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CONSTRUCTING HISTORIES OF POPULAR MUSIC

This chapter examines how histories of popular music in books, online and in television documentaries have been constructed, along with some of the criticisms of these conventional approaches. Engaging with the histories that have already been produced will enable you to undertake analyses of your own, and encourages you to ask some important questions about the way we understand what happened in pop history. The final section of the chapter outlines a model for approaching a historical analysis of moments in popular music's past that builds upon the most useful elements from existing accounts and the critiques of these histories. This knowledge and skill is central to the approach taken in the subsequent three chapters.

The chapter poses some fundamental questions about the pop histories that currently exist. By working through your own answers to these questions you will start to develop the understanding and skill that is necessary to do your own analysis of existing histories of pop found in books, online and in television documentaries.

- What's the difference between a history of popular music and a study of something that happened in popular music in the past?
- Why isn't there just one, widely agreed, history of popular music?
- What influences the way pop music histories are written and produced?
- What sorts of criticisms are made of the histories we can already read and watch?
- What should we look at when we do our own historical analysis of a moment in pop's past?

Histories construct a narrative of the past in which the significance of certain events are emphasised over others, and ideas of cause and effect are woven into an unfolding story. In histories of popular music these narratives



are usually built around musical artists, genres of music and the social worlds in which they operated, and the histories are given a strong sense of chronology through the use of key dates. These histories 'tell the story' of how pop changed over time, usually take a sweep of time greater than the careers of individual artists, and are usually concerned with general shifts in the music itself. We can find these histories in book form, on websites, or as television or radio broadcasts.

However, even though they all present a chronology of musical and social events, one of the first things that strikes the reader flicking through books or websites on popular music history, or the viewer watching television documentaries, is that there is very little consensus about which musicians and which genres are significant. Even when these books, websites or broadcasts are presented as general histories of pop, they often cover very different periods of time. A comparison of three such books, shown in Figure 1.1, reveals this clearly.

	Donald Clarke (1995) <i>The Rise and Fall of Popular Music</i>	Paul Friedlander (1996) <i>Rock & Roll: A Social History</i>	Iain Chambers (1985) <i>Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture</i>
1840–1900	minstrelsy, vaudeville		
1910–1920	Tin Pan Alley, ragtime	blues	
1920–1930	jazz		
1940–1950	broadway, big band, bebop and cool jazz	rhythm & blues	
1955–1960	rock & roll	doo wop, rock & roll	blues, rock & roll, skiffle
1960–1965	folk, rock and soul	60s pop, Beatles,	blues revival, Mersey beat soul, mods
1965–1970		Rolling Stones, Dylan, soul, motown	rock, folk
1970–1975		guitar rock	singer-songwriters heavy metal, teenyboppers glam rock
1975–1980	disco, punk	punk rock	funk, northern soul, reggae, punk
1980–present		MTV	electro-pop, new pop

Figure 1.1 A schematic of three histories of popular music

Comparing the three lists, it is apparent that each book constructs a very different history of popular music. This is in part because the books are focussed on different questions and make different arguments. Clarke's history contrasts what he considers the two golden decades of popular music starting in 1940 with what he sees as the fall of popular music to the present day. Friedlander traces the origins and then dominance of rock music in the 1960s and 70s. Chambers focusses on British popular culture and music from 1956 to the early 1980s.

It is valuable to have an overall sense of what music was being made in different periods and the schematic of the contents of these three books is a good starting point. However, as this simple exercise demonstrates there is no one history of popular music, but many different ones. As well as differing in their styles of scholarship or writing, each book also differs in the particular history that it constructs. It is important that we therefore ask questions about why they highlight particular people, styles and moments, and what sorts of histories they therefore construct.

Activity 1.1 Analysing histories of popular music

Produce an analysis of other books on the history of popular music. Select three histories of popular music from your library. Using the contents page and the chapter subheadings, produce a schematic of the dates and key musicians and musics used to tell that story of popular music. What story do they tell? What periods do they emphasise? Do they see popular music as progress? Or decline? How important are non-musical events in the story? What role is assigned to the music industry?

For all their different emphases on different musicians, however, most histories of popular music share common features in the way they are constructed. First, they often outline their history as a series of dramatic disruptions. Second, they draw a clear distinction between 'mainstream' musical culture and a marginalised 'alternative' one (usually they champion new alternative music cultures). Finally, they emphasise the idea of musical roots, so that each new musical form is understood in terms of earlier precedents. Understanding these characteristics will sharpen your ability to read and research other histories critically; once you have become familiar with them you will be able to discern them in almost all broadcast documentary, online and book-length histories.

SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS IN A HISTORY OF DISRUPTION

Like the vast majority of other such histories, the histories listed in Figure 1.1 are built upon types of music and artists understood as being recognisably different from those forms that preceded them. That is, these are histories of change and disruption. New music is presented as revolutionary in some way, and it is the abrupt changes in popular music that each author wants to contextualise or celebrate. Of course there are also other narrative components – in the examples in Figure 1.1 for instance, Clarke uses a narrative of decline, while Friedlander in contrast uses a narrative of maturity – but the notion of abrupt and significant new musical forms is there centrally, as it is in almost all such histories. However, we should not see each disruption as of equal significance. When dealing with a moment of disruption you need to ask questions about the particular historical significance of that moment. For instance: in what ways did particular artists change the music? Was the music of these artists widely liked, or did it in some way articulate the ‘voice’ of a particular group or subculture? Why are these events significant: because they show a change in music-making, or in music consumption, or in the mediation of the music?

As you investigate various representations of each historical moment you will discover that there is no consistency in the selection of music or artists that populate these histories. For instance, Clarke selects two types of music for the 1920s and 30s: Tin Pan Alley and ragtime, but they are selected for very different reasons. While Tin Pan Alley is the name given to the mainstream commercialised songwriting that dominated music publishing and then radio, film soundtracks and recorded music for urban white Americans through the first half of the century, ragtime was a short-lived music with more of a minority appeal. It remains significant for Clarke because it is one of the earliest example of a musical form rooted in African-American culture that gained popularity with a white American and European audience.

We must be aware, then, of two important points. First, each historical moment was as musically and culturally eclectic and diverse as today’s popular musical culture. Second, each historical moment was not necessarily dominated by the music or artists identified with that moment by historians. A particular musical form may have significance for a particular historian not because of its role at that time, but in some future moment. For instance, the blues music of the 1940s was not particularly influential on the mainstream of American and European popular music at the time, but became hugely influential on the popular music of the 1950s

and 1960s. In almost all cases the music identified with an era was not the best selling, nor the most exposed in the wider media, but is significant in some other way that the author often assumes (even if they are not always explicit).

THE MAINSTREAM AND THE MARGINALISED UNDERGROUND

Most histories emphasise musical forms which at their moment of origin had small followings, and which were often produced on the margins of the record industry. Dave Harker (1992) has pointed out that the best-selling records of the late 1960s – a period often written about as dominated by the classic period of rock – were soundtrack albums from film and theatrical musicals like *The Sound of Music*. In the 1960s, rock-based musical forms were named ‘the underground’ to distinguish them from the forms of music which dominated record releases and sales, radio plays and film and television appearances. Although the term ‘underground’ has moved in and out of general usage and, of course, has been used to define some very different sounds, the concept remains a very useful one to understand the history of popular music.

The emphasis in histories on less prominent sounds can be demonstrated quite simply by examining the sales charts for particular years highlighted in the histories. Figure 1.2, for instance, provides a comparison of the artists in the British Top 20 singles charts in the same week in 1957, 1967, 1977 and 1987.

In most histories these years are constructed as emblematic of rock and roll with Elvis Presley, psychedelic rock (and maybe soul) with the Beatles (and Otis Reading), punk (and maybe disco) with the Sex Pistols (and the Bee Gees), and house with DJ artists like Farley ‘Jackmaster’ Funk. My analysis of these charts suggests that even by the most generous interpretation there is never more than 25 per cent of each type of music to be found in the sample chart for that year. In fact it is mainstream pop music that is dominant in each chart, accounting for between 50 and 75 per cent of the artists in each sample chart. Interestingly, there were the same number of rock artists charting in the sample chart of 1987 as 1967, and while it is possible to identify five rock and roll singles in 1957, four rock and four soul singles in 1967, three disco singles in 1977 and five dance-based singles in 1987, the vast majority of them relied very heavily on the conventions of mainstream pop. Additionally, in January 1977 there were no punk singles at all, and in January 1987 there was no house music (although both styles are apparent in the lower Top 40 later in the those years).

	1957	1967	1977	1987
1	Tommy Steele	Tom Jones	David Soul	Jackie Wilson
2	Guy Mitchell	Monkees	Showaddywaddy	Housemartins
3	Malcolm Vaughan	Seekers	Abba	Madonna
4	Frankie Vaughan	Who	Johnny Mathis	Europe
5	Johnnie Ray	Donovan	Stevie Wonder	A-ha
6	Bing Crosby/ Grace Kelly	Dave Dee	Mike Oldfield	Alison Moyet
7	Eddie Fisher	Troggs	Tina Charles	Erasure
8	Elvis Presley	Cliff Richard	Julie Covington	Communards
9	Pat Boon	Val Doonican	Smokie	Oran 'Juice' Jones
10	Bill Haley	Supremes	10cc	Gregory Abbott
11	Frankie Vaughan	Kinks	Paul Nicholas	Gap Band
12	Fats Domino	Four Tops	ELO	Bon Jovi
13	Elvis Presley	Georgie Fame	Status Quo	Dexy's Midnight Runners
14	Frankie Lane	Move	Queen	Berlin
15	Frankie Lane	Cat Stevens	Barry Biggs	Genesis
16	Garry Miller	Wayne Fontana	Yvonne Elliman	Elkie Brooks
17	Elvis Presley	Easybeats	Rose Royce	Jaki Graham
18	Jimmy Young	Cream	Kursaal Flyers	Eurythmics
19	Pat Boone	Jimmy Ruffin	Boney M	Status Quo
20	Mitchell Torok	Temptations	Steely Dan	Pretenders

