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## **7 'Shop Around'**

### **Marketing and mediation**

Marketing has come to play a crucial role in the circulation of cultural commodities. It is a complex practice, involving several related activities: research, product planning and design, packaging, publicity and promotion, pricing policy and sales and distribution; it is also closely tied to merchandizing and retailing. Central to the process is product positioning and imbuing cultural products with social significance to make them attractive to consumers. In popular music, this has been concentrated on the marketing of genre styles and stars, which have come to function in a similar manner to brand names, serving to order demand and stabilize sales patterns. I begin this chapter with an examination of the marketing of Bob Marley and the Wailers to illustrate this.

The marketing process illustrates the manner in which the music industry includes a range of people and institutions that 'stand between' consumers and the musical text, once it has been produced as a commodity. I use the phrase 'stand between' as shorthand for what are complex processes of marketing and consumption at work. The concepts of 'gatekeepers' and 'cultural intermediaries' have been used to analyse the way in which workers in the cultural industries select, reject and reformulate material for production, broadcast and publication. Based on a filter-flow model of information flow, gatekeepers 'open the gate' for some texts and information and close it for others. The gatekeeper concept became critiqued for being too mechanistic and oversimplified and, following the work of Bourdieu (1984) was largely superseded by the more flexible concept of 'cultural intermediaries'.

The sound recording companies have a number of such personnel making the initial decision about who to record and promote and filtering material at each step of the process involving the recording and marketing of a song. Beyond the record companies are a number of institutions and related practices mediating music, including retail, film, radio, television, the music press, MTV and the internet. These form something of a historical succession; the second part of the chapter takes up the first of them: retail and radio and the manner in which they are linked by the charts.

### Marketing and commodification

It is noteworthy that by the 1990s the cant term for music within the industry was 'product'. Although this process was hardly new, it referred to popular music being an increasingly commodified product: merchandise to be packaged and sold in the market. There are aspects of popular music as a commodity form that distinguish it from other cultural texts, notably its reproducibility, its ubiquity of formats and its multiple modes of dissemination.

Recorded music can be reproduced in various formats – vinyl, audio tape, CD, video, digital files – and variations within these: the dance mix, the cassette single, the limited collector's edition, the live performance and so on. These can then be disseminated in a variety of ways – through radio airplay, discos and dance clubs, television music video shows and MTV-style channels, live concert performances and on the internet. Then there is the exposure of music and musicians through the use of popular music within film soundtracks and as part of television advertising for consumer goods (Klein, 2010). In addition, there is the assorted paraphernalia and memorabilia available to the fan, especially the posters and the t-shirts. Complimenting all of these may be reviews of the musical text and interviews with the performer(s) in various print publications or online.

In sum, these reinforce one another within the wider music culture and society more generally.

This enables a multimedia approach to be taken to the marketing of the music and a maximization of sales potential, as exposure in each of the various forms strengthens the appeal of the others. Marketing includes the use of genre labels as signifiers, radio formatting practices and standardized production processes (e.g. Stock Aitken Waterman and dance pop in the 1980s). Above all, it involves utilizing star images, linking stars and their music with the needs, demands, emotions and desires of audiences. The case of Bob Marley and the Wailers is instructive here.

#### Marketing Marley

Island Records was started by Chris Blackwell, the Jamaican-born son of an English plantation owner, in 1962 to supply Jamaican music to West Indian customers in Britain. The company had its first major success when Millie Small's ska tune 'My Boy Lollipop' reached no. 2 in the English pop charts later that year. The company diversified to black music in general, setting up Sue Records in 1963 as a subsidiary to market American soul, blues, ska, and rhythm and blues tracks under licence. In the later 1970s Island hooked into the commercial end of the British counterculture, releasing records by Traffic, Fairport Convention and Free. In 1972 Blackwell signed the Wailers, with Bob Marley (see Barfe, 2004: 259–62).

Conventional histories see this move as inevitably successful, riding the burgeoning western interest in reggae. But in fact the marketing of reggae and the Wailers is illustrative of record company attempts to maximize their investment at their most successful moment. Island shaped and marketed Marley and the

Wailers as ethnic rebellion for album buyers, both black and white (Barrow and Dalton, 1997; Jones, S., 1988; White, 1989). The strategies used included recording *Catch a Fire* (Island, 1972), the Wailers' first album, in stereo; doubling the pay rates for the session musicians involved, enabling them to record for longer; employing the latest technical facilities of the recording process to 'clean up' the music; and remixing and editing the backing tracks in London, after they had been recorded in Jamaica. Blackwell, a very hands-on label boss, also accelerated the speed of the Wailers' basic rhythm tracks by one beat, thinking that a quicker tempo might enhance the appeal of reggae to rock fans. The result was a more 'produced sound', with keyboards and guitars, moving away from reggae's traditional emphasis on drums and bass. (*Catch a Fire: Deluxe Edition* of Island/UME, includes the UK remixed and overdubbed album [2001], along with the original, previously unreleased version recorded in Jamaica.)

*Catch a Fire* had an elaborated pop art record cover, designed as a large cigarette lighter, while the Wailers' second album, *Burnin'* (Island, 1973) pictured rastas in various 'dread' poses, and printed the song lyrics. 'These ploys seemed to confirm Island's intention to sell the Wailers as "rebels" by stressing the uncompromising and overtly political aspects of their music' (Jones, 1988: 65). At the same time, however, this stance was watered down for white consumption. The group's third album had its title changed from *Knotty Dread*, with its connotations of rasta militancy and race consciousness symbolized by dreadlocks, to *Natty Dread*, with its white connotations of fashionable style.

Island carefully promoted the Wailers concert tour of Britain in 1973 to include appearances on national radio and television. This level of exposure was new for reggae, previously constrained by the genre's limited financial support. Later marketing of the band, following only fair success for their first two albums, included pushing Bob Marley to the fore as the group's frontman and 'star'. This strategy proved particularly successful during the 1975 tour of Britain, as the band – now 'Bob Marley and the Wailers' – commercially broke through to a mass white audience. Original founding members Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer left towards the end of 1974, both feeling that too much attention was now being given to Bob. In another strategic marketing move, instead of simply replacing them with similar characteristically Jamaican male harmonies, the more gospel-inflected female backup vocals of the I-Threes were brought in to supply a sound more familiar to rock audiences at that time (Barrow and Dalton, 1997: 131). A string of record hits and successful tours followed in the late 1970s, due at least in part to the music becoming more accessible and pop oriented. In 1981, Bob Marley and the Wailers worldwide album sales were estimated to be in excess of \$US190 million.

The success of Island with the Wailers helped usher in a period of the international commercialization of reggae. For the multinational record companies, 'reggae was a rich grazing-ground requiring low levels of investment but yielding substantial profits' (Jones, 1988: 72). Jamaican artists could be bought cheaply compared to the advances demanded by their western rock counterparts. Yet while reggae spurred the success of dub and the ska revival of the early 1980s,

and was a crucial influence on commercially successful bands like the Police, Bob Marley remained the only major star to emerge from reggae. His international success arguably owed as much to Blackwell and Island as to his personal charisma and the power of the music.

Marley's death in 1981 did little to diminish his commercial worth, as Island successfully marketed a greatest hits package, *Legend* (1984), which was no. 1 in the UK for several months. Indeed, the continued appeal of Marley was indicated by the album's remarkable longevity: by 1997 it had sold 12 million copies worldwide (Barrow and Dalton, 1997: 135), and has remained the top-selling (back) 'catalogue' album in *Billboard* since that chart's creation in 1991. By 1984 Dave Robinson was running Island, and his market research indicated that:

You should keep the word 'reggae' out of it. A lot of what people didn't like about Bob Marley was the threatening aspect of him, the revolutionary side. So the (album cover) picture chosen was one of the softest pictures of Bob. It was a very well conceived and thought-out package. And a very well put-together record.

(Blackwell, cited in Stephens, 1998: 145)

This approach set the trend for the subsequent marketing of the reggae star, as his image was subtly remoulded, moving from the Rastafarian outlaw of the 1970s to the natural family man of the 1980s to the 'natural mystic' in the 1990s. This process reflected not only the incorporation of his music but also the incorporation of his image and message. A new CD compilation, *The Natural Mystic* (1995) and a four-CD boxed set *Songs of Freedom* (1992), both reflected how 'The Marley of the 1970s, rude boy, revolutionary, Rastafarian, needed to be exorcised for the singer to appeal to a more mainstream white audience' (Stephens, 1998: 142). The cover of *Natural Mystic*, a profile head shot of a gently smiling Marley with his hand at his chin, was similar to that used on the *Legend* cover and indeed came from the same photo session in 1977. The booklet accompanying the 1992 boxed set tells the story of Marley's origins as a rude boy in Trenchtown, Jamaica, the turn to Rastafari in the late 1960s and his rise to international stardom in the 1970s. The accompany CDs parallel this history. The booklet and its images, and in the choice of songs for inclusion in the package, emphasize Marley's growing commitment to spiritual and social issues, playing down his increased political consciousness and desire to connect with a black audience as illness looked likely to end his career.

### **Prince and the bat**

A further instructive example of marketing, illustrating newer synergies within the music industry was Prince's soundtrack for the film *Batman* (1989). This was part of a carefully orchestrated marketing campaign to create interest in the film, the first in what became a franchise, and to break Prince to a wider audience, primarily through exposure on MTV. Warner Communications Inc. (WCI) invested US\$30 million in the *Batman* film, seeing it not simply as a one-off film, but as a

package of ongoing projects: a series of films, albums, sheet music, comics and novelizations. The soundtrack for *Batman* was actually put out in two forms: an album by Prince, which featured songs for the film soundtrack and music inspired by the film, which achieved double platinum sales; and an orchestral album by composer Danny Elfman, with respectable sales of around 150,000 copies. WCI had recently acquired Chappelle, making the corporation the largest song publisher in the world and the two albums generated further income for the company through their sales of sheet music. Both album jackets featured the bat logo, an icon that reinforced publicity for the film and its associated products. Unusually, Prince's video of the album's lead song, 'Batdance', featured no footage from the film, but used the actor's lines as a lead-in to the rap/funk style number. The video received heavy airplay on the MTV channel, watched primarily by white middle-class youth and adults. WCI had established Prince's main audience as white females in their late twenties to early thirties, so the MTV exposure helped broaden his appeal, while also bringing the *Batman* film to the attention of non-comic book fans and white women.

The marketing of popular music has become increasingly sophisticated since the efforts of Island with Bob Marley and the Wailers and WCI with Prince. The expansion of the music press, the sophistication of retail, the continued formatting of radio, the popularization of MTV and music video and the emergence of the internet have all contributed to the ability of the industry to coordinate marketing internationally across a range of media. The star as a form of commodity has been exemplified in the careers of, among others, Kylie Minogue, Beyoncé and Taylor Swift.

### **Mediation and cultural intermediaries**

These case studies of marketing indicate the role of other cultural intermediaries, primarily various music media in disseminating and popularizing music. There is a historical progression of these media, which provides a logic and structure for the discussion that follows. Based in the established sector of sheet music sales, retail shops were where sound recordings could first be listened to and purchased. Later, film and radio provided cultural spaces in which music could be experienced, informing and shaping consumption. The music press, established in the 1920s, played a similar role, especially in the emergence of 'rock culture' in the 1960s. The introduction of television in the 1950s, followed by MTV in the 1980s, provided new sites of mediation. Most recently (as indicated in Chapters 1 and 2), the internet has dramatically altered the relationship between the sound recording industry and the manufacture, distribution and consumption of music. The opportunities offered by the new digital environment, with practices and institutions such as web radio, blogs and YouTube, have both inflected and, in some cases superseded, the older historically dominant forms of mediation. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider the role of retail and radio in mediating popular music, with subsequent chapters looking at the place of later media in such processes.

### Music retail

Marketing includes the sites at which music is sold, including street markets (Laing, 2012), the physical 'record shop', music megastores and online retail. Their inventory can encompass sheet music, musical instruments, music-related merchandise, concert tickets, music DVDS, music magazines and books. Primarily, however, the term 'music retail' refers to the sale of sound recordings to the public. Information on this topic is sparse and there is a history of music retail yet to be written, but a quick sketch is possible.

Sound recordings were first available through shops selling sheet music and musical instruments. In the early 1900s, chains of department stores began supplying hit songs, along with sheet music. Later, smaller, independent and sole proprietor shops (the 'mom and pop' stores in the US) emerged. By the 1950s, and the advent of rock 'n' roll, record retailers included independent shops, often specializing in particular genres; chain stores; and mail order record clubs. The subsequent relative importance and market share of each of these has reflected the broader consolidation of the music industry, along with shifts in recording formats and distribution technologies. Retailers have had to adapt to changes as mundane as the need for different shelf space to accommodate new formats. The advent of electronic bar coding in the 1990s enabled retail, distribution, and production 'to be arranged as an interconnected logistic package'. This allowed 'music retailers to delineate, construct and monitor the consumer of recorded music more intricately than ever before' (du Gay and Negus, 1994: 396). A similar process now occurs with the tracking of the preferences of browsers and purchasers in online music retail sites, such as Amazon.

Retail chains have, at times, also assumed a direct gatekeeping role, by censoring or not stocking particular artists, genres and recordings (for example Wal-mart in the US). Record company sales and distribution practices can be directly tied to music retail. Several leading mail order record clubs in the 1950s were adjuncts of labels, receiving discounts on stock, a situation successfully challenged legally by their competitors (Barfe, 2004). Linked independent record stores have been part of labels, such as Rough Trade and Beggars Banquet in the UK, although the importance of such arrangements declined in the 1990s.

As with the culture industries generally, increased concentration of ownership has been a feature of the music retail industry since the mid-1990s, as CD sales peaked and then declined. In 2006 Matt Brennan documented how the increased concentration of music retail in Britain constrained the availability of releases from indie and specialist genre labels. In addition to central buying, the five major chain stores have introduced the use of 'retail packs', with only a limited number of sales spaces available:

At HMV there's 24 non-pop retail packs up for grabs every month. And that's for folk, world music, classical *and* jazz. If you don't get one of them, you're not going to sell even 1000 records.

(Tom Bancroft, owner of jazz label Caber Music, cited in Brennan, 2006b: 224)

As he observed, this 'can mean almost guaranteed commercial failure for independent artists not offered a pack' (ibid.). Further, the central buyer's decision to offer a pack will be based on an artist and labels 'track record': a combination of favourable press coverage; radio airplay; band tours and promotional activities; and previous retail history. Obviously, there is a process of validating existing advantages likely to occur here: to those who have, shall be given.

