Taking Popular Music Seriously

Selected Essays

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CHAPTER 16

Towards an aesthetic of popular music

Introduction: the 'value' of popular music

Underlying all the other distinctions critics draw between 'serious' and 'popular' music is an assumption about the source of musical value. Serious music matters because it transcends social forces; popular music is aesthetically worthless because it is determined by them (because it is 'useful' or 'utilitarian'). This argument, common enough among academic musicologists, puts sociologists in an odd position. If we venture to suggest that the value of, say, Beethoven's music can be explained by the social conditions determining its production and subsequent consumption we are dismissed as philistines – aesthetic theories of classical music remain determinedly non-sociological. Popular music, by contrast, is taken to be good only for sociological theory. Our very success in explaining the rise of rock 'n' roll or the appearance of disco proves their lack of aesthetic interest. To relate music and society becomes, then, a different task according to the music we are treating. In analyzing serious music, we have to uncover the social forces concealed in the talk of 'transcendent' values; in analyzing pop, we have to take seriously the values scoffed at in the talk of social functions.

In this paper I will concentrate on the second issue; my particular concern is to suggest that the sociological approach to popular music does not rule out an aesthetic theory but, on the contrary, makes one possible. At first sight this proposition is unlikely. There is no doubt that sociologists have tended to explain away pop music. In my own academic work I have examined how rock is produced and consumed, and have tried to place it

ideologically, but there is no way that a reading of my books (or those of other sociologists) could be used to explain why some pop songs are good and others bad, why Elvis Presley is a better singer than John Denver, or why disco is a much richer musical genre than progressive rock. And yet for ten years or more I have also been a working rock critic, making such judgments as a matter of course, assuming, like all pop fans, that our musical choices matter.

Are such judgments spurious – a way of concealing from myself and other consumers the ways in which our tastes are manipulated? Can it really be the case that my pleasure in a song by the group Abba carries the same aesthetic weight as someone else's pleasure in Mozart? Even to pose such a question is to invite ridicule – either I seek to reduce the 'transcendent' Mozart to Abba's commercially determined level, or else I elevate Abba's music beyond any significance it can carry. But even if the pleasures of serious and popular musics are different, it is not immediately obvious that the difference is that between artistic autonomy and social utility. Abba's value is no more (and no less) bound up with an experience of transcendence than Mozart's; the meaning of Mozart is no less (and no more) explicable in terms of social forces. The question facing sociologists and aestheticians in both cases is the same: how do we make musical value judgments? How do such value judgments articulate the listening experiences involved?

The sociologist of contemporary popular music is faced with a body of songs, records, stars and styles which exists because of a series of decisions, made by both producers and consumers, about what is a successful sound. Musicians write tunes and play solos; producers choose from different sound mixes; record companies and radio programmers decide what should be released and played; consumers buy one record rather than another and concentrate their attention on particular genres. The result of all these apparently individual decisions is a pattern of success, taste and style which can be explained sociologically.

If the starting question is why does this hit sound this way, then sociological answers can be arranged under two headings. First, there are answers in terms of technique and technology: people produce and consume the music they are capable of producing and consuming (an obvious point, but one which opens up issues of skill, background and education which in pop music are applied not to individual composers but to social groups). Different groups possess different sorts of cultural capital, share different cultural expectations and so make music differently – pop tastes are shown to correlate with class cultures and subcultures; musical styles are linked to

specific age groups; we take for granted the connections of ethnicity and sound. This is the sociological common sense of rock criticism, which equally acknowledges the determining role of technology. The history of twentieth-century popular music is impossible to write without reference to the changing forces of production, electronics, the use of recording, amplification and synthesizers, just as consumer choices cannot be separated from the possession of transistor radios, stereo hi-fis, ghetto blasters and Walkmen.

While we can thus point to general patterns of pop use, the precise link (or homology) between sounds and social groups remains unclear. Why is rock 'n' roll youth music, whereas Dire Straits is the sound of Yuppie USA? To answer these questions there is a second sociological approach to popular music, expressed in terms of its functions. This approach is obvious in ethnomusicology, that is in anthropological studies of traditional and folk musics which are explained by reference to their use in dance, in rituals, for political mobilization, to solemnize ceremonies or to excite desires. Similar points are made about contemporary pop, but its most important function is assumed to be commercial – the starting analytical assumption is that the music is made to sell; thus research has focused on who makes marketing decisions and why, and on the construction of 'taste publics'. The bulk of the academic sociology of popular music (including my own) implicitly equates aesthetic and commercial judgments. The phenomenal 1985 successes of Madonna and Bruce Springsteen are explained, for example, in terms of sales strategies, the use of video, and the development of particular new audiences. The appeal of the music itself, the reason Madonna's and Springsteen's fans like them, somehow remains unexamined.