Figure 1.2 Sample Top 20 singles charts for the second week in January 1957, 1967, 1977 and 1987

Source: D. Rees, B. Lazell and R. Osborne (1992) *40 Years of NME Charts*. London: Boxtree.

Of course it could be countered that rock and roll, soul and house were, in 1957, 1967 and 1987 respectively, American phenomena, or that psychedelic rock was usually issued on LPs ('long-playing' records) rather than singles, or that punk and house were issued by small independent

companies not well represented in the high street shops used to construct the charts, and so were unlikely to be prominent in a UK Top 20 singles chart. These are all telling points, but they merely reinforce the fact that however significant these were as cultural and musical phenomena, at these times at least, these forms of music were being produced and distributed on the margins of the record industry, and purchased by a minority of music consumers.

The historians of popular music culture, then, emphasise forms of popular music and artists that were not always even dominant in popular music culture of the time they are examining. Rather, they emphasise new sounds and styles of artists. The historical story is that they are part of a new type of music that starts in the margins and moves into the mainstream. Its existence in the margins is seen as significant because the music was associated with other significant social or cultural movements, or because the performers introduced radically different forms of music-making. A music's adoption by the mainstream is presented as a decline in its social relevance or vigour. Rock and roll, rock, punk and house are all presented in this way in histories of popular music.

We cannot read these histories, then, as accounts of what was happening in popular music culture at a particular time, but as ways of highlighting certain values (those of innovation or social significance) over others, and of processes through which new musical or social ideas move from a minority interest to have a place in the mainstream. This distinction between the underground and the mainstream is itself an over-simplification, and the processes of change in popular music culture are far more complex. Nevertheless, as will become clearer in the rest of this book, the concepts of the 'mainstream' and the 'margins' does allow us to understand that there are differences between different parts of popular music culture. Different parts of the music industry and the wider media are organised around different patterns of music production and promotion. And different social groups give significant meanings to different ways of buying, listening and dancing. In the historical dimension this mainstream/margins distinction allows us to see how the sounds and meanings of music relate to these sociological patterns, and how these elements have changed over time. As such, the idea is often linked to the notion that histories explain the roots of a type of music.

MUSICAL ROOTS

The idea of change constitutes a central characteristic of histories of popular music. As I have already suggested, one of the reasons that these histories examine just one particular type of music in one time period is that they can then highlight a process of musical development. Marginal

musics – particularly those established before the 1950s – are examined simply because they are seen as constituting the roots of a later style. This idea of musical roots is the final characteristic of popular music histories. The titles of many histories cannot help but belie this approach. *Right On: From Blues to Soul in Black America* (Haralambos, 1974), *From Blues to Rock* (Hatch and Millward, 1987), *The Roots of the Blues* (Charters, 1981) and *Origins of the Popular Style* (Van der Merwe, 1989) are all good examples.

Simon Frith opens his influential book on popular music, *Sound Effects* (1983), with such a study of ‘rock roots’. In it he examines rock music as ‘the result of an ever changing combination of independently developed musical elements, each of which carries its own cultural message’ (1983: 15). The key roots Frith identifies are black music, country music, folk music and pop music. However, we should not just understand this approach to mean that the sound of one form of popular music becomes the basis for another, later form. As Frith, and later Van der Merwe (1989), point out, while historians of popular music often neglect the importance of the form and sound of music, the meaning of popular music is not found in a strict study of musical form, but in an understanding of each music’s ‘cultural message’. This is a message which is not simply to be found in the music’s notes or structure, nor simply in the sounds inherited from its root musics, but in the way that these forms and sounds are produced and utilised in the social practices of music-making and music consumption and in the way that musicians, listeners and dancers actively create the music’s meanings. These issues are discussed further in Chapter 13.

The concept of musical roots is a useful idea as long as we extend the idea of influence beyond that of the sounds produced by different musical forms. Frith’s list of black, country, folk and pop musics refer to more than just different types of popular music sounds, and their influence on other forms of popular music at different times involves far more than a new generation copying the sound of the music produced in an earlier age.