Smaller local music chains have been forced to retrench by consolidating shops and 'downsizing' staff or have kept operating through niche marketing and their increased use of the internet. In New Zealand, local music retail chain Marbecks announced in March 2012 that it was closing its remaining Wellington store, after 17 years of trading at the site, as the company scaled down its retail operations to focus on digital and online sales. 'It's really just a change in our industry', said Roger Harper, the co-owner and major shareholder. This was the latest in a succession of music retail stores to close in Wellington, New Zealand's capital.

An increasing proportion of recordings are now sold through general retailers (e.g. Woolworths, Wal-mart) and the surviving music megastores. This concentration influences the range of music available to consumers and the continued economic viability of smaller retail outlets. The general retailers frequently use music as a loss leader: reducing their music CD and DVD prices to attract shoppers whom they hope will also purchase other store products with higher profit margins. This situates music as only one component of the general selling of lifestyle consumer goods. In New Zealand, for example, this marketing strategy is central to the Warehouse national chain, now the country's largest music retailer. The Warehouse has used its bulk purchasing power, along with heavy advertising of discounts through blanket media coverage (the press, flyers to home mail boxes, TV, radio advertising) to secure market dominance. What this means for consumers, however, is a relatively restricted range of music on offer, with a heavy emphasis on the discounted chart-oriented recordings, which are available only on CD.

Historically, indie or specialist and second-hand record shops occupied a distinct space within the music market. In many cases, they contributed significantly to local music scenes by promoting shows, supporting local artists, and selling tickets, t-shirts, fanzines and other merchandise not handled by major retailers. Part of the appeal of such shops is the shoppers' relationship with the staff, which frequently involves trusting their musical knowledge and recommendations, along with a reciprocal recognition, often hard won, of the buyers' own expertise. The 1980s was something of a high point for the specialist and used record store. As Hayes notes of the US:

While many small (largely regional) labels continued to release music on 7" and 12" records throughout the '90s, locating their products was often a difficult task since mainstream retail outlets such as Tower Records and HMV shelved few if any LP releases after deleting previous stock.

(Hayes, 2006: 56)

This limited vinyl enthusiast to two main sites of acquisition: a small number of independent retailers who continued to stock vinyl releases, usually limited pressings by small labels; and used record stores.

Emma Pettit (2008) has documented how independent (and second-hand) record shops continue to form a minor but still culturally significant part of record retail. However, they have increasingly struggled, with the impact of the internet and its auction websites, increases in rent for traditional central city areas, especially as these become 'gentrified'/renewed and the ongoing concentration of music retail generally. They have managed to survive and, in some cases, even flourish, by using the internet, by catering to specialist interests and continuing to stock vinyl. The shift online of music retail continues, and has resulted in changes in the nature of music consumption (see Chapter 10).

## Radio

Radio developed in the 1920s and 1930s as a domestic medium aimed primarily at women in the home, but also playing an important role as general family entertainment, particularly in the evening. Radio in North America was significant for disseminating music in concert form and helped bring regionally based forms such as western swing and jazz to a wider audience (Ennis, 1992). Historically the enemy of the record industry during the disputes of the 1930s and 1940s around payment for record airplay, radio subsequently became its most vital promoter. Until the advent of MTV in the late 1980s, radio was indisputably the most important broadcast medium for determining the form and content of popular music.

The state has played a significant, yet often overlooked, role in radio. First, it has shaped the commercial environment for radio, primarily through licensing systems, but also by establishing broadcasting codes of practice – a form of censorship. This state practice has at times been challenged, most notably by pirate radio (see later). Second, the state has at times attempted to encourage 'minority' cultures and local music, with the two frequently connected, through quota and other regulatory legislation. Examples of this are attempts to include more French-language music on Canadian radio (Grenier, 1993), a case illustrating the difficulties of conflating 'the national' in multicultural/bilingual settings; and the New Zealand government's recent introduction of local content quotas for radio (see Chapter 14).

The organization of radio broadcasting and its music formatting practices have been crucial in shaping the nature of what constitutes the main 'public face' of much popular music, particularly rock and pop and their associated subgenres. Radio has also played a central role at particular historical moments in popularizing or marginalizing music genres. Two examples of this follow: the popularizing of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s and the impact of British pirate radio in the 1960s.

## *Radio meets rock 'n' roll: payola and the cult of the DJ*

The reshaping of radio in the 1950s was a key influence in the advent of rock 'n' roll. Radio airplay became central to commercial success, especially through the popular new chart shows. Hit radio was 'one of America's great cultural inventions', revitalizing a medium threatened by television (Barnes, 1988: 9). The DJ (disc jockey) emerged as a star figure, led by figures such as Bob 'Wolfman Jack' Smith and Alan Freed.

The place of radio in the music industry was brought to the fore by the debate around payola, a term used for the offering of financial, sexual or other inducements in return for promotion. In 1955 the US House of Representatives Legislative Oversight Committee, which had been investigating the rigging of quiz shows, began looking at pay-to-play practices in rock music radio. Payola, as the practice was then known, had long been commonplace, but was not illegal. 'Song plugging', as the practice was originally termed, had been central to music industry marketing since the heyday of Tin Pan Alley in the 1920s. By the 1950s DJs and radio station programmers frequently supplemented their incomes with 'consultant fees' and musical credits on records, enabling them to receive a share of songwriting royalties. During the committee hearings, Dick Clark admitted to having a personal interest in around a quarter of the records he promoted on his influential show *American Bandstand*. He divested himself of his music business holdings and was eventually cleared by the committee. A clean-cut figure, Clark survived the scandal because he represented the acceptable face of rock 'n' roll. Pioneer DJ Alan Freed was not so fortunate; persecuted and eventually charged with commercial bribery in 1960, his health and career were ruined.

Payola did not target all music radio, but was part of a conservative battle to return to 'good music', a campaign underpinned by economic self-interest. The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) supported the attack on payola by criticizing rivals BMI (Broadcast Music, Inc.), whose writers were responsible for most rock 'n' roll. The major record labels participated in the campaign as part of a belated attempt to halt the expansion of the independents. Hill goes so far as to conclude that one way to see the payola hearings was as an attempt – ultimately successful – 'to force a greater degree of organization and hierarchical responsibility onto the record industry so that the flow of music product could be more easily regulated' (Hill, 1992: 39). The involvement of conservative government officials, and a number of established music figures (including Frank Sinatra), was largely based on an intense dislike of rock 'n' roll, a prejudice with only loosely concealed racist overtones, given the prominence of black performers associated with the genre.

Payola did not disappear, merely becoming less visible and concealed under 'promotion' budgets. In the US in 2005, echoing the earlier controversy, New York Attorney-General Eliot Spitzer initiated a sweeping payola investigation, implicating all four major record labels in pay-for-play practices.

**Pirate radio and the BBC**

Pirate radio broadcasts are those made by unlicensed broadcasters as an alternative to licensed, commercial radio programming. However, the pirate stations usually rely on the same popular music that is programmed on commercial radio, rarely programming music other than the main pop and rock styles. A major exception was in the 1960s, when the British pirates challenged the BBC's lack of attention to pop/rock music. British pirate radio in its heyday, 1964–1968, was an historical moment encapsulating the intersection of rock as cultural politics and personal memory with market economics and government intervention. Twenty-one different pirates operated during this period, representing a wide range of radio stations in terms of scale, motives and operating practices.

The myth of the pirates is that they were about providing pop music to their disenfranchised and previously ignored youthful listeners, representing a somewhat anarchic challenge to radio convention and commerce; indeed, this is the narrative of the recent celebratory feature film *The Boat that Rocked* (2010). However, as Robert Chapman argues, the reality was rather more commercial. Given that the BBC's popular music policy was woefully inadequate in the early 1960s, the pirates did cater for a largely disenfranchised audience; they also pioneered some innovative programmes and boosted the careers of leading DJs of the time Kenny Everett and John Peel. But, as their programming indicated, they were never predominantly about popular music and were heavily oriented toward advertising. All the pirates were commercial operations: 'though work-place and legal judicial circumstances were not typical, in all other respects these were entrepreneurial small businesses aspiring to become entrepreneurial big businesses' (Chapman, 1992: 167). This was particularly evident in the case of Radio London, set up with an estimated investment of £1.5 million, whose 'overriding institutional goals were to maximize profit and bring legal commercial radio to Great Britain' (Chapman, 1992: 80). In this respect, the station succeeded, with the BBC's Radio 1, established in 1967 as the pirates were being closed down, borrowing heavily from the practices of pirate radio and even hiring pirate DJs.

**From FM to web radio**

FM radio was developed in the early 1930s, using a frequency modulation (hence FM) system of broadcasting. It did not have the range of AM and was primarily used by non-commercial and college radio until the late 1960s, when demand for its clearer sound quality and stereo capabilities saw the FM stations become central players in the commercial market. They contributed to what became a dominant style of music radio in the 1970s and 1980s (radio friendly; high production values; relatively 'easy listening': 'classic rock', exemplified by the Eagles and Fleetwood Mac). The appeal of FM witnessed a consolidation of the historically established role of radio in chart success. Independent programme directors

became the newest powerbrokers within the industry, replacing the independent record distributors of the early sixties (Eliot, 1989). Most radio stations now followed formats shaped by consultants, with a decline in the role of programme directors at individual stations, a situation that persisted into the 1990s and continues today.

Terrestrial radio's audience dropped steeply in the early 2000s. In response to this dwindling market share and its serious impact on advertising revenue, eight of the top radio companies in the North American market formed the HD Digital Radio Alliance in 2005 and began launching digital radio stations in key markets. These new stations offered listeners near CD-quality sound and up to three additional channels per frequency, along with alternate versions to their primary format (*Rolling Stone*, 23 February 2006: 18. 'Radio's Next Generation').

Web radio and new broadcasting technologies have continued to foster an explosion of radio stations, even although many have a localized signal. In the commercial sector, digital technologies have produced new production aesthetics and reshaped the radio industry. The last decade has seen a renaissance of radio, exploiting the new platforms of cable, satellite, digital transmission and the internet. 'Though often widely scattered, the audiences for internet stations are not necessarily large but they gain the potential for interactivity: they can download music and other material' (Starkey, 2010: 169). In the United Kingdom, thanks to the Broadcasting Act of 1990, there has been a remarkable expansion of the 'independent' or commercial sector along with the many stations available through Sky and Freeview television services. Radio continues to expand at local, regional and national levels, 'with a greater choice of programming today than ever before' (Starkey, 2010: 165).

**Stations and formats**

Radio stations are distinguishable by the type of music they play, the style of their DJs and their mix of news, contests, commercials and other programme features. We can see radio broadcasts as a flow, with these elements merging. The main types of radio station include college, student, pirate and youth radio (e.g. the US college stations; New Zealand's campus radio; Australia's Triple J network); state national broadcasters, such as the BBC; community radio; and, the dominant group in terms of market share, the commercial radio stations. There is a long-standing contradiction between the interests of record companies, which are targeting radio listeners who buy records, especially those in their teens and early twenties, and private radio's concern to reach the older, more affluent audience desired by advertisers. To some extent, this contradiction has been resolved by niche marketing of contemporary music radio.

Station and programme directors act as gatekeepers, being responsible for ensuring a prescribed and identifiable sound or format, based on what the management of the station believes will generate the largest audience – and ratings – and consequent advertising revenue (the classic study here is Rothenbuhler, 2006).

The station's music director and the programme director – at smaller stations the same person fills both roles – will regularly sift through new releases, selecting three or four to add to the playlist. The criteria underpinning this process will normally be a combination of the reputation of the artist; a record's previous performance, if already released overseas; whether the song fits the station's format; and, at times, the gut intuition of those making the decision. Publicity material from the label/artist/distributor plays an important role here, jogging memories of earlier records or sparking interest in a previously unknown artist. Chart performance in either the US or UK is especially significant where the record is being subsequently released in a 'foreign' market. In choosing whether or not to play particular genres of popular radio functions as a gatekeeper, significantly influencing the nature of the music itself (Neill and Shanahan, 2005; the situation they outline in relation to New Zealand's commercial networks remains evident).

Historically, radio formats were fairly straightforward, and included 'top 40', 'soul', and 'easy listening'. Subsequently, formats became more complex and by the 1980s included 'adult-oriented rock', classic hits (or 'golden oldies'), contemporary hit radio and urban contemporary (Barnes, 1988). Urban contemporary once meant black radio, but now included artists working within black music genres. In the US, black listeners constitute the main audience for urban contemporary formats, but the music also appeals to white listeners, particularly in the 12–34 age group. Today, radio in most national contexts includes a range of formats: the dominant ones, reflecting historical developments in addition to current demographics, are rock, contemporary chart pop, adult contemporary and classic hits.

As channel switching is common in radio, the aim of programmers is to keep the audience from switching stations. Common strategies include playing fewer commercials and running contests that require listeners to be alert for a song or phrase to be broadcast later, but the most effective approach is to ensure that the station does not play a record the listener does not like. While this is obviously strictly impossible, there are ways to maximize the retention of the listening audience. Since established artists have a bigger following than new artists, it makes commercial sense to emphasize their records and avoid playing releases from new artists on high rotation (i.e. many times per day) until they have become hits, an obvious catch-22 situation.

### **Classic rock radio**

The most extreme example of this approach is classic rock radio, which has its origins in progressive rock radio in the mid-1960s. DJs began playing tracks from albums such as the Beatles *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) which had not had any singles released from them. A subsequent variant of this practice was album-oriented rock (AOR), which emerged in the mid-1970s and which evolved into 'classic rock' on many of the new FM radio stations, a format that included singles along with album tracks (Barnes, 1988). The first station to call

itself 'classic rock' was WYSP in Philadelphia, in January 1981 and the format became firmly established over the next few years. Some radio stations used the related term 'classic hits', mixing the classic rock playlist with hits from pop and R&B and drawing on both historical and contemporary material. Classic rock radio became prominent in part because of the consumer power of the aging post-war 'baby boomers' and the appeal of this group to radio advertisers. The format continues to concentrate on playing 'tried and proven' past chart hits that will have high listener recognition and identification. Its playlists are largely drawn from the Beatles to the end of the 1970s and emphasize white male rock performers (see Thompson, D., 2008).

