

# **RETROMANIA**

**Pop Culture's Addiction to  
Its Own Past**

**SIMON REYNOLDS**



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# INTRODUCTION

## The 'Re' Decade

We live in a pop age gone loco for retro and crazy for commemoration. Band reformations and reunion tours, tribute albums and box sets, anniversary festivals and live performances of classic albums: each new year is better than the last one for music from yesteryear.

Could it be that the greatest danger to the future of our music culture is . . . *its past*?

Maybe that sounds unnecessarily apocalyptic. But the scenario I'm imagining isn't a cataclysm so much as a gradual wind-down. This is the way that pop ends, not with a BANG but with a box set whose fourth disc you never get around to playing and

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### THE RETROSCAPE

2000/April: The Smithsonian Institution's Memphis Rock 'n' Soul Museum opens >>>>>>  
2000/May: Julien Temple's Sex Pistols doc *The Filth and the Fury* is released, kicking off a decade-spanning trilogy of punk documentaries by the director of *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* >>>>>> 2000/June: The Experience Music Project, a huge rock'n'pop museum founded by billionaire infotech mogul Paul Allen, opens in Seattle >>>>>> 2001/July: Garage-rock revivalists The White Stripes release their commercial breakthrough album *White Blood Cells* to huge acclaim >>>>>> 2001/November: Here and Now, a nostalgia revue offering 'The Very Best of the 80s', tours the UK, with reanimated stars Paul Young, Kim Wilde, Curiosity Killed the Cat, Heaven 17, Go West, T'Pau and Nick Heyward performing to 60,000 across seven arenas >>>>>> 2002/February: *Spring Term*, a compilation spinning off the seventies/eighties nostalgia club School Disco, hits no. 1 in the UK

an overpriced ticket to the track-by-track restaging of the Pixies or Pavement album you played to death in your first year at university.

Once upon a time, pop's metabolism buzzed with dynamic energy, creating the surging-into-the-future feel of periods like the psychedelic sixties, the post-punk seventies, the hip-hop eighties and the rave nineties. The 2000s felt different. *Pitchfork* critic Tim Finney noted 'the curious slowness with which this decade marches forward'. He was specifically monitoring electronic dance music, which all through the nineties had been pop culture's vanguard, hurling forth a new Next Big Thing every season. But Finney's observation can be applied not just to dance music but to popular music in its entirety. The sensation of moving forward grew fainter as the decade unfurled. Time itself seemed to become sluggish, like a river that starts to meander and form oxbow lakes.

If the pulse of NOW felt weaker with each passing year, that's because in the 2000s the pop present became ever more crowded out by the past, whether in the form of archived memories of yesteryear or retro-rock leeching off ancient styles. Instead of being about itself, the 2000s has been about every other previous decade happening again all at once: a simultaneity of pop time

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>>>>>> 2002/April: Release of *24 Hour Party People*, a sort of 'collective biopic' focused on Factory Records boss Tony Wilson but including Joy Division, Martin Hannett, Happy Mondays and the Hacienda >>>>>> 2002/May: Mash-up craze reaches the mainstream as Sugababes' 'Freak Like Me' hits no. 1 – it's their 'cover' of Richard X aka Girls On Top's 'We Don't Give a Damn About Our Friends', a mash-up of Gary Numan's 'Are "Friends" Electric?' and Adina Howard's 'Freak Like Me' >>>>>> 2002/July: School Disco's nostalgia festival *School Fields* on Clapham Common draws 40,000-strong crowd, many wearing school-uniform-style ties and pleated skirts >>>>>> 2003/March: Young British artists Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard's *File Under Sacred Music*, an event at London's ICA, is a re-enactment of a 1978 show by The Cramps at the Napa State Mental Institute, California >>>>>> 2003/March: 251 Menlove Avenue, John Lennon's childhood home in Liverpool, is opened to the public, having been acquired by Yoko Ono, donated to the National Trust and painstakingly restored to fifties style >>>>>> 2003 November: *Let It Be . . . Naked*, a version of the final Beatles album stripped of Phil Spector's added-on-after-the-fact orches-

that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present's own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel.

Instead of being the threshold to the future, the first ten years of the twenty-first century turned out to be the 'Re' Decade. The 2000s were dominated by the 're-' prefix: *revivals*, *reissues*, *remakes*, *re-enactments*. Endless *retrospection*: every year brought a fresh spate of anniversaries, with their attendant glut of biographies, memoirs, rockumentaries, biopics and commemorative issues of magazines. Then there were the band *reformations*, whether it was groups *reuniting* for nostalgia tours in order to *replenish* (or to bloat still further) the members' bank balances (Police, Led Zeppelin, Pixies . . . the list is endless) or as a prequel to *returning* to the studio to *relaunch* their careers as recording artists (Stooges, Throbbing Gristle, Devo, Fleetwood Mac, My Bloody Valentine et al.).

If only it was just the old music and old musicians coming back, in archived form or as reanimated performers. But the 2000s was also the decade of rampant *recycling*: bygone genres *revived* and *renovated*, vintage sonic material *reprocessed* and *recombined*. Too often with new young bands, beneath their taut skin and rosy cheeks you could detect the sagging grey flesh of old ideas.

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tral overdubs and embellishments, is released >>>>>> 2003/December: The Doors of the 21st Century – Ray Manzarek and Robbie Krieger plus The Cult's Ian Astbury as ersatz Jim Morrison – play Wembley Arena, the climax to a year of touring and legend-milking. Original drummer John Densmore and the Morrison estate are not happy and eventually win an injunction against the use of The Doors' name >>>>>> 2004/spring–summer: The Pixies re-form for a tour that takes in the US, Europe, Brazil and Japan, an emotionally fraught reunion documented in the rock doc *loudQUIETloud* >>>>>> 2004/September: Brian Wilson releases *SMILE*, his attempt (with Van Dyke Parks) to complete the legendarily unfinished Beach Boys album *Smile*, which was started in 1966 >>>>>> 2004/October: *Chronicles, Volume 1*, the first instalment of Bob Dylan's memoirs, is published to much acclaim >>>>>> 2005/February to November: Mötley Crüe's reunion tour grosses almost \$40 million and becomes the eleventh most lucrative US tour of the year >>>>>> 2005/March: Queen embark on a massive world concert tour, with deceased frontman Freddie Mercury replaced by Paul Rodgers of Free/Bad Company >>>>>> 2005/July: *No Direction Home*:

As the 2000s proceeded, the interval between something happening and its being revisited seemed to shrink insidiously. The *I Love the [Decade]* TV series created by the BBC and adapted by VH1 for America hurtled through the seventies, eighties and nineties, and then – with *I Love the New Millennium*, which aired in the summer of 2008 – wrapped up the 2000s before the decade was even over. Meanwhile, the reissue industry's tentacles have already reached the late nineties, with box sets and remastered/expanded versions of German minimal techno, Britpop and even Morrissey's lamest run of solo albums. The rising tide of the historical past is lapping at our ankles. As for revivals, the music scene mostly abided by the Twenty-Year Rule of Revivalism: the eighties were 'in' for much of the 2000s, in the form of the post-punk, electropop and most recently Goth resurgences. But you also had precocious glimpses of nineties revivalism, with the nu-rave fad and the rise of shoegaze, grunge and Britpop as reference points for new indie bands.

