

## POPULAR MUSIC

## Folk and Folk Rock as Green Cultural Production

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This essay draws upon folk music and its now proliferating subgenres to address a key question in ecomedia studies – to what extent can ecological awareness be nurtured by green popular culture? Popular music exists as a configuration of “organic” folk culture, oppositional subculture, and mass market “pop.” The consensus is that this particular “circuit of culture” (du Gay et al. 1997) is not especially conducive to meaningful environmental representation. Few pop or rock artists engage with environmental issues and when they do it’s invariably tokenistic (Parham 2016, 151). Likewise, rock music’s narcissism, individualism, and consumerist values are, David Ingram argues, “largely antithetical to radical environmentalism” (2010, 120).

But circuits, like ecosystems, mutate. They evolve in response to changing conditions, emergent risks, and new opportunities. The ecological and climate crisis has accelerated globally since 1945, shortly before modern pop and rock emerged. Mutating established categories is one way for new perspectives to be generated, perspectives perhaps better fitted to an altered world. I’ll argue here that popular music is evolving hybrid forms that address diverse and complex ecological issues, from how we treat the physical environment or other animals to questions of plastic use, pollution, and climate change. My focus will be on one artist in particular, Ani DiFranco.<sup>1</sup>

**Parameters: “Green” Popular Music**

There are different ways to think about green popular music. One approach could be the ecomateriality examined elsewhere in this book. A *Rolling Stone* article on “The 15 Most Eco-Friendly Rockers” highlights, for example, how musicians ranging from Bonnie Raitt to Radiohead have promoted environmental issues and green lifestyle in practical terms – such as touring ecovillages – and in material terms, through adopting sustainable low-impact touring practices, by recycling, and using biodegradable materials and biofuels (Coscarelli 2010).

Environmental advocacy might also come (in the sense of *political ecology*) through the music itself. Previously studied examples include the Beach Boys (Carter 2013) and U2 (Parham 2016, 165–69), while Ingram identifies a sustained environmentalist tradition in folk artists such as Malvina Reynolds, Pete Seeger, Tracy Chapman, and Neil Young. Such analyses are mindful, nonetheless, of potential contradictions between environmental advocacy and the priorities of the music industry or rock culture itself. The Beach Boys’ commitment to environmental protection

was seemingly checked by “the risk averse logic of the Commercial music industry” (Carter 2013, 44). U2’s advocacy of “more sustainable ways of life” appears to be contradicted by the industrial infrastructure that underpins their studio recording and world tours (Pedelty 2012, 18).

Green popular music also encompasses artists focused on environments, animals, or humans’ increasingly hazardous impact on the Earth. Timothy Morton’s “dark ecology” conceptualises a sense of our now troubled and ominous relationship with other species. This is articulated, Morton suggests, in “uncanny” songs like The Cure’s “A Forest” that convey the “environment as creepy” (Morton 2010, 54). The avant-garde or “freak” folk of Joanna Newsom likewise posits nature as impenetrable and dangerous. Newsom deranges our sense of place and other animals via indecipherable lyrics, a jarring, childlike voice, and harp arrangements which mess with our expectations of how both folk and classical music should sound (see Ingram 2010, 117).

The ecocultural approach I take in this essay can examine where music originates from, how genres adapt to and circulate environmental themes, and the success (or otherwise) with which “green music” reaches a mass audience. For all their faults, U2’s blend of “indigenous” Irish music, American folk, and global rock might well have been effective in translating an environmentalist sense of place and an urgent realisation of ecological crisis into popular awareness (Parham 2016, 165–66). DiFranco is another example, one who makes a direct case for how folk’s evolution into folk rock can function as green popular music.