From the fans' perspective it is obvious that people play the music they do because it 'sounds good', and the interesting question is why they have formed that opinion. Even if pop tastes are the effects of social conditioning and commercial manipulation, people still explain them to themselves in terms of value judgment. Where, in pop and rock, do these values come from? When people explain their tastes, what terms do they use? They certainly know what they like (and dislike), what pleases them and what does not. Read the music press, listen to band rehearsals and recording sessions, overhear the chatter in record shops and discos, note the ways in which disc jockeys play records, and you will hear value judgments being made. The discriminations that matter in these settings occur *within* the general sociological framework. While this allows us at a certain level to 'explain' rock or disco, it is not adequate for an understanding of why one rock record or one disco track is better than another. Turn to the explanations of

the fans or musicians (or even of the record companies) and a familiar argument appears. Everyone in the pop world is aware of the social forces that determine 'normal' pop music – a good record, song, or sound is precisely one that transcends those forces!

The music press is the place where pop value judgments are most clearly articulated. A reading of British music magazines reveals that 'good' popular music has always been heard to go beyond or break through commercial routine. This was as true for critics struggling to distinguish jazz from Tin Pan Alley pop in the 1920s and black jazz from white jazz in the 1930s as for critics asserting rock's superiority to teen pop in the late 1960s. In *Sound effects*[1] I argued that rock's claim to a form of aesthetic autonomy rests on a combination of folk and art arguments: as folk music rock is heard to represent the community of youth, as art music rock is heard as the sound of individual, creative sensibility. The rock aesthetic depends, crucially, on an argument about authenticity. Good music is the authentic expression of something – a person, an idea, a feeling, a shared experience, a *Zeitgeist*. Bad music is inauthentic – it expresses nothing. The most common term of abuse in rock criticism is 'bland' – bland music has nothing in it and is made only to be commercially pleasing.

'Authenticity' is, then, what guarantees that rock performances resist or subvert commercial logic, just as rock-star quality (whether we are discussing Elvis Presley or David Bowie, the Rolling Stones or the Sex Pistols), describes the power that enables certain musicians to drive something individually obdurate through the system. At this point, rock criticism meets up with 'serious' musicology. Wilfrid Mellers' scholarly books on the Beatles and Bob Dylan,[2] for example, describe in technical terms their subjects' transcendent qualities; but they read like fan mail and, in their lack of self-conscious hipness, point to the contradiction at the heart of this aesthetic approach. The suggestion is that pop music becomes more valuable the more independent it is of the social forces that organize the pop process in the first place; pop value is dependent on something outside pop, is rooted in the person, the *auteur*, the community or the subculture that lies behind it. If good music is authentic music, then critical judgment means measuring the performers' 'truth' to the experiences or feelings they are describing.

Rock criticism depends on myth – the myth of the youth community, the myth of the creative artist. The reality is that rock, like all twentieth-

[1] Simon Frith, *Sound effects: youth, leisure and the politics of rock 'n' roll* (New York, 1981).
[2] Wilfrid Mellers, *Twilight of the gods: the Beatles in retrospect* (London, 1973), and *A darker shade of pale: a backdrop to Bob Dylan* (London, 1984).

century pop musics, is a commercial form, music produced as a commodity, for a profit, distributed through mass media as mass culture. It is in practice very difficult to say exactly who or what it is that rock expresses or who, from the listener's point of view, are the authentically creative performers. The myth of authenticity is, indeed, one of rock's own ideological effects, an aspect of its sales process: rock stars can be marketed as artists, and their particular sounds marketed as a means of identity. Rock criticism is a means of legitimating tastes, justifying value judgments, but it does not really explain how those judgments came to be made in the first place. If the music is not, in fact, made according to the 'authentic' story, then the question becomes how we are able to judge some sounds as more authentic than others: what are we actually listening for in making our judgments? How do we know Bruce Springsteen is more authentic than Duran Duran, when both make records according to the rules of the same complex industry? And how do we recognize good sounds in non-rock genres, in pop forms like disco that are not described in authentic terms in the first place? The question of the value of pop music remains to be answered.