The word 'retro' has a quite specific meaning: it refers to a self-conscious fetish for period stylisation (in music, clothes, design) expressed creatively through pastiche and citation. Retro in its strict sense tends to be the preserve of aesthetes, connoisseurs and collectors, people who possess a near-scholarly depth

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**Bob Dylan**, Martin Scorsese's two-part rock-doc mini-series about Dylan in the sixties, is a global event >>>>>> 2005/August–September: The first 'Don't Look Back' season of classic albums played in their original order includes The Stooges doing *Funhouse*, Gang of Four performing *Entertainment!* and Dinosaur Jr. playing *You're Living All Over Me* >>>>>> 2005/October: Cream play three shows at Madison Square Garden and gross \$10.6 million >>>>>> 2005/December: Coldplay release the single 'Talk', which recycles the chord sequence from Kraftwerk's 1980 'Computer Love', with the German synth-pioneers' permission and blessing >>>>>> 2006/January: *Rock of Ages*, a musical that does for eighties Sunset Strip hair metal what *Grease* did for fifties rock'n'roll and *Mama Mia!* did for ABBA, premieres at The Vanguard, Los Angeles. MTV smashes by Journey, Bon Jovi, Twisted Sister, Poison, Whitesnake et al. soundtrack the story of a 'legendary Hollywood rock club facing its demise at the hands of eager developers'. What the *Los Angeles Times* hails as 'a burst of retro adrenaline' then moves to Las Vegas for a sell-out run at the Flamingo Las Vegas Hotel and Casino, and then on to New York and Broadway >>>>>> 2006/March:

of knowledge combined with a sharp sense of irony. But the word has come to be used in a much more vague way to describe pretty much anything that relates to the relatively recent past of popular culture. Following this looser common usage of the word, *Retromania* investigates the entire range of contemporary uses and abuses of the pop past. This includes phenomena such as the vastly increased presence in our lives of old pop culture: from the availability of back-catalogue records to YouTube's gigantic collective archive and the massive changes in music consumption engendered by playback devices like the iPod (which often functions as a personal 'oldies' radio station). Another major area is the natural greying of rock music some fifty years into its existence: performers from the past who stick around, continuing to tour and record, as well as artists who mount comebacks after a long period of retirement. Finally, there's 'new old' music made by young musicians who draw heavily on the past, often in a clearly signposted and arty way.

Earlier eras had their own obsessions with antiquity, of course, from the Renaissance's veneration of Roman and Greek classicism to the Gothic movement's invocations of the medieval. But there has never been a society in human history so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of *its own immediate past*. That is what

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Having already re-formed to play concerts, the surviving members of the original line-up of The Stooges release their first studio album in over twenty years, *The Weirdness* >>>>>> 2006/March: VH1 Classic sponsors a joint tour by Blondie and The New Cars (featuring Todd Rundgren on vocals as a prosthesis for the unwilling Ric Ocasek). Blondie's latest greatest-hits package is promoted by the single 'Rapture Riders', a mash-up of their disco-rap hit 'Rapture' with The Doors' 'Riders on the Storm' >>>>>> 2006/June: Cirque du Soleil's Beatles extravaganza *Love* opens in Las Vegas >>>>>> 2006/July: VH1 Classic airs a documentary on Platinum Weird, a legendary lost soft-rock group who paved the way for Fleetwood Mac. The doc features Mick Jagger, Elton John and Ringo Starr, but the band is fictitious, a concoction of Dave 'Eurythmics' Stewart and Kara DioGuardi's launched earlier in the year with fake fan sites on the Web. The album *Make Believe*, ten recordings 'from 1974', is released in the autumn >>>>>> 2006/August: MTV celebrates its twenty-fifth birthday by re-broadcasting the entirety of its first twenty-four hours output from 1 August 1981 >>>>>> 2006/September: Elton John and Bernie Taupin release a se-

distinguishes retro from antiquarianism or history: the fascination for fashions, fads, sounds and stars that occurred within living memory. Increasingly, that means pop culture that you already experienced the first time around (as a *conscious*, pop-aware person, as opposed to stuff that you lived through unaware as a small child).

This kind of retromania has become a dominant force in our culture, to the point where it feels like we've reached some kind of tipping point. Is nostalgia stopping our culture's ability to surge forward, or are we nostalgic precisely because our culture has stopped moving forward and so we inevitably look back to more momentous and dynamic times? But what happens when we run out of past? Are we heading towards a sort of cultural-ecological catastrophe, when the seam of pop history is exhausted? And out of all the things that happened this past decade, what could possibly fuel tomorrow's nostalgia crazes and retro fads?

I'm not alone in feeling perplexed by these prospects. I've lost count of the number of hand-wringing newspaper columns and blog posts that worry about what happened to innovation and upheaval in music. Where are the major new genres and sub-cultures of the twenty-first century? Sometimes it's the musicians themselves who sound a note of weary *déjà vu*. In a 2007

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quel to the 1975 semi-autobiographical concept album *Captain Fantastic & the Brown Dirt Cowboy*. It's titled *The Captain & the Kid*, and although the title track warns 'and you can't go back, and if you try it fails', its sales figures are nearly twice those of its immediate precursor, 2004's *Peachtree Road*, described by Elton as 'probably one of my lowest-selling albums of all time' >>>>>> 2006/November: *Love*, a collection of remixed and mashed-up Beatles classics, wrought by George Martin and his son Giles as the soundtrack to Cirque du Soleil's Las Vegas stage show of the same name, debuts at no. 4 in *Billboard* and no. 3 in the UK charts >>>>>> 2006/winter: Lou Reed performs his classic *Berlin* album in its entirety for the first time; Martin Stephenson and the Daintees also perform their 'classic' *Boat to Bolivia* album in its entirety for the first time >>>>>> 2006/2007/2008: Having re-formed once already in 1996 for the Filthy Lucre tour, The Sex Pistols reunite again for five UK gigs and several European festivals >>>>>> 2007/February: Young British artist Jo Mitchell stages a re-enactment at London's ICA of *Concerto for Voice and Machinery*, a notorious 1984 performance-cum-riot involving members of German metal-bashing en-

interview, Sufjan Stevens declared: ‘Rock and roll is a museum piece. . . . There are great rock bands today – I love the White Stripes, I love the Raconteurs. But it’s a museum piece. You’re watching the History Channel when you go to these clubs. They’re just reenacting an old sentiment. They’re channeling the ghosts of that era – the Who, punk rock, the Sex Pistols, whatever. It’s been done. The rebellion’s over.’