### **Folk into Rock**

On a spectrum between Anglophone folk music and electrified rock music, traditional folk, alongside country music, is usually seen as the popular form closest to “nature.” Its roots lie in the land, in songs articulating an earlier, everyday agrarian life. Both the US folk revival of the 1960s and its British equivalent contrasted a rural ideal to the alienations of modern industrial, urban life (Gruning 2006, 2). Commentators have complicated that portrayal, but it still recurs frequently and, in the assessment of some critics, remains a valid one. David Ingram argues that a “folkish anti-modernism” and “radical” nostalgia critiques the present, while folk is also oriented towards the future for instance by exemplifying modes of “local, sustainable cultural production” (2015, 221, 229). Rightly or wrongly, however, folk can also be seen as a genre constrained, in terms of being truly *popular*, by archaism, parochialism, and somewhat stale genre conventions. Describing the English Folk Revival of the twentieth century, Georgina Boyes concludes that “the Folk, by definition, re-created, rather than innovated” and suggests that folk music would not develop unless the “fundamental” principles of “tradition” and “authenticity” were rejected (2010, 240–41).

Yet folk music is evolving. Dick Weissman (2020) highlights how in North America the genre has co-mingled with blues, Celtic, hip hop, punk, pop, and world music (Chapters 12, 16), while Rowan Bayliss Hawitt (2020) detects movement beyond the “surface markers” of folk towards “globalised forms such as popular music” (336). Such adaptations can help address environmental challenges. In respective studies of Canadian and Scottish folk music, Ellen Waterman (2016) and Rowan Bayliss Hawitt (2020) both argue that a melding of local sensitivity and global ecological concern has engendered new environmental ethics of “responsibility and redress” (Waterman) and “solidarity and care” (Hawitt). However, can these new forms of folk music achieve the audience reach of the mainstream music industry? And why does this matter?

Both the science underlying ecological crisis and the required adjustments in policy and politics are complex. They seem to require challenging texts able to encapsulate and represent that complexity. However, as Richard Kerridge has pointed out, the speed at which the crisis is escalating means we probably don’t have time to wait for “avant-garde” aesthetics and ideas to reach a larger

audience (2014, 368–69). He concludes that while awakening urgency about climate change will need the dramatic jolt offered by experimental forms of culture, a more moderate disturbance of popular genres might also coax viewers, readers, or listeners relatively quickly towards environmental awareness. Kerridge cites science fiction, horror, and recent television nature documentaries as examples (372). Folk music is evolving in a similar way.

In *Electric Eden*, Rob Young concurs that folk music embodies important environmental values – organic local culture, a critique of modernity – while also arguing that in the 1960s it avoided stagnation through electrification and the emergence of folk rock (2011, 5–10). Since then folk has intersected more and more with music industry staples such as electronic rock and mainstream pop. Just as country music now encompasses “alt-country,” rapper Little Nas X’s genre-busting “Old Town Road,” and commercial superstardom (Taylor Swift), folk, too, has splintered into almost innumerable variants. These are both subcultural – “chamber folk,” “psych folk,” and “weird folk” – and mainstream: “folk rock,” “indie folk,” “pop folk,” and arena fillers such as Mumford and Sons and Fleet Foxes.

The most logical space for environmentalist folk music to move into is rock. Like folk, rock is guitar music. Lyrics are important, as is live performance. Rock has inherited core values from folk: authenticity, community, critique of mass culture, and political protest (see Bennett 2001, 30; Keightley 2001, 120). Rock also emerged from “pop music,” inheriting its melodies and production values, its thematic emphasis on love, romance, and sex, and its commercial instincts and audiences (see Frith 1983, 32–38). While this potentially creates a tension between social dissent and commercial appeal, it is a tension that can be harnessed by environmentally minded artists. Folk rock has the capacity to stretch green discourse beyond prevailing modes – earnestness, fury, and sermonising – that lack traction amongst a mass audience. Correspondingly, folk rock could move rock beyond its narcissistic limitations – perhaps even its “waning vitality” as a genre (Pedelty 2011, 19) – thereby enabling rock music to rediscover the ground beneath its feet. Ani DiFranco arguably shows us how.

