

‘Wherever we are, we are’¹ – Place

In Julien Temple’s film about Dr Feelgood, *Oil City Confidential* (2009), discussed in Chapter 1 looking at milestones and innovations, the band’s former manager Chris Fenwick remarks that ‘bands all come from somewhere’.² Music films usually include reference at the very least to the geographical starting – or indeed end – points of the artists, labels, or scenes they are about. However, some films place more emphasis on the role that place and location play in a band’s music, identity, success and legacy. In some cases, place is a backdrop. In some cases, it is integral. In some cases, it is presented as the latter but is ultimately the former. An example of this can be found in the Fela Kuti documentary *Finding Fela!* (2014). The film repeatedly returns to Lagos, Nigeria, where Kuti lived, worked and was persecuted for his outspoken political music. However, because the film has no central themes or identity, and spends a lot of time veering between ideas and points, the relationships between Kuti and Nigeria are never explored to a satisfying degree. Merely because a film spends so much time showing us a place, it does not necessarily mean that it is about that place, or about the music and that place.

This chapter discusses a series of films where place is inextricably linked to the music and musicians being documented, either directly as stated by the artists or indirectly through context. Some of the contexts under discussion involve global contextual understandings of places, for example *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999). In this film audiences are led to understand the socio-political context of Cuba through the lens of authorship. It is safe to assume that films about place made by people from that place are more sympathetic to and more nuanced about the resonances and politics of location on the lives

¹ *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* (2005).

² Julien Temple’s film is as much about Canvey Island, Essex, as it is anything else.

and works of musicians, though not always. This chapter includes discussions of works where this is the case, films that are empathetic and centralize the subject and their experiences. However, there are also examples where native and non-native directors have made, intentionally or not, films that fall into traps around representation of race and gender or where saviour narratives or othering and exoticized readings can come to the fore. This chapter will discuss the authorship of the films in question, and how understandings of places and their peoples are shaped.

‘You need culture for a language to survive’³ – Wales

It is worth looking at *Separado!*, *American Interior* and *Anorac* as a triptych of sorts. This is not to diminish their individual merits but because they are so similarly attuned. They are not observed or passive but participatory and deeply active. They involve journeys, quests no less, with musician Gruff Rhys in *Separado!* and *American Interior*, and DJ and promoter/label owner Huw Stephens in *Anorac*, as they seek to learn more about Welsh language and culture, Welsh language music and where they fit into their nation’s musical history and legacies. They are all deeply personal films. Predominantly in Welsh with English subtitles, that do not follow musicians simply making or performing music, though they do contain those elements. Instead, the focus is on ideas and topics other than music. There are bigger questions than music at play, though all are poetic and philosophical accounts of the roles indigenous language music and culture play in national identity.

Separado! and *American Interior* are two feature-length collaborations between filmmaker Dylan Goch and musician Gruff Rhys, best known as the lead singer of the band Super Furry Animals. Both films follow Rhys as he travels from Cardiff, Wales to Central and South America in *Separado!* and to the United States in *American Interior*. Rhys is in search of the comfort of history and knowledge, familial and national, that will help him tie both his musical approach and national pride to something bigger than himself. Formally both

³ *Anorac* (2019).

films follow the conventions of a road movie, with Gruff writing songs and performing these and others from his back catalogue, along the way. The objectives of the quest, to track down a distant relative Rene Griffiths, a Patagonian Gaucho troubadour who sings in Welsh, in *Separado!* and retracing the steps of explorer John Evans into the American interior in *American Interior*, throw up questions of colonisation and expatriation, both in the countries where these figures built or found legacy but also at home in Wales. The reasons why Welsh people ended up in deepest South America and the American Midwest are always bubbling under the surface. *American Interior* hinges on Evans' belief, handed down to him, that there is a tribe of Welsh-speaking Native Americans to be found and strangely, or maybe not, both films must reckon with Welsh involvement in the annexing of traditional lands in both Patagonia and North America.

The films do not shy away from acknowledging complicity in these events but also leave unspoken, in the subtext, the parallels between these oppressions and the ostracizing and terrorizing of the Welsh language and its speakers by the English in Wales. In both films Rhys meets with academics, historians, and local and native people to learn about the history of their countries. Raymond Williams writes that 'it's how past and present relate that tells in a culture' (2003: 08). Rhys acts as mediator between past and present in both films. Each one has wonderful sequences where Rhys meets community elders who talk of the struggles to maintain long-standing identities, both Welsh immigrant and Native American, again echoing the struggle for the survival of the Welsh language that Rhys is so passionate about. In both cases the sense grows that Rhys is not necessarily learning anything new but rather using the films to physically interact with people and share these untold stories with the cinema audience. In both films he performs for local audiences, using the making of the films as reasons to play gigs off the normal beaten track. Both films contain odd performances rendered as quasi-music videos, framed as interludes from the journey.