This malaise is not restricted to pop music, of course. Look at the Hollywood mania for remaking blockbuster movies from a couple of decades earlier: *Alfie*, *Ocean’s Eleven*, *Bad News Bears*, *Casino Royale*, *The Pink Panther*, *Hairspray*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *Fame*, *Tron*, *True Grit* . . . The near future promises remakes of *The Fly* (yes, it’s being made for the third time), *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *The Dirty Dozen* . . . , while Russell Brand is due to star in remakes of *Arthur* and *Drop Dead Fred*. When they’re not revamping proven box-office successes of the past, the movie industry is adapting much-loved ‘iconic’ TV series for the big screen, like *The Dukes of Hazzard*, *Charlie’s Angels* and *Get Smart*, along with bygone kiddie cartoons like *Yogi Bear* and *The Smurfs*. Somewhere between the two is the *Star Trek* that hit cinema screens in mid-2009: not strictly a remake but a prequel (the ad slogan drips with unintentional irony: ‘The Future

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semble Einstürzende Neubauten which also took place at the ICA >>>>>> 2007/March: Retro-rap outfit The Cool Kids release their debut EP *Totally Flossed Out*. Their big anthem is ‘88’, a celebration of hip hop’s wonder year – which also happens to be the year that the younger half of the duo, Mikey Rocks, was born. The *New York Times* reveals they are part of a back-to-the-golden-age-of-rap, lo-fi-sounding movement alongside Kidz in the Hall and The Knux, whose Krispy Kream says, ‘We recorded songs in the worst way possible so you get a certain feel from it, like an old hip-hop record from 1990 or whenever’ >>>>>> 2007/April: Rage Against the Machine reunite to headline the final night of the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in California >>>>>> 2007/April: Theatre of Hate’s *West-world* twenty-fifth anniversary tour >>>>>> 2007/June: Paul McCartney releases his twenty-first album, *Memory Almost Full*, full of elegiac songs like ‘Ever Present Past’, ‘Vintage Clothes’, ‘That Was Me’ and ‘The End of the End’. ‘All you’ve got is the past, really,’ he tells one interviewer. 2007/September: Held at a Scottish castle, Retrofest is the UK’s first eighties-themed music festival. Promising ‘the Biggest 80s Line-up since Live Aid’, it features The

Begins’) featuring the young Spock and Kirk. This movie trades off the generation-spanning cumulative affection created by the original sixties TV series, the eighties film versions and the subsequent *Star Trek: The Next Generation* TV series.

Theatre has a long tradition of reviving canonic plays and much-loved musicals, but here too you can see the remake and the spin-off catching on with productions like *Spamalot* (based on the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*) and ‘jukebox musicals’ written around golden oldies by legendary bands or drawn from vintage genres: *We Will Rock You* (Queen), *Good Vibrations* (Beach Boys), *The Times They Are A-Changin’* (Bob Dylan) and *Rock of Ages* (eighties hair metal). There’s even ‘jukebox TV’ with shows like *Glee* and *Pop Idol/American Idol* (with its Beatles nights, Stones nights et al.), which fold rock and soul back into the non-threatening tradition of showbiz/light entertainment/variety. Television has even got in on the remake action, albeit with generally less success than Hollywood. People in the industry describe the contemporised version of the classic TV series as ‘a presold concept’, but so far the attempts – glitzy remakes of *The Prisoner*, *The Survivors*, *The Rockford Files*, *Charlie’s Angels*, *Dragnet*, *The Twilight Zone*, *The Fugitive*, *Kojak*, *Bionic Woman*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Dallas*, plus Britcom favourites like *Minder*,

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Human League, Spandau Ballet’s Tony Hadley, ABC, Howard Jones, Kajagoogoo and Bananarama, among many others. 2007/September: *Control*, Anton Corbijn’s biopic of Joy Division’s Ian Curtis, is released >>>>>> 2007/winter: Treading the UK boards again are Madness, Happy Mondays, Hugh Cornwell and band, The Stranglers (Not Featuring Hugh Cornwell), Ian Hunter, New Model Army, The Men They Couldn’t Hang and the movie-fictional Irish soul band The Commitments. There’s also The Pogues doing their twenty-fifth anniversary tour and The Wedding Present doing The George Best 20th Anniversary Tour, while tribute band The Other Smiths embark on a Strangeways Tour devoted to The Smiths’ last album *Strangeways Here We Come* plus ‘Best of Most of 1984–2006’. In a competitive season, though, the Pure Sadness Prize goes to the twenty-two-date tour by *From the Jam*, which is Bruce Foxton and Rick Buckler but not Paul Weller >>>>>> 2007/2008: The Police Reunion Tour plays 159 arena-size concerts across the world between 28 May 2007 and 7 August 2008, grossing over \$340 million and becoming the third most lucrative tour of all time >>>>>> 2007/2008: Sonic Youth perform their hallucinatory, epoch-defining

*Reggie Perrin* and *The Likely Lads* – have not ‘sold’ especially well in terms of ratings (indeed, in America these remakes often get cancelled before the season is through). Still, people keep trying: the logic of renovating the tried-and-true, of milking the cult status of the original, seems an irresistible pitch.

Then there’s fashion, where rummaging through yesterday’s wardrobe closet has been integral to the industry for some time, but whose recycling of old ideas nonetheless seemed to reach a frenzied rate of rotation this last decade. Designers like Marc Jacobs and Anna Sui ransacked the styles of previous epochs almost as soon as they ended. The market for vintage clothing boomed (‘vintage’ now meaning as recently as the eighties, with designers like Azzedine Alaïa in huge demand), and this was paralleled by the ‘antique-isation’ of furniture and artifacts from the second half of the twentieth century, as the shelter magazines went nuts for mid-century modern furniture.