Ideologically, 'classic rock' serves to confirm the dominant status of a particular period of music history – the emergence of rock in the mid-1960s – with its associated values and set of practices: live performance, self-expression and authenticity; the group as the creative unit, with the charismatic lead singer playing a key role and the lead guitar as the primary instrument. This was a version of romanticism, with its origins in art and aesthetics. It incorporated particular notions of authenticity, valorized by first generation rock critics such as Robert Christgau, Dave Marsh and Lester Bangs (see Chapter 9).

Classic rock radio depends heavily on British hard rock and progressive rock bands; notably the Rolling Stones, the Who, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin and Cream. American artists who are staples of classic rock include Jimi Hendrix, the Doors, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Lynyrd Skynyrd and Fleetwood Mac. However, these artists represent only a selection of the music of the 1960s and 70s. Some commercially successful rock acts, such as Kiss and Grand Funk Railroad, receive only limited airplay on classic rock radio and there are also examples of commercially successful styles that coexisted with rock during the period, such as soul, funk, and Motown and performers such as Sly and the Family Stone and James Brown are noticeably absent. The reasons for such absences warrant further investigation.

The concern to retain a loyal audience assumes fairly focused radio listening. Paradoxically, while the radio is frequently 'on', it is rarely 'listened' to, instead largely functioning as aural wallpaper, a background to other activities. Yet high rotation radio airplay remains vital in exposing artists and building a following for their work, while radio exposure is also necessary to underpin activities such as touring, helping to promote concerts and the accompanying sales of records. The very ubiquity of radio is a factor here. In its terrestrial formats, it can be listened to in a variety of situations and with widely varying levels of engagement, from the Walkman to background accompaniment to activities such as study, doing domestic chores and reading. However, the internet radio experience is very different from mainstream listening, given it is much less portable and flexible.

### **The charts**

Historically, the charts provided a crucial link between music retail and radio, one that remains prominent despite the shift of music online. The popular music

chart is a numerical ranking of current releases based on sales and airplay, usually over a week; the top ranked album/single is no.1 and the rest are ranked correspondingly. The charts were a feature of the music press from early on its development. The first UK chart appeared in 1928 (the *Melody Maker* 'Honours List'); in the US, leading trade paper *Billboard* began a 'Network Song Census' in 1934. Such charts quickly became the basis for radio 'Hit Parade' programmes, most notably the 'top 40' shows.

The popular music charts represent a level of industry and consumer obsession with sales figures almost unique to the record industry. The charts are part of the various trade magazines (e.g. *Billboard*, *Variety*, *Music Week*), providing a key reference point for those working in sales and promotion. The record charts also play a major role in constructing taste: 'to the fan of popular music, the charts are not merely quantifications of commodities but rather a major reference point around which their music displays itself in distinction and in relation to other forms' (Parker, 1991: 205). This role remains evident, although arguably less influential, in the digital age.

The precise nature of how contemporary charts are compiled, and their basis, varies between competing trade magazines and national approaches differ. In the US, singles charts are based on airplay, while the album charts are based on sales. Current releases are generally defined for the singles charts as up to 26 weeks after the release date. In the UK, the charts are produced by market research organizations sponsored by various branches of the media. In both countries, data collection is now substantially computerized and based on comprehensive sample data. Airplay information is compiled from selected radio stations, with sales information from online retail and wholesalers, assisted by bar coding.

This represents a form of circular logic, in that the charts are based on a combination of radio play and sales, but airplay influences sales and retail promotion and sales impacts on radio exposure. Historically, there has been frequent controversy over attempts to influence the charts and debate still occurs over perceived attempts to manipulate them. The charts continue to provide the music industry with valuable feedback and promotion and help set the agenda for consumer choice.

Changes in the presentation of the charts can have important repercussions for the relative profile of particular genres/performers. The charts are broken down into genre categories; these can change over time, acting as a barometer of taste, as with the change in *Billboard* from 'race' records to R&B in 1949. The decline of the single has influenced the way in which the charts are constructed. In the UK, in 1989 the music industry reduced the number of sales required to qualify for a platinum award (from one million to 600,000) to assist the promotional system and ensure charts continued to fuel excitement and sales. In 2006 greater chart recognition of online sales of singles reflected their increasing market share (see Chapter 2). More recently, the proliferation of formats has complicated the tracking of sales and undermined the place and influence of the charts. When Robbie Williams' *Intensive Care* album was released in 2005 there were 164 elements and configurations of material you could buy. As David

Jennings observes: 'It's increasingly difficult for chart rules to keep up with this kind of proliferation and provide a credible measure of the overall market impact of an album packaged in the age of digital convergence' (Jennings, 2007: 67).

The following chapter picks up the theme of mediation and marketing in an examination of the relationship of various audio visual media to the production and consumption of popular music culture.

## Further reading

### Retail

- Barf, L. (2004) *Where Have all the Good Times Gone? The Rise and Fall of the Record Industry*, London: Atlantic Books.
- Pettit, E. (2008) *Old Rare New: The Independent Record Shop*, London: Black Dog.
- Straw, W. (1997) 'Organized Disorder: The Changing Space of the Record Shop', in S. Redhead (ed.) *The Club Cultures Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 57–65.

Music industry websites include considerable accessible information on marketing and sales.

### Radio

- Barnes, K. (1988) 'Top 40 Radio: A Fragment of the Imagination', in S. Frith (ed.), *Facing the Music*, New York: Pantheon Books.
- Crissell, A. (ed.) (2004) *More Than a Music Box: Radio Cultures and Communities in a Multi-Media World*, Oxford: Berghahn.
- Ennis, P. (1992) *The Seventh Stream*, Hanover, London: Wesleyan University Press (especially Chapter 5: 'The DJ Takes Over, 1946–56').
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## 8 'U Got the Look'

### From film to video games: music and pictures

This chapter continues the theme of mediation, examining the relationship of popular music production, dissemination and consumption to an historical succession of audiovisual media: film and television, music video and MTV, video games. With film, my focus is on commercial feature film and popular music, primarily the popular/rock musicals that followed in the footsteps of classic Hollywood musicals. With television, I am interested in the impact of the new medium on the impact of rock 'n' roll and the subsequent role of mainstream television music shows, including those that are a form of reality television (*S Club 7*; *Idol*). Both film and television have screened popular music documentaries, biopics, validating and mythologizing particular performers, styles and historical moments. Music video and MTV illustrate, once again, the global reach of the music industry and the synergy between music, marketing and audiences. Video gaming represents an increasingly important contemporary site for the production and consumption of popular music. Currently, YouTube has enabled access to a wide range of music in all its previous audiovisual forms.

#### Film

Film has an important historical relationship to popular music. Early silent films often had a live musical accompaniment (usually piano); and with the arrival of the 'talkies' musicals became a major film genre in the 1930s and continued to be important into the 1960s. Composers and musicians, primarily stars, provided a source of material for these films, as did Broadway musicals. The various genres of popular music, its fans and performers have acted as a rich vein of colourful, tragic and salutary stories for filmmakers. A new form of musical, the 'rock musical', played an important part in rock 'n' roll in the mid-1950s. Allied with such musicals were youth movies, with a range of subgenres. Over the past 40 years or so, considerable synergy has been created between the music and film industries; film soundtracks and video games represent another avenue of revenue for recordings, including the back catalogue and help promote contemporary releases.

The classic Hollywood musical was a hybrid film genre, descended from European operetta and American vaudeville and the music hall. While *The Jazz*

*Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927) was the first feature film with sound, the first 'all-talking, all-singing, all dancing' musical was *The Broadway Melody* (Harry Beaumont, 1929), which was important also for establishing the tradition of the backstage musical. The musical soon became regarded as a quintessentially American or Hollywood genre, associated primarily with the Warner and MGM studios and RKO's pairing of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Mainly perceived as vehicles for song and dance, the routines and performance of these became increasingly complex, culminating in the highly stylized films of Busby Berkeley. *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) introduced a new musical formula, combining youth and music. Other new forms of the musical were introduced during the 1940s, including composer biographies and biographical musicals of 'showbiz' stars. The vitality and audience appeal of the musical continued into the 1950s, with contemporary urban musicals such as *An American in Paris* (Vincent Minnelli, 1951), which portrayed a dynamic Paris music scene, with a cast including musical stars Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby. Although the 1960s did see several blockbuster musicals, notably *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965), the heyday of the classic musical had passed, with fewer Broadway hits now making it to the screen. The 1960s saw a move towards greater realism in the musical, exemplified by *West Side Story* (Robert Wise, Jerome Robbins, 1961), an updated version of *Romeo and Juliet*. The classic musical established a link between music and the screen, featuring stars from both media and creating a market synergy between them, a relationship that rock 'n' roll was able to build on in the 1950s.

#### Popular and rock musicals

The classical musical's place was taken by a plethora of new forms associated with the popular musical genres spawned by the advent of rock 'n' roll. These films are frequently treated as a generic group – 'popular musicals' – but this term could apply equally to their historical predecessors, or as 'rock films', although their subject matter goes beyond rock as a genre. There are a substantial number of such films, including a number of identifiable subgenres, and there is a considerable literature on them.

During the 1950s, the decline of the Hollywood studio system and a dwindling cinema audience led to the need to more systematically target particular audience demographics. Hollywood linked up with the record industry to target youth, with a spate of teenage musicals. Many of these starred Elvis Presley, with his song and dance routines in films such as *Jail House Rock* (Richard Thorpe, 1957). Most early popular musicals had basic plots involving the career of a young rock performer: *Rock Around the Clock* (Fred Sears, 1955), *Don't Knock the Rock* (Fred Sears, 1956), and *The Girl Can't Help It* (Frank Tashlin, 1957). These were frequently combined with the other stock form, films serving purely as contrived vehicles for their real-life stars. Most of Elvis Presley's movies, from *Love Me Tender* (Robert Webb, 1956) onward, were of this order, while British examples include Cliff Richard in *The Young Ones*

(Sydney Furie, 1961) and Tommy Steele in *The Tommy Steele Story* (Gerard Bryant, 1957).

Any interest such films retain is largely due to their participant's music rather than their acting talents, although they did function as star vehicles for figures like Presley. In helping establish an identity for rock 'n' roll, the teenage musicals placed youth in opposition to adult authority and for conservatives confirmed the 'folk devil' image of fans of the new genre, associating them with juvenile delinquency, a major concern internationally through the 1950s. Thematically, however, the popular musicals actually stressed reconciliation between generations and classes, with this acting as a point of narrative closure at the film's ending.

Such musicals also helped create an audience and a market for the new musical form, particularly in countries distant from the initial developments (see Chapter 13). These related roles continued to be in evidence in the subsequent development of the popular rock musical. The single 'Rock Around the Clock', by Bill Haley and the Comets, provides an example of the market power of cinema in the popularization of rock 'n' roll. Originally released in May 1954, the song barely dented the US *Billboard* chart, peaking at no. 23, where it stayed for only one week. Greater success came when the song was prominently used on the soundtrack for *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1954). One of the most successful and controversial films of the period, it used the new genre of rock 'n' roll to symbolize adolescent rebellion against the authority of the school. Re-released in May 1955, 'Rock Around the Clock' went to no. 1 in the UK and the US. By the end of 1955 it had become the most popular recording in the US since 'The Tennessee Waltz', selling 6 million copies and having an international impact.

British beat and the 'British Invasion' of the early 1960s were served up in a number of films. Gerry and the Pacemakers brought a taste of the moment to a broader audience with *Ferry Across the Mersey* (J. Summers, 1964). This stuck to what had already become a standard formula – struggling young band makes good after initial setbacks – which was only shaken when the Beatles enlisted director Richard Lester to produce the innovative and pseudo-biographical *A Hard Day's Night* (1964). Along with Lester's *Help* (1965), this consolidated the group's market dominance and extended the rock film genre into new and more interesting anarchic forms. In the mid- to late 1960s, with the emergence of the counterculture, popular music was a necessary backdrop and a cachet of cultural authenticity for films such as *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) and *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967). Both fused contemporary rock soundtracks with thematic youth preoccupations of the day: the search for a personal and cultural identity in contemporary America.

During the 1970s and 1980s there was a profusion of popular musicals: the realist Jamaican film *The Harder They Come* (Perry Henzel, 1972); the flower power and religious fantasy of *Godspell* (David Greene, 1973) and *Hair* (Milos Forman, 1979); the disco dance musical *Grease* (Radnal Kleister, 1978); and the dance fantasies of *Flashdance* (Adrian Lyne, 1983) and *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino,

1987). The 'rock lifestyle' was the focus of *That'll Be The Day* (1973) and Ken Russell's version of *Tommy* (1975). Nostalgia was at the core of *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973), *The Blues Brothers* (John Landis, 1978), *The Buddy Holly Story* (Steve Rash, 1978) and *Quadrophenia* (Franc Rodham, 1979). The success of these popular musicals helped prepared the ground for the success of MTV, launched in 1981, by reshaping the political economy of popular music, shifting the emphasis from sound to sound and images.

Since the 1980s popular musical films have continued to mine a range of themes: youth subcultures (*River's Edge*, Tim Hunter, 1987); adolescent and young adult sexuality and gender relations (*Singles*, Cameron Crowe, 1992); class and generational conflict; nostalgia; stardom and the rock lifestyle (*Purple Rain*, Albert Magnoli, 1984; *Backbeat*, Iain Softley, 1995; *Rock Star*, Stephen Hereck, 2001); dance fantasies such as *Strictly Ballroom* (Baz Luhrman, 1992) and *Take the Lead* (Liz Friedlander, 2006); and fandom and the joy of making music, as in *High Fidelity* (Stephen Frears, 2000), *School of Rock* (Richard Linklater, 2004) and *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* (Edgar White, 2010). *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975) created a new subgenre: the cult musical, with the audience becoming an integral part of the cinematic experience, an indulgence in fantasy and catharsis. The film went on to become the king of the 'midnight movies' – cult films shown at midnight for week after week, usually on Friday and Saturday nights.

The storylines of such musicals involve popular music to varying extents, ranging from its centrality to the narrative theme, to its use as soundtrack. These films articulate with the hopes and dreams, and fantasy lives, which popular music brings to people. When an actual artist is drawn on, or featured, such films help the process of mythologizing them, as with Elvis Presley, the Beatles and Jim Morrison. Dominant themes include youth and adolescence as a rite of passage, frequently characterized by storm and stress, and using subcultural versus 'mainstream' affiliations to explore this; reconciliation, between generations, competing subcultures and genders, frequently expressed through the emergence of couples; and the search for independence and an established sense of identity. Given such themes are ones identified in the literature as central adolescent 'tasks' and preoccupations, they clearly appeal to youthful cinema audiences and to filmmakers looking for box office success.