### Ani DiFranco

Originally from Buffalo, New York, and now settled in New Orleans, DiFranco was introduced by her music teacher to Buffalo’s folk scene at the age of nine and began learning guitar. DiFranco left home at 15 and toured extensively, selling tapes at shows and building a fan base via open mic events and festivals. Her connections with the folk scene run deep. DiFranco has worked with both contemporary artists (e.g. Bon Iver’s Justin Vernon) and folk icons (Utah Phillips, Pete Seeger). The Woody Guthrie Center in Oklahoma curates her fortnightly radio show. DiFranco’s music likewise identifies her as a folk artist: the centrality of lyrics, a conversational stage style (Garrett 2008, 379), and an emphasis on live performance over recording. Music is “something you *did*, not something you *bought*,” she has said (Rodgers 2000). Nevertheless, DiFranco has currently recorded 22 studio albums, on her own label, Righteous Babe Records, established so that she would never be beholden to corporate money. The label maintains the community ethos of folk – employing friends, being based in a renovated Buffalo church, and striving to “work with local designers and manufacturers.” As such, Righteous Babe corresponds with the ecocritical values espoused by critics like David Ingram and Mark Pedelty, who advocate folk as local, sustainable music. The label nurtures the music itself. More than twenty other artists are signed to Righteous Babe, ranging from Anais Mitchell’s post-apocalyptic folk opera *Hadestown* to Peter Mulvey’s wintry soundscapes.

In other respects, DiFranco conforms less readily to the folk archetype. Interviews often query her categorisation as a folk singer. DiFranco’s largely self-produced albums recreate the

“authenticity” of live performance central to folk, keeping the music close to her audience (Barlow 2019). Yet intermittent regrets about not doing her songs justice (“sometimes I do look back at my records and I think ‘sorry, songs’”! [CBS Mornings 2021]) locate DiFranco somewhere between folk and the pop music tradition of the singer-songwriter. More visible still is a distinct subcultural attitude that DiFranco has helped introduce into folk culture. Tom Gruning’s *Millennium Folk* offers entertaining accounts of her pierced and tattooed, gender and sexually fluid fans descending on folk festivals (2006, 125, 151). DiFranco herself describes her music as “one degree of separation between Pete Seeger and Prince” (another collaborator) and underlines a version of folk closer to the countercultural:

folk music is not an acoustic guitar – that’s not where the heart of it is. I use the word “folk” in reference to punk music and rap music. It’s an attitude, it’s an awareness of one’s heritage, and it’s a community. It’s subcorporate music that gives voice to different communities and their struggle against authority.

(Rodgers 2000)

DiFranco also transcends the place specificity of folk. She is a national, even international, artist who unwaveringly confronts a world stewing in neoliberal capitalism. Her songs attack big business, consumerism, patriarchy, sexism, racism, war, and gun crime. They incorporate references to climate change, global warming, the ozone layer, chemical and river pollution, plastic waste, and nuclear disaster. Correspondingly, while her eclectic music can accurately be called “folk rock” or “indie folk,” these are just the foundations on which DiFranco overlays just about every other popular genre imaginable: jazz, soul, and funk; electronic, ambient, and environmental sound; hip hop, punk, and rock.

How does this translate into green popular music? Keir Keightley has distinguished between two rock music traditions. The first, “Romanticism,” is organic. It cherishes a “pre-industrial” past and “locates authenticity principally in the direct communication between artist and audience.” The second, “Modernism,” values music that breaks from the past and shocks. Here, authenticity means being “true to [...] experimentation, innovation, development, change” as a means of expressing estrangement from and a challenge to society (2001, 136). Romanticism encompasses folk, blues, and country styles. It emphasises roots, place, sincerity, liveness, “natural” as opposed to technological instruments, and a belief in a “core [...] rock sound.” Conversely, Modernism – closer to “art music” or pop – privileges radical or experimental sound, technology, and artifice (137). DiFranco swings between the two. And just as her musical fluidity has been seen to push the boundaries of feminist expression (Love 2013, 159), so, too, it meets the challenges of dark ecology by colliding the traditional signifiers of folk with the dissonant sounds of “modernist” rock.