Those are just some of the most visibly fevered zones of retro-omania. But there’s also retro toys (crazes for everything from the View-Master to the Blythe doll of the early seventies) and retro gaming (playing and collecting old-school computer, video and arcade games from the eighties). There’s retro food (sandwich chain Pret A Manger offers ‘Retro Prawn on Artisan’, a sort

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1988 album *Daydream Nation* at twenty-four concerts in the US, Spain, Germany, France, Italy, the UK, Australia and New Zealand >>>>>> 2008/February: Tribute bands The Clone Roses and The Smiths Indeed team up for a double bill that never happened in historical reality (The Smiths played their last UK concert on 12 December 1986, when the Roses were unknowns). Keeping the theme Mancunian is the night’s DJ, Clint Boon of Inspiral Carpets, who are actually embarking on their own Return of the Cow tour the following month >>>>>> 2008/February–March: Bettye Swann-abe Duffy is number one in the UK for five weeks with ‘Mercy’, a slice of retro-soul whose intro samples the opening bars of Ben E. King’s ‘Stand By Me’ and which ends up the third-best selling single of the year >>>>>> 2008/February–March: The Mission play a four-date concert series at London’s Shepherd’s Bush Empire, performing ‘an entire album’ per night ‘plus all B sides from the singles of that time’ >>>>>> 2008/April: Mudcrutch, Tom Petty’s not-actually-fake ‘lost group’ from his pre-Heartbreakers early-seventies period, re-form, tour and record an album of their vintage material. Petty: ‘We left some music back there and it was time to go

of poshed-up sandwich version of that seventies fave the Prawn Cocktail), and there's also retro interior design, retro candy, retro ring-tones, retro travel and retro architecture. You even get retro-style commercials on television now and then, like the one for Heinz Baked Beans that mega-mixes snippets from vintage UK ads from the sixties, seventies and eighties, capped off with the imperishable slogan 'Beanz Meanz Heinz'. But strangest of all is the demand for retro porn: collectors who specialise in erotica and skin mags from particular periods; websites with scores of specialist categories such as 'retro face-sitting', 'retro big tits', 'natural' (breasts from before boob jobs became widespread) and 'vintage hairy' (porn from before the era of the Brazilian wax). Phone-line ads on cable-TV porn stations are punctuated every so often with interludes from black-and-white stag movies and nudie reels from the fifties (or even earlier), inviting the melancholy thought that the lascivious ladies cavorting in them are now either in assisted-living facilities or – gulp – food for worms.

For all its ubiquity across culture, retro-consciousness nonetheless seems most chronically prevalent in music. That may well be because it somehow feels especially *wrong* there. Pop ought to be all about the present tense, surely? It is still considered the domain of the young, and young people aren't supposed to be nostalgic;

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get it' >>>>>> 2008/May: Public Enemy perform their incendiary, epoch-defining 1988 album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* at London's Brixton Academy, Glasgow's ABC1 and the Manchester Academy >>>>>> 2008/May: Sparks trump everybody else in the play-your-classic-LP-in-the-right-order stakes by performing all twenty of their albums over twenty nights at the Islington Academy, London, climaxing on the twenty-first night with the unveiling of their new and twenty-first album at the Shepherd's Bush Empire >>>>>> 2008/summer: A decade after disintegrating My Bloody Valentine re-form for a worldwide tour, playing to a legion of *Loveless* lovers who never saw them the first time plus long-term fans back for punishment after being deafened in 1992 >>>>>> 2008/September: Late-eighties/early-nineties retro infiltrates prime-time TV: *Gossip Girl*'s middle-aged alt-rock dad Rufus Humphrey re-forms his one-hit-wonder grunge-lite band Lincoln Hawk for a support-slot tour. 'Oh my god, I just got the call. We're opening for The Breeders. I guess the Luscious Jackson reunion didn't work out' >>>>>> 2008/September: Echo and the Bunnymen perform their fourth album, *Ocean Rain*, in its entirety and in its original

they haven't been around long enough to build up a backlog of precious memories. Likewise, the essence of pop is the exhortation to 'be here now', meaning both 'live like there's no tomorrow' and 'shed the shackles of yesterday'. Popular music's connection to the new and the now explains its unparalleled capacity to distil the atmosphere of a historical era. In period-drama movies and TV shows nothing conjures the vibe of an epoch more effectively than pop songs from that time. Nothing – except maybe fashion, which, intriguingly, is the other area of popular culture that's utterly rife with retro. In both cases, this very topicality, this date-stamped quality is what causes it to become quickly dated and then, after a decent interval, so potently epoch-evoking, so *revivable*.

In terms of mainstream pop music, many of the 2000s' most commercially prominent trends involved recycling: the garage-punk resurgence of The White Stripes, The Hives, The Vines, Jet et al.; the vintage-soul style of Amy Winehouse, Duffy, Adele and other young white Brit females who pass for black American lady singers from the sixties; eighties synth-pop-inspired femmes like La Roux, Little Boots and Lady Gaga. But where retro truly reigns as the dominant sensibility and creative paradigm is in hipsterland, pop's equivalent to highbrow. The very people who you would once have expected to produce (as artists) or champion (as

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sequence at the Royal Albert Hall >>>>>> 2008/autumn: Conde Nast's/Vogue's Fashion Rocks supplement: Dhani Harrison dressed and moustached as father George c.1968, with blonde model Sasha Pivovarova playing the Patti Boyd role in luxe-bohemian look of wide-brimmed hat and furs >>>>>> 2008/December: The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Annex opens in downtown Manhattan, a New York-focused branch of the Cleveland-based Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum >>>>>> 2009/February: In synch with Black History Month, VH1 Classic launches a four-part series called *Black to the Future*, a celebration of African-American pop-cult ephemera in the kitschadelic vein of their *I Love the '70s/'80s/'90s* series >>>>>> 2009/February: ArtCore – an exhibition of the 'visual culture' of acid house and rave – launches at Selfridges Ultralounge in London, to be followed by an auction of the work, which includes flyers for clubs and raves like Hacienda, Spectrum, Raintance, Tribal Gathering >>>>>> 2009/February: Van Morrison releases an album with one of the least appetising titles of all time: *Astral Weeks Live at the Hollywood Bowl*. It's the document of his 'Don't Look Back'-style performance of his classic 1968 LP >>>>>> 2009/

consumers) the non-traditional and the groundbreaking – *that's* the group who are most addicted to the past. In demographic terms, it's the exact same cutting-edge class, but instead of being pioneers and innovators, they've switched roles to become curators and archivists. The avant-garde is now an arrière-garde.

At a certain point the sheer mass of past accumulating behind the music began to exert a kind of gravitational pull. The sensation of movement, of going somewhere, could be satisfied as easily (in fact, *more* easily) by going backwards within that vast past than by going forwards. It was still an exploratory impulse, but now it took the form of archaeology.

You could see this syndrome starting to emerge as far back as the eighties, but it's really escalated in the last decade. The young musicians who've come of age during the last ten years or so have grown up in a climate where the musical past is accessible to an unprecedentedly inundating degree. The result is a recombinant approach to music-making that typically leads to a meticulously organised constellation of reference points and allusions, sonic lattices of exquisite and often surprising taste that span the decades and the oceans. I used to call this approach 'record-collection rock', but nowadays you don't even need to collect records any more, just harvest MP3s and cruise through YouTube.

