist tradition of monitoring the everyday life features of social change. Third, they are cognizant of the exciting work engaged in by other junior scholars, several of whom are represented in this special issue.

The question remains: what is symbolic interaction's approach to the scholarly study of popular music? Interactionism's major contribution may be its power to conceptualize social and cultural phenomena. Conceptualization ranges from the creation of *sensitizing concepts* that suggest questions to ask, as we will read in the various explorations of *authenticity* in popular music, to *typological* analysis by which the author organizes and

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makes sense of otherwise complex and disparate phenomena, as Robert Gardner does in organizing all sorts of musical interaction into *scenes*, *subcultures*, and *communities*. Good concept work helps us two ways. First, it helps us to see sociological similarities among musical and nonmusical phenomena. There can be numerous types of communities based upon characteristics such as members' similarities, their survival needs, or their shared history. All communities need mechanisms to acquire meaning for the situations their members face, and music is just one type of resource for acquiring meaning. Second, and perhaps most importantly, good concept work provides a perceptual distance between the writer and the music. Writing objectively and calmly about music is very difficult because music is honey: we really love the music we study and share in its romance, wonder, imagination, and possibilities. Good concepts are analytical filters that let the magic of music through, but allow us to catch our breath long enough to think and write about what we just witnessed first hand. I do not think I could write much about Van Halen's "Jump" until I could *see* it as an example of children's music enjoyed by teenagers who were not quite ready to give up the joys of play.

I will conclude this essay with a brief discussion of the positive impact popular music has had on the field of symbolic interaction. Pop music helps us to revitalize and reposition existing concepts. Our study of Latino music in Houston, as reported in this collection, does both. The concept of the *scene* is still viable in the present era of MTV, iTunes, and online concerts. Fans still have the great desire to experience their music live, face to face if you will. Music is not only something to which you listen, but it is an experience, an event – a gathering in somewhat of a primitive sense. Our study also allows us to reposition the interdisciplinary concept of *place*. Place is a location where activities like music occur. Whereas the social scientific literature correctly posits place as point in space and time where music occurs – as a social construction – we *see* place as a social possibility. Latino music, like all styles of music, can help (re)create someplace we've been (e.g., a motherland), someplace we are (e.g., a Latino family's 15-year-old daughter's *quinceanera* party), or someplace we would like to be (e.g., *La Raza* or *America*).

The essays in this special issue are exciting because the editors and authors sense something special, something almost sacred about popular music. They do not frame popular music as simply one of many illustrations of a culture. They do not reduce music to a mere meaning use or a set of demographic categories. Music is social life. Reader ... enjoy!

SECTION 1

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