

The same old song?

Roy Stafford

"One of the advantages (and difficulties) of teaching pop music is that it immediately involves the common experience of the students . . . organised through a continual employment of such common-sensical categories as 'entertainment', 'leisure' and 'pleasure', and this has pertinent consequences for a teaching situation (not least being friction that can arise if it is felt that the student's leisure space, the realm of the 'private', is being violated and transformed into a public exercise in academia)". (Chambers 1981:5)

This quote sums up a widely held view of teaching popular music that prevailed in the 1980s. Twenty years later, I think that it is still a worthwhile point to make, but the triangular relationship between teachers, student and 'the subject of media studies' has possibly changed. Students perhaps now expect to study all aspects of popular culture, including popular music, and the exams culture means that they possibly accept the need to violate a private space with public discussion. Even so, media teachers would do well tread warily, whether they believe (naively?) that they can share the music culture of their students or they acknowledge that it is to them an alien world. I certainly approach this discussion from the latter perspective and here I want to focus on the less 'personal' issues of industry and institution and on the ways in which ideas about popular music are circulated and mediated by music journalism (i.e. rather than on what the music itself might represent to a specific fan base).

The curriculum

Suddenly, popular music is all over the curriculum. In 2007 it figures, in the form of 'the music press', as the controlled test for AQA's GCSE Media Studies and also as one of two options for the unseen element of OCR's GCSE Media Studies (as music magazines). In 2008, Popular Music on TV is an examined topic in

WJEC GCSE Media Studies. At AS, 'Music Culture and Radio' is an option for OCR's Unit 2731 Textual Analysis in terms of representation. At A2, it features as an industry to study (one of two) for WJEC Unit 5 'Changing Industries' and as 'Music Programmes on TV' as an option in OCR's Unit 2735. What follows are some ideas about the music industry and the music press.

The music industry now

Now is a good time to be looking at the music industry since it is in a state of turmoil and, some might argue, teeters on the edge of collapse. That shouldn't happen of course because the product itself continues to be popular, but there are serious questions about how the business of making and distributing music can remain profitable. For several years now, sales of recorded music have been falling or have remained static. You can check these figures in various places.

A good indication of the crisis is the annual report of the Recording Industry Association of America (www.riaa.com). The statistics available from the site show that the American industry reached its peak in 1999, with shipments of product valued at \$14.6 billion. By 2003 this had fallen to \$11.1 billion and although the development of digital downloads has seen an improvement in sales, in 2005 the figure was still only \$12.3 billion.

If you want to get a sense of the UK market (the world's third largest after the US and Japan) go to the International Federation of Phonographic Industries site at www.ifpi.org. This reveals that in 2005, the UK industry was static with new digital sales exactly matching the decline in CD sales.

Getting into industry and institution

Media students (and, often, their teachers) seem to find concepts of industry and institution the most difficult, or perhaps the least pleasurable to grapple with. The good news is that the music industry should prove both

interesting and enjoyable to research. Here are some reasons why:

1. The UK is in a strong position as a major market and as a major producer (three of 2005's top albums worldwide came from UK acts). There is a great deal of support for the music industry and plenty of interest.

2. Compared to other media industries, there is not the same kind of domination by the six or seven major media conglomerates. Yes, Universal and Sony are by far the largest players, but EMI represents a UK major with international clout and Warner Music is no longer part of Time Warner. In addition, 'independent' music companies have a significant share and because of the success of the iPod and iTunes, Apple is also a significant player. At the time of writing, Universal looks like buying the music interests of the German major Bertelsmann (currently organised as a joint undertaking with Sony) and EMI is always under consideration as a bid target, so there are plenty of news stories to find.

3. The music business is 'local' as well as 'global'. Wherever you live in the UK, there will be a recording studio somewhere in your locality. There will be the means to make and distribute music in your school or college and in many student bedrooms. The promotion of live music events happens on your doorstep. This isn't an industry that only exists in metropolitan centres.