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March: A state-of-the-art, hi-tech rock'n'pop museum, the British Music Experience, opens at the O2 in London >>>>>> 2009/April: A reissue programme for Nick Cave's entire discography kicks off. Every deluxe repackaging includes the CD plus a DVD containing a film about each album made by re-enactment artists Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard >>>>>> 2009/April–May: The Specials' original line-up (albeit with the singular exception of leader/founder Jerry Dammers) re-form for a thirtieth-anniversary reunion tour >>>>>> 2009/May: The Breeders, who haven't technically re-formed because they just went very quiet for a very long time but never actually split, curate the All Tomorrow's Parties festival, featuring reactivated post-punkers Gang of Four, X and Wire, plus late-eighties/early-nineties alt-rock warhorses Shellac, Throwing Muses, Teenage Fanclub, Giant Sand and Th' Faith Healers >>>>>> 2009/May: Great Gig in the Sea, the first Pink Floyd-themed cruise to the Bahamas, sets sail, promising two full shows by tribute band Think Floyd USA, including a track-by-track rendition of *Dark Side of the Moon* >>>>>> 2009/June: Neil Young releases the first volume of his long-awaited *Archives* project. The ten-disc box

All the sound and imagery and information that used to cost money and physical effort to obtain is available for free, just a few key and mouse clicks away.

It's not that nothing happened in the music of the 2000s. In many ways, there was a manic bustle of micro-trends, subgenres and recombinant styles. But by far the most momentous transformations related to our modes of consumption and distribution, and these have encouraged the escalation of retromania. We've become victims of our ever-increasing capacity to store, organise, instantly access, and share vast amounts of cultural data. Not only has there never before been a society so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its immediate past, but there has never before been a society that is *able* to access the immediate past so easily and so copiously.

Yet *Retromania* is not a straightforward denunciation of retro as a manifestation of cultural regression or decadence. How could it be, when I'm complicit myself? As much as I've written as a journalist about 'brave new frontier' musics like rave and electronica, and as much as I've celebrated at book length movements like post-punk that were all about futurism, I'm also an avid participant in the retro culture: as a historian, as a reviewer of reissues, as a talking head in rock documentaries and as a sleeve-note writer.

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*Archives, Vol. 1: 1963–1972* is just the first of four such sets and contains unreleased music plus twenty hours of video, the 1974 Young doc *Journey Through the Past*, photos, lyrics, letters, memorabilia, a replica journal and audio of interviews, radio spots and concert raps >>>>>> 2009/July: Release of *Horehound* by The Dead Weather, a retro-rock supergroup featuring Jack White of The White Stripes and The Kills singer Alison Mosshart (whose image/voice channels Patti Smith). Meanwhile, Kills guitarist Jamie Hince (whose playing channels Dr Feelgood's Wilko Johnson) starts thinking about forming a group with his girlfriend Kate Moss >>>>>> 2009/August: Forty years to the minute after The Beatles crossed Abbey Road on 8 August 1969 for the front-cover photograph of the *Abbey Road* LP, the owner of The Beatles Coffee Shop, Richard Porter, conducts a special Beatles tour across the road >>>>>> 2009/August: Ang Lee's movie *Taking Woodstock* is released on the fortieth anniversary of the 1969 rock festival >>>>>> 2009/September: Richard Hell, the man whose haircut and ripped T-shirt Malcolm McLaren ripped off for The Sex Pistols, releases a re-recorded version of The Voidoids' second album, *Destiny Street*,

But it goes beyond professional involvement. As a music fan, I'm as addicted to *retrospection* as anybody: trawling the second-hand record stores, poring over rock books, glued to VH1 Classic and YouTube, ogling rock docs. I pine for the future that's gone AWOL on us, but I also feel the lure of the past.

Sifting through old articles of mine when researching this book, I was surprised to see the extent to which retro-related issues have been a long-running preoccupation. Amid all the wide-eyed burbling about the next big thing in music, its polar opposite – the peculiar burden upon rock of its own mounting history – has persistently cropped up as a cause for concern. Retro has haunted me, the ghostly inverse of 'the future' I'm better known for banging on (and on) about. Looking back, I can see that I've often been mustering all my resources of belief and optimism in an unconscious drive to cast aside that feeling of belatedness common to my generation: the negative birthright of all those who missed, as a conscious participant, the sixties or punk. As much as they catalysed belief, nineties movements like grunge and rave also triggered *relief* – finally, something on a par with the storied glory of the past was actually happening in our own time, in real time.

I've had plenty of time and love for bands who could easily be dismissed as mere retro pastiche. It's caused me to resort to ingenious arguments and tortured metaphors to explain why a particular adored band is not just another grave-robbing necrophile. The most recent example is Ariel Pink, who is probably

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entitled *Destiny Street Repaired* >>>>>> 2009/September: The Beatles' long-awaited remastered albums, plus two highly priced deluxe box sets of their discography in both stereo and mono versions, top the LP charts worldwide. In the video-game charts, *The Beatles: Rock Band* outsells *Guitar Hero 5* >>>>>> 2009/September: Disney and Apple Corps strike a deal for Robert Zemeckis's 3D motion-capture adaptation of the 1968 Beatles-inspired animation movie *Yellow Submarine* >>>>>> 2009/October: The Pixies tour the in-sequence entirety of *Doolittle* to celebrate its twentieth anniversary, and there is talk of them actually making a brand-new album, their sixth, in the studio >>>>>> 2009/November: Kraftwerk release 12345678: *The Catalogue*, which is their entire discography (bar three

my favourite musician of the 2000s, and whose *Before Today* was widely acclaimed as one of 2010's best albums. Without a trace of embarrassment, Ariel describes his sound, woven out of blurry echoes of halcyon radio pop from the sixties, seventies and eighties, as 'retrolicious'. And it is! Nostalgia is, after all, one of *the* great pop emotions. And sometimes that nostalgia can be the bittersweet longing pop feels for its own lost golden age. To put that another way: some of the great artists of our time are making music whose primary emotion is towards *other* music, *earlier* music. But then again, isn't there something profoundly wrong about the fact that so much of the greatest music made during the last decade sounds like it could have been made twenty, thirty, even forty years earlier?

Up until now, the introduction to a book has always been the last thing I've written. This time I'm starting at the beginning. I don't have that much sense of what I'm going to discover before I set off. This book is very much an investigation – not just of the hows and whys of retro as a culture and an industry but also of the larger issues to do with living *in*, living *off* and living *with* the past. Given that I enjoy many aspects of retro, why do I still feel deep down that it is lame and shameful? How new is this retromania phenomenon, and how far back in pop's history can its roots be traced? Is retromania here to stay or will it one day get left behind, revealed to have been just a historical phase? If so, what lies beyond it?