*Reprieve* (from 2006) is a beautiful album haunted by natural disaster and human malignancy (or stupidity). Recorded before and after Hurricane Katrina, *Reprieve* also recalls the atomic bomb; its cover image shows a Nagasaki eucalyptus tree truncated by the bomb. Several tracks address ecological malaise by mixing seemingly incompatible sounds. On “Subconscious,” electronic sound unsettles a largely conventional folk song to underscore its theme: personal anxiety compounded by a world of plastic water bottles, air conditioning, and cell phone radiation. In “Millennium Theater,” pollution, melting ice caps, and a commodification of natural resources and of people are conveyed by a folk song that struggles to be heard beneath *Twilight Zone* electronica. There is no reprieve; the track ends in white noise. We live in “hell,” says DiFranco on “Decree,” the “darkest darkness.” Mollified by media, consumer goods, and celebrity culture, nobody notices pollution, health hazards, or (it’s implied) the death of nature. So DiFranco inflicts

even greater injury to the folk sound. “Decree” is prefaced by noise: frightened animals and malign technologies. Discordant electronica tramples the guitar. The lyrics end prematurely, the folk voice annulled by 45 seconds of empty technological and percussive sound not unlike the outer limits of Radiohead. Gesturing towards the avant-garde, this experimental track sounds like the victory of “Modernist” rock over “Romantic” folk. The songs are a palimpsest: modernity writes itself over the values of folk.

The liberal use of studio-engineered, abstract sound – reverberation, eeriness, echo, and silence – often bleeding from one track to the next and implies an ontology of blurred lines, unsettled states, distortion, and disorientation brought about by the neoliberalism DiFranco is denouncing. Yet these sounds are also paired with environmental or animal sounds: wind through trees, birds singing and twittering, and honking and squawking geese (or ducks). Synthesised studio effects intrude, for example, in “Unrequited,” where DiFranco is baffled at the urge to kill a “beautiful” animal just to hang it on the wall. The track ends, however, with a surprise – the fleeting sound of a horse whinnying. Written before Katrina struck, “Millennium Theater” mentions New Orleans bidding its time. These environmental sounds imply not only a technologically altered posthuman world hurtling towards disaster but also the other type of posthumanism, the one where nature returns.

Earlier DiFranco songs had sometimes adopted an animal’s perspective. On the title track of *Evolve* (2003), for example, folk guitar becomes a pounding funk bass as a moth frantically circles a lightbulb. It thinks it’s “trying to evolve,” just like we do while increasingly disorientated by a mediated, technological world. On *Reprieve*, “In the Margins” opens with an acoustic guitar but played in a way critics and DiFranco herself have identified as “chunky,” “ripping,” and “powerful and percussive,” a style apparently achieved by wrapping duct tape around artificial fingernails (Garrett 2008, 381, 388; Love 2013, 161). The guitar is overly forceful. Coupled with heavy bass, reverberation, and synthesised instruments it suggests again modern(ist) disorientation. The focus this time is on fractured personal relationships, disillusioned love, and the “cheap” insignificance of the human “saga.” Until, that is, DiFranco takes on an animal’s perspective. A “rare bird” flickers by; a stray dog looks on. Noticing these, DiFranco realises that love (the “pop” theme at the core of many of her songs) is a fool’s game. These animal perspectives shift from the margins of the city to the centre of the song to see the world as it should be. Truth to Earth equates to truth to self. This understanding is met by a return to folk, the song concluding with unadorned vocals and scratched acoustic chords. By using animal, environmental, and technological sounds, DiFranco allows for ecological perspectives that would not be possible in a folk music conventionally grounded in *human* concepts of place, community, authenticity, and social solidarity. Yet Ani is nothing if not agile. Elsewhere she utilises the human perspective of the singer-songwriter tradition, extending the range of her green popular music.

Simon Frith has argued that, as folk music became increasingly intertwined with rock and pop, authenticity to the “folk” was replaced with personal authenticity: “truth to self rather than truth to a movement or an audience” (1983, 32). Something gets lost, it’s implied. Yet shaped by feminism, DiFranco’s songs have “always reflected an acute connection between my personal life and the life of my society” (“About Ani” 2022). Desire and aspiration, personal trauma and anxiety, sit alongside cultural, political and environmental hazards, creating a link between what she has called “macro” and “micro” melancholy (“Serpentine” 2003). Broken hearts happen (in part) because capitalism fosters transactional relationships, paranoid female identity, and the wrong kinds of masculinity. Moreover, DiFranco’s music puts environmental desecration into dialogue with recent thinking around mental health and climate anxiety (see, for example, Clayton 2020; Thompson 2021).