All of this could lead to the belief that the films are the same, the latter a rehash of the former. While there are many thematic and structural similarities, formally and tonally the films are very different. *Separado!* is billed as a Western, leaning into the Gaucho identity of Griffiths, the troubadour Rhys is tracking

down across Patagonia to the foothills of the Andes. Rhys's travels in the film are relayed as traditional – cars and trucks – and non-traditional – teleportation. Rhys dons a helmet that fans will recognize from live performances, particularly with the Super Furry Animals, and, as the frame dissolves in visual and sonic psychedelic squalls, he moves from South Wales to South America, first Brazil and then Patagonia, and back again. It is a much looser and weirder film than its successor, recalling the energy of Alejandro Jodorowsky in parts. *American Interior* is more muted, its strangeness less pronounced. Presented mostly in black and white, the film features colourful animated sequences mapping the journey. For the physical journey, Rhys is joined by an incarnation of the never-photographed John Evans, rendered physical in the form of a small puppet imagined by frequent Rhys collaborator Pete Fowler and built by Louise Evans, also known as Felt Mistress.

Rhys is a selfless guide, eagerly engaging with the felt puppet, bringing Evans to life in a playful way. As a musician and performer Rhys is smart, funny and off-kilter; these films celebrate and showcase that, providing symbiotic audio/visual representations of his audio output. Yet, as playful as the formal approaches in the films are, they are serious projects, aimed at introducing the world to overlooked Welsh figures and addressing the pressing issue of the future of the Welsh language by engaging with little-known pasts. The serious aims of *American Interior* are encapsulated in the Transmedia nature of its emergence into the world.⁴ As well as the film and corresponding album, both released in 2014, there is also a book and an app, all adding to the story and the experience of listening to the music Rhys creates alongside his work as an excavator of histories.

In a film discussed later in this chapter, *The Man Behind the Microphone*, the director/narrator says that home is 'not a place where you live, but where you are understood, where you recognise yourself'. *Separado!* and *American Interior* involve watching Rhys making music as a way of tracking an experience and creating something recognizable. Songs that maybe help him understand home. While it is common for music films to feature documentation of a band or artist in the process of making music, it is less common for so much of two films to be

⁴ I wrote about this aspect of the project on the film's release. See <https://directorsnotes.com/2014/05/08/gruff-rhys-american-interior/>

given over to one artist performing music that is in the process of being written or that has just been written, in front of live audiences away from home. However, the result is that the relationship between what Gruff Rhys learns on his odysseys and the music he is making is undeniable. Music is shown as his way of processing what it means for him to confront the history of his beloved Welsh culture and language, and its possible future. Because of the artist he is, and because the director and editor Dylan Goch knows him so well, the cinematic representation of that process of learning is enjoyable and feels natural.

In his essay *Welsh Culture*, Raymond Williams writes about the problem of cultural identity:

I wish I could see it in one of its popular forms: in a kind of emphasis on Welshness against an alien and invading culture; in a consequent emphasis on culture as tradition, and on tradition as preservation.

2003: 07

The 2019 film *Anorac* can be seen as a response to Williams’ call to arms. Another road movie, this time it is a journey closer to home. However, it remains connected to the themes of investigating Welsh language music and relates the past to the present once more as a way of considering and safeguarding the future. In the film, Huw Stephens journeys around Wales, starting from Cardiff just like Rhys, to find musicians of all genres singing in Welsh. Over conversations that always seem to involve eating and drinking, Stephens debates the merits, virtues, challenges and pitfalls of singing in Welsh. In one conversation the musician Gwenno says she is often asked why she sings in a language few people understand, to which she replies: ‘that’s the point’. It is a tone that recurs throughout the film, swerving from point to point on the spectrum from pride to resistance and back again. The film contains a multitude of performances, often in and around the eating and drinking establishments in which the conversations take place.

The multitude of musicians featured in the film is necessary to make the point that artists singing in their native tongue are not limited to the obvious. Yes, there are folk musicians, but also Hip Hop, electronic, and a plethora of indie bands. The performers encompass a wide range of ages and genders. It’s a film of celebration and statement, and one of the strongest statements

is made visually. Over time, the recurring locations for conversation and performance start to reveal a deeper theme: class. The locations are those traditionally associated with the working class – working men's clubs, pubs, bus shelters and greasy spoon cafes. The film, through its locations, dispels what might be presumed, that those choosing to sing in Welsh are a privileged few from a particular demographic. Despite telling the story of a small nation, one that, as musician Gwilym Morus says in the film, has often defined itself as an 'oppressed nation', the film doesn't feel insular in its scope.