A particular form of popular music film is the biopic: a biography presented as a film or television feature, but differing from a documentary in that it is aimed at a popular audience and will balance reliability and accuracy against commercial considerations and the need to entertain. A popular music biopic is 'a film which purports to tell, in part or in full, the biography of a musical performer (living or dead), and which contains a significant part of his or her music' (Inglis, 2007: 77; he was referring to rock/pop biopics, but his definition can stand for the genre). The subjects for music biopics can be found in a range of genres, including blues, rap, jazz, soul, country, and pop and rock. Examples include *Sid and Nancy* (Alex Cox, 1986), on Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols; *Bird* (Clint Eastwood, 1988), about Charlie Parker; *The Doors* (Oliver Stone, 1990); *Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004), about Ray Charles; *Walk The Line* (James Mangold, 2005), about Johnny Cash;

*Nowhere Boy* (Sam Taylor-Wood, 2009), on the early life of John Lennon; and *The Runaways* (Floria Sigismundi, 2011), on the influential teen girl rock band of the late 1970s.

As Spencer Leigh (2009: 348) observes, reviewing *Nowhere Boy*, to some degree makers of such films are, of necessity, 'playing fast and loose with the truth', as they are constrained by the limited time to tell a story that covers several years and may include considerable musical experimentation. The original source material, where there are widely varying popular biographies/memoirs and so forth of a figure like Lennon, can also be problematic.

### Soundtracks

As mentioned earlier, *Rock Around the Clock* (1956) and many of the films featuring Elvis Presley demonstrated the market appeal of popular musical soundtracks, as had many Hollywood musicals before them. Mainstream narrative cinema has increasingly used popular music soundtracks to great effect, with accompanying commercial success for both film and record. A key film to initially demonstrate the advantages of such synergy to the music industry was *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977). As shown in Chapter 7, Prince's soundtrack for the film *Batman* (1989) was part of a carefully orchestrated marketing campaign, which successfully created interest in the film and helped break Prince to a wider audience, primarily through exposure (of the promotional video clip) on MTV. The soundtrack to *The Commitments* (Alan Parker, 1991), featuring some impressive covers of soul classics and the powerful voice of Andrew Strong (who plays the part of the lead singer Deco), charted internationally, reaching no. 1 in several countries.

Such soundtracks feature popular music composed specifically for the film, or previously recorded work which is thematically or temporally related to the film, as with *American Graffiti* (1973), *The Big Chill* (1983), *Boyz n The Hood* (1991) and *High School Musical* (2006). This enables multimedia marketing, with accompanying commercial success for both film and record. Several musicians better known for their band recordings have followed Ry Cooder's example and moved into composing music for such films, for example Trent Reznor (Nine Inch Nails) for *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and *The Social Network* (2010) and Kirk Hammet (Metallica) and Orbital for *Spaced* (1999). Television series have also provided a vehicle for music soundtracks. *Northern Exposure* (1990–95) set the pattern for later shows, using a local radio station and the local bar's jukebox to get artists from Nat King Cole to Lynyrd Skynyrd into each episode.

### Television

Television has been an important mode of distribution and promotion for the music industry. It is now commonplace for successful television series to include popular songs, situating them historically and lending themselves to narrative themes. When carefully selected, these add to the effectiveness of the

programme, while also providing an income stream and publicity for musicians and their labels; for example, for its series *Case Histories* (2011) the BBC provides web links on its website to the music used and its performers. Popular music plot themes, music segments and signature tunes are an important part of many television genres, including those aimed at children (e.g. *Sesame Street*) and adolescents (*The Simpsons*, *The X Files*), but also 'adult' dramas such as *The Sopranos* and *Grey's Anatomy*, with the accompanying release of soundtrack albums from these series.

I now want to consider the role of free-to-air, broadcast television and the popular music programmes that form part of its schedules: light entertainment series based around musical performers, music documentaries and the presentation of musical acts as part of television variety and chat/interview shows (MTV and similar cable channels are dealt with later). A contradictory relationship initially existed between television and popular music. Television is traditionally a medium of family entertainment, collapsing class, gender, ethnic and generational differences in order to construct a homogeneous audience held together by the ideology of the nuclear family. In contrast, many forms of popular music, especially rock 'n' roll and its various mutations, have historically presented themselves as being about 'difference', emphasizing individual tastes and preferences (Frith, 2007: Chapter 12). The introduction of public broadcast television in the US and the UK, in the 1950s, coincided with the emergence of rock 'n' roll. Television helped popularize the new music and established several of its performers, most notably Elvis Presley, as youth icons. Indeed, for some fans, along with film television was their only access to 'live' performance. Television was quick to seize the commercial opportunities offered by the emergent youth culture market of the 1950s and there was a proliferation of television popular music shows.

The better known of these on US television included *American Bandstand*, one of the longest running shows in television history (1952–89), *Your Hit Parade* (1950–59) and *The Big Record* (1957–58). Britain had *Juke Box Jury* and *Top of the Pops*, both starting in the late 1950s, and *The Old Grey Whistle Test* (launched by the BBC in 1971 and aimed at more album-oriented older youth). In 1963 *Ready Steady Go!* (RSG) began showcasing new talent, who usually performed live, compared to the *Top of the Pops* staid studio lip-synchs with backing from a house orchestra. In addition to the music, such shows have acted as influential presenters of new dances, image and clothing styles. Several of these shows were subsequently marketed as sell-through videos or DVDs, documenting historically significant performers and styles (e.g. *The Best of the Old Grey Whistle Test*, BBC DVD, 2001) and showcasing contemporary acts (*Later, with Jools Holland*).

Through the 1980s and into the 1990s, a number of studies illustrated the factors at work in the emergence and nature of popular music programmes on commercial television, particularly their place within scheduling practices and the process of selection of the performers and music videos for inclusion on them. Of particular interest were the links between screen space, advertising and record sales. While it is difficult to prove a direct causal link, as with radio airplay and

chart 'action' there was evidence that the television exposure had an influence on record purchases. The nature of such shows, and their tendency to play music videos that are shortened versions of the associated song, exercised considerable influence over the way in which videos were produced and their nature as audiovisual and star texts. Also significant, especially in small nations such as Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands, was the often marginalized status of locally produced music videos that are competing for screen space compared with their imported counterparts, a form of cultural imperialism.

Television's presentation of rock music prior to the advent of music video was generally uninspiring. Performers either straightforwardly performed, even if at times in an impressively frenetic manner (as with the Who's debut effort on *RSG*) or mimed to their recordings in a pseudo-live setting. There were a few notable experiments through the 1960s and 1970s to incorporate additional visual elements (see Shore, 1985, for a full history of the development of music video in relation to television; also Austerlitz, 2007). The 1980s' success of MTV boosted televised music videos, reshaping the form and the broadcast shows that relied on music videos for their content. In the US and Canada, nearly every major city had its own televised music video show, with several nationally syndicated. MV-based programmes also became a stock part of television channel viewing schedules in the UK and western Europe, and New Zealand and Australia. These shows were significant because of their importance to advertisers, drawing a young audience whose consuming habits are not yet strongly fixed.

The increased popularity of MTV and the digital delivery of music undermined music on mainstream television. In New Zealand and Australia, which were slow to acquire cable television and more widely available satellite reception, such television shows retained the high audience ratings they achieved during the 1960s through into the 1990s, but then fell away. Many of the traditionally screened shows have now ended, including the iconic *Top of the Pops* in the UK (in 2006) and the older, chart-oriented shows, have been supplanted by music-driven reality television. Today, popular music on television is increasingly competing against other genres for scheduling space and advertising revenue, while the demographic significance and spending power of the youth audience has steadily declined since the 1990s. At the same time, web-based delivery systems for audiovisual content, notably YouTube, have proved more attractive to younger (and many older) consumers.

### **Reality television: from S Club 7 to Pop Idol**

'Reality television' describes a variety of programming ranging from crime and emergency-style shows, to talk shows, docusoaps and some forms of access-style programming. Emerging in the 1980s in the US, it established itself as a central part of mainstream, popular television by the mid-1990s. In the 2000s reality television became a leading programme format, with many shows internationally franchised (e.g. *Survivor*, *Big Brother*). A hybrid genre, reality television draws on and reworks generic codes and conventions from a variety of sources, using new

technology (e.g. camcorders) to convey a sense of immediacy and authenticity to viewers. Reality television has been criticized for being reliant on shock value and pandering to viewer voyeurism and the lowest common denominator, but also celebrated for its emphasis on viewer participation and its influence on producing commercial pop stars for the music industry. Popular music has provided a significant vehicle for reality television. Early series, notably *The Monkees* in the 1960s and *S Club 7 in Miami* in the late 1990s, reinforced the public profiles and commercial success of their performers.

Initial TV and 19 Management (who managed the Spice Girls) conducted a nationwide search in the UK to develop a group to star in a teen-oriented television show for BBC 1. Reflecting their name, the assembled group S Club 7 consisted of seven members whose public image was very much that of a supportive friendship group. The television show, *S Club 7 in Miami*, debuted in the UK during 1999 and went on to be screened internationally. Its success led to the show being rescreened (on BBC 2 in 2000), and to its marketing as two 'sell-through' video compilations of several episodes. A follow-up series, with S Club 7 now in Los Angeles (*L47*), first screened in the UK on BBC 1 in early 2000 and was also sold overseas. S Club 7 appeared frequently in the teen music magazines, with several cover stories (e.g. *Smash Hits*, 5 April 2000) and on shows such as *Top of the Pops*.

Further media coverage was generated through the group's own magazine, *S Club*, and a sophisticated official website that introduced visitors to 'the s club experience' in an interactive and engaging manner. The site enabled fans to find out personal details about each member of the group, the recordings and television shows and their other activities. Fans could register to receive advance information about all of these and leave messages for the groups' members. The website consolidated S Club 7's fan base and was an early example of what has become a valuable adjunct to more traditional forms of music marketing. This fan base appeared to largely consist of young girls aged between eight and twelve, a significant 'demographic' with considerable spending power (there were some boys, too, however).

Helped by such exposure, the group's debut single 'Bring it All Back' topped the UK chart and enjoyed modest success when it was released in the US. A second single, 'S Club Party', also charted, as did the groups self-titled first album. In March 2000 a second album and the first single from it ('Reach') charted in the UK and overseas. The group enjoyed further chart success through 2001 and 2003 and made a third television series, *Hollywood 7*. In mid-2002 Paul Cattermole left the band, which continued as S Club. In 2003, after their movie *Seeing Double* and a greatest hits album (*Best*) were released, the group broke up.

*S Club 7* foreshadowed later series such as the *Pop Idol*, *Popstars* and *Rock Star* series. These musical talent quests, based on audience votes but with a key role played by judging panels (especially in the initial selection of participants), have become an international phenomenon. They have created new pop and rock stars in a number of countries, although the career of some has been short lived. The

popularity of such shows, their audience and the discourse of commodification and authenticity surrounding them are topics that have attracted increased attention in popular music studies.

### **American Idol; Pop Idol**

*Pop Idol* first screened in the UK in 2001, then in the US (as *American Idol*). Early series of *Pop Idol* launched the careers of Will Young and Gareth Gates in the UK and Ruben Studdard in the US. The show went on to become a global success story, being produced and aired in more than 35 countries. *American Idol* has been enormously successful, especially the earlier series, with all the winners and some finalists going on to recording and touring careers. It is essentially a talent competition, with contestants initially selected (from auditions) by a panel of expert judges, followed by a series of elimination rounds, culminating in a final. Audience voting plays a major determining role in the outcome of each programme. Although primarily about musical talent, however that is defined by the judges and the viewers, the appeal of *Idol* is arguably its focus on the character development of an ever-dwindling pool of contestants, as they handle the increasing pressure.

The antecedents of *Pop Idol* lay in the high rating *Popstars* television series held in New Zealand and Australia in 1999 and 2000 respectively. The first part of this was a talent quest, auditioning singers to make up a band; the second part followed the band touring, making a record and gelling (or not) as a group. The New Zealand winners, True Bliss, attracted a good deal of media attention and had some chart success, although this was fairly short-lived. The concept and the format were then picked up in the UK and developed and screened (as *Popstars*) by London Weekend Television (LWT). After one season, it was rebranded and reshaped as *Pop Idol* by Simon Cowell and Simon Fuller, both of whom had considerable success previously as pop producers, along with Alan Boyd from Granada Television (Cowell, 2003: 97–114). The first series was aired on ITV in 2001 and demonstrated enormous audience appeal, with the consequent attractiveness of such high ratings to advertisers. The 2002 final of *Pop Idol* (UK) was watched by 15 million viewers and received some 8.7 million phone votes (although it is important to note that there was no limit on the number of votes an individual viewer could cast). Initially one of the judges in both series, Cowell's realistic and ruthless treatment of some contestants created considerable publicity. Cowell then helped create the US show *American Idol*, on which he also judged. *American Idol* enjoyed even greater success than its UK predecessor and in 2011 was in its tenth consecutive year. Although its popularity has declined since the early series, in its latest season it remained the most watched television show in the US and has been a 'cash cow' for the Fox network. According to *Billboard*, Kelly Clarkson, the winner of the first series, has been the most commercially successful of the *Idol* contestants, with a number of high-charting records.

Academic analysis of the idol phenomenon has focused on the construction of the contestants as 'ordinary', enabling closer audience identification with them;

the associated role of viewer interactivity, through the voting system; the industry tie-in; and the adaptation of the format internationally (Stratton, 2008; Zwaan and de Bruin, 2012). With the judges having a background in production or performance, the winner is usually guaranteed a recording contract, with a 'massive body of deeply invested fans' (Stahl, 2004: 212) ensuring at least initial commercial success.

### **Documentaries and rockumentaries**

'Constructed as a genre within the field of non-fictional representation, documentary has, since its inception, been composed of multiple, frequently linked representational strands' (Beattie, 2004: 2). Popular music documentaries include concert, tour and festival films; profiles of performers, and scenes; and ambitious historical overviews. Such documentaries can be produced for either film or television as both 'one-offs' and series. The various forms of popular music documentary have served a number of economic and ideological functions. As a form of programming, they create income for their producers and those who screen them, via rights and royalties. They validate and confirm particular musical styles and historical moments in the history of popular music as somehow worthy of more 'serious' attention. While celebrating 'youth' and the mythic status of stars, they also confirm their status as 'the other' for critics of these sounds and their performers.