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early experimental efforts) remastered and repackaged >>>>>> 2009/November: Sonic Youth make a cameo appearance in *Gossip Girl* as the wedding band for Rufus Humphrey's nuptials, playing an acoustic version of 1986's 'Starpower' >>>>>> 2009/December: John 'I have never, ever been interested in repeating myself' Lydon re-forms Public Image Ltd for a series of gigs to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of *Metal Box*, albeit not with the lineup that made the album (which included Keith Levene and Jah Wobble) but with the late-eighties incarnation. A US tour follows in spring 2010 >>>>>> 2009/December: The Flaming Lips release a cover version of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* >>>>>>

## Prologue

# DON'T LOOK BACK

## Nostalgia and Retro

Nostalgia as both word and concept was invented in the seventeenth century by the physician Johannes Hofer to describe a condition afflicting Swiss mercenaries on long tours of military duty. Nostalgia was literally homesickness, a debilitating craving to return to the native land. Symptoms included melancholy, anorexia, even suicide. Up until the later years of the nineteenth century, this malady (in retrospect, obviously psychosomatic) remained the concern of military doctors, because maintaining morale was crucial to successful warfare.

So nostalgia originally referred to a longing to return through space, rather than across time; it was the ache of displacement. Gradually it shed these geographical associations and became a temporal condition: no longer an anguished yearning for the lost motherland but a wistful pining for a halcyon lost time in one's life. As it became de-medicalised, nostalgia also began to be seen not just as an individual emotion but as a collective longing for a happier, simpler, more innocent age. The original nostalgia had been a *plausible* emotion in the sense that there was a remedy (catching the first warship or merchant vessel back home and returning to the warm hearth of kith and kin, a world that was *familiar*). Nostalgia in the modern sense is an impossible

emotion, or at least an incurable one: the only remedy would involve time travel.

This change of meaning doubtless came about because mobility became more commonplace and unremarkable, thanks to mass immigration to the New World and the movement of settlers and pioneers within the Americas; to colonial or military service by Europeans in their various empires; and to the increases in the number of individuals who relocated for migrant work opportunities or to advance their careers. Nostalgia for the past also intensified because the world was changing faster. Economic transformations, technological innovations and socio-cultural shifts all meant that for the first time there were increasingly stark differences between the world that you grew up in and the world in which you grew old. From landscapes dramatically altered through development ('It were all fields round here when I were a lad') to new technologies affecting the feel and rhythm of everyday life, the world in which you had felt at home gradually disappeared. The present became a foreign country.

By the middle of the twentieth century, nostalgia was not considered a pathology any more but a universal emotion. It could apply to individuals (a morbid harking back to the past) or to society at large. Often the latter has taken the form of a reactionary longing for an old social order considered more stable owing to its clearly defined class structure, where 'everybody knew their place'. But nostalgia hasn't always served the forces of conservatism. Radical movements throughout history have often envisioned their goals not as revolutionary but resurrectionary: restoring things to how they used to be, a golden age of social equilibrium and justice that had been interrupted by historical trauma or by ruling-class machinations. In the build up to the English Civil War, for instance, the parliamentarians saw themselves as conservatives and King Charles I as the innovator expanding the powers of the Crown. Even the Levellers, one of

the most radical factions active during Oliver Cromwell's interregnum following the king's execution, believed they were just upholding the Magna Carta and 'natural rights'.

Revolutionary movements have often constructed narratives based around 'paradise lost and paradise regained' scenarios. The Situationists, theorists of 1968's Paris riots, wrote of 'the lost totality': an Edenic state of social unity and individual non-alienation, which they believed existed before the era of industrial capitalism and the fragmented consciousness caused by class division, specialisation in the workplace and labour sold by the hour. The Situationists thought that automation would free humankind of the need to work, enabling it to recover the 'totality'. Similarly, some feminists believe in a lost primordial matriarchy that had once upon a time flourished free of domination and exploitation, with humankind placidly at one with itself and with Mother Nature.

What reactionary and radical nostalgias share is dissatisfaction with the present, which generally means the world created by the Industrial Revolution, urbanisation and capitalism. As this

### NOSTALGIA AS REVERIE VERSUS NOSTALGIA AS RESTORATION

Theorist Svetlana Boym distinguishes between the personal and political manifestations of nostalgia with her dichotomy: reflective nostalgia versus restorative nostalgia. The latter ranges from curmudgeonly intransigence towards all things newfangled and progressive, to full-bore militant efforts to turn back the clock and restore an older order (ranging from recent American eruptions like the Tea Party movement and Glenn Beck's 2010 'Restoring Honor' rally to various flavours of theocratic fundamentalism, royalism, nativism, neo-fascist campaigns for an ethnically cleansed homeland, etc.). Restorative nostalgia tends to be big on pageantry (think of the Orange parades in Ulster), folklore and Romantic nationalism. These bolster the collective ego with tales of past glory, but also nurse ancient injuries and insults (think of the centuries-old grievances festering in the nations of the former Yugoslavia).

Reflective nostalgia, in contrast, is personal, eschewing the political arena

new era was ushered in, time itself became increasingly organised around the schedules of the factory and the office (and also school, which trained children for those workplaces) rather than natural cycles like dawn and dusk or the seasons. A component of nostalgia can actually be a hankering for a time before time: the perpetual present of childhood. That notion can also extend to entire past epochs (as with the Victorian fascination for the Medieval era) that are seen as History's equivalent to childhood. Svetlana Boym, author of *The Future of Nostalgia*, talks about how it's even possible to be 'nostalgic for a prenostalgic state of being'. And it's true that when I think wistfully about golden periods in my life, they all share this quality of total immersion in the now: childhood, or falling in love, or phases of total involvement in current music (post-punk when I was a teenager, the early rave scene during my late twenties).

Where pop nostalgia gets interesting is in that peculiar

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altogether in favour of reverie, or sublimating itself through art, literature and music. Far from wanting to resurrect a lost golden age, reflective nostalgia takes pleasure in the misty remoteness of the past and cultivates the bittersweet pangs of poignancy. The danger of restorative nostalgia lies in its belief that the mutilated 'wholeness' of the body politic can be repaired. But the reflective nostalgic understands deep down that loss is irrecoverable: Time wounds all wholes. To exist in Time is to suffer through an endless exile, a successive severing from those precious few moments of feeling at home in the world.