Activity 1.2 Analysing musical choices in histories of popular music

Using the books you selected for Activity 1.1, identify why the author selected the particular style of music or artist for their history. Can you ascertain whether these forms were widely popular at the time, or constituted a marginal taste among consumers? Are they presented as a musical form that became the roots of a later style? How does the author explain the processes of development and influence? Is the author concerned with non-musical factors? If so, what are they?



Image 1.1 Behind every popular music performance is a history of influences

While histories of popular music in book form were quite a specialised sector, the popularity of pop music within fan culture has ensured that there are a vast number of websites about popular music history. These vary from professionally produced pages created by journalists like *The Guardian* newspaper's online 'Fifty years of pop' (www.guardian.co.uk/music/2004/may/02/popandrock) which claimed to tell pop history since 1954, to a fan site like Piero Scaruffi's 'A brief history of pop music' (www.scaruffi.com/history/popeu.html). In the last decade there has also been a substantial expansion in television and radio documentaries that tell the whole history of popular music, or key parts of that history, often associated with what are seen as key genres. The earliest is probably the 1976 17-part British ITV documentary series *All You Need is Love*, the story of popular music made by Tony Palmer, but specialist arts channels like the British BBC4 and Sky Arts now regularly feature histories of popular music. Given this dramatic expansion in the number of histories, and their diversity of subject matter, it is remarkable how consistent the use of the tropes of disruption, margins and mainstream, and roots has become.

We should also distinguish between these attempts to document the history of pop, with books and programmes that focus on a particular artist's past work, or media representations of popular music that were made in the past. These all provide important ways we can access information about the history of popular music, and they do often feature the disruption, margins/mainstream and roots tropes, but they are also characterised by other stronger narrative preoccupations linked to the way that individual artists are presented. Approaches focussing on individual music stars are the subject of Chapter 10.

CRITICISMS OF EXISTING HISTORIES OF POPULAR MUSIC

Thinking through the issues already raised highlights the point that pop history is authored. There is no single history; no definitive description or analysis of music-making and consumption. Rather there are acts of interpretation, and arguments constructed about each music's meaning, causes and effects. That is not to say that existing histories can be understood as a diverse collection of individual accounts. As Keith Negus (1996) has pointed out, the idea of 'the rock era' dominated popular music histories produced in the twentieth century. In this perspective the pivotal moment in popular music's history is the development of rock in the late 1960s, and earlier music is seen as an evolution towards rock, while later music is understood as a development of the classic form.

It is certainly the case that within academic and journalistic accounts the terms 'rock and roll' and 'rock' have been used as synonyms for popular music, and as ways of making value distinctions between forms of popular music. For Negus this 'rock imperialism' (p. 162) has meant that many popular music scholars have interpreted musical history as a set of significant moments that first created, then sustained and developed, and finally led to the decline of the rock era. In these consensus descriptions of the 'rock era', popular musical culture is understood to be reinvigorated by new sounds and ideas from the marginalised underground. This, of course, assumes all musics other than rock are simply either raw material for rock's development, or musics that, by their existence, serve to define the superiority of rock. It is for this reason that, within these histories, rock is widely contrasted with pop as a 'watered down, blander' music (Shuker, 1998: 226). Carys Wyn Jones' (2008) developed reading of the rock canon and its relation to the rock album is exemplary. She is particularly adept at locating the way the idea of the canon was adapted from literature and art to serve a particular model of rock popular music, and how difficult it is for the idea to survive in contemporary popular music.

Motti Regev (2002) has attempted to rethink these ideas, rejecting the idea of a rock era, musical decline and a rock-pop division. Instead, he argues, all the prominent genres of contemporary popular music share a 'rock aesthetic' that guides the creative production of popular music. He suggests that this aesthetic not only produces a canon of great recordings, but two distinct processes of musical change – commercialism and avant-gardism – which can be used to understand the history of popular music. However, this approach still seeks to find a central story to explain how music changes, and how it relates to the culture in which it is produced.

Histories based upon the idea of a 'rock era' or a 'rock aesthetic' fall neatly into a mode of historical explanation known as 'totalising'. The most sustained criticism of this sort of approach has come from the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. Madan Sarup (1993: 53) has contrasted the 'totalising history' with Foucault's approach thus:

Whereas traditional or 'total' history inserts events into grand explanatory systems and linear processes, celebrates great moments and individuals and seeks to document a point of origin, [Foucault's] analysis attempts to analyse and preserve the singularity of events, turns away from the spectacular in favour of the discredited, the neglected and a whole range of phenomena which have been denied a history.

Although neither Foucault nor Sarup specifically had histories of popular music in mind, these comments seem very telling for our study. It is not surprising that writers who grew up in the 1960s and 70s, and whose own lives were transformed by their love of rock music, should have carried these views over into their scholarship and writing. At its best this writing is informed and interesting (see, for instance, Garofalo, 1992; Grossberg, 1992b; Marcus, 1975). However, while such approaches are valuable for us in appreciating a particular, historically located, way of understanding popular music, they have also produced a 'grand explanatory system' for understanding popular music. As Negus (1996: 161) has pointed out:

For many music fans across the world, there are numerous sounds that cannot be rock and there is much music being listened to by the 'youth market' which would be described using a label other than rock, such as rap, merengue, soul, reggae, cumbia, country, techno, and so on.