Concert, tour, festival and scene documentaries demonstrate a close link between the documentation of musical performance and observational modes of documentary filmmaking. Referred to in the US as 'direct cinema', and evident from the early 1960s, these documentaries have a well-established tradition (see Beattie, 2004), exemplified in the work of director D.A. Pennebaker (*Don't Look Back*, 1966; *Monterey Pop*, 1968; and *Down From the Mountain*, 2002). Direct cinema mutated into 'docusoap' and other variants of reality television, as in MTV's *The Real World* series (which frequently featured participants who were seeking musical careers), and *Meet the Osbournes*, a fly-on-the-wall depiction of the family life of aging heavy metal rocker Ozzy Osbourne.

Films of music festivals have consolidated the mythic status of events such as *Monterey Pop* (1968) and, especially, *Woodstock* (1969), with the 1970 film a major box office success. A number of other concert and concert tour films have had a similar but more limited commercial and ideological impact; for example: *The Last Waltz* (Martin Scorsese, 1978), a record of The Band's final concert; *Stop Making Sense* (Jonathon Demme, 1984), featuring Talking Heads; *Hail, Hail Rock and Roll* (Taylor Hackford, 1987), featuring Chuck Berry and other seminal rock 'n' roll performers; Prince's *Sign O' The Times* (Prince, 1987); and Neil Young and Crazy Horse in *Year of the Horse* (Jim Jarmusch, 1998). Such films capture particular moments in 'rock history', while at the same time validating particular musical styles and performers.

Other documentaries consolidate particular historical moments: Julian Temple's examination of the Sex Pistol's phenomenon, including the television interview

that sparked off controversy (*The Filth and the Fury*, 2000); the Rolling Stones Altamont concert of 1969 (*Gimme Shelter*, Albert and David Maysles, 1970; released on DVD by Criterion in 2000); and the Beatles first tour of America (*What's Happening! The Beatles in the USA*, Albert and David Maysles, 2004). Documentaries have also been important in exposing particular scenes, sounds, and performers to a wider audience, as in *The Decline of Western Civilization, Part One* (Penelope Spheeris, 1981), on the Los Angeles punk/hardcore scene circa 1981, featuring Black Flag, the Circle Jerks, X and the Germs; its 'sequel', *The Decline of Western Civilization, Part Two: the Metal Years* (Penelope Spheeris, 1988), featuring Aerosmith, Alice Cooper, Kiss, Ozzy Osbourne, Metallica and Motörhead; and *Hype!* (Doug Pray, 1996), on the Seattle grunge scene. The success of *Buena Vista Social Club* (Wim Wenders, 1999) introduced Cuban jazz to an international audience and led to massive sales of the accompanying soundtrack album (which had initially gone largely ignored following its first release in 1996). *Genghis Blues* (Roko Belic, 2000) consolidated the appeal of world music and *Down From the Mountain* (D.A. Pennebaker, 2002) did the same for contemporary bluegrass. Documentaries have reminded us of the important role of session musicians and 'house bands', for example the Funk Brothers in *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* (Paul Justman, 2002). More frequently they celebrate major performers, as with The Who in *The Kids Are Alright* (Jeff Stein, 1979; released as a special DVD edition, 2004) and The Rolling Stones in *Shine A Light* (Martin Scorsese, 2008), a concert film of the band recorded in New York in 2006 at the end of their world A Bigger Bang Tour. As with any genre the ultimate accolade is parody, best represented by *This is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner, 1984).

Documentary series on the history of popular music, made for television, include the joint BBC and US co-production *Dancing in the Street* (1995; with an accompanying book, by Robert Palmer); *Walk on By* (2003) a history of song-writing; Ken Burns *Jazz* (2000); the Australian series *Long Way to the Top* (ABC, 2001); and the Martin Scorsese series, *Legacy of the Blues*, screened as part of the 'Year of the Blues' celebrations in the US in 2003. In addition to the income from their initial screenings and international licensing, such series have produced accompanying books, soundtracks and video and DVD boxed sets. Although the selection of material depends heavily on the nature and quality of what is available, they visually construct particular historical narratives, reframing the past. In the case of *Dancing in the Street*, for example, the emphasis is on 'authentic artists' rather than commercial performers: in the episode 'Hang on to Yourself', Kiss get barely a minute, while 'punk icon' Iggy Pop features throughout. In sum, as with the music press, music documentary history is situated primarily around key performers and styles, another form of canonization.

### Music video

The most pervasive and significant form of musical audiovisual text is the music video, traditionally associated with the television channel MTV (established in 1981), and more recently a prominent aspect of YouTube. While MTV

certainly elevated the form to a central place in popular music culture, the music video had been around in various forms since 'talkies' in the 1940s (see Shore, 1985).

Individual music video clips largely follow the conventions of the traditional 45" single: they are approximately 2–3 minutes long, and function, in the industry's own terms, as 'promotional devices', historically to encourage record sales and chart action. These clips have been the staple component in music television, especially the MTV channel; the long-form music video compilation, increasingly available on DVD; and are now widely available through YouTube. The primary focus in the study of music video (MV) has been on their nature as audiovisual texts. Various attempts to read music videos have necessarily adopted the insights and concepts of film and television studies, although these have had to be modified in the light of the different functions they often play in MVs, particularly in relation to the music. There is also some recognition, at times rather belated, of the point that MVs are not self-contained texts, but reflective of their nature as industrial and commercial products and their close association with MTV (see later).

I want to sketch some basic considerations that usefully inform specific 'textual' readings of MV and, with particular reference to the influential work of Ann Kaplan, examine the difficulties endemic in constructing a classificatory typology of music videos. Duran Duran's 'Hungry Like the Wolf' (1981), helped establish the conventions of the form. (For extended discussions of music videos as texts and examples of close readings, see Austerlitz, 2007; Vernallis, 2005.)

### 'Reading' music video

Two general points frequently made about MVs as individual texts are their preoccupation with visual style and, associated with this, their status as key exemplars of 'postmodern' texts. Music videos were pioneers in video expression, but their visual emphasis raises problems for their musical dimensions. As some three-quarters of sensory information comes in through the eye, the video viewer concentrates on the images, arguably at the expense of the soundtrack. This combination has been accused of fuelling performers' preoccupation with visual style, which can dominate over content. Since the 1980s MV has been a crucial marketing tool, with the music often merely part of an overall style package offered to consumers.

Cultural historian and theorist Fredric Jameson (1984) saw music videos as 'meta entertainments' that embody the postmodern condition. It is certainly clear that MVs do indeed merge commercial and artistic image production and abolish traditional boundaries between an image and its real-life referent. In this respect, their most obvious characteristic is their similarity to advertisements, making them a part of a blatantly consumerist culture. Kaplan (1987) went so far as to suggest that the MV spectator has become decentred and fragmented, unable any longer to distinguish 'fiction' from 'reality', part of postmodern

culture. This conflation of MV and postmodernism is, however, difficult to sustain. While many MVs display considerable evidence of pastiche, intertextuality and eclecticism, this does not in itself make them postmodern (for an insightful discussion of this point, see Goodwin, 1993). Further, by the 2000s, the nature of MVs was arguably becoming more traditional and clichéd, as just a few hours of watching MTV then made clear.

Considering music videos as texts means applying some stock topics and questions. These are derived partly from film studies and include cinematic aspects, such as camera techniques, lighting, use of colour and editing. Different styles of video utilize different conventions; heavy metal videos, for example, make considerable use of wide-angle lens and zoom shots in keeping with their emphasis on a 'live' performance format. A major focus of MV analysis that draws on film studies is the nature of the gaze in MV – who is looking at whom, how and what do these conventions convey in terms of power relations, gender stereotypes and the social construction of self?

In more general thematic terms, there is a need to also consider:

- The mood of the video – the way in which the music, the words and the visuals combine to produce a general feeling of nostalgia, romanticism, nihilism or whatever.
- The narrative structure – the extent to which the video tells a clear time-sequenced story or is a non-linear pastiche of images, flashbacks, etc.
- The degree of realism or fantasy of the settings or environments in the video and the relationship between genres and particular physical settings, as with rap and the street.
- The standard themes evident, for example, the treatment of authority, love and sex, 'growing up' and the loss of childhood innocence, political and social consciousness.
- The importance of performance: why does this format better suit particular genres such as heavy metal?
- Different modes of sexuality – the female as mother/whore figure; androgyny and the blurring of dress codes; homoeroticism.
- The nature of MVs as a star text, centred on the role played by the central performer(s) in the video and the interrelationship of this to their star persona in rock more generally.
- The music – what we hear and how it relates to what we see.

The last was often a critical absence from the early, visual-oriented, readings of MV. Andrew Goodwin goes so far as to argue that:

a musicology of the music video image is the basis for understanding how to undertake a credible textual study. Issues relating to the sound-vision relation, the formal organization of music videos, questions of pleasure and so on, need to be related to the musical portion of the text.

(Goodwin, 1993: Introduction)

In a substantial, music-based study of later music videos, Carol Vernallis (2005) sees them as utilizing visual images to represent and enhance the music, while continuing to play a commercial role as industry promotion.

These are not simply signposts to viewing individual MVs, they are also factors that can be utilized to categorize them. Although much criticized, the most thorough attempt to categorize MVs still remains that developed by Ann Kaplan, in her study *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture* (1987). While Kaplan is primarily concerned with analyzing MTV, she also constructs an interesting typology of individual MVs. Her five categories are derived from combining a reading of rock history with theoretical tools taken from psychoanalytic and film theory, a combination that at times sits awkwardly. Her five typical video forms are: the romantic, the socially conscious, the nihilist, the classical and the postmodern. However, attempting to apply the typology to particular videos has proved difficult.

Kaplan's schema is weak partly because it mixes the bases for each category: the first three are situated in pop history – the romantic clips drawing from 1960s' soft rock; the socially conscious from 1970s' rock and the nihilist from 1980s' new wave and heavy metal music. But then the remaining two categories are based in film theory (with the classical category related to realist film texts) and the postmodern in some sort of catch-all residual category in which post-modern motifs, evident in practically all MVs, are simply more plentiful. The result is that clips placed in one category might just as easily be located in another. It is also questionable to collapse the history of pop/rock music into a series of decades, each dominated by and identified with a certain style of music. Further, the schema ignores the significance of genre and auteurship in the music industry, both of which fit uncomfortably with it. What would be a viable alternative schema? Perhaps the eclectic nature of music video makes impossible anything other than a basic distinction between performance and fictional narrative MVs? Having raised some issues surrounding the analysis of music videos, I now want to relate these to an early, now classic example. (For detailed analyses of later music videos, see Austerlitz, 2007; Vernallis, 2005.)

### *Duran Duran: 'Hungry Like the Wolf' (dir. Russell Mulcahy, 1981)*

The career of Duran Duran provides an early example of the need to consider music videos as promotional devices as much as mini visual texts. Formed in 1978, the UK pop group achieved considerable early commercial success, with several hits in the British Top 20 in 1981, but initially failed to dent the US market. Despite intensive touring in North America and the photogenic male group's considerable exposure in the teen music press, Duran Duran's self-titled debut album on Capitol/EMI failed to yield a hit single and had only risen to no. 150 on the album charts. Exposure on MTV changed this dramatically.

The group had already attracted attention with their first video: 'Girls on Film' (1980) directed by leading video auteurs Godley and Creme. The group barely

appear in the MV, which features a series of soft-core porn-style scenes, including attractive, scantily clad (nude in the uncensored version) women pillow fighting on a whipped cream-covered phallic pole! Kevin Godley acknowledges the sexism of the video, but explains:

Look, we just did our job. We were very explicitly told by Duran Duran's management to make a very sensational, erotic piece that would be for clubs, where it would get shown uncensored, just to make people take notice and talk about it.

(cited in Shore, 1985: 86)

That bands were increasingly making two versions of their videos, one for mainstream television shows and MTV and one for more adult cable outlets and clubs, demonstrates the market-driven nature of the video text and any reading of MV must take this intention into account.

In August 1981, as MTV began broadcasting in North America, EMI invested \$200,000 to send Duran Duran to Sri Lanka to shoot three video clips with director Russell Mulcahy. One of them, 'Hungry Like the Wolf', became an MTV favourite. Less than two months after the two-week shoot, the clip was in high rotation on MTV and getting heavy radio airplay and this exposure helped propel the single into the Top 10 and Duran Duran's second album, *Rio*, into the upper reaches of the album charts. MTV confirmed Duran Duran as a teenage pop sensation. In 1983, in conjunction with Sony's promoting its new video 45s (which included the Duran's 'Girls On Film' – the uncensored nightclub version – and 'Hungry'), along with Duran Duran's compilation, 'sell-through', video cassette, the group undertook a highly successful video tour of major clubs across North America; 'Each date on the video tour sold out, and in every city the video tour hit, Duran Duran's records sold out within days' (Shore, 1985: 93–4).

In 'Hungry like the Wolf' Singer Simon LeBon's head rises in slow motion out of a river as rain pours down. He then chases a beautiful Indian woman, who appears to be clad only in an animal skin, through a Sri Lankan tropical jungle and open air market. During the chase, he has his brow mopped by a young Indian (boy?) and overturns a bar room table. When he catches the beast/woman, they have an encounter suggestive of both sex and violence:

Mulcahy's ravenously tracking and panning camera, insinuating erotic ambiguity, and editing wizardry (frames slide in from the left or right, double and split-screen edits on and around the beat, etc) which have been the real stars of the show all along, come into full play ... we've been dazzled seduced and abandoned.

(Shore, 1985: 178)

The nature of the narrative is almost irrelevant here, serving merely to showcase LeBon and add an aura of exotic appeal and sexuality to the song.

Indeed, a satisfactory analysis of 'Hungry' as a text must acknowledge this 'focus on the star' aspect of it. Duran Duran was the pin-up band of the mid-1980s, particularly among young girls. Watching the video even now, women students focus on the physical appeal of the singer, who is variously described as 'delicious', a 'hunk' and 'sexy'. Young male viewers acknowledge that LeBon is 'conventionally handsome' and some even tentatively point to his rather androgynous appeal. The star appeal of LeBon is fed on and enhanced by the technical virtuosity of the director, already then recognized as a leading auteur of the music video form. Mulcahy is arguably the star as much as LeBon – although not, of course, to the young fans of Duran Duran in the mid-1980s.