In pop terms, Morrissey is the supreme poet of reflective nostalgia (although Ray Davies closely rivals him with 'Waterloo Sunset' and that autumnal almanac of English wistfulness, *The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society*). Throughout The Smiths and his solo career, Morrissey mourns a place and a time (Manchester of the sixties and seventies) where he never stole a happy hour. Now and then, though, Morrissey has crossed over into the restorative nostalgia danger zone, with controversial public gestures (wrapping himself in the Union Jack at a rock festival), ambiguous songs ('The National Front Disco') and unguarded interview comments (observing to the *NME* in 2007 that today's England is barely recognisable as the country of his youth and attributing that partly to immigration).

nostalgia you can feel for the glory days of ‘living in the now’ that you didn’t . . . actually . . . *live* through. Punk and the rock’n’roll fifties both stir feelings of this kind, but the Swinging Sixties beats all comers when it comes to triggering vicarious nostalgia. Ironically, it’s the absence of revivalism and nostalgia during the sixties itself that partly accounts for why there have been endless sixties revivals ever since. Part of the period’s attraction is its spirit of total immersion in the present. This was the decade that coined the slogan ‘be here now’, after all.

In the second half of the twentieth century, nostalgia became steadily more and more bound up with popular culture. It expressed itself *through* pop culture (revivals, golden-oldie shows on the radio, reissues et al.), but it would also be triggered *by* the pop culture of one’s youth: artifacts of mass entertainment such as bygone celebrities and vintage TV shows, quaint commercials and dance crazes, ancient hit songs and dated slang. As Fred Davis argued in his 1979 study *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, bygone mass culture increasingly superseded political events like wars and elections as the warp-and-woof of generational memory. So for those who grew up in the thirties, wistful memories are aroused by radio comedies and live musical broadcasts, whereas for those who grew up in the sixties and seventies, the markers are TV pop shows like *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train*, *Ready Steady Go* and *Top of the Pops*. And for a later generation still (many of them now making music and making waves) the nostalgia triggers are various aspects of the eighties’ garish modernity: the gauche early stabs at video-as-art-form aired on MTV and the once-futuristic, now laughably primitive computer and arcade games of the day, along with the robotically jaunty melodies and day-glo synth tones of games music.

Nostalgia is now thoroughly entwined with the consumer-entertainment complex: we feel pangs for the products of yesterday, the novelties and distractions that filled up our youth.

Eclipsing individual pursuits (like hobbies) or participatory local activities (like amateur sports), the mass media and pop culture take up an ever-increasing proportion of our mental lives. Which is why those *I Love the '70s/'80s/etc.* shows are so effective: the passage of our time has become indexed to the procession of rapidly obsolescing fads, fashions, celebrity careers et al.

The intersection between mass culture and personal memory is the zone that spawned retro. Time, perhaps, for a provisional definition distinguishing retro from other modes of relating to the past:

(1) Retro is always about the relatively immediate past, about stuff that happened in living memory.

(2) Retro involves an element of exact recall: the ready availability of archived documentation (photographic, video, music recordings, the Internet) allows for precision replication of the old style, whether it's a period genre of music, graphics or fashion. As a result, the scope for imaginative misrecognition of the past – the distortions and mutations that characterised earlier cults of antiquity like the Gothic Revival, for instance – is reduced.

(3) Retro also generally involves the artifacts of popular culture. This differentiates it from earlier revivals, which, as the historian Raphael Samuel points out, were based around high culture and originated from the higher echelons of society – aristocratic aesthetes and antiquarians with a rarified taste for exquisite collectables. Retro's stomping ground isn't the auction house or antique dealer but the flea market, charity shop, jumble sale and junk shop.

(4) A final characteristic of the retro sensibility is that it tends neither to idealise nor sentimentalise the past, but seeks to be amused and charmed by it. By and large, the approach is not

scholarly and purist but ironic and eclectic. As Samuel puts it, 'retrochic makes a plaything of the past'. This playfulness is related to the fact that retro is actually more about the present than the past it appears to revere and revive. It uses the past as an archive of materials from which to extract subcultural capital (hipness, in other words) through recycling and recombining: the bricolage of cultural bric-a-brac.

Where does the word 'retro' come from? According to the design historian Elizabeth Guffey, the term entered common parlance in the early sixties as a linguistic spin-off of the Space Age. Retro rockets provided reverse thrust and slowed a spaceship's propulsion. The connection of 'retro' to the era of sputnik and the space race lends itself to an appealing analogy: retro as the cultural counterpart to 'reverse thrust', with nostalgia and revivalism emerging in the seventies as a reaction against the sixties' full-tilt surge into the 'out there'.

As attractive as this notion is, though, it seems more likely that 'retro' came into use as a detached prefix that had gotten unstuck from 'retrospection', 'retrograde', 'retrogressive' and similar words. Terms starting with 'retro' tend to have a negative connotation, whereas 'pro' is attached to words like 'progress'. Retro itself is something of a dirty word. Few people like to be associated with it. The most bizarre example of this is the tragic story of Birmingham pub landlord Donald Cameron, who committed suicide in 1998 when owner Bass Breweries decided to convert his establishment into a retro theme pub called Flares. At the inquest, his ex-wife Carol talked about how the humiliating prospect of 'wearing a seventies outfit and a wig' plunged Cameron into despair. 'He felt he could not deal with any trouble in the pub. People would laugh at him because he looked ludicrous.' A few days after being reprimanded by his Bass bosses for obstinately turning up for work in his sharp nineties suit and tie, the

thirty-nine-year-old father of two asphyxiated himself in his car.

That's an extreme reaction. But I did notice that people I approached for interviews were keen to stress that they had *nothing* to do with retro. These would often be people whose entire lives were dedicated to a particular bygone era of music or sub-culture. But retro? *Oh no . . .* It's not that people dislike the image of being obsessed with musty, mouldering old stuff, or of being a curmudgeon who thinks the present can't compare with the past. In fact, many proudly dismiss all modern pop culture. What makes them recoil from retro are the associations with camp, irony and mere trendiness. Retro, as far as they're concerned, signifies a shallow, surface-oriented attunement to style, as opposed to a deep, passionate love of a music's essence.

In many people's minds, retro is twinned with hipster, another identity that almost nobody embraces voluntarily, even when they outwardly appear to fit the profile completely. The last few years of the 2000s witnessed a spasm of hipster-hate, with a spate of magazine critiques of hipsterdom as pseudo-bohemia. These articles were then followed by meta-critiques examining the phenomenon of hipster-phobia itself, invariably pointing out that nobody would ever voluntarily describe themselves as a hipster, and that hipster-haters themselves usually fit the profile of the hipster rather closely. This orgy of hipster-inspired debate has paralleled – without quite overlapping – the journalistic subgenre that asks, 'Whatever happened to innovation?' Here retro tended to be used in a vague, all-encompassing way to refer to anything old-fashioned or derivative, with some futurist zealots (myself included sometimes) going so far as to use retro as a stick to bash any artist who is blatant about their influences and debts to specific ancestors.