“Simultaneously,” from 2021’s *Revolutionary Love*, is framed around a series of conjunctions. It conjoins a “fragile” self with a “dumb” social world. It suggests a cultural bipolarism – we feel (simultaneously) “fractured” and “free.” The agents of our fractured selves are both political (“oppression”) and personal (“disrespect”) but so too are the solutions. The album was influenced by Valarie Kaur’s book *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (2020). Kaur argues for a politics of dissent and protest based on understanding, compassion, and dialogue with others. “Simultaneously” has no reference to climate change, plastic, or pollution. Yet in a context, in which the environmental crisis is increasingly personal, even in the global North – with forest fires in California and Australia, flash flooding in Britain and Germany – DiFranco appears to acknowledge this as green popular music. The video for “Simultaneously” was filmed on oil company land. DiFranco landed up in court charged with trespass. In articles and interviews, she has repeatedly articulated “revolutionary love” in ecological terms, expressed in the view that “we can’t kick each other off the planet” (see Barlow 2019; Baltin 2020).

### **Conclusion: The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere**

“Simultaneously” can’t really be called a folk song; it’s about as close to pop as any DiFranco track I’ve heard. Critics and reviewers have, however, frequently noted DiFranco returning to her folk roots. *Revolutionary Love* is a good example. On her website, DiFranco writes:

This thing was made more like it was 1968, with people performing on instruments made of wood and metal, laying down a few takes and moving on. It really brought out the prowess of the musicians involved and the immediacy of offering up a song to another human.

It was on a much earlier album, *The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere* (1996), that DiFranco set Utah Phillips’ stories to music: “I would find the BPM [*beats per minute*] of the story and try to negotiate a rhythm track to it” (Rodgers 2000). The purpose, DiFranco said at the time, was to unite the energy of youth and the wisdom of age. If younger musicians would only listen to Phillips, she insisted, they’d be inspired. And then they could “take the same old tools—an acoustic guitar—and be working in an old crusty medium like folk music, and do something totally new” (Rodgers 2000).

Now, folk artists are creating something new. Green ideas often lie at the heart of this, whether it’s Edgelarks, Sam Lee, or Karine Polwart reworking traditional folk or artists like Cloud Cult, DiFranco, or the British indie band Sea Power explicitly colliding genres. Yet a question remains: how do we know whether these innovative forms of popular music really are helping nurture environmental awareness, changes in lifestyle, and even social action? A very rudimentary analysis indicates that some fans, at least, share or are inspired by musicians’ environmental principles. On Twitter, if you pair “Ani DiFranco” with “climate,” “environment,” or “pollution,” you will find people quoting DiFranco, citing her lyrics, or simply reflecting on the state of the planet after listening to her music:

Untouchable Face by Ani DiFranco is taking on new, considerable meaning in the political and biological climate

(One Shtick Ari (@arisbarmitzvah), March 5, 2020).

Listening to Ani DiFranco this morning pretending it is the 90s and we still have time to avert climate catastrophe

(Hiel, Adrian (@AdrianHiel), February 29, 2020).

Corroborating claims about green music's effect will ultimately require large scale, longitudinal analysis of fan literature, and/or social media. Addressing a lack of research into the audience reception of environmental texts is, I believe, still the key future task facing ecomedia studies (Parham 2016, 3). If we can answer those questions, the hope will be that these texts *do* speak to people, and in large enough numbers. They certainly deserve to.

In one of the few books on popular ecomusicology, Mark Pedelty writes that, "To be considered truly musical, organized sound also needs to contain selective and purposeful violations of culturally defined patterns, violations that both surprise and please an audience" (2011, 18–19). Avant-garde music is unlikely to please any audience at the scale environmental values must reach, nor will audiences be "surprised" (i.e., stimulated) by any forced repatriation back to "traditional" music. Splintering, mashing, and recombining genres are essential if we are to articulate and confront increasingly urgent challenges. But we should also retain core ecological values embedded into our cultural circuits by more traditional folk music. For there's pleasure to be had here: the pleasure of music charged by a visionary mix of folk, rock and pop, punk and hip hop, and free jazz and electronica, and that brings along with it the sound of horses, birds, and trees.

### Note

- 1 With thanks to my friend and colleague David Arnold who introduced me to Ani DiFranco and shared his thoughts on environmental themes in her work.

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