Even purely at the level of text, 'Hungry like the Wolf' is difficult to categorize in Kaplan's terms. It has elements of the 'classical', with the male as subject and the woman as object: 'I'm on the hunt I'm after you', sings LeBon – although there is a case for reversing this distinction. Further, the video's narrative structure is a mini-drama, based loosely around LeBon's chase while his friends are being enticed by lithe beauties back in the town, a narrative that never fully realizes closure. But in Kaplan's terms, the video also has strongly 'postmodernist' features. The rapid editing creates a series of disjointed images, which disrupt linear time and leave the viewer uncertain about the sequence of the events and even if there is indeed a 'plot' to follow. Kaplan pays little attention to the music in her analysis of music video, an absence that is significant in the case of 'Hungry' (even if it is admittedly not one of the MVs she examines). The sharp rhythm and strong beat of the song, along with the single male voice, match the rapid editing and sheer physical aggression of the video. It is the music that links and 'makes sense of' the images, which would not have the same impact on their own.

The 'Hungry Like the Wolf' video also raises the issue of authorship in MVs. While it is customary to refer to MVs as being the product of the particular performer featured, and some artists take a major role in determining the nature of their MVs, 'the directors most often are responsible for the concepts, the vision, the imagery, and the editing rhythm that coalesce into a look that keeps people watching' (Shore, 1985: 97). This is still the case, particularly with 'new' performers unfamiliar with the medium. There are a number of MV directors who can be considered pioneers and auteurs in the field, including Godley and Creme, Russell Mulcahy, David Mallet, Julian Temple and Michelle Gondry. Several, most notably Mulcahy and Temple, have gone from making music videos to directing major feature films.

To explain the nature of the appeal of music videos it is necessary to go beyond their purely textual aspects and consider their function as polysemic narratives and images of viewer fantasy and desire. As with other popular culture texts, MVs present a semiotic terrain open to cultural struggles over meaning. This illustrates the general point that meanings and pleasures are not purely embedded 'in' MV texts, but are produced in the act of viewing and through their cultural location at the intersection of art and commerce.



## MTV

The 24-hour, non-stop commercial cable channel 'MTV: Music Television', founded in 1981, made itself and its logo synonymous with the music video form. Originally owned by the Warner Amex Satellite Company, the channel was subsequently sold to Viacom International in 1985. Viacom, which still owns MTV and MTV 2, also has interests in broadcast and cable television, radio, the internet, book publishing and film production and distribution. By 2005 it was the third largest communications conglomerate in the world, with annual revenues of US\$26.6 million.

After a slow start, with many detractors who did not think a dedicated music video channel would have an audience, MTV became enormously popular and highly profitable. The channel is credited with boosting a flagging music industry in the 1980s. Not only did it eventually capture a considerable share of the advertising directed at the youth and young adult/yuppie market, as Andrew Goodwin observes, MTV solved the perennial problem of cable television – how to generate enough revenue for new programming – by having the record companies largely pay for the 'programmes' by financing the video clips (Goodwin, 1993).

In the late 1980s MTV was reaching nearly 20 million American homes and was regularly watched by 85 per cent of 18 to 34 year olds (Kaplan, 1987). In November 1991 *MTV 10*, an hour-long celebration of MTV's tenth anniversary, was screened in prime time on the North American ABC TV network. The show asserted the cultural centrality of MTV over the networks, opening with a performance of 'Freedom 90' by George Michael: 'We won the race/Got out of the place/Went back home/Got a brand new face/For the boys on MTV.' Performers on the show included Michael Jackson, Madonna and REM and *MTV 10* was subsequently screened world wide, while the 1992 MTV Music Awards were seen in 139 countries.

By the early 1990s MTV had 28 million subscribers, and was adding one to three million new subscribers every year. MTV's success spawned a host of imitators in the US and a number of national franchises and imitations around the globe. These raised the issue of the place of local music in a context dominated by international repertoire, especially from the North American music market (Hanke, 1998). After an initial struggle to untangle cable and satellite regulations in dozens of countries, MTV Europe, launched in 1988, broke even for the first time in February 1993 and became the continent's fastest growing satellite channel. By 1993, its 24-hours-a-day MV programming was available in more than 44 million homes and it was adding subscribers at the rate of almost one million a month. Thirty per cent of its airtime was reserved for European performers and while the programme format was similar to that of its parent station, it played a substantial number of locally made videos. MTV-Asia began broadcasting in late 1991, with a signal covering more than 30 countries from Japan to the Middle East. The channel's English-language broadcasts reached more than three million households with a programme dominated by MVs by western stars, but with a 20 per cent quota of Asian performers. MTV channels continued to proliferate

internationally, although a few have been short-lived (for the current situation, see the MTV web site: [www.mtv.com](http://www.mtv.com)).

The influence of MTV on the North American music industry during the 1980s – and, therefore, by association, globally – was enormous. By 1991 80 per cent of the songs on the *Billboard* Hot 100 were represented by a video and MTV became the most effective way to 'break' a new artist and to take an emerging artist into star status. Performers who received considerable exposure on MTV before they were picked up by radio include Madonna, Duran Duran, the Thompson Twins and Paula Abdul. Dave Rimmer argues that the new 'invasion' of the American charts by British groups, in the mid- to late 1980s was directly attributable to MTV (Rimmer, 1985).

Given their crucial role in determining commercial success, a key question is how particular MVs are chosen for the MTV playlist. Evidence on this point is sparse and it is clearly an area for further inquiry. Surprisingly, Kaplan's (1987) study of the channel ignores the selection issue, as do most commentators preoccupied with the videos as texts. MTV's top 20 lists are compiled from national sales data, video airplay and the channel's own research and requests, building circularity and subjectivity into the process. In his thorough study of the operation of MTV, Banks (1996: Chapter 9) looked at the gatekeeper role of the American MTV channel, the operation of its acquisitions committee and the standards, both stated and unstated, that they apply. He concluded that major companies then willingly edited videos on a regular basis to conform to MTV's standards, even coercing artists into making changes to song lyrics, while smaller, independent companies cannot usually get their videos on MTV. It would be worthwhile to know if such practices remain the case, but an update of Banks' work is lacking.

Despite the heady growth of the 1980s, the American MTV channel began the 1990s by retrenching, with MTV executives claiming that the format had lost its freshness and was becoming clichéd. The channel initiated a programme overhaul designed to lessen its reliance on videos; new shows included *Vidcoms*, combining comedy and MV, and *Unplugged*, a 30-minute Sunday series featuring live acoustic performances by bands such as Crowded House. *Unplugged* proved highly successful, particularly through associated chart-topping album releases (Eric Clapton, Mariah Carey, Nirvana). These changes were a direct response to research on viewing patterns, which indicated, not surprisingly, that people tuned in to MTV for only as long as they enjoy the clips. With MVs making up some 90 per cent of the channel's broadcast day, negative reaction to a few clips can spell problems for audience retention and the sale of advertising time. This is a situation MTV shares with 'mainstream' television and radio, which have always been in the business of delivering audiences to advertisers in a highly competitive market.

Today, while MVs are still the staple of MTV channel's programming, the channel also screens concerts, interviews and music-oriented news and gossip items, acting as a visual radio channel. Although owned by a global media giant (Viacom), 'localization' is almost a mantra for the nationally situated MTV channels, which use local VJs, play locally produced music videos and air local

programming. Bill Roedy, the Chairman and CEO of MTV International provides an informative entertaining insider's account of the growth of the company, with an emphasis on how 'we took the original American MTV concept of delivering music with a creative cutting edge and adapted it to the customs and desires of almost every culture on every continent' (Roedy, 2011: 5). Rather surprisingly, given its ubiquity and continued popularity, there is an absence of current academic research into the channel.

### Video games

In the past 20 years, video games, also referred to as 'electronic games', have become a pervasive part of popular media culture. They can now be played on several platforms, including Xbox 360, PS3, personal computers and the most recent mobile phones. Several of these have the capability to be linked online, enabling playing with other participants. They are no longer simply a male-dominated leisure form and have a wider and older range of consumers. In addition to the games themselves and their associated music magazines and websites, video games have 'crossed over' to feature films. Video games are an increasingly significant part of the revenue of media corporations, including the music industry, which is:

forming closer ties with the gaming industry both in terms of direct income via licensing music for use in games and more recently as a means of extending an artist's brand equity through games designed around music performance, such as *Guitar Hero*.

(Hull *et al.*, 2011: 22)

These performance games are a way for fans (and aspiring musicians) to play along with popular songs, in effect a form of home karaoke. The most successful of these has been *The Beatles Rockband* (2009); made in consultation with the surviving Beatles, it includes dozens of the group's original songs, to play on *Rockband*-style guitar, bass and drums, or to just sing along to.

There are several composers who specialize in writing music for video games. The most successful is Tommy Tallarico, whose work has appeared in over 300 video games, including the best-selling *Prince of Persia*, *Mortal Combat*, *Advent Rising* and *Tony Hawk Pro Skate*. In 2005 Tallarico hosted a multimedia show *Video Games Live*, in which an orchestra and choir performed music from popular video games, while a large screen showed excerpts from the games. The world premiere, at the Hollywood Bowl with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, attracted an audience of 11,000 and the show went on to tour internationally. In addition to licensing earlier songs for use in games soundtracks, an increasing number of 'rock' musicians are writing for video games and the British Academy of Film and Television Arts now has an awards category for video game soundtracks.

Academic studies of the composition and role of music in such video games, and the social experience of playing them, are beginning to be published (Collins, 2008) and the topic is one that is going to generate further interest.

### Conclusion

The historical succession of media combining music and image tracked here have eroded the distinction between sound and pictures. Access to film, television, music video and MTV is no longer just through terrestrial, physical sites, with all of them increasingly available through the internet and practices such as streaming. You Tube has opened up access, providing an electronic portal to the whole corpus of audiovisual musical texts. In the process, it has democratized consumer choice, in terms of both the scope of the viewing and listening experiences available and the decision of when and where to engage with these.

### Further reading

#### Film and television

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#### Music video

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#### Reality TV; Idol

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 Stratton, J. (2008) 'The Idol Audience: Judging, Interactivity and Entertainment', in P. Bloustein and S. Luckman (eds), *Sonic Energies: Music, Technology, Community, Identity*, Aldershot: Ashgate.  
 Zwaan, K. and de Bruin, J. (2012) *Adapting Idol: Authenticity, Identity and Performance in a Global Television Format*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

### **Video games**

Collins, K. (ed.) (2008) *From Pac-Man to Pop Music Interactive Audio in Games and New Media*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

The essays cover a range of topics, including issues of aesthetics, economics, technology and music making. The book includes an extensive bibliography.

*The Beatles Rockband* (2009), Xbox 360.

Game play is easy to grasp following the tutorial included. Songs are ranked in 'level of difficulty'; you can start with their first songs played at The Cavern Club in Liverpool and work your way through to recoding Abbey Road or just choose any song to play and sing.

## **9 'On the Cover of *The Rolling Stone*'**

### **The music press**

The music press plays a major part in the process of selling music as an economic commodity, while at the same time investing it with cultural significance. In one of the first extended critical discussions of the music press, Simon Frith correctly argued for its central role in 'making meaning': 'the importance of the professional rock fans – the rock writers', and the music papers, whose readers 'act as the opinion leaders, the rock interpreters, the ideological gatekeepers for everyone else' (Frith, 1983: 165). Currently, the 'traditional' music press remains significant, but has been modified by the advent of online music magazines and blogs producing a democratization of music journalism.

My discussion begins with a general consideration of just what constitutes 'the music press', which I view as a diverse range of publications. Music journalism is a literary genre in which any distinction between 'rock journalism' and academic writing on popular music is frequently blurred. Music magazines include industry reference tools, musicians' magazines, record collector magazines, fanzines, 'teen glossies', 'the inkiies', style bibles and the new tabloids. Although these publications have many features in common, each serves a particular place in a segmented market, in which journalism becomes collapsed into, and often indistinguishable from, music industry publicity. Despite this symbiosis, popular music critics continue to function as gatekeepers and arbiters of taste, a role examined in the concluding section of the discussion here.

The music press includes a wide range of print publications, with many now also online, along with web-based publications. General interest magazines and newspapers will also cover popular music, with regular review columns. More specifically, however, the music press refers to specialized publications: lifestyle magazines with major music coverage, music trade papers and weekly and monthly consumer magazines devoted to popular music or particular genres within it. In addition to these are privately published fanzines, usually peripheral to the market economy of commercial publishing but significant nonetheless. Although categories frequently overlap, various categories of publication can be distinguished. They include popular (auto)biographies, histories and genre studies; various forms of consumer guide, including encyclopedias and dictionaries, discographies and chart listings and compilations; and discographies, usually organized by artist, genre or historical period. The last represent an important aspect

of popular music history, which they constitute as well as record, and are important texts for fans and aficionados. There are also more esoteric publications, such as rock quiz books, genealogical tables plotting the origin and shifting membership of groups and 'almanacs' dealing with the trivia and microscopic detail of stars' private lives. In one of the first bibliographies of popular music, Paul Taylor observed: 'The variety of these publications is matched by the variation in the quality of their writing, accuracy and scholarship, which means one must approach them with a degree of discrimination and care' (Taylor, 1985: 1). Almost 30 years on, this judgment still stands.

### Music journalism and rock criticism

Initially, popular music journalism included a proliferation of 'quickie' publications, cashing in on the latest pop sensation. This was very much the case with the pop annuals accompanying the emergence of chart pop in the 1950s, which were largely rewritten PR (public relations) handouts. Emphasizing the pictorial aspect and providing personal information about performers rather than any extended critical commentary, these were often little more than pseudo-publicity. They reinforced the star aspect of pop consumption, feeding fans' desire for consumable images and information about their preferred performers, as did pop and rock magazines aimed at the teenage market (*Record Mirror*, UK, which began publication in 1953; and *Disc*, UK, 1958).

In the 1960s this changed with the impact of two factors: first the rise of a 'rock culture' with serious artistic intentions; second, the emergence of the 'new journalism', associated with the writing of figures such as Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe. New journalism set out to move journalism beyond simple factual reporting, by using conventions derived from fiction:

Stylistic traits pioneered by the new journalists such as scene by scene construction, third person point of view, recording of everyday detail and the inclusion of the figure of the journalist within the text were appropriated by US and UK music critics from the end of the 1960s.

(Leonard and Strachan, 2003: 254)

There was also a commitment to treating popular culture as worthy of serious analysis, an approach that has continued to be influential. The newly established *Rolling Stone* (US) magazine and a revamped *NME* in the UK exemplified this and elevated several rock critics to star status.