Sarah Thornton (1990) has argued that historical importance has been assigned to music or music-makers on the basis of four criteria: sales figures, biographical interest, critical acclaim and media coverage. Each, she proposes, has led to a particular strategy of writing history. So sales figures are used as the basis for lists of pop's past, biographical studies tend to personalise complex cultural processes, critical judgements are used to produce canons of 'the best' music, and historical media sources have been treated as 'windows' on the past, rather than texts which construct and mediate the events and values they record. Not only is each of these strategies prominent in the 'rock era' histories, but they also produce an emphasis on history as a simple timeline, full of key moments and personalities who drive change. These are the very qualities of the totalising history.

There are some important lessons to learn here about how we read the histories of other writers and how to write histories of our own. While 'rock era' histories subordinate all information to the story of 'roots, rise, maturity and then decline', a more fruitful approach is to try to understand points in popular music's past in their own terms. That involves using the sources that tell us about this past as not simply giving us information but also interpreting the significance of that moment and the values it represents. It is encouraging to see that more recent studies of popular music, often by younger writers, have tended to understand popular music in different ways. Totalising histories of popular music are far less common amongst academic writers from the 1990s onwards, and analyses of practices of particular types of (usually contemporary) music are more prevalent. In part this could be understood as an attempt by a new generation of music culture theorists to investigate areas neglected by the rock era theorists, particularly to study the 'singularity' of contemporary practices (see, for instance, Gilbert and Pearson, 1999).

However, these analyses of specific contemporary music cultures produce their own limitations, especially in terms of the way we make sense of the present in relation to the past. In particular they represent a view – often only implicit – that contemporary popular music is more fragmented than it was in the 'rock era'. This view is obviously in part based upon reading the histories produced in previous totalising approaches, and contrasting the perception that each period of the past is dominated by one style of music, while today we have many different styles.

The 'rock era' theorists often share this idea of fragmentation themselves. Brian Longhurst (1995: 111), for instance, has characterised the music culture of the last two decades of the twentieth century as separated from earlier periods by punk rock:

[Punk] represented an attempt first to regain the spirit of the early days of rock 'n' roll in its desire for independence and the short three minute song; and second to reintegrate the rock and pop forms which had been increasingly split during the 1970s. It also marks the beginning of the fragmentation that was rapidly to develop in the 1980s and 90s.

However, as the next three chapters will show, historical analysis does not support the idea that popular music is now more fragmented while in the past it was much more homogeneous. This view is the product of totalising histories in which the domination of rock music from the late 1960s to the early 1980s is seen to provide a homogeneous popular music culture, and its decline as leading to fragmentation. It is far more productive to interrogate the ideas that shape historical accounts and to

ask why moments in popular music history are presented as part of a coherent pattern of progress (or decline). We can then engage more directly with moments of popular music's past as at all times fragmented, complex and distinctive.

Activity 1.3 Analysing 'rock era' histories

To understand these criticisms of existing histories of popular music it is helpful to analyse again two or three that are available to you in the library. First, can you identify the degree to which they build that history around the idea of the 'rock era'? This can be done by examining chapter headings and subheadings. My outline of three books at the start of this chapter reveals that Friedlander's approach is a classic of this kind. Second, can you see how the history constructs the birth, development and decline of the rock era? This requires greater attention to different sections, but it will increase your ability to read other authors' arguments critically. You will find that some writers create totalising histories even if they do not play so centrally on the idea of the rock era – Clarke's book is representative of this kind – and it is productive to analyse what and how they periodise and characterise popular music's history.

The criticisms we have looked at so far have focussed on written, and mainly academic, attempts to understand the past of popular music. However, in the twenty-first century, the main centre of activity for historicising pop can now be found in television and radio, rather than book publishing. There has been an equivalent rise in studies of these broadcast historical documentaries. Interestingly, one of the first and most prominent objects of study here was a documentary series on the history of jazz. Ken Burns' *Jazz*, broadcast in 2001 on the US public television network PBS, received a notable amount of attention, and some very strong criticism, for the way it historicised the development of jazz (see Stanbridge, 2004, for a good summary of these criticisms). Burns is a very well regarded documentary maker, and his style of using still images, music and interviews has been widely influential, even when he has been criticised for the very particular construction of American culture he has developed (see Harlan, 2003). My own work with Paul Long (Wall and Long, 2010) has made an explicit contrast between Burns' take on jazz as an American music, and the examination of the history of the music in the UK in the BBC series *Jazz Britannia*. Although we judged the British programme to be innovative in many ways, we noted the totalising narrative, the strong use of the disruption, margins/mainstream and roots tropes, and the importance

of examining such programmes in the context of public service television. Elsewhere (Long and Wall, 2010) we extended our analysis to the many programmes which followed within the template established by *Jazz Britannia* examining how different popular musics – including folk, soul, dance, pop, prog-rock, synth and even classical music – developed in the UK. We noted that over time a formula, based upon totalising narratives, had become even more pronounced, which anchored – or even over-rode – the more complex story that was apparent in the archive footage and interviews with people involved in the original events.