An alternative approach to music and society

In an attempt to answer these questions I want to suggest an alternative approach to musical value, to suggest different ways of defining 'popular music' and 'popular culture'. The question we should be asking is not what does popular music *reveal* about 'the people' but how does it *construct* them. If we start with the assumption that pop is expressive, then we get bogged down in the search for the 'real' artist or emotion or belief lying behind it. But popular music is popular not because it reflects something, or authentically articulates some sort of popular taste or experience, but because it creates our understanding of what popularity is. The most misleading term in cultural theory is, indeed, 'authenticity'. What we should be examining is not how true a piece of music is to something else, but how it sets up the idea of 'truth' in the first place – successful pop music is music which defines its own aesthetic standard.

A simple way to illustrate the problems of defining musical popularity is to look at its crudest measure, the weekly record sales charts in the British music press and the American *Billboard*. These are presented to us as market research: the charts measure something real – sales and radio plays – and represent them with all the trimmings of an objective, scientific apparatus. But, in fact, what the charts reveal is a specific definition of what can

be counted as popular music in the first place – record sales (in the right shops), radio plays (on the right stations). The charts work not as the detached measure of some agreed notion of popularity, but as the most important determination of what the popularity of popular music means – that is, a particular pattern of market choice. The charts bring selected records together into the community of the market place; they define certain sorts of consumption as being collective in certain sorts of ways.

The sales charts are only one measure of popularity; and when we look at others, it becomes clear that their use is always for the creation (rather than reflection) of taste communities. Readers' polls in the music press, for example, work to give communal shape to disparate readers; the Pazz 'n' Jop poll in *The Village Voice* creates a sense of collective commitment among the fragmented community of American rock critics. The Grammy awards in the United States and the BPI awards in Britain, present the industry's view of what pop music is about – nationalism and money. These annual awards, which for most pop fans seem to miss the point, reflect sales figures and 'contributions to the recording industry': measures of popularity no less valid than readers' or critics' polls (which often deliberately honor 'unpopular' acts). In comparing poll results, arguments are really not about who is more popular than whom empirically (see rock critics' outrage that Phil Collins rather than Bruce Springsteen dominated the 1986 Grammys) but about what popularity means. Each different measure measures something different or, to put it more accurately, each different measure constructs its own object of measurement. This is apparent in *Billboard*'s 'specialist' charts, in the way in which 'minority' musics are defined. 'Women's music', for example, is interesting not as music which somehow expresses 'women', but as music which seeks to define them, just as 'black music' works to set up a very particular notion of what 'blackness' is.

This approach to popular culture, as the creation rather than the expression of the people, need not be particular to music. There are numerous ways in our everyday life in which accounts of 'the people' are provided. Turn on the television news and notice the ways in which a particular mode of address works, how the word 'we' is used, how the word 'you'. Advertisers in all media are clearly in the business of explaining to us who we are, how we fit in with other people in society, why we necessarily consume the way we do. Each mass medium has its own techniques for addressing its audience, for creating moments of recognition and exclusion, for giving us our sense of ourselves. Pop music does, though, seem to play a particularly important role in the way in which popular culture works. On the one hand, it works with particularly intense emotional experiences – pop songs

and pop stars mean more to us emotionally than other media events or performers, and this is not just because the pop business sells music to us through individual market choices. On the other hand, these musical experiences always contain social meaning, are placed within a social context – we are not free to read anything we want into a song.

The experience of pop music is an experience of placing: in responding to a song, we are drawn, haphazardly, into affective and emotional alliances with the performers and with the performers' other fans. Again this also happens in other areas of popular culture. Sport, for example, is clearly a setting in which people directly experience community, feel an immediate bond with other people, articulate a particular kind of collective pride (for a non-American, the most extraordinary aspect of the 1984 Olympics was the display/construction of the Reagan ideology of both the United States and patriotism). And fashion and style – both social constructions – remain the keys to the ways in which we, as individuals, present ourselves to the world: we use the public meanings of clothes to say 'this is how I want to be perceived'.