Significant screen time is given over to the national cultural tradition of Eisteddfod, a celebration of the Welsh language, in particular the Maes B stage where the youth of Wales come to sing their songs in a variety of genres. However, the film ends at another large communal celebration, Festival No 6, which takes place at the location that also gave the event its name, the Portmeirion estate that was the location for cult television show *The Prisoner* (1967–1968). The headline act are Welsh music icons the Super Furry Animals, whose album *Mwng* is the biggest-selling Welsh language record of all time. Stephens picks up a vinyl copy in nearby Cob Records in Porthmadog (though surely, he must already have a copy) before watching the band's set and talking to their frontman, Gruff Rhys. Despite difficult conversations about Welsh language music, and Welsh language struggles in general, the film is never pessimistic. It is defiant but also hopeful and practical. As Rhys says near the film's end, and echoing Williams somewhat, 'popular culture offers ways into the language' and, as *Anorac* shows, many bands and artists actively feel the same.

The fourth film about Wales under discussion is formally different but the questions at its heart, about Welshness and what it means to be Welsh, are just as prominent. *Truth & Memory* is a film compiled and edited by Kieran Evans from material filmed by the Manic Street Preachers and those around them at the time of recording and promoting the release of their 1998 album *This Is My Truth Tell Me Yours*. The footage recorded at the time, on a variety of low-grade video formats, is intercut with subtle, atmospheric visuals shot and graded by Evans to match the tone and aesthetic of the aged visuals. In addition, there are quotes and slogans that fans familiar with Manic Street Preachers' live shows or album sleeves will recognize. What works so well in the context of the film is the fact that the quotes capture the theme of the film, as narrated by bassist and lyricist Nicky Wire, of a band finding and reminding themselves of their place in

the music world and their home country. Wire mentions at one point that *This Is My Truth Tell Me Yours* is the Manics' 'Welsh folk record' and the film plays with that idea in its visual relationships to poets, politicians and cultural figures.

The film, like the album it documents, expands from Welsh poet RS Thomas's work *Reflections* (1995), in which readers gaspingly 'partake of a shifting identity never your own'. The footage captures a band working on a record at a significant remove from their most infamous moment, the disappearance of co-lyricist and spiritual figurehead Richey Edwards in 1995, grappling with life after that moment and simultaneously their national identity and musical direction. The fact that the footage from the studio and on the road was shot by the band themselves, for seemingly no specific aim, adds poignancy when viewed in retrospect. When talking about the future in the film Wire comments, looking back furtively on the band's younger days, that there are 'no more Stalinist five-year plans. Since Richey disappeared it's one-day plans. Too much disaster lurking round the corner'. There's a fragility to Wire's reflective narration, which sounds like it is coming from a future, the present now, rather than the moment of recording. This is married with seeing the video format footage assembled and distributed on the Internet – the film was released via the band's YouTube channel in 2019 – and edited with filmed footage of polaroid stills from the time – the most nostalgia surfacing photographic format – that convey, visually, the sense that this is a film seeking to make sense of both the present and the past. In many senses a film about the past and memory, filmed on old formats such as Mini-DV and featuring Polaroid photos, belongs on the internet. As Simon Reynolds writes 'the Internet places the [...] past and [...] present side by side. Equally accessible, they become the same thing: far yet near ... old yet now' (2011: 85).

Recording starts in two Welsh studios, Monnow Valley and Rockfield. There is footage of the album cover photo shoot at Blackrock Sands near Porthmadog (though Wire in the film says it's Harlech beach, nearby). Wire talks about writing the lyrics to the song 'Tsunami' after seeing a BBC Wales documentary about the 'silent twins', June and Jennifer Gibbons, from Haverfordwest. Wales runs through the film and the album visually and thematically. Wire is heard talking about Welsh identity and what emerges from Evans' construction of material and additional context is that the genesis of the album was bound up

in evolving and returning questions of Welshness, just as so much of the Manic Street Preachers' work is.