A major part of the historical development of music criticism was in jazz and the blues, where critics established some of the norms that later shaped the field more generally. Mark Brennan (2006a) explores the relationship between *Rolling Stone* and *Down Beat* and *Jazz*, especially the motivations for jazz publications to begin covering rock music in the late 1960s. Subsequently, other genres established their own body of work and associated key publications. Documentation and analysis of these has been particularly evident in regard to 'rock criticism',

initially associated with the early periods of magazines such as *Rolling Stone* and *Cream* in the United States and *NME* in the United Kingdom and the writing of critics such as Greil Marcus, Lester Bangs, Robert Christgau and Dave Marsh in the US and Jon Savage, Dave Rimmer, Nik Cohen, Barney Hoskyns and Charles Shaar Murray in the UK. (For a thorough overview of the historical development, approaches and impact of rock criticism, see Lindbergh, *et al.*, 2005; the website Rock's Back Pages usefully brings much of this writing together.) America's most lauded rock critic, Bangs, who died in 1982, was the critic with rock star status. An early champion of the proto-punk of 1960s' garage, he is the subject of a biography (De Rogatis, 1982) and his character makes a cameo appearance in the film *Almost Famous*.

The 1980s saw a continuation of this trend, with a proliferation of articles and book-length studies of a more serious vein and intent. Angela McRobbie observed how:

Two kinds of writing now feed into the study of youth and popular culture. These are the more conventional academic mode, and what might be called a new form of cultural journalism. Each is marked by its own history, its debates and disputes.

(McRobbie, 1988: xi)

Her edited collection, *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses*, showed serious popular music journalism had changed dramatically during the 1980s, 'with interest shifting from the music itself to a more general concern with the cultural phenomena which accompany it'. This new focus was strongly evident in the new 'style bibles' of the 1980s, especially *The Face*. Some of this journalism also colonized the 'mainstream' press and the more 'serious' weekly and monthly magazines.

Alongside this developed a similar, albeit more historically situated, identifiable body of journalistic work on popular music, not only aimed at a broader readership, but also thoughtful and critically analytical of its subjects. Indicative of the commercial and ideological significance of this work is its appearance in book form as sustained, in-depth studies of genres and performers; collected reviews and essays; several encyclopedias of popular music, aimed at a broad readership; and anthologies (for example, Bangs, 1990; Hoskyns, 2003; the Da Capo series). Also significant, are a number of more thematic historical studies that imbue particular performers, their musical styles and their recordings with meaning and value, situating them as part of a critical tradition and the musical canon. For example, in *Mystery Train*, Greil Marcus uses a handful of rock artists, including Elvis Presley, Sly Stone, the Band and Randy Newman, to illuminate the 'question of the relationship between rock 'n' roll and American culture as a whole'. His concern is with 'a recognition of unities in the American imagination' (1991: Introduction).

### Biography

Much music journalism has been identified with biographical studies (and autobiography), which play an important role in popular music. In relation to

individuals they 'create, reinforce and also challenge the dominant representations of popular musicians' (Leonard and Strachan, 2003: 13). The biography interpolates and reflects on fandom, stardom, marketing and promotion. In spite of the proliferation of general academic writing in the past 20 years, the journalistic biography has historically been a staple of the music press and remains so; it is essential to the construction and maintenance of fandom. A number of journalists are strongly identified with the biographical form, including Dave Marsh, Barney Hoskyns, Victor Brockis and Peter Guralnick, while biographical profiles are an integral part of edited collections. Most autobiographies are written with the aid of professional music journalists, as is the case with Keith Richards (2010), who was assisted by James Fox.

Such biographies include a wide range of musical performers and vary widely in quality. There is a constant turnover of 'quickie' publications on the latest pop sensations. These remain interesting as they trace 'how star appeal has been defined at different historical moments' (Frith, 1983: 272). In some instances, such biographies seek to undermine the general perception of stars figures, highlighting the scandalous aspects of their lives; these are biographical exposés, as with Albert Goldman's studies of Elvis Presley and John Lennon. A new style of biography emerged in the UK and the US in the 1990s, the 'confessional memoir', in which fans describing their encounters with music and, at times, their own unsuccessful attempt as musicians to 'break into' the music industry, with these often represented as 'celebrations of failure' (Leonard and Strachan, 2003: 13; for example, Giles Smith, *Lost in Music*).

As with literary biography, writers of popular music biographies grapple with issues of sources, materials and objectivity; the links between the subject's life and the social context within which it occurred; and questions of musical production, creativity and authenticity. (For an insightful discussion of this process, from the author's perspective, see the introduction to Guralnick, 2002.) An instructive specific example is provided by Tom Perchard, who, with reference to several biographies of the saxophonist John Coltrane, considers 'the ways that biographical narratives are constituted from disparate source materials and the ideological agendas and political problems that attend this creative act' (2007: 119). With reference to several detailed examples, Thomas Swiss (2005) considers 'what constitutes a successful rock autobiography'. Several recent biographies exemplify the insights the form can offer into the music industry, musical creativity, and particular musical genres, sounds, and scenes, along with their 'readability' and entertainment value (Benatar, 2010; Letts, 2007; Richards, 2010; Smith, 2010).

### Music magazines

We can usefully distinguish between industry-oriented, performer-oriented and consumer-oriented music magazines. The music trade papers keep industry personnel informed about mergers, takeovers and staff changes in the record and media industries and changes in copyright and regulatory legislation and policies;

advise retailers about marketing campaigns, complementing and reinforcing their sales promotions; and provide regular chart lists based on extensive sales and radio play data (the main publications are *Billboard*, *Music Business International* and *Music Week*). Musicians' magazines (e.g. *Guitar Player*) inform their readers about new music technologies and techniques, thereby making an important contribution towards musicianship and musical appropriation.

The various consumer- or fan-oriented music magazines play a major part in the process of selling music as an economic commodity, while at the same time investing it with cultural significance. Popular music and culture magazines don't simply deal with music, through both their features and advertising they are also purveyors of style. At the same time, these magazines continue to fulfill their more traditional function of contributing to the construction of audiences as consumers.

The majority of popular music magazines focus on performers and their music and the relationship of consumers and fans to these. These magazines fall into a number of fairly clearly identifiable categories, based on their differing musical aesthetics or emphases, their sociocultural functions and their target audiences. 'Teen glossies' emphasize vicarious identification with performers whose music and image is aimed at the youth market (e.g. *Smash Hits*, which ended in 2006; *Melody Maker*, which ceased publication in 2000) and *New Musical Express* (the 'inkies') have historically emphasized a tradition of critical rock journalism, with their reviewers acting as the gatekeepers for that tradition; and the 'style bibles' (*The Face*) emphasize popular music as part of visual pop culture, especially fashion. Several relatively new magazines offer a combination of the inkies focus on an extensive and critical coverage of the music scene and related popular culture, packaged in a glossier product with obvious debts to the style bibles (*MOJO*, *Q*, *UNCUT*). Currently, there is a clear split between inclusive magazines, attempting to cover a broad range of musical styles, and those magazines that are genre specific.

Such magazines can be studied and compared in relation to a series of generally common features:

- Their covers: the cost, the title and the featured artists are all indicative of the magazine's scope and target audience. Further 'clues' are in the visual design (layout, graphics, typeface), the level of language and the use of promotional give a ways (e.g. *Smash Hits* key rings compared with the compilation CDs used with *MOJO* and *Uncut*).
- The general layout and design: e.g. the use or absence of colour, boxed material, sidebars, visuals and even the actual size and length of the magazine.
- Scope: the genres of music included; other media covered (the increasing reference to internet sites, X Games, video game culture); the relative importance accorded particular artists; language used; gender representation (including in the advertising).
- Reviews: length/depth tone and language used (e.g. *Rolling Stone's* stars system; *Hot Metal's* skull rating system). (For a helpful early analysis of the evaluative

criteria and rating systems underpinning reviews in Australia's *Rolling Stone* and *Juice*, see Evans, 1998.)

- Adverts: which products feature? The links to a target readership; e.g. teen magazines feminine hygiene ads; the proportion of the content that is adverts; and the values and associated lifestyles projected by the advertising. Often the distinction between adverts and 'real' content is blurred, with much content rewritten press copy.
- The readership involvement: letters to the editor; competitions; reader questions answered (*Q*'s 'where are they now?'); the use of their readers to survey taste and the popularity of artists and genres.

In sum, the answers to such questions provide a profile of particular music magazines, and an indication of their relationship to the wider music industry – a combination of gatekeeper and symbiotic marketing tool. While there is obvious overlap – and market competition – among these various types of music magazine, each has its own distinctive qualities. The following examples illustrate this.

#### **NME: the inkie tradition**

Typical of the more serious 'inkie' rock press is the *New Musical Express* (*NME*), which began publication in 1952, marketed to the new generation of teenage record buyers in the UK. As with its main competitor, *Melody Maker*, the *NME* was closely tied into the record industry. In 1952, *NME* published 'the first regular and reasonably accurate list of British record sales'; the *Melody Maker* soon followed with a similar 'hit parade' based on retailers' returns and both charts became closely tied to the industry's stocking and promotional policies (Frith, 1983: 166). Through the 1950s, the *NME* focused on the stars of popular music, with little critical perspective on the music covered. This clearly met a market demand and by 1964 the magazine was selling nearly 300,000 copies per week.

The orientation of the UK music press, including *NME*, changed with the emerging and critically self-conscious progressive rock market of the mid-1960s and the development in the US of new, specialist music magazines such as *Creem* and *Rolling Stone*, characterized by their serious treatment of rock as a cultural form. In 1972 the *NME* was reorganized, with a new team of writers recruited from Britain's underground press. After a slump in the face of a late 1960s' market assault by the now 'progressive' *Melody Maker*, by 1974 *NME* was back to 200,000 sales (Frith, 1983). Biting 'new journalist' prose for many readers became part of *NME*'s appeal – whether you agreed or not with the evaluations on offer was almost incidental.

Increasingly, the *NME* became associated with the British 'alternative' or indie music scene (see the recollections of its staff, in Gorman, 2001). To a degree, *NME*'s very hipness and cynicism in the 1980s proved its undoing, as two new groups of readers emerged in the music marketplace: ageing fans, no longer into clubbing and concerts, with an eye to nostalgia, Dire Straits, their CD collections

and FM 'solid rock'/'golden oldies' radio; and younger yuppies and style-oriented professionals. Both groups of consumers were largely uninterested in the indie scene and turned instead to the lifestyle bibles and the new glossies like *Q* and (later) *MOJO*. This competition saw a decline in *NME*'s circulation, but it maintained its role as the essential chronicler of indie music.

*NME* remains indispensable for those wanting to keep up with this scene and invaluable for those performers and labels working within it. The magazine sticks closely to its traditional format: a tabloid-style layout, although now using better quality paper and with much greater use of colour. It continues to feature a mix of features: reviews of records and concerts, as well as film, book and video reviews; competitions and classifieds; extensive UK gig guide and tour news; and chart listings, including retrospectives of these. In addition to its print version, the magazine has a website.

#### **Rolling Stone: from countercultural icon to industry staple**

The American inspiration for the outburst of the rock press in the late 1960s and its reorientation, *Rolling Stone* was launched in San Francisco on 9 November 1967. Jann Wenner, its founder, wanted the publication to focus on rock music, but it was also to cover the youth culture generally. The first issue of the new fortnightly established that it was aiming at a niche between the 'inaccurate and irrelevant' trade papers and the fan magazines, which were viewed as 'an anachronism, fashioned in the mould of myth and nonsense'. *Rolling Stone* was for the artists, the industry and every person who 'believes in the magic that can set you free'; it was 'not just about music, but also about the things and attitudes that the music embraces' (cited in Frith, 1983: 169).

This rather earnest ideological mission resulted in considerable tension in the early years of *Rolling Stone*, as it attempted to fuse in-depth and sympathetic reporting of youth culture and the demands of rock promotion. In its struggling early years, *Rolling Stone* was supported by the record companies and the concern with radical and alternative politics was soon suborned by the dependence on the concerns of the music industry. In August 1973 *Rolling Stone* changed its format, becoming 'a general interest magazine, covering modern American culture, politics and art, with a special interest in music' (Frith, 1983: 171). However, it retained its now preeminent place as an opinion leader in the music business, mainly because its ageing, affluent, largely white male readership continued to represent a primary consumer group for the record industry. In addition to its print version, *Rolling Stone* now has an extensive website.

The development of 'regional editions' of *Rolling Stone*, beginning with Britain in 1969 and followed by an Australian monthly edition, along with subsequent Japanese- and German-language editions reflects the increasing internationalization of popular music and the global predominance of Anglo-American artists. In format, *Rolling Stone* retains its distinctive character through its famous cover picture feature (immortalized in the Doctor Hook single of 1972, which gained the band a cover story), but contents and presentation wise, it is similar to its newer

competitors such as *Q* and the hip-hop bibles *The Source* and *VIBE*. This is hardly surprising, given that these magazines are oriented to older consumers with sufficient disposable income to allow them to purchase the music, clothes, spirits and travel opportunities that *Rolling Stone* advertises.

### **No Depression and alt. country**

Along with terms such as 'roots rock' and Americana, alt. country began being used in the 1990s for performers who positioned themselves as producing 'something heartfelt and worthwhile outside the foul and cancerous dreck which typifies country music in the last 15 years' (Russell, *UNCUT*, May 2004: 98). Russell's comment typifies the discourse surrounding alt. country, with authenticity a central referent. The music evokes 'traditional', often threatened American cultures, peoples and rural landscapes and the universality of these themes is integral to its appeal. Alt. country is musically wide ranging, with many disparate artists seen as falling under its umbrella, from Gillian Welch and Lucinda Williams to Wilco, Ryan Adams and Justin Townes Earle. The loose style was picked up and marketed by record labels such as Hightown and championed and popularized by the magazine *No Depression*.

*No Depression* (*ND*) took its name from the Carter Family song, a classic of early country music, which was later covered by Uncle Tupelo. *ND* began as a peer-to-peer message board, with postings from fans of 'those groups who have followed the pioneering insurgent country band, Uncle Tupelo, by mixing indie rock aggression with country twang' (Peterson and Beal, 2001: 235). The print magazine was launched as a bi-monthly publication in 1995 and ran until 2009, when it became a web-only publication. In an extensive analysis of the magazine, Tonya Cooper documents how it became 'the seminal magazine for alt. country news and information, especially following the demise of *Country Music* magazine in 2003' (Cooper, 2012: 75). Indeed, the magazine provided another label for the emergent sub genre: 'The "No Depression" sound is the alternation or a joining of grinding punk, country rock and acoustic country; a focus on the darker side of small town life; and a heightened social/political consciousness' (Goodman, cited in Peterson and Beal, 2001: 235).