But music is especially important to this process of placement because of something specific to musical experience, namely, its direct emotional intensity. Because of its qualities of abstractness (which 'serious' aestheticians have always stressed) music is an individualizing form. We absorb songs into our own lives and rhythms into our own bodies; they have a looseness of reference that makes them immediately accessible. Pop songs are open to appropriation for personal use in a way that other popular cultural forms (television soap operas, for example) are not – the latter are tied into meanings we may reject. At the same time, and equally significant, music is obviously rule-bound. We hear things as music because their sounds obey a particular, familiar logic, and for most pop fans (who are, technically, non-musical) this logic is out of our control. There is a mystery to our musical tastes. Some records and performers work for us, others do not – we know this without being able to explain it. Somebody else has set up the conventions; they are clearly social and clearly apart from us.

This interplay between personal absorption into music and the sense that it is, nevertheless, something out there, something public, is what makes music so important in the cultural placing of the individual in the social. To give a mundane example, it is obviously true that in the last thirty years the idea of being a 'fan', with its oddly public account of private obsessions, has been much more significant to pop music than to other forms of popular culture. This role of music is usually related to youth and youth culture, but it seems equally important to the ways in which ethnic groups in both

Britain and the United States have forged particular cultural identities and is also reflected in the ways in which 'classical' music originally became significant for the nineteenth-century European bourgeoisie. In all these cases music can stand for, symbolize *and* offer the immediate experience of collective identity. Other cultural forms – painting, literature, design – can articulate and show off shared values and pride, but only music can make you *feel* them.

The social functions of music

It is now possible to move back to the starting point of this essay – the social functions of music and their implications for aesthetics. I will begin by outlining the four most significant ways in which pop is used and then suggest how these uses help us to understand how pop value judgments are made.

The first reason, then, we enjoy popular music is because of its use in answering questions of identity: we use pop songs to create for ourselves a particular sort of self-definition, a particular place in society. The pleasure that pop music produces is a pleasure of identification – with the music we like, with the performers of that music, with the other people who like it. And it is important to note that the production of identity is also a production of non-identity – it is a process of inclusion and exclusion. This is one of the most striking aspects of musical taste. People not only know what they like, they also have very clear ideas about what they don't like and often have very aggressive ways of stating their dislikes. As all sociological studies of pop consumers have shown, pop fans define themselves quite precisely according to their musical preferences. Whether they identify with genres or stars, it seems of greater importance to people what they like musically than whether or not they enjoyed a film or a television program.

The pleasure of pop music, unlike the pleasures to be had from other mass cultural forms, does not derive in any clear way from fantasy: it is not mediated through day-dreams or romancing, but is experienced directly. For example, at a heavy metal concert you can certainly see the audience absorbed in the music; yet for all the air-guitar playing they are not fantasizing being up on stage. To experience heavy metal is to experience the power of the concert as a whole – the musicians are one aspect of this, the amplification system another, the audience a third. The individual fans get their kicks from being a necessary part of the overall process – which is why heavy metal videos always have to contain moments of live performance

(whatever the surrounding story line) in order to capture and acknowledge the kind of empowerment that is involved in the concert itself.

Once we start looking at different pop genres we can begin to document the different ways in which music works to give people an identity, to place them in different social groups. And this is not just a feature of commercial pop music. It is the way in which all popular music works. For example, in putting together an audience, contemporary black-influenced pop clearly (and often cynically) employs musical devices originally used in religious music to define men's and women's identity before God. Folk musics, similarly, continue to be used to mark the boundaries of ethnic identity, even amidst the complications of migration and cultural change. In London's Irish pubs, for example, 'traditional' Irish folk songs are still the most powerful way to make people feel Irish and consider what their 'Irishness' means. (This music, this identity, is now being further explored by post-punk London Irish bands, like the Pogues.) It is not surprising, then, that popular music has always had important nationalist functions. In Abel Gance's 'silent' film, *Napoleon*, there is a scene in which we see the *Marseillaise* being composed, and then watch the song make its way through the Assembly and among the crowds until everyone is singing it. When the film was first shown in France, the cinema audience rose from their seats and joined in singing their national anthem. Only music seems capable of creating this sort of spontaneous collective identity, this kind of personally felt patriotism.