'Where do you go from here?'⁵ – Northern England

As mentioned earlier, in *Anorac*, Huw Stephens buys a Super Furry Animals record in Porthmadog's Cob Records. Earlier in the film he buys a copy of Gwenno's first record *Y Dydd Olaf* from Spillers in Cardiff, the world's oldest-known record shop. In *Separado!* Gruff Rhys scours a record shop in Buenos Aires looking for records by his distant relative Rene Griffiths. In *The Man Behind the Microphone*, director Claire Belhassine sifts through the racks of a Tunis record shop looking for the work of her grandfather Hedi Jouini. Record shops, and vinyl, have an important place in the mythology of many musicians and artists. Records are the artefacts that offer artists, as Nas says in *Nas: Time Is Illmatic* (2014), 'proof that I was here.' They are also, perhaps more importantly, the artefacts that have historically connected artists with their fans. Since the start of the 2010s several films have sought to capture the unique, often



Figure 4.1 *Sound It Out* (dir. Finlay, 2011) © Jeanie Finlay.

⁵ NG83 *When We Were B Boys* (2016).

particularly male, atmosphere of record stores and the people who frequent them. One of the earliest, and the best, is Jeanie Finlay's *Sound It Out* from 2011.

Finlay's film is a portrait of Sound It Out Records, the last remaining record shop in Teesside, Northern England. It tells the story, through portraiture rather than all out biography, of owner Tom and to a lesser extent, in terms of screen time, his staff David and Kelly.⁶ Equally, however, the film is a portrait of the town of Stockton-on-Tees, where the shop is located, and the people who live there and love music. The first section of the film, as audiences get acquainted with the staff and regular customers, sets the scene by showing where the shop is in the town. In a side road off the high street, near the job centre and a cheap pub. The orbit of the shop that the film does in its opening moments makes it clear the type of place Stockton is, and by extension the type of customers Tom serves. The visual theme being drawn out echoes that of *Anorac* and its choice of locations. This is a place that you don't see in the mythologies of rock music and the customers are people also excluded from narratives of musical glory. However, music is as important here as it is in London, Manchester, New York.⁷

Over the course of its short – 75 minutes – running time, the characters the film introduces audiences to run the gamut from the casual punter looking for a Dire Straits CD through to the obsessive Chris with his 2,000 plus records, framed Nick Cave lyrics and Boards of Canada t-shirt. In and around are Sam and Gareth who like 'anything suffixed by the word metal' and who proudly tout their 'battle jackets',⁸ Makina DJ Big Dave ruling the internet airwaves from his shed and Shane with his unabashed Status Quo obsession. The film spends a lot of time with each of the shop's regulars, listening to them and giving them space to talk, thus building empathy. One of Finlay's skills as a documentary filmmaker is making people feel comfortable and caring for them. To merely glance at people such as those interested in the distinctly

⁶ Between writing and publication of this book, Sound it Out owner Tom Butchart died. Filmmaker Jeanie Finlay described him as a 'bones deep friend'. See www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/tom-butchart-tributes-pour-after-27107890.

⁷ A wonderful film about a New York record shop and community is *Other Music* (2019). The film is directed and produced by Puloma Basu and Rob Hatch-Miller whose earlier work *Syl Johnson: Any Way the Wind Blows* was discussed in the chapter on Black music.

⁸ Find out how to make your own Battle Jacket here: <https://toiletovhell.com/how-to-make-your-own-battle-jacket/>.

regional dance music Makina would show little concern for them as people and risk adding to stereotypes of them as ‘Chavs’.⁹ In *Sound It Out* they emerge as complex, interesting people with a deep passion for music and a knowledge of how that passion is protecting them, to a certain degree, from an even more difficult life.

There are cutaways to the dying high street with its ubiquitous charity and pound shops or looming, smoking, industrial stacks. As one of the Makina fans says, ‘it’s dreadful, it’s awful, but it’s home. I feel safe here. The Northeast’. At the centre of all these people’s universe is Tom and his shop. He knows the importance of music to wellbeing and as hard as it is to maintain a living, he knows why it matters that Teesside has a record shop. The film also highlights the importance, financially, of Record Store Day. As he says at one point ‘records hold memories’ and it becomes clear as the film spends time with him that his defiance is not stubbornness but an act of vital goodness for his town. The most moving moment is when the camera candidly catches Tom watching an in-store performance by Stockton-born musician done good, Saint Saviour. Leaning against the door of his shop, behind a packed crowd, all are, and him most of all, lost in the music.

