

Review: The Brass Liberation Orchestra

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The Brass Liberation Orchestra (BLO) is a marching band based in San Francisco, California, USA, made up of “musicians[...] and cultural workers who use culture to support causes of a broadly left nature,” while paying “particular attention to racism and white supremacy” (“Points of Unity and Vision” 2004). On September 25th 2009, the BLO launched *Operation: Hey Mackey*, a musical flash mob protest inside the Bay Place Whole Foods. With this act of dissidence, the BLO sought to inform consumers of their objections to then-CEO John Mackey’s recently articulated position that “healthcare is not an intrinsic right” (2009).

Dancers and musicians with instruments small enough to fit in cases trickled into the store, picking up shopping baskets and hoping to fit in. Musicians equipped with sousaphones and other large attention-grabbing instruments entered last. Not long after, shouts of “Hey Mackey, you’re a swine! You’re a swine you blow my mind! Hey Mackey!” rang out from the back of the store, soon accompanied by booming sousaphones and crooning clarinets, trombones and more. The BLO’s adaptation of the 1982 Toni Basil pop hit “Hey Mickey” continued:

Oh Mackey, what a pity
You don't seem to care
We're not as rich as you
but we still need healthcare

Dancers clapped, hopped, bounced, and smiled like cheerleaders. After a few rounds of the song, musicians and dancers paused as a protestor with a megaphone informed Whole Foods shoppers and employees of the reason for their action: John Mackey’s recent statement in the *Wall Street Journal* that “healthcare is not a right” (Brass Liberation Orchestra 2009). Protestors distributed flyers directing shoppers to a “Boycott Whole Foods” facebook page, played a few more rounds of the song, and then cheerfully and leisurely exited while still playing and dancing. Blogger Cassidy Friedman observed that the protestors’ audience was largely receptive, noting that “one or two shoppers joined the action,” and “even employees struggled to hide their amusement by the outburst” (2009).

Despite the fact that the action took a little more than five minutes in all and that no reporters were physically present at the event, it attracted attention from bloggers, local news outlets and national progressive outlets (eventually landing on the website of *New York Magazine*). Protestors believed that it was the online buzz, generated as their YouTube and Vimeo documentation of the protest went viral, that attracted the attention of larger news outlets. Protestors perceived that the action was one of many diverse strategies enacted nationwide that successfully contributed to John Mackey's

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decision to step down from his position as Chairman of the Board of Whole Foods (Vastine), despite his insistence that this move had nothing to do with the national response to his statement in the Wall Street Journal (Mackey 2009). Regardless of how firmly we can or cannot link the flash mob to any change in Whole Foods' governance, particularly in light of the fact that Mackey remains the CEO of the corporation, the BLO still viewed *Operation: Hey Mackey* as more effective than any of their previous actions, most of which had taken place during marches and rallies in the streets of the San Francisco Bay area (Vastine). By entering a space privately owned by a corporate entity, with digital cameras in hand, protestors found they were able to attract more eyes to their action in the digital commons than they had previously been able to do through actions that took place on the street, the physical commons. This was the first of several musical flash mob protests that the BLO staged and disseminated via social media, and one of the first of many musical flash mob protests that we have seen since. In 2010, commentator Paul Hogarth asked if the BLO's second musical flash mob protest, *Caught in a Bad Hotel*, was "the future of protest," and the subsequent emergence of musical flash mobs from London, England (Leveille 2013) to Cairo, Egypt (Gubash 2013) seems to indicate that the answer is yes.

What I wish to emphasize here is the BLO's relationships to and understandings of power, place, space, and the media, placing *Operation: Hey Mackey* in the context of the Seattle World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings protests of 1999 and the Occupy Wall Street protests beginning in 2011. Taken together, these three protests mark a notable trend, with *Operation: Hey Mackey* marking an otherwise easily overlooked midpoint. In this neoliberal age, many dissidents seek out not capitol buildings, legislative halls, or news cameras but instead corporate centers of operation, with cell phones in hand. As privatization creeps and spreads throughout what were once public commons, activists and progressive citizens seek influence through their online social networks, and also through their spending habits, voting with their dollars.

However, one might argue that civil discourse that relies on internet access or dollars that one might withhold from Whole Foods is fundamentally undemocratic. What's more, what avenues for civil discourse remain available to citizens who, due to race or class markers, may not be able to smoothly infiltrate corporate centers of power? I consider the BLO's response to the privatization of the commons to be an effective and savvy one, given the conditions in which they were, and, arguably, we still are working. How might we build upon the success of these tactics and also reclaim the commons? What lessons might we glean from the successes and failures of the Seattle WTO protests and the Occupy movement in this regard? What is next?

Subsequent musical flash mob protests offer some possible answers, as dissidents seek to reclaim funds from the private sector in the name of the common good. For example, activists in London used music to declare a flagship Apple store "Irish territory" in response to allegations that Apple failed to pay its share of taxes to Ireland (Leveille 2013). Similarly, the BLO's most

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recent musical flash mob protest demanded that Bank of America pay a fair share of taxes as well (US Uncut 2011). I'm struck by the boldness of the musicians pictured striding through the front doors of Bank of America in the official video documentation available on YouTube. There's no attempt to infiltrate, to pretend that they are customers. The musicians glide down the escalator silently staring, their moral indignation louder than words.

Perhaps this is the road that leads us to movements like North Carolina's Moral Monday, a series of weekly direct actions in protest of a rash of state legislation that drastically cuts public services and imposes voter identification restrictions that discourage the participation of people of color, young people, and elderly people, all citizens unlikely to vote for the present leadership. Every Monday since April 29, dissidents proudly enter their legislative halls, what should be their commons, and simply refuse to leave. When police officers began to arrest Occupy protestors, we understood that to be a defeat, the alleged end of the movement. In North Carolina, cheering crowds celebrate those who volunteer to be arrested (Keyes 2013). The organizers of Moral Monday have crafted a different narrative, in which we acknowledge that oppression is real and inevitable, and we celebrate those who publicly suffer its effects for making what is usually invisible so clearly visible to us all. How does *Operation Hey Mackey* lead us here? Whether through music and dancing or not, I recognize in both *Operation Hey Mackey* and Moral Mondays a bold, even cheerful celebration of dissidence, an uncontainable joy that spills from the streets to the cellphone camera to the screen where these very words flicker in front of me.

Natalie Goodnow is a M.F.A. student in Performance as Public Practice at the University of Texas at Austin. She is a nationally recognized theatre artist, teaching artist, and activist from Austin, Texas. Her solo play *Mud Offerings* is the 2011 winner of the Jane Chambers Playwriting Award, and has been presented nationally at festivals and conferences in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Washington D.C., and throughout Texas. Previously, Goodnow worked as a Teaching Artist and Artistic Associate with Creative Action, engaging young people in dialogue about social issues through the creative arts, and developing curricula and training for other educators. She holds a B.A. from Southwestern University, where she majored in Theatre and minored in Spanish and Feminist Studies. She researches and practices arts integration strategies within dialogue facilitation, critical pedagogy, popular education, and community organizing projects with both youth and adults, both in and outside of formal school settings.

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