Music's second social function is to give us a way of managing the relationship between our public and private emotional lives. It is often noted but rarely discussed that the bulk of popular songs are love songs. This is certainly true of twentieth-century popular music in the West; but most non-Western popular musics also feature romantic, usually heterosexual, love lyrics. This is more than an interesting statistic; it is a centrally important aspect of how pop music is used. Why are love songs so important? Because people need them to give shape and voice to emotions that otherwise cannot be expressed without embarrassment or incoherence. Love songs are a way of giving emotional intensity to the sorts of intimate things we say to each other (and to ourselves) in words that are, in themselves, quite flat. It is a peculiarity of everyday language that our most fraught and revealing declarations of feeling have to use phrases – 'I love/hate you', 'Help me!', 'I'm angry/scared' – which are boring and banal; and so our culture has a supply of a million pop songs, which say these things for us in numerous interesting and involving ways. These songs do not replace our conversations – pop singers do not do our courting for us – but they make

our feelings seem richer and more convincing than we can make them appear in our own words, even to ourselves.

The only interesting sociological account of lyrics in the long tradition of American content analysis was Donald Horton's late 1950s study[3] of how teenagers used the words of popular songs in their dating rituals. His high school sample learned from pop songs (public forms of private expression) how to make sense of and shape their own inchoate feelings. This use of pop illuminates one quality of the star/fan relationship: people do not idolize singers because they wish to be them but because these singers seem able, somehow, to make available their own feelings – it is as if we get to know ourselves via the music.

The third function of popular music is to shape popular memory, to organize our sense of time. Clearly one of the effects of all music, not just pop, is to intensify our experience of the present. One measure of good music, to put it another way, is, precisely, its 'presence', its ability to 'stop' time, to make us feel we are living within a moment, with no memory or anxiety about what has come before, what will come after. This is where the physical impact of music comes in – the use of beat, pulse and rhythm to compel our immediate bodily involvement in an organization of time that the music itself controls. Hence the pleasures of dance and disco; clubs and parties provide a setting, a society, which seems to be defined only by the time-scale of the music (the beats per minute), which escapes the real time passing outside.

One of the most obvious consequences of music's organization of our sense of time is that songs and tunes are often the key to our remembrance of things past. I do not mean simply that sounds – like sights and smells – trigger associated memories, but, rather, that music in itself provides our most vivid experience of time passing. Music focuses our attention on the feeling of time; songs are organized (it is part of their pleasure) around anticipation and echo, around endings to which we look forward, choruses that build regret into their fading. Twentieth-century popular music has, on the whole, been a nostalgic form. The Beatles, for example, made nostalgic music from the start, which is why they were so popular. Even on hearing a Beatles song for the first time there was a sense of the memories to come, a feeling that this could not last but that it was surely going to be pleasant to remember.

It is this use of time that makes popular music so important in the social organization of youth. It is a sociological truism that people's heaviest

[3] Donald Horton, 'The dialogue of courtship in popular songs', *American Journal of Sociology*, 62 (1957), pp. 569–78.

personal investment in popular music is when they are teenagers and young adults – music then ties into a particular kind of emotional turbulence, when issues of individual identity and social place, the control of public and private feelings, are at a premium. People do use music less, and less intently, as they grow up; the most significant pop songs for all generations (not just for rock generations) are those they heard as adolescents. What this suggests, though, is not just that young people need music, but that 'youth' itself is defined by music. Youth is experienced, that is, as an intense presence, through an impatience for time to pass and a regret that it is doing so, in a series of speeding, physically insistent moments that have nostalgia coded into them. This is to reiterate my general point about popular music: youth music is socially important not because it reflects youth experience (authentically or not), but because it defines for us what 'youthfulness' is. I remember concluding, in my original sociological research in the early 1970s, that those young people who, for whatever reasons, took no interest in pop music were not really 'young'.

The final function of popular music I want to mention here is something more abstract than the issues discussed so far, but a consequence of all of them: popular music is something possessed. One of the first things I learned as a rock critic – from abusive mail – was that rock fans 'owned' their favorite music in ways that were intense and important to them. To be sure, the notion of musical ownership is not peculiar to rock – Hollywood cinema has long used the clichéd line, 'they're playing our song' – and this reflects something that is recognizable to all music lovers and is an important aspect of the way in which everyone thinks and talks about 'their' music. (British radio has programs of all sorts built around people's explanations of why certain records 'belong' to them.) Obviously it is the commodity form of music which makes this sense of musical possession possible, but it is not just the record that people think they own: we feel that we also possess the song itself, the particular performance, and its performer.