Another film worth discussing is one that, similar to *Sound It Out*, seeks to acknowledge the role and impact on the opposite side from those making music. In *NG83 When We Were B Boys* (2016) the focus of fan response to music is not collecting, entirely, but dancing, mostly. The film captures through a wealth of archive material the impact of Hip Hop on the predominantly Black working-class youth of Nottingham in 1983. Through contemporary interviews the film also investigates what happened after the initial excitement and, more crucially, community support for the city’s breakdancing crews dissipated. It looks at life after breaking in a place without the same cultural life that other cities impacted by Hip Hop and subcultural movements often benefit from. Much of the film’s past and present revolves around the Rock City venue in Nottingham. One of the main crews in the film are the ‘Rock City Crew’, a name that pays tribute to their base location and pioneering New York break-dancers ‘The Rock Steady Crew’. The most poignant moment of the film,

⁹ There is a lovely short documentary about Makina that can be found here via the British Council. Available at: - <https://music.britishcouncil.org/news-and-features/2020-04-30/watch-makina>.

one that reveals so much about the disparate legacies of the breakdancing youths, is when, during an on-street interview, one of the film's protagonists, veteran B Boy 'Dancing' Danny, spots someone from 'back in the day' who enters the film for a moment. He is smart, confident, on a night out and went by the name of Flux when he danced for 'Supreme Force'. He is the opposite of Danny, and this chance moment is where the film most readily captures how the city holds stories and legacies in its everyday. The universe of the film and its central story is expanded, momentarily, and the melancholy truth of that fleeting couple of years in the early 1980s is most keenly felt.

The final film under discussion in this Northern England triptych is about a band who started plying their trade in the early 1980s but didn't find prominence, and later fame, until the mid-1990s. Pulp, an art-pop band from Sheffield, was one of the trinity of bands, along with Oasis and Blur, most readily associated with Britpop.¹⁰ The film, *Pulp: A Film About Life, Death & Supermarkets*, centres around a hometown show at Sheffield's Motorpoint Arena in December 2012, which would prove the final traditional concert of a successful reunion tour. The film isn't a traditional concert film; instead, the director Florian Habicht and band leader Jarvis Cocker use the opportunity to investigate cinematically the role that Sheffield played in the band's work but also the legacy the band left, and still leaves, on its home town. Owen Hatherley writes how, for Pulp, the 'hometown becomes the subject matter – and [Sheffield] is a sexualised city, where the post-industrial landscape is suffused with carnality in its every twist, turn, alleyway and precinct' (2011: 33). The film playfully positions Pulp within the fabric of the city's everyday life more poignantly and introspectively by interviewing fans of the band at the grand homecoming gig. Similar to *Sound It Out* and *NG83*, it investigates the impact of music on fans. One fan interviewed had travelled from the US to the UK to see the band having been too young to see them when they last played near them. This fan, along with the other 'diehards' who arrive at the venue very early, received a reward in the shape of a credit in the film.

'The People of Sheffield' are also credited at the start of the film, ensuring that the role of fans in the legacy and life of the band is given due prominence

¹⁰ A word Jarvis Cocker can't even bring himself to say, as he divulged on *The Adam Buxton Podcast* in 2022.

in the audience's expectations. It is not tokenistic. The film frequently returns to stories of the importance of the band to those from Sheffield, with meaningful stories of how they helped a fan reacclimatize to the city following a period where they 'accidentally moved to London for six months once' or the woman who made special Pulp underwear because as she says, 'I quite like Jarvis on me bum'. What stops the film being a simple love letter to the band, and makes it a more complicated work, is how the film includes testimony from people who clearly know who Pulp are, but who only associate them with Sheffield, or whose love for the band is more ephemeral. This, in classic Jarvis Cocker style, pricks the potential pomposity of the film, making it more bittersweet and tinged with melancholy. There's a wonderful sequence where a group of older people in a market café sing along to the Pulp song 'Help the Aged'. Here, as in the other films about the North of England, and Wales, images and sequences associated with the working class are prominent. The sequence would not seem out of place in a Pulp jukebox musical were it not for the fact that it is obvious they are singing from lyric sheets and have clearly just finished a quick rehearsal. This does not diminish the sweetness of the moment. Despite Jarvis saying 'surroundings don't make much difference' at some level he disagrees and has made a film in collaboration with his band and the filmmaker and the fans that seeks to ask what difference the people around you make on the music, and what flows back the other way.

'We are the walls of this house'¹¹ – Further Afield

If the role played by place in the film about Pulp is playfully unstable, it is even more so in a personal film about a filmmaker using the documentary form to investigate family history. Claire Belhassine's *The Man Behind the Microphone* has many resonances with *Separado!* in that it follows a person on a journey to different countries to uncover and deepen and clarify a family history that revolves around music. In this case it tells the amazing story of how the director

¹¹ *They Will Have to Kill Us First* (2015).

heard a Tunisian song in a taxi and when they asked the taxi driver who sang it, they replied with the name of her grandfather, Hédi Jouini. The film that follows is Belhassine's attempt to learn about and ultimately heal the rift in the family that concealed this information from her. She remembers her grandfather from summer visits to Tunisia when she was a child but, following a series of disagreements, the visits stopped and, as her grandfather kept the musical side of his life out of the family environment, the knowledge lay dormant. The film's investigation delves into the relationship between Jouini and Tunisia and Belhassine's own relationship to the Tunisian side of her family, as she has an English mother and a Tunisian father – Hédi's eldest son.

