Tucker Seifert
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Historical Silences and "Malt Shop Memories"

Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* illuminates the intersections of power, memory, and the production of history. The book highlights how "silences" enter the process of historical construction at crucial moments, which supports its model of multiple historicities that correspond to "what happened" and "what is said to have happened."[1] Trouilllot also highlighted that people create the conceptions of history as *agents, actors,* and *subjects.* Just as narratives of the Alamo, the arrival of Christopher Columbus, and the Haitian Revolution reflect both historical phenomena and sociohistorical processes that lead to conceptions of said phenomena, music draws from past occurrences, undergoes silences, and becomes reinterpreted by new audiences.[2] My song, "Malt Shop Memories" draws from Trouillot's theory to illustrate how social memory, silences, and power affect our interpretation of "malt shop era" music.[3]

As a self-taught musician, I gravitated towards malt shop music due to its beauty and simplicity. The era's antiquated recording technology and faded black and white images of singers produced a golden nostalgic glow around the music. As I continued to play malt shop music, I realized that it evoked similar emotions in others. In fact, aside from criticisms of the music's repetitiveness, the discourse surrounding this music is so powerful that one cannot escape the nostalgic yearnings from fans of the genre to either re-live or in some way experience the era. This theme highlights the power of historical silences: the era is not fully (or even that well) portrayed by the musical artifacts we have access to today. Yet, as Trouillot demonstrated

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[1] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 6%, Kindle Edition.
[2] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, chapter 1-5.
[3] "Malt shop music" refers to an of music that included aspects of doo wop, rock 'n' roll, and pop genres that were popular in the late 1905s and early 1960s. Malt shop songs share similar structures, themes, melodies, harmonies, motifs, and imagery.

that the "fixity of the past" is malleable, one recreates or, at least, creates a projection of the past when engaging with malt shop music.[4]

Utilizing sweet melodies, variations of the I-vi-IV-V chord progression, and well-produced harmonies, this music became a vehicle to market to a young audience who had access to radios and record players in the late 1950s and early 1960s. While the themes of love, good times, heartbreak, and loss ring throughout 20th century popular music, the malt shop era capitalized on these themes in an overtly heteronormative and anti-deviant manner. The solutions frequently suggested to the problems posed in these songs are found through learning the rules of life and love or in heterosexual relationships, for example. Adding to this, the roots of the genre were stripped from Black musicians and whitewashed to appeal to a mainstream American audience. As such, one should understand the nostalgic discourse surrounding malt shop music as it is better understood as a reinterpreted memory rather than a history of "what happened."[5]

Bringing Trouillot's theory and a critical view to malt shop music has shown me that I, as a musician, am one of the "artisans of a different kind" that play a role in shaping people's understanding of history and its narratives.[6] What part have I played in silencing "what [might have] happened" in favor of a preferable "what is said to have happened?" I now question if musicians are not themselves public historians, drawing from narratives and sonic inventions that transcend the axis of time. If so, what obligations do we have as musicians to speak to power and address the silencing processes that pervade music production and consumption? "Malt Shop Memories" utilizes malt shop musical structures to apply the theory from *Silencing the Past* to illuminate and engage with these questions.

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[4] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 72%.
[5] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 6%.
[6] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 16%.

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Lyrics

Verse 1

I can play you these four chords, a progression full of soul—
Or oppression with a goal? To label and control—
Reify the malt shop's glow, is that what happened or just what is told?

Verse 2

Remember those warm nights, under the moon so bright—
Forget those who had to fight—
Remember "we" were White—
Forget where the music's from—
Remember, to package and sell it to the young

Bridge

But the silences keep shouting out into this crucial moment—
Production shows no signs war, queer love, or Black roots stolen—
From the actions, to recording, to retrieval, to the instance you're listening—
Remembrance frames the past, a lost great world, gold and glistening—
But who was there to see?
Can you know it anymore?
So for this nostalgic picture the malt shop conforms

Verse 3

She left me by the juke box['s] side, now we look back with pride—
As Trouillot's "different Kind[s]" my power hides in sight—
Agents laid the themes, and actors made the scenes—
Now as subject you and me, show the past is not just memory