In 'possessing' music, we make it part of our own identity and build it into our sense of ourselves. To write pop criticism is, as I have mentioned, to attract hate mail; mail not so much defending the performer or performance criticized as defending the letter writer: criticize a star and the fans respond as if you have criticized them. The biggest mail bag I ever received was after I had been critical of Phil Collins. Hundreds of letters arrived (not from teenyboppers or gauche adolescents, but from young professionals) typed neatly on headed notepaper, all based on the assumption that in describing Collins as ugly, Genesis as dull, I was deriding their

way of life, undermining their identity. The intensity of this relationship between taste and self-definition seems peculiar to popular music – it is 'possessable' in ways that other cultural forms (except, perhaps, sports teams) are not.

To summarize the argument so far: the social functions of popular music are in the creation of identity, in the management of feelings, in the organization of time. Each of these functions depends, in turn, on our experience of music as something which can be possessed. From this sociological base it is now possible to get at aesthetic questions, to understand listeners' judgments, to say something about the value of pop music. My starting question was how is it that people (myself included) can say, quite confidently, that some popular music is better than others? The answer can now be related to how well (or badly), for specific listeners, songs and performances fulfill the suggested functions. But there is a final point to make about this. It should be apparent by now that people do hear the music they like as something special: not, as orthodox rock criticism would have it, because this music is more 'authentic' (though that may be how it is described), but because, more directly, it seems to provide an experience that transcends the mundane, that takes us 'out of ourselves'. It is special, that is, not necessarily with reference to other music, but to the rest of life. This sense of specialness, the way in which music seems to make possible a new kind of self-recognition, frees us from the everyday routines and expectations that encumber our social identities, is a key part of the way in which people experience and thus value music: if we believe we possess our music, we also often feel that we are possessed by it. Transcendence is, then, as much a part of the popular music aesthetic as it is of the serious music aesthetic; but, as I hope I have indicated, in pop, transcendence marks not music's freedom from social forces but its patterning by them. (Of course, in the end the same is true of serious music, too.)

The aesthetics of popular music

I want to conclude with another sort of question: what are the factors in popular music that enable it to fulfill these social functions, which determine whether it does so well or badly? Again, I will divide my answer into four points; my purpose is less to develop them in depth than to suggest important issues for future critical work.

My first point is brief, because it raises musicological issues which I am not competent to develop. The most important (and remarkable) feature

of Western popular music in the twentieth century has been its absorption of and into Afro-American forms and conventions. In analytical terms, to follow the distinction developed by Andrew Chester at the end of the 1960s, this means that pop is complex 'intentionally' rather than, like European art music, 'extensionally'. In the extensional form of musical construction, argues Chester, 'theme and variations, counterpoint, tonality (as used in classical composition) are all devices that build diachronically and synchronically outwards from basic musical atoms. The complex is created by combination of the simple, which remains discrete and unchanged in the complex unity.' In the intentional mode, 'the basic musical units (played/sung notes) are not combined through space and time as simple elements into complex structures. The simple entity is that constituted by the parameters of melody, harmony and beat, while the complex is built up by modulation of the basic notes, and by inflexion of the basic beat.'[4] Whatever the problems of Chester's simple dichotomy between a tradition of linear musical development and a tradition of piled-up rhythmic interplay, he does pose the most important musicological question for popular music: how can we explain the *intensity* of musical experience that Afro-American forms have made possible? We still do not know nearly enough about the musical language of pop and rock: rock critics still avoid technical analysis, while sympathetic musicologists, like Wilfrid Mellers, use tools that can only cope with pop's non-intentional (and thus least significant) qualities.

My second point is that the development of popular music in this century has increasingly focused on the use of the voice. It is through the singing voice that people are most able to make a connection with their records, to feel that performances are theirs in certain ways. It is through the voice that star personalities are constructed (and since World War II, at least, the biggest pop stars have been singers). The tone of voice is more important in this context than the actual articulation of particular lyrics – which means, for example, that groups, like the Beatles, can take on a group voice. We can thus identify with a song whether we understand the words or not, whether we already know the singer or not, because it is the voice – not the lyrics – to which we immediately respond. This raises questions about popular non-vocal music, which can be answered by defining a voice as a sign of individual personality rather than as something necessarily mouthing words. The voice, for example, was and is central to the appeal of jazz, not through vocalists as such, but through the way jazz people played

[4] Andrew Chester, 'Second thoughts on a rock aesthetic: The Band', *New Left Review*, 62 (1970), pp. 78–9.

and heard musical instruments – Louis Armstrong's or Charlie Parker's instrumental voices were every bit as individual and personal as a pop star's singing voice.