Vox pops on the street in Tunis, and singalongs in bars, reveal that Jouini was not just a Tunisian musician but a national icon. It feels as though he is known and beloved by all Tunisians. This naturally causes problems in the family, in terms of their relationship with him. At one point, one of his daughters admits that he belonged to Tunisia as much as he belonged to them. However, Hédi comes across as a family person for a considerable portion of his life. Indeed, that is only how the filmmaker remembers him. The film's family focus means there is frustration at what cannot be gleaned more broadly about Tunisia and Jouini's place in its history and culture, although the film does an excellent job of introducing a complex figure to wider prominence. His political beliefs were often at odds with the government but were matched by an unabated patriotism. His womanizing proves him capable of the same clichéd traps of other musicians of his stature globally. Then there's the sadly age-old and gendered fact that the filmmaker's grandmother forsook her own musical career to raise the family. Despite all this, the pull of the story remains the family and its dramatic rupture. This makes it hard to really know the Tunisia of which Jouini was such an integral artistic part, but this feels like the point. When family is concerned, nothing else really matters.

If there are thematic resonances between *The Man Behind the Microphone* and *Separado!* there are formal ones between *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* and *Anorac*. In an interview for this book, *Anorac* director Gruffydd Davies cited Fatih Akin's portrait of the Istanbul music scene as an influence on his desire to do the same for Wales. Indeed, much like Davies' film, *Crossing the Bridge* feels like a collaboration between filmmaker and narrator. Here,

the narrator – Berlin-born Alexander Hacke of the band Einstürzende Neubauten – traverses the Turkish capital, excitedly and curiously, in search of music, much like Huw Stephens does in *Anorac*. However, unlike Stephens, Hacke is an outsider. Having become interested in contemporary Turkish music following a collaboration with the director Akin when he scored the Turkish-German filmmaker's 2004 film *Gegen die Wand* (*Head On*), this documentary follows Hacke as he explores Istanbul, learning about its history and the connection of music to that history, as well as recording the artists as he goes. What separates this film from those where figures external to the country seek to learn about and capture indigenous music is how Hacke sublimates himself to the local music scene, acting neither as saviour nor champion.

Hacke is seen dancing extravagantly as he records one band, sometimes sitting in with others to record, often just watching. The focus is always on the local musicians, never Hacke, except at the film's finale where he admits that he never could have expected to really 'know' the city or its music from such a fleeting time within it. What emerges from the interaction of this German musician with his Turkish counterparts is a passion and restless desire to hear all kinds of sounds that can also be found in Hacke's work with his own band. There is also a sense of how meaningful, respectful conversations, where there is a genuine desire to listen to speech and musical sound, can result in a vibrant portrait of a time and place. Whether it is the father of rapper Ceza saying 'Hip Hop is the music Turkey needs right now' or a performance by icon Orhan Gencebay who, despite thousands of records and movie appearances – a similar discography and filmography to Hédi Jouini – rarely plays live, the film manages, through a majority of hand-held camerawork and fast cutting, to capture a fleeting moment that suggests an ocean of music beneath its surface. What is known of the Istanbul scene by the end of the film doesn't feel total. Instead, it feels like an introduction.

Another film from the 2000s that has shone a light on a music scene in a place where politics increasingly plays a part in what music is permitted – a theme that will recur when discussing Mali later in this chapter – is the Iranian film *No One Knows About Persian Cats*. The film, directed by Bahman Ghobadi, is not strictly a documentary. However, most people in the film, including protagonists Negar and Ashkan, play versions of themselves. The film centres on the Tehran indie music scene, of which Negar and Ash were prominent

members at the time the film was made. For aesthetic (documentary feel) and practical (permits and cultural permissions in Tehran) reasons the film is shot on the move, using hand-held digital video. In interviews for the film the actors say they 'lived what you see' and the director claims it is a 'documentary fiction about underground music'. In this documentary fiction, Ash and Negar enlist the help of local fixer Nader to secure visas and passports to leave Iran so their band, Take It Easy Hospital, can play a gig in London.