4. Technological change has had an enormous impact on the music industry and it isn't over yet. Record shops are disappearing, download opportunities are proliferating – and yet, vinyl is making a comeback. Online sales may drive the high street record store out of business, but they are also encourage us to buy a much greater variety of music.

5. Piracy and the impact on pricing and profits of music products is something

that implicates all the students in your classroom. Some of them might wish to earn a living from music – all of them have got used to the idea that music is freely available to download or to copy. It should be possible to work that into a debate.

An industry project

How can you engage students in studying the industry? One idea is to divide the class into small groups (of three or four), possibly allowing them to form groups based around their shared musical interests. The brief would be to create a new recording artist (an individual or a band) and develop a strategy to market the chosen artist as both a recording star and a performer. It would be useful to introduce such a project by outlining some standard models of how this might be done:

- through a major music label, aiming for an international profile;
- through an independent label, focusing more on a specialised market;
- on a DIY model, operating via a website and local infrastructure.

Your students could decide for themselves which model to explore – or you could assign a couple of groups to each model. Students could research via the internet and via discussion with any local music industry contacts they can find. The outcome would be a computer presentation (i.e. PowerPoint etc.) of their findings, which would include perhaps some images to represent the artist, some background on the various companies involved and an outline of a marketing strategy in relation to the chosen model.

You would also need to run through some basic marketing ideas in order to make this work, but the outline structure of the brief could be pushed towards different key concepts such as representation (constructing a star image), distribution, ideas of genre etc. I've seen this model work well with GNVQ/VCE Media groups – although it is important to stress that students need to do some hard-nosed research if they are going to suggest strategies that might work in the real world.

The idea for this approach as a way into industry/institution was introduced to me by a teacher who was intrigued to discover that Bertelsmann was a company that had some of the major music acts on its roster, including some with a radical

'edge'. But the parent company is a relatively conservative family company that has had to face questions about its actions in Germany during the Nazi period. Faceless corporations aren't very interesting, the teacher argued, but when there is a back story it can be used to trigger student enthusiasm. Compared to other media industries, music perhaps offers the best possibilities for debating the decisions that 'alternative' or 'radical' musicians might have to take if offered a big deal by a major record label.

The Music Press

One of the ways in which the music industry 'reaches' potential record buyers and concertgoers is via the music press – which now appears as a topic at GCSE. This Summer's 'unseen' paper for OCR's GCSE Media Studies offered students a choice between a moving image text and a print text.

The print text was the front cover and a contents page for *Mojo* magazine. It will be interesting to see the Examiner's Report to discover how students approached this study. *Mojo* is a magazine aimed mainly at male readers and the median age of readers is around 37 (details from the *Mojo* page at www.emapadvertising.com/magazines/portfolio.asp?ID=18). The magazine claims that in the new world of downloads it has attracted more younger readers, but this seems doubtful.

Nick Lacey has prepared an analysis of a *Mojo* magazine cover and has generously agreed to have it posted on the *itp* website. You can find his analysis on: www.itpmag.demon.co.uk/Bookandwebresources/musicresources.html

Nick's analysis suggests that the front page design and layout follows a set of fairly rigid conventions – certainly in the market segment targeting older music fans (compare *Mojo*, *Uncut*, *Word* etc.). Titles for younger readers are still conventional, but somewhat messier (and livelier). Much of the originality has gone out of the music press since it became resolutely corporate, but you can still find design ideas that are different amongst the small specialist magazines and fanzines.

Research into the market

There is actually an enormous range of music magazines available, but it's not straightforward to list them all. A large newsagents or a specialist music store like HMV, Virgin or Borders will carry a

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fair range. Students could be tasked to categorise the magazines they can find on display, building up a database. What they might find is:

- an age-related categorisation with *NME* and *Kerrang!* now at the youthful end and *Word* proclaiming its target of (50 year-old) '50 quid bloke' (that darling of the industry who buys large numbers of CDs/DVDs etc.);
- an increasingly large number of 'musician mags', especially with the re-birth of guitar bands and acoustic music;
- industry or trade magazines such as *Music Week* in the UK, *Billboard* in the US;
- an attempt to follow musical genres which works in two ways – in genres of popular music for younger readers (heavy metal, rock, urban, dance etc.) and more specialised titles for older readers ('world', country, jazz etc.)