Obviously, having influences is not retro per se. I don't totally agree with Norman Blake of Teenage Fanclub, who suggested to me once that 'Any music that *doesn't* sound like anything else

in rock history always sounds *terrible*.’ But how do you make music without a starting point? Most musicians, artists, writers learn how to do what they do by copying, to begin with at least. Similarly, being a musical traditionalist does not automatically make you retro. A good way to illustrate this is to consider the British folk scene. The movement began at the very end of the nineteenth century as a form of antiquarian ethnomusicology: song collectors like Cecil Sharp traipsed up and down the British Isles making cylinder recordings of old men and women who were typically the last surviving people in their village to remember ancient folk ballads. But this preservationist project – documenting Britain’s traditional music and, later, attempting to perform it as faithfully as possible – was nothing like retro in the modern sense. It was a deadly earnest business, freighted with political idealism (folk was deemed the People’s Music and thus intrinsically left-wing). Gradually, as the British traditional scene developed, a schism grew between the purists and those who felt that keeping the music *vital* meant bringing contemporary elements into play. The latter took liberties with folk forms, changing the instrumentation or going electric, blending in non-indigenous influences and writing original songs with increasingly bohemian and countercultural lyrics.

Of today’s younger generation of British folk singers, Eliza Carthy is considered a leading figure. What she does is on the surface conservative: she literally carries on the family business (the renovation of British traditional music) by following in the footsteps of her parents, Norma Waterson and Martin Carthy. But she might feature synthesizers in her music alongside acoustic instruments such as her own fiddle, or work in influences from trip hop or jazz. She happily records using state-of-the-art digital techniques. Closer to retro in the more precise sense is the American free-folk movement (sometimes known as freak folk or wyrd folk). These young minstrels – performers like Joanna Newsom,

Devendra Banhart, MV & EE, Wooden Wand, Espers – venerate the same late-sixties and early-seventies heyday of British folk during which Martin Carthy and Norma Waterson made their name, but they fixate on the more kooky figures from that time such as The Incredible String Band and Comus, or obscure artists like Vashti Bunyan. The free-folk outfits fetishise the acoustic and the analogue: they take great pains to get a vintage sound and use the right period instrumentation. The differences also come across in self-presentation and packaging. Eliza Carthy onstage and on album covers has been known to sport a nose ring and punky-style purple or crimson hair dye. In contrast, the free-folk troubadours signpost their allegiances to the lost golden age through their raggle-taggle clothing, long maiden-like tresses and beards. Their record artwork is often reverential and referential. Publicity photos of Espers evoke the woodland tableaux favoured by The Incredible String Band on their classic sixties albums; the cover of *Wooden Wand* and the Sky High Band's *Second Attention* recreates the lovers-snuggling-on-a-hilltop cover photograph of John and Beverley Martyn's 1970 album *Stormbringer*.

Where Eliza Carthy wants to update folk music and make it appeal to contemporary audiences, the freak-folk outfits want to bring the past *into* the present, like time travel. Folk is literally in Carthy's blood, it's something she grew up with; in contrast, the freak-folk artists' relationship with their sources is almost entirely mediated through recordings from a much earlier era, and is given further distance by being largely focused on British folk rather than the American counterparts of the same era. They have *zero interest* in contemporary practitioners like Carthy or even in the current activities of veterans of the original late-sixties/early-seventies Britfolk era like Richard Thompson.

'It's record collector music,' Byron Coley, one of the free-folk scene's journalistic champions and a record dealer himself, told music critic Amanda Petrusich. Rather than folk as a tradition

passed from generation to generation and learned through teaching or watching the music performed, free folk is ‘a fabulous simulation’ based around listening to records. Coley: ‘It was largely guys, sitting alone in their rooms, at night, looking at liner notes.’ One of the genre’s patron saints, the guitarist John Fahey, was an obsessive record collector, and in his later years founded the archival reissue label Revenant (it means a visible ghost or reanimated corpse that returns after death to persecute the living) through which to release the obscure primitivist folk, blues and gospel he’d disinterred.

Developed in the nineteenth century but defining the twentieth, recording in all its forms is what ultimately created the conditions of possibility for *rétro*. Audio recordings and other types of documentation (photographic, video) not only provide *retro* with its raw materials, they also create the sensibility, based as it is on obsessive repeat-play of particular artifacts and focused listening that zooms in on minute stylistic details. ‘It’s a total paradigm shift, it’s completely screwed with our brains,’ says Ariel Pink of the shift between music sold as scores and music sold as records. ‘The recording medium actually crystallises an event and makes it more than the sum of the score. The feel of the moment is captured. That has changed everything – people being able to revisit memories like that.’ Poring over records allows sound-fiends like Pink to isolate and replicate the specific qualities of bygone production styles and vocal modes. So on *Before Today*’s ‘Can’t Hear My Eyes’, for instance, there’s a tom-tom roll where the drum timbre, the feel of the pattern, is like a portal through time to the end-of-the-seventies era of Gerry Rafferty’s ‘Baker Street’ and Fleetwood Mac’s *Tusk*. Pink describes his music’s relationship to pop’s past as ‘preserving something that has died. Something that’s going extinct. And just saying, “No!!!” That’s all it is for me, as a music lover. I like to do things that I *like*. And what I like is something that I don’t *hear*.’

Pop's impact was dependent on records. Its qualities of newness and the way it penetrated deep into everyday life came about through records being played on the radio or being bought from stores by masses of people all within the same approximate time span, and then taken home and played over and over and over again. Musicians could reach many more people across the world, in a much more intimate and more pervasive way than they ever could by performing live to audiences. But records created a kind of feedback loop: there was now the possibility of getting stuck on a particular record or performer. Eventually, after pop built up enough history, it became possible to fixate on an earlier period you preferred to your own pop time. Ariel Pink: 'When people like sixties music, they live there for ever. They live in a moment when the person they are listening to was growing their hair long for the first time. They look at the pictures and they feel like they can actually live there. For my generation, we weren't even there' – he means biologically alive in the sixties; he was born in 1978 – 'so we really live "there". We have no concept of time.'

The phonographic recording is something of a philosophical scandal in that it takes a moment and makes it perpetual; it drives in the wrong direction down the one-way street that is Time. In another sense, one of the problems for pop music is that its essence is the Event – epoch-defining moments like Elvis Presley's appearance on *Ed Sullivan* or The Beatles arriving at JFK airport, Hendrix immolating 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock or The Sex Pistols firing off expletives on the Bill Grundy show. But the very media it is dependent on and disseminated through – records and television – enable the Event to become permanent, subject to endless repetition. The moment becomes a monument.