On their travels around Tehran to put a band together the audience sees other, real, bands perform songs by way of audition that also create a portrait of the indie, metal, Hip Hop and traditional pop landscape of the city. At one point an 'audition' of a heavy metal musician at a remote farm outside the city is preceded by the sound of angsty cows and Ash and Nagar are informed that the music upsets the animals. Most of these performances feature montages of Tehran life as cutaways and, during the film, a portrait emerges through sound and image, as well as the struggle of the two young musicians at the centre of the film to play the music they want freely. The dramatization of real life in the way the film approaches it works, for the most part, creating a sense of authenticity and drama that heightens the real-life situation but never detracts from or dilutes it. One of the negative aspects is that the characterisation of Negar, the only female musician in the film, reduces her role to that of the Western trope of the suspicious, cynical woman constantly nagging and preaching caution while her male counterpart is allowed to dream free and face the consequences like a tragic hero.

Another film with a tension between the real and the narrative is the most famous film discussed in this chapter, *Buena Vista Social Club*. The film, directed by Wim Wenders, tells the story of how musician Ry Cooder 'found' several 'forgotten' Cuban musicians and brought them to world prominence through the recording of an eponymous album and international tour. As Bill Callahan wryly notes in his song 'Ry Cooder' from 2020's *Gold Record*:

'He freed Cuba,
with a Buena Vista,
him and Wim'

Callahan acutely exposes the narrow line between documenting from a position of sublimation to the subject, or entering the narrative and coming across, intentionally or not, as a saviour. *Buena Vista Social Club* is an apt film

with which to discuss this tension, due to its prominence and cinematic reputation. There is no denying, on one level, that the prominence is deserved because the film features incredible musicians and captures them working on stage and in the studio at significant power. The scenes of the musicians all gathered onstage in Amsterdam, the show which forms the bulk of the live footage, or in the celebrated Egrem Studios in Havana, are captivating. So too is the footage of the concert at the legendary Carnegie Hall in New York with Ibrahim Ferrer – the most prominently featured musician in the film – moved and overwhelmed by the ecstatic audience reaction.

What makes the film problematic, admittedly potentially from the retrospect of 2024, is the insertion of Cooder into the film's narrative. Similarly problematic insertions and narrative constructions that divert attention from the subject to the filmmakers in ways that unsettle can be found in works from the little known *Ethiopiques: Revolt of the Soul* (2017) to the Oscar-winning *Searching for Sugar Man* (2012). There is little contention that Cooder, in recording and celebrating the work of musicians such as Ferrer, Compay Segundo and others, was vital in making those musicians better known, but his narration, plus the way Wenders shoots and cuts in his contributions in the studio and the concerts, makes it appear that it is only because of Cooder that these musicians are known. Audience gratitude is sought most blatantly in the final shot of the film, not the musicians themselves, but Cooder taking a slow-motion bow and exiting the Carnegie Hall stage alone. Some of the filmmaking choices, including the stock footage-esque imagery of Havana life – where some participants are visibly uncomfortable with the camera's gaze – show little engagement with a Cuban history and politics that might counter the saviour narrative. Tanya Katerí Hernández writes that 'what is missing from this finely spun tale is any demonstration of agency on the part of the Afro-Cuban musicians themselves and the respect they garnered within Cuban society of their own accord' (2002: 62). Even so, it is difficult to judge too harshly the intent of the filmmakers because some of the choices – most notably the Havana locations where the musicians are filmed delivering solo performances throughout the film – do hint at an appreciation of the underlying social factors that have subdued these incredible talents in their homeland for so long.

Johanna Schwartz's *They Will Have to Kill Us First: Malian Music in Exile* is a film that similarly documents musicians whose careers are crushingly

curtailed by a lack of freedom to write and perform. The film explores the impact of local Jihadist rule in Northern Mali, particularly Timbuktu, where music is banned and how this impacts a variety of musicians who are forced either to flee south to parts of the country where fighting for local control is less severe or cross the border to Burkina Faso. The film remains focused on the lives of the people it is about, including singer Khaira and the group Songhoy Blues. One of the interesting facets of the film is how it downplays successes that emerge from a Western engagement with the music, or at least keeps them in perspective in terms of the story it is telling of a people displaced.

In the film, the rise of Songhoy Blues is captured as they sign to UK label Transgressive Records and tour Britain, as well as collaborating with Damon Albarn's Africa Express project where they meet Nick Zinner of the band Yeah Yeah Yeahs, who produces their acclaimed debut album. This coverage is always tempered by the band's constant reflection on the political situation in their homeland and their desire to return home as free musicians. The footage of them riding the London Underground clutching their instruments, tired, tells so much of homesickness and the bittersweet irony of finding success outside a home context. This story is only part of the film's structure, however. As much if not more focus is given over to female musicians struggling to maintain lives and careers without Western acknowledgement. For the legendary Khaira, who holds a similar place in the hearts of Malian audiences as Jouini in Tunisia and Gencebay in Istanbul, it is vital that she holds a concert for peace in Timbuktu despite life-threatening danger. It is also vital that she performs with her friend and peer Disco who is seen throughout the film working in a refugee centre for displaced Malian women.