It is useful to contrast these totalising narratives with the much more open approach to dealing with the events, people and music found in the first attempt to document pop's history, *All You Need is Love*. Here our analysis (Long and Wall, 2013) suggested that while many of the same tropes were apparent, and the series director relied on perspectives derived from classical art to understand popular music, Palmer's documentaries ask the viewer to think about the material they are presented with and he gives far more time for music than contemporary programmers allow.

Activity 1.4 Analysing television pop music histories

Having made these additional observations about television documentaries that seek to tell the story of some part of popular music history, you should be able to adapt the analysis you used to analyse book-length histories to consider television programmes. Again, look for evidence that suggests that the programmes are built upon ideas of disruption, margins/mainstream and roots. Given that the programme you are analysing may be about music outside the rock age, are any of the characteristics suggested by Negus still apparent? Finally, how much do the programme-makers 'close-down' the meanings of the material they use to fit with a totalising narrative, and how many examples can you find where interviewees or archive material suggests the history is more complex than the narrative of the programme suggests?

Case study *The Joy of Disco*

This documentary history of the music genre of disco was broadcast in 2012 on the UK digital terrestrial channel BBC4 as part of a themed night of programmes featuring disco artists and music from the late 1970s. The corporation policy documents set the station the aspiration to 'be the most culturally enriching

channel in UK broadcasting' and 'the channel of distinction for people who love to think' (BBC, 2011:29). Such lofty ambitions are strongly within the BBC's tradition as a public service broadcaster. For analysts of popular music culture, a documentary like *The Joy of Disco* raises a series of questions about the position taken by the documentary, the degree to which it documents the historical events, and the way the narrative is constructed. For a documentary broadcast on a public service channel there is a further question about the degree to which pop history documentaries match the cultural and intellectual ambitions set out by the BBC.

This is certainly a programme that seeks to take a much maligned musical genre seriously and to set it in its cultural context. However, analysis reveals that from this alternative position it produces a totalising story, conforms to standardised tropes of pop history, and anchors potentially ambiguous or paradoxical meanings using standardised television rhetoric.

The documentary is far more than a string of pop videos of well-known disco numbers and it has been made with skill and at some expense. There are interviews with key musicians, singers, producers, DJs and remixers from disco's heyday, with music journalists, black cultural commentators and gay and feminist analysts, and with participants who give personal testimony. The programme ranges over the role of gay liberation, feminism and race identity and the shifts in urban politics, and links them strongly to what the programme presents as a hedonistic, sex-driven, drug-influenced music culture. The programme also features a considerable amount of archive footage, much of it capturing moments in the disco culture of the time, or revealing important insights into the politics which contextualises these moments.

The programme title suggests that disco is about pleasure, and many viewers who were young in the days of disco will read the programme name as a pun on a 1970s best-selling book, *The Joy of Sex*. The politics of pleasure, even if not a fully thought through idea, is used as the totalising narrative through which the story of disco is told. In a succinct summary of the programme's narrative, BBC publicity called it a 'documentary about how disco music soundtracked gay liberation, foregrounded female desire in the age of feminism and led to the birth of modern club culture as we know it today, before taking the world by storm'. These ideas are established firmly at the outset. In the swift segue of ideas that open the programme the cultural derision that is often applied to disco as a music is countered with personal testament to its joys, before establishing the standard tropes in the hyperbolic claim that disco in the 1970s 'changed the world'. The narration, and selected interviewees, explicitly assert that disco was revolutionary music, located outside mainstream radio and the music industry, developed in

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oppressed gay, black and Puerto Rican minority culture, soundtracked by 'a never-ending orgasmic music' rooted in black R&B, but moving effectively into the pop mainstream. A further ten-minute assemblage of archive news footage and personal testimony evidences the veracity of the claim, offering a very different story to the oft-held view that disco is simply a highly commercialised unsophisticated pop music.

Once the totalising narrative is established the programme abruptly switches to the roles of individual New York-based party hosts, venues and DJs who are presented as the originators of disco as a culture. The evidence and testimony presented clearly points to the importance of these people and places, but the narrative reduces their activities to the singular origin of disco. Key studies of the development of post-1970s US dance music culture (for instance, Brewster and Broughton, 1999; Lawrence, 2003) cover the same ground, but as single incidents in a longer, geographically divergent, and more complex history of cultural activity across North America and Europe.