*No Depression* has a tagline: 'A magazine about alt. country, (whatever that is).' Remaining vague on the musical aesthetics of alt. country artists, *No Depression* instead prefers to discuss them in relation to their perceived authenticity and sincerity. Reflecting the disparate nature of alt. country music, Grant Alden and Peter Blackstock, the editors of the magazine, observed that:

We are not biologists. It is not our purpose to identify, quantify, and codify a subgenus called alt. country, or to limit ourselves to its study ... It is our purpose to write and assign articles about artists whose work is of enduring merit.

(Alden and Blackstock, 2005: viii)

This indicates the way in which the magazine attempts to position itself as acting outside the music industry and to align itself with alt. country's perceived

anti-commercial and anti-modernist stances (Peterson and Beal, 2001: 237). Yet at the same time *ND* played a prominent role in construct the genre's trajectory, acting as a gatekeeper, helping to define what music and performers are and (perhaps more importantly) are not, indicative of the genre. *ND* includes new artists, along with older, more established musician deemed to be indicative of alt. country: they 'do not necessarily share musical qualities, but they do share an emotional resonance, genuine sentiment and behaviour which is required of the scene' (Cooper, 2012: 77).

*ND* represents the 'intersection of intersection of three main factors: professionalism, perceived amateurism, and commerciality' (Cooper, 2012: 78). At one level, *ND* exhibited the standard characteristics of published magazines: a consistent format and layout; the use of a printer and international distribution; advertisements and promotional content; an editorial, and the usual mix of features, reviews and current news items. This was combined with elements of spontaneity and a DIY (do-it-yourself) attitude, exemplified in the aesthetics of its logo and typeface and the photos used throughout. As Cooper astutely observes, the logo 'usually in red or black, and all capital letters, has a heavy angular dark feeling, showing the tough, rebellious spirit of the magazine, as does the weathered, rustic feel of the typeface' (2012: 79). Performers' photos frequently lack a composed feel and are often unfocused. The online format of *ND* combines professional music journalists or writers from the print run with fans and amateur writers, 'lending it an egalitarian atmosphere, allowing readers to judge writing on its merits and opinion, rather than because of reputation or perceived authority' (Cooper, 2012: 78). This is also characteristic of other online music magazines.

### **Music journalism shifts online**

In addition to *No Depression*, there are now a number of prominent online-only magazines on music and culture. Collectively, these exhibit a new paradigm of music journalism, characterized by a wide range of associated activities (podcasts, festivals, parties), in addition to traditional music reviews and features. Two examples are sketched here:

*Resident Adviser* (also referred to simply as *RA*) was founded in 2001 as a site to provide information and news coverage on the Australian dance music scene. It soon expanded to cover global electronic dance music and culture and now has offices in London and Berlin. In addition to interviews with artists, news, and reviews, the website includes event listings and ticket sales, extensive artist and record labels profiles, DJ charts and the *RA* podcast. Celebrating its tenth anniversary in 2011, *RA* held a series of high-profile dance parties in major cities around the world, involving leading DJs. The podcast, launched in 2006, has featured an exclusive weekly mix of electronic music from top DJs and producers, including Frankie Knuckles, Mark E, and Laurent Garnier.

*Pitchfork*: Now based in Chicago, Pitchfork Media, commonly termed simply *Pitchfork*, was established in 1995. Terming itself 'The essential guide to

independent music and beyond', *Pitchfork's* focus is on indie rock. Along with extensive regular reviews, the internet publication has annual listings of album and song of the year, with many of these included in its publication *The Pitchfork 500: Our Guide to the Greatest Songs from Punk to the Present* (Plagenhoef and Schreber, 2008). An associated website, Pitchfork.tv, initiated in 2008 and now part of Pitchfork.com, presents videos and other coverage of independent music acts. *Pitchfork* is also on Twitter and Facebook. Since 2007, in conjunction with UK-based production company All Tomorrow's Parties, *Pitchfork* has held festivals featuring artists performing the content of albums in their entirety. The site has been credited with 'breaking' (helping to popularize) bands such as Arcade Fire, Clap Your Hands Say Yeah and Animal Collective, with favourable reviews and 'best of year' awards leading to further publicity and increased record sales.

To some extent, similar activities had already become part of the traditional, print-based, music magazines, but their web-based equivalents have taken them to a new level. In addition, the accessibility of these sites, along with blogs, to readers/fans wanting to post their own comments and reviews has democratized the process of music criticism. In doing so, they have followed the tradition established by fanzines.

### **The zines**

Fanzines are often overlooked in discussions of the music press, due to their largely non-commercial nature, but play an important role in it. They are typically part of alternative publishing, which is characterized by the centrality of amateurs, readers as writers; non-mainstream channels of distribution; a non-profit orientation; and a network based on expertise from a wide base of enthusiasts. Produced by one person, or a group of friends, working from their homes, popular music fanzines are usually concentrated totally on a particular artist or group, and are characterized by a fervour bordering on the religious. This stance can be a reactionary one, preserving the memory of particular artists/styles, but is more usually progressive. Many of the original punk fanzines were characterized by a broadly leftist cultural politics, challenging their readers to take issue with the views presented by bastions of the status quo and reasserting the revolutionary potential of rock. Fanzines like *Crawdaddy* and *Bomp!* in the 1960s and *Sniffin' Glue* in the 1970s had tremendous energy, reflecting the vitality of live performances and emergent scenes.

The impact of punk rock was aided by a network of fanzines and their enthusiastic supporters. Jon Savage argues that in the early days of punk in the UK, nobody was defining 'punk' from within:

the established writers were inevitably compromised by age and the minimal demands of objectivity required by their papers. The established media could propagandize and comment, but they could not dramatize the new movement in a way that fired people's imagination.

(Savage, 1991: 200)

With photocopying cheap and accessible for the first time, the fanzines were a new medium tailor made for the values of punk, with its DIY ethic and associations of street credibility and there was an explosion of the new form. These fanzines provided a training ground for a number of music journalists (e.g. Paul Morley, Jon Savage, Lester Bangs) and, in some cases, useful media expertise for those who, taking to heart their own rhetoric of 'here's three chords, now form a band', subsequently did just that (for example Bob Geldof, the Boomtown Rats; Chrissie Hynde, the Pretenders). Fanzines producers/writers did not have to worry about deadlines, censorship or subediting and 'even the idea of authorship was at issue, as fanzines were produced anonymously\* or pseudonymously by people trying to avoid discovery by the dole or employers' (Savage, 1991: 279).

Fanzine readers tend to actively engage with the publication: they debate via the 'letters to the editor', contribute reviews of recordings and concerts, provide discographies and even interviews with performers. A number of studies have demonstrated the value of fanzines to producing and maintaining particular musical styles and scenes, as with Seattle in the early 1990s. In the case of progressive rock, fanzines maintain interest long after the genre had been discarded by the mainstream. Chris Atton (2009) compares how a fanzine, *The Sound Projector*, and the avantgarde-oriented *The Wire* situate their reviews within a shared paradigm of alternative music reviewing.

Despite their essentially non-commercial and often ephemeral nature, fanzines remain a significant part of popular music culture, representing a cultural space for the creation of a community of interest. The internet has provided a new medium for the international dissemination of fanzines; through their 'printing' of contemporary concert reviews and tour information, such 'e zines' have an immediacy that provides a form of virtual socialization for fans.

### **Gatekeepers and industry publicity**

Writing in 1983, Frith saw the music papers and their writers as operating in a symbiotic relationship with the record industry, with the blurring of the boundary between rock journalism and rock publicity reflected in the continuous job mobility between them: 'record company press departments recruit from the music papers, music papers employ ex-publicists; it is not even unusual for writers to do both jobs simultaneously' (Frith, 1983: 173). The situation Frith describes has since become even more firmly consolidated. Popular music magazines have developed in tandem with consumer culture, with the variations evident among them reflecting the diversity of readers' tastes and interests. They have also become part of a general magazine culture; while they are to be found in a separate section in the magazine racks, they are competing for advertising with a proliferating range of magazines. Accordingly, the market profile (especially the socioeconomic status) of their readership must guarantee advertisers access to their target consumers. The advertising each carries firmly indicates their



particular market orientation. They are providing not just an adjunct to popular music – although that dimension remains central – but a guide to lifestyle, especially leisure consumption.

The ideological role of the music press in constructing a sense of community and in maintaining a critical distance from the music companies had already become muted by the late 1980s: ‘The music press has abandoned its pretensions of leading its readership or setting agendas, and contracted around the concept of “service”: hard news, information, gossip, consumer guidance’ (Reynolds, 1990: 27). During the 1990s the music press largely abandoned any residual post-punk sense of antagonism towards the industry, realizing that they share a common interest in maintaining consumption. This is achieved by sustaining a constant turnover of new trends, scenes and performers, while also mining music’s past using the links between older consumer’s nostalgia, younger listeners’ interest in antecedents and the back catalogue.

They remain influential as gatekeepers of taste, arbiters of cultural history and publicists for the record industry. This influence can sometimes be spectacular, as with *Billboard* editor Timothy White’s decision, on first hearing *Jagged Little Pill*, to make Alanis Morissette the focus of his ‘Music to My Ears’ column before the album’s release; and then influencing the editors of *Spin* and *Rolling Stone* to follow suit. White’s column (in the 18 May 1995 issue) was distributed with some review copies of *Jagged Little Pill*, helping set the tone for the generally positive press and magazine reviews the record received. The album was exceptional, but this coverage provided a very helpful initial boost.

Such episodes aside, there is general agreement that music critics don’t exercise as much influence on consumers as, say, literary or drama critics. The more crucial intermediaries are those who control airtime (DJs and radio programmers) and access to recording technology and reproduction and marketing facilities (record companies and record producers). Nonetheless, I would argue that the critics do influence record buyers, particularly those who are looking to make the best use of limited purchasing power. Many buyers purchase (or at least acquire!) the latest releases as a matter of course, acting as confirmed followers of that artist, style or scene. But others are actively exploring the byways of fresh talent, new musical hybrids or the back catalogue.

These searches are aided by the way in which music critics don’t so much operate on the basis of some general aesthetic criterion, but rather through situating new product via constant appeal to referents, attempting to contextualize the particular text under consideration:

Canadian Angela Desveaux combines a nice mix of gentle Gillian Welch countrified flavours with a few Lucinda Williams-like rockier moments. However, unlike, say, Jenny Lewis, she ultimately falls short of her two main inspirations on her debut, *Wandering Eyes*. While Williams – and Loretta Lynn, Neko Case, and Emmylou Harris – is comfortable to wallow in the depths of despair as yet another man has used her and cast her aside, Desveaux takes a far more restrained approach, like on *Familiar Times*. And

when she does decide to take a rockier route ... it owes more to the Dixie Chicks.

(Lindsay Davis, review of *Wandering Eyes*, *Dominion Post*, 9 November 2006)

In the process, popular music critics construct their own version of the traditional high–low culture split, usually around notions of artistic integrity, authenticity and the nature of commercialism. The best of such critics – and their associated magazines – have published collections of their reviews. The various editions of *The Rolling Stone Record Guide*, recent series such as the *All Music Guides*, the *Rough Guides* (to rock, reggae, hip-hop, etc.) and the *Pitchfork 500* have become bibles in their fields, establishing orthodoxies as to the relative value of various styles or genres and pantheons of artists. Record collectors and enthusiasts, and surviving specialist and second-hand record shops, inevitably have well-thumbed copies of these and similar volumes close at hand.

Yet, this body of criticism is a field in which highly idiosyncratic and disparate standards are the norm. Particular performers and their efforts will be heaped with praise by one reviewer and denigrated by another. Evaluations reflect personal preferences and matters of taste. Rarely are evaluative criteria laid bare for critical scrutiny and even where this occurs it creates as well as resolves difficulties (see McLeod, 2001). Popular music critics, and their histories, encyclopedias and consumer guides are playing a key role in defining the reference points, the highs and lows in the development of ‘rock’ and other styles of popular music. They imbue particular performers, genres and recordings with meaning and value, and even their internecine arguments strengthen an artist or record’s claim to being part of a selective tradition. The consumers of the music themselves frequently reflect (even if only to reject) such distinctions.

This is also a strongly gendered field of writing. An example of this is the manner in which gender is marked in the press coverage of Ani DiFranco, a self-produced indie artist, who records on her own label, Righteous Babe Records. Drawing on a corpus of 100 articles on DiFranco, appearing between 1993 and 2003, in a wide range of print sources and online reports, Anna Feigenbaum shows ‘how language employed in rock criticism frequently functions to devalue and marginalize women artists musicianship, influence on fans, and contribution to the rock canon’ (Feigenbaum, 2005: 37). She concludes that it is necessary to move away from ‘gendered binaries’, to ‘challenge and reconstruct the conventional language that dominates rock criticism’ (2005: 54; see also Elafros, 2010).

## Conclusion

There is now greater attention paid to the role of music press and music critics, placing an emphasis on the manner in which their critical discourse constructs notions of authenticity, musical merit and historical value. Music magazines play their part in the economics of popular music, encouraging readers to buy records (and posters, t-shirts, etc.), and generally immerse themselves in consumer ‘pop’

culture. Similarly, music critics act as a service industry to the record industry, lubricating the desire to acquire both new product and selections from the back catalogue. Music press reviews still form an important adjunct to the record company and music retail marketing of their products, while providing the record companies (and artists) with critical feedback on their releases. In the process, they also become promotional devices, providing supportive quotes for advertising and forming part of press kits sent to radio stations, websites and press outlets. Yet both press and critics also play an important ideological function. They distance popular music consumers from the fact that they are essentially purchasing an economic commodity, by stressing the product's *cultural significance*. Furthermore, this function is maintained by the important point that the music press is not, at least directly, vertically integrated into the music industry (i.e. owned by the record companies). A sense of distance is thereby maintained, while at the same time the need of the industry to constantly sell new images, styles and product is met.

### **Further reading**

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- Swiss, T. (2005) 'That's Me in the Spotlight: Rock Autobiographies', *Popular Music*, 24, 2: 287–94.

### **Book series**

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### **Websites**

[www.rocksbackpages.com](http://www.rocksbackpages.com)

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[www.nodepression.com](http://www.nodepression.com)

[www.pitchfork.com](http://www.pitchfork.com)

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