Today's commercial pop musics are, though, song forms, constructing vocal personalities, using voices to speak directly to us. From this perspective it becomes possible to look at pop songs as narratives, to use literary critical and film critical terms to analyze them. It would be fairly straightforward, for example, to make some immediate genre distinctions, to look at the different ways in which rock, country, reggae, etc. work as narratives, the different ways they set up star personalities, situate the listener, and put in play patterns of identity and opposition. Of course, popular music is not simply analogous to film or literature. In discussing the narrative devices of contemporary pop in particular, we are not just talking about music but also about the whole process of packaging. The image of pop performers is constructed by press and television advertisements, by the routines of photo-calls and journalists' interviews, and through gesture and performance. These things all feed into the way we hear a voice; pop singers are rarely heard 'plain' (without mediation). Their vocals already contain physical connotations, associated images, echoes of other sounds. All this needs to be analyzed if we are going to treat songs as narrative structures; the general point, to return to a traditional musicological concern, is that while music may not represent anything, it nevertheless clearly communicates.

The third point is an elaboration of the suggestion I have just made: popular music is wide open for the development of a proper genre analysis, for the classification of how different popular musical forms use different narrative structures, set up different patterns of identity, and articulate different emotions. Take, for example, the much discussed issue of music and sexuality. In the original article on rock and sexuality I wrote with Angela McRobbie at the end of the 1970s,[5] we set up a distinction between 'cock' rock and teenybop narratives, each working to define masculinity and femininity but for different audiences and along different contours of feeling. Our distinctions are still valid but we were looking only at a subdivision of one pop genre. Other musical forms articulate sexuality in far more complicated ways; thus it would be impossible to analyze the sexuality of either Frank Sinatra or Billie Holiday, and their place in the history of crooning and torch singing, in the terms of the 'cock' rock/teenybop contrast. Even Elvis Presley does not fit easily into these 1970s accounts of male and female sexuality.

[5] Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, 'Rock and sexuality', *Screen Education*, 29 (1978/9), pp, 3–19.

The question these examples raise is how popular musical genres should be defined. The obvious approach is to follow the distinctions made by the music industry which, in turn, reflect both musical history and marketing categories. We can thus divide pop into country music, soul music, rock 'n' roll, punk, MOR, show songs, etc. But an equally interesting way of approaching genres is to classify them according to their ideological effects, the way they sell themselves as art, community or emotion. There is at present, for example, clearly a form of rock we can call 'authentic'. It is represented by Bruce Springsteen and defines itself according to the rock aesthetic of authenticity which I have already discussed. The whole point of this genre is to develop musical conventions which are, in themselves, measures of 'truth'. As listeners we are drawn into a certain sort of reality: this is what it is like to live in America, this is what it is like to love or hurt. The resulting music is the pop equivalent of film theorists' 'classic realist text'. It has the same effect of persuading us that this is how things really are – realism inevitably means a non-romantic account of social life, and a highly romantic account of human nature.

What is interesting, though, is how this sort of truth is constructed, what it rests on musically; and for an instant semiotic guide I recommend the video of *We are the world*. Watch how the singers compete to register the most sincerity; watch Bruce Springsteen win as he gets his brief line, veins pop up on his head and the sweat flows down. Here authenticity is guaranteed by visible physical effort.

To approach pop genres this way is to look at the pop world in terms rather different from those of the music industry. Against the authentic genre, for instance, we can pitch a tradition of artifice: some pop stars, following up on David Bowie's and Roxy Music's early 1970s work, have sought to create a sense of themselves (and their listeners) as artists in cool control. There is clearly also an avant-garde within popular music, offering musicians and listeners the pleasures of rule breaking, and a sentimental genre, celebrating codes of emotion which everyone knows are not real but carry nostalgic weight – if only they were! What I am arguing here is that it is possible to look at pop genres according to the effects they pursue. Clearly we can then judge performers within genres (is John Cougar Mellencamp's music as truthful as Springsteen's?), as well as use different genres for different purposes (the sentimental genre is a better source of adult love songs than the avant-garde or the artificers). To really make sense of pop genres, though, I think we need to place this grid of ideologies over the industry's grid of taste publics. To understand punk, for example, we need to trace within it the interplay of authenticity and artifice; to understand country we need to follow the interplay of authenticity and sentiment.