The programme certainly tries to locate a British origin for disco in the northern soul subculture, but the logical connections between these cultural activities is unclear and the logic of the story starts to spiral out of control. The British events predate those highlighted in New York, and did not involve any explicit connection to gay, black or women's liberation. Northern soul was a predominantly white, male, working-class culture (Wall, 2006b), and the substory arc is built around the embrace of disco by one former Northern Soul DJ. At this point the programme is not characterised by a thoughtful engagement with the complexity of the emergence of a record-based dance culture, but the use of standardised documentary rhetorical devices to anchor the programme materials to the totalising narrative. It is only voice-over narration and editing that bring a spurious sense of coherence.

Music is more often used as cliché than for insight. A brass band rendition of Dvorak's *Largo* signals the north of England, and jazz establishes 1970s down-at-heel New York, but the few attempts to explain disco as music are left stranded within the narrative. For instance, the demonstration of 1970s dance beats by one of the key soul drummers, Earl Young, is very informative, but as none of the music that is played from that point onwards uses Young's approach, it tantalises but offers no sustained explanation.

At about half way, *The Joy of Disco* introduces its second theme. By juxtaposing Donna Summer with a feminist culture critic, the programme proposes that disco was also about female sexual desire. The alternative reading that such music was misogynistic porn chic is ignored, even though it could be supported by the examples of record cover art we are later shown. The

feminist empowerment reading is emphasised through a montage of interviews and performances from Labelle. The nuanced reading of former porn star Andrea True from one interviewee, and the engineer's claim that he would not have remixed the record if he had known it had sexual meaning, just hang there until anchored by an incomprehensible voiceover about women's sexuality, male dominance and 12-inch singles. These are complex issues about sexual politics, but the programme closes down debate about them, rather than using these events to ask some fundamental cultural questions.

Overall, the music we hear, the things we see, and the points the interviewees make in the documentary actually all suggest the fact that there was no coherent thing called disco music. At the simplest level, disco is just music that is played in a disco, and the issue that really needs answering is about why and how this assortment of dance music, dancers and musical artists was organised into a coherent whole. The answer is there in the sidelines of the documentary, of course. Record companies learnt that discos were a new promotional opportunity and dancers were a new market for record sales. The economics of disco is as important as its culture.

The last third of the documentary does deal with celebrity disco glamour and the chart success of records now marketed as disco. However, European dance music and *Saturday Night Fever* appear from nowhere in *The Joy of Disco* story. As both have important and comprehensible stories of their own, and offer a partial explanation of the why and how of disco, their abrupt introduction requires analysis. Of course, neither fit within the totalising story of disco as primarily a New York-based African American music through which gay men and feminist women change the world. Instead the programme presents disco as simply the introduction of out gay culture into mainstream culture, even though all their examples were of disco joining other instances of out gay culture in mainstream culture.

If it is true that disco has not been taken seriously for thirty-five years, there is an interesting bigger question to be asked about the degree to which *The Joy of Disco* actually takes it seriously. The programme impressively connects the rise of the disco and DJ-based dance music to important liberation struggles, and in doing so challenges the clichés used by dance music's detractors. It is easy to argue, though, that in seeking a simple and accessible story, such documentaries close down thinking about the importance of popular music in our culture, and in doing so make culture less rich and less nuanced. Particularly in a programme on a public service station, we could expect a documentary that explores long-held assumptions about disco, rather than simply replacing them with another set.

A MODEL FOR ANALYSING POPULAR MUSIC HISTORY

The central argument of this chapter is that we should not use existing histories of popular music as defining stories of popular music's development, but as resources that we can utilise together with other forms of research to understand particular historical moments – including the present – as diverse musical cultures. When we are dealing with histories of popular music, then, we need to identify the discourse of the author of the history, as well as tease out the discourses of those involved in the historical moment itself. As Dick Bradley (1992: 31) has argued:

the very constituting of rock as a body of musical practices is largely the work of writers, of talkers, of listeners reflecting discursively on the music and setting a context for their own and other people's listening and making processes.

We are therefore not just seeking to understand a history of events, but a history of thinking about popular music, its interpretation and evaluation.

To do so we need to recast the characteristics of existing histories in a manner that takes account of the criticisms outlined above. This approach has three aspects. First, we should aim to examine moments in the history of music culture, but rather than choosing just those seen as significant through a totalising theory, we should start with single moments and then seek to understand their significance. Second, we should keep a sense of the mainstream and the margins but we should seek to examine how they interact as discourses of musical culture and how they make each other meaningful at any particular moment. Finally, we should be interested in the cultural material out of which a particular practice is built, but we should see this as more than a simple idea of musical roots, and instead as the musical and cultural repertoires which are available for particular music culture practices.