The concert forms the last act of the film,¹² placing the role of women and the importance of music in everyday life front and centre to the film's narrative and theme. In it, the two women perform on a Timbuktu Street, surrounded by their musicians and fans, seated, listening, singing, cheering. Schwartz's film is one that lets the musicians speak even more than the music. Very little, if any,

¹² This device, of building narrative towards a single event, is something the film shares with many other music films including *Buena Vista Social Club* and *Inna De Yard* (2019), a reggae film mentioned in the chapter on Black Music.

music is played by those featured in the film – troubadour Moussa Sidi is the other musician focused on – until around 35 minutes into the film. Up to that point, the audience is invited to spend time getting to know the musicians as people first, trusting that empathy will build and increase when they start playing. It makes the human politics of the film overt because ultimately, as Khaira says, capturing what her battle means in a personal–political context, ‘if we can’t have music, it’s the end of us’.

The final film under discussion in this chapter is a masterpiece that contains within its form all the components featured thus far. Ahmed El Maanouni’s *Trances* is a poetic documentary about place – Morocco – making music in your own language and with your own culture as the base, national politics, the politics of place, who speaks for whom, fandom and transcending national borders. That it manages to incorporate all these elements in a seamless whole that captures the transcendent music of the group Nass El Ghiwane in a cinematic experience is testament to the approach of the filmmaker. El Maanouni spends time observing the band in a variety of environments with no agenda and uses the music film as a direct means of capturing the resonances between people and place. The film follows the band as they move around Morocco and other North African countries on tour, as they exist and live – as teachers and struggling musicians between gigs – and as they come together to make the music that so overwhelms audiences, who continually rush the stage at the band’s hypnotic, rhythmic concerts. The people in the different places the band visit, and in their homeland, feel the music intimately. As Sally Shafto (2013) writes ‘what’s clear from watching Nass El Ghiwane in public is the highly participatory nature of their concerts. People perform a trancelike dance onstage and often embrace the four musicians. The spectator is an essential part of the equation.’ This is most thrillingly captured in the opening sequence where the audience, unable to contain themselves, storm the stage throwing the whole performance and film into disarray. The cutting captures the intensity of the moment, revealing something like the feeling of being present.

The film returns to the theme of place through montages over the music. The sound design artfully mixes ambient place sounds with live and recorded music to beautiful effect, conjuring a sense of place that feels connected to how the band talk about the music they make, rooted directly in ideas around Moroccan and African history, culture and politics. The approach to footage

and editing is impressionistic. Some of it feels like a traditional observational street documentary, while, at other times, it is much more expressionistic with images transplanted over musical sequences that seem like the director is finding connections between visual and aural stimulus, sharing interpretive moments with the audience. Making place the central theme, intentionally or not, ensures that the film has an axis around which the musical compositions and performances, as well as the band's collective and individual philosophies, can be engaged. Striking scenes include one in which two members of the band take a break from making furniture to work on new rhythms with a passing street musician, and another where a local man dances in red as a sheep is sacrificed, while Nass El Ghiwane's music plays. It all affirms the statement by a theatre director in the film that 'Moroccans recognise themselves in the group' and, conversely, that the opposite is true, that the band recognize Morocco in themselves and their music. Bilge Ebiri writes that the film 'starts off like a regular concert documentary and transforms over the course of its 90 minutes into a kind of conjuring, bringing forth the spirits of a nation' (2013: 29–32). It is not a biographical document but a portrait that seeks to evoke in the audience a feeling of why this music matters, rather than telling them why it does.

As Hacke asserts at the finale of *Crossing the Bridge*, it is impossible to know everything of a place and its music in a short time. Indeed, it is always impossible and certainly beyond the capabilities of a film. However, the films engaged with here acknowledge the limitations of the form in capturing the entirety of a subject. Instead of seeking to do so, they use a variety of approaches – personal, poetic, political etc. – to tell part of a story. By focusing on place, these films give audiences a way into the story.¹³ As musician Kode9 (Steve Goodman) says in the film about experimental music *The Sound Is Innocent* (2019): 'Music being just about listening is all wrong [...] music is architectural, more than something you listen to, it's something you inhabit.' By focusing on place, these films, despite their geographical differences, emphasize the interconnectedness of music and environment, of sound and place.

¹³ Though it could be argued that one of the problematic aspects of *Buena Vista Social Club* is how it purports to be about place but ultimately is not.