In everyday life we actually have a rather good knowledge of such conventional confusions. To know how to listen to pop music is to know how to classify it. One thing all pop listeners do, whether as casual fans or professional critics, is to compare sounds – to say that A is like B. Indeed, most pop criticism works via the implicit recognition of genre rules, and this brings me to my final point. Our experience of music in everyday life is not just through the organized pop forms I have been discussing. We live in a much more noisy soundscape; music of all sorts is in a constant play of association with images, places, people, products, moods, and so on. These associations, in commercial and film soundtracks, for example, are so familiar that for much of the time we forget that they are 'accidental'. We unthinkingly associate particular sounds with particular feelings and landscapes and times. To give a crude example, in Britain it is impossible now for a ballet company to perform the *Nutcracker Suite* for an audience of children without them all, at the key moment, breaking into song: 'Everyone's a fruit and nut case', has been instilled into them as a Cadbury's jingle long before the children hear of Tchaikovsky. Classical or 'serious' music, in short, is not exempt from social use. It is impossible for me, brought up in post-war popular culture, to hear Chopin without immediately feeling a vaguely romantic yearning, the fruit of many years of Chopinesque film soundtracks.

There is no way to escape these associations. Accordions played a certain way mean France, bamboo flutes China, just as steel guitars mean country, drum machines the urban dance. No sort of popular musician can make music from scratch – what we have these days instead are scratch mixers, fragmenting, unpicking, reassembling music from the signs that already exist, pilfering public forms for new sorts of private vision. We need to understand the lumber-room of musical references we carry about with us, if only to account for the moment that lies at the heart of the pop experience, when, from amidst all those sounds out there, resonating whether we like them or not, one particular combination suddenly, for no apparent reason, takes up residence in our own lives.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to suggest a way in which we can use a sociology of popular music as the basis of an aesthetic theory, to move, that is, from a description of music's social functions to an understanding of how we can and do value it (and I should perhaps stress that my definition of popular

music includes popular uses of 'serious' music). One of my working assumptions has been that people's individual tastes – the ways they experience and describe music for themselves – are a necessary part of academic analysis. Does this mean that the value of popular music is simply a matter of personal preference?

The usual sociological answer to this question is that 'personal' preferences are themselves socially determined. Individual tastes are, in fact, examples of collective taste and reflect consumers' gender, class and ethnic backgrounds; the 'popularity' of popular music can then be taken as one measure of a balance of social power. I do not want to argue against this approach. Our cultural needs and expectations are, indeed, materially based; all the terms I have been using (identity, emotion, memory) are socially formed, whether we are examining 'private' or public lives. But I do believe that this derivation of pop meaning from collective experience is not sufficient. Even if we focus all our attention on the collective reception of pop, we still need to explain why some music is better able than others to have such collective effects, why these effects are different, anyway, for different genres, different audiences and different circumstances. Pop tastes do not just derive from our socially constructed identities; they also help to shape them.

For the last fifty years at least, pop music has been an important way in which we have learned to understand ourselves as historical, ethnic, class-bound, gendered subjects. This has had conservative effects (primarily through pop nostalgia) and liberating ones. Rock criticism has usually taken the latter as a necessary mark of good music but this has meant, in practice, a specious notion of 'liberation'. We need to approach this political question differently, by taking seriously pop's individualizing effects. What pop can do is put into play a sense of identity that may or may not fit the way we are placed by other social forces. Music certainly puts us in our place, but it can also suggest that our social circumstances are not immutable (and that other people – performers, fans – share our dissatisfaction). Pop music is not in itself revolutionary or reactionary. It is a source of strong feelings that because they are also socially coded can come up against 'common sense'. For the last thirty years, for example, at least for young people, pop has been a form in which everyday accounts of race and sex have been both confirmed and confused. It may be that, in the end, we want to value most highly that music, popular and serious, which has some sort of collective, disruptive cultural effect. My point is that music only does so through its impact on individuals. That impact is what we first need to understand.