These three aspects of historical analysis can be developed into an analytical model that can be used to guide an analysis of moments of musical history. The model emphasises the relationships between four key musical and cultural repertoires and their interaction with three important social, economic and technical factors that allow us to understand the immediate society in which music-making, distribution and consumption takes place. Diagrammatically the model could be represented as shown in Figure 1.3.

The idea of musical and cultural repertoires is examined in detail in Chapter 2. The other dimension of the model, looking at the social, economic and technological factors involved in moments of popular music

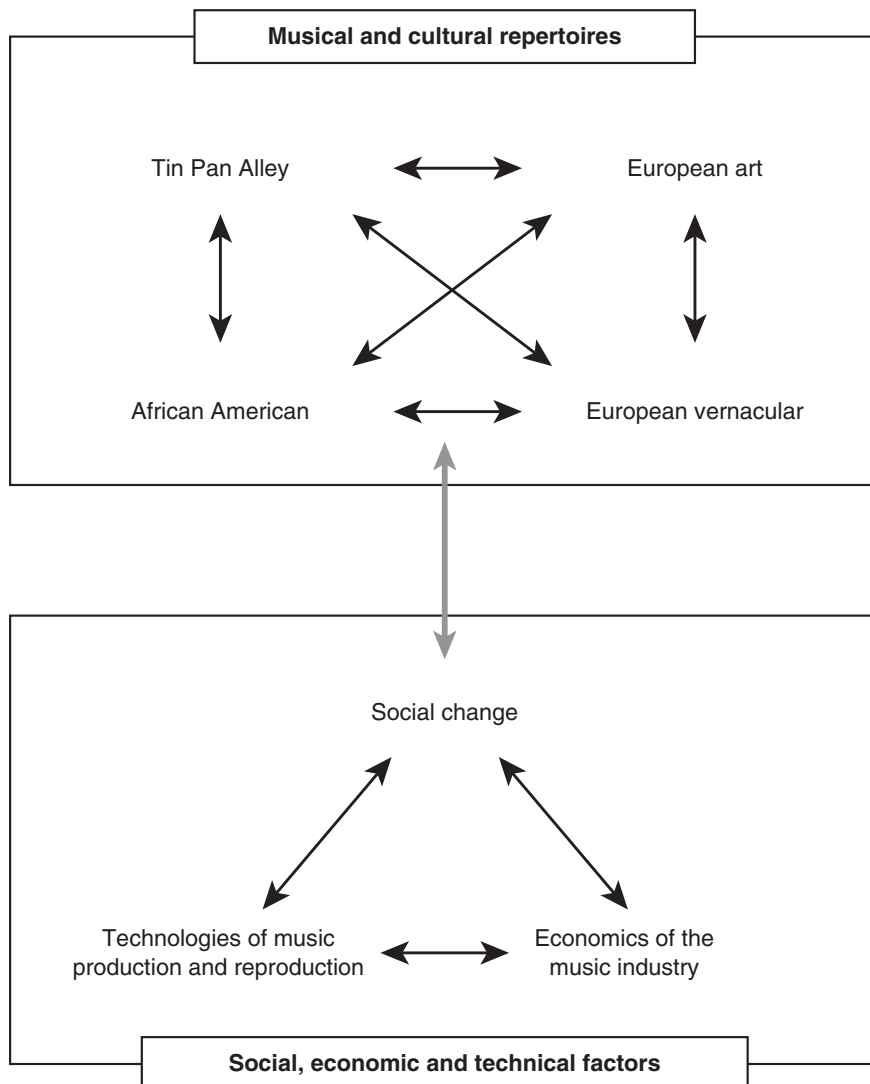


Figure 1.3 A model for historical analysis

history, is developed in Chapter 3. The fourth chapter will demonstrate how this model can be applied in three case studies.

SUMMARY

This chapter has focussed on the way we can conduct a historical analysis of popular music culture. Histories have tended to emphasise significant

moments, give more prominence to marginal, rather than mainstream forms, and see one music as the root of another. Although these approaches provide us with valuable insights, when combined with the idea of the 'rock era' they have tended to privilege some forms of music and practice over others, and have narrowed our understanding of history, often into a totalising theory of the development of music culture. Instead it is more productive to try to unearth the plurality of voices within popular music culture, and to recognise that our knowledge, and that of the writers we read, is constructed through the discourses we utilise.

Recognising this presents us with a significant challenge. It is just not possible to individually examine all the single events in the history of popular music. So particularly when starting this study we need a set of analytical tools with which to make sense of it all. We need an approach that avoids reducing all the diverse meanings of popular music culture to that of a totalising story – and that includes avoiding both the story of rock's coherence and progress, and the story of its fragmentation – but also one that allows us to start making sense of each single moment and its whole history.

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