However, many of the best selling magazines such as *Q* or *NME* are difficult to categorise in terms of musical genres. Students may decide that the definitions of music covered in these magazines mirror the playlists of music radio. Indeed, 'masthead' radio stations such as the EMAP stations *Q*, *Mojo* and *Kerrang!* do precisely that. *Q* radio tells us that its listeners, "love the best music of all eras with a passion" (www.emapadvertising.com/radio/portfolio.asp?ID=6)

Of course, not all titles are easily available through retail outlets. Smaller magazines work mainly through mail order/subscription, with or without a major internet presence. Such magazines range from specialist titles focusing on specific genres to fanzines, both general and performer-based.

Some titles have become entirely internet based and are distributed largely by mail order or indeed by digital download. External factors such as the change in UK postal charges may cause some of these small magazines to change their shape (A5 could be cheaper to post) and the moves to change retail distribution arrangements for small magazines may mean that mail order/download subscription becomes even more important. (See Branston and Stafford (2006), Chapter 13).

Title	Publisher	Target readership	Musical genre	Frequency	Circulation	Readership	Website
<i>NME</i>	IPC	Male 65%, 15-24	Indie	Weekly	74,206	395,000	www.ipcmedia.com/magazines/nme/
<i>Mojo</i>	EMAP	Male 25-45	For the 'discerning music fan'	Monthly	121,746	271,000	www.mojo4music.com/
<i>Uncut</i>	IPC	Male (96%) 35-55	None (includes film)	Monthly	88,756	280,000	www.ipcmedia.com/magazines/uncut/
<i>Kerrang!</i>	EMAP	15-24, 60% male	Heavy Metal	Weekly	80,186	432,000	www.kerrang.com/
<i>Q</i>	EMAP	15-35	None	Monthly	158,271	695,000	www.q4music.com/
<i>Vibe</i>	(Independent US)		Urban	Monthly			www.vibe.com/
<i>Songlines</i>	(Independent UK)		World	8 issues p.a.			www.songlines.co.uk
<i>fRoots</i>	(Independent UK)	53% musicians 35-55, 75% ABC1	Roots	9 issues p.a.	12,000	40,000	www.frootsmag.com
<i>The Wire</i>	(Independent UK)		Jazz, Avant garde	Monthly			www.thewire.co.uk
<i>Dazed & Confused</i>	(Independent UK)	Women 52%, 15-35	Fashion, Music, Film	Monthly	85,200	383,400	www.confused.co.uk
<i>Plan B</i>	(Independent UK)		'Counter culture', music, film	Monthly			www.planbmag.com
<i>Maverick</i>	(AAG Publishing UK)		Country, Roots	Monthly			www.maverick-country.com/
<i>Black Velvet Magazine</i>	(Independent UK)		Independent Rock Fanzine	Quarterly			www.blackvelvetmagazine.com
<i>Acoustic</i>	Oyster Media	Acoustic Guitarists					www.acousticmagazine.com
<i>Mixmag</i>	Development Hell	Median age 26, 72% male	Dance Music	Monthly	41,757	304,000	www.mixmag.net
<i>Metal Hammer</i>	Future Publishing		'Hardcore Metal'	Monthly	45,359		www.metalhammer.co.uk
<i>BBC Music</i>	Origin Publishing		Classical Music	13 issues p.a.	51,272		www.originpublishing.co.uk/consumer/bbcmusic.htm
<i>Blues and Soul Magazine</i>	Blues and Soul Ltd.		Blues and Soul	Fortnightly			www.bluesandsoul.com
<i>Computer Music</i>	Future Publishing			Monthly	20,558		www.computermusic.co.uk
<i>Clash Magazine</i>	(Independent – Scotland)		Indie	Bi-Monthly			www.clashmagazine.com
<i>Classic Rock</i>	Future Publishing		Rock	Monthly	56,037		www.classicrockmagazine.com
<i>Music Week</i>		Trade		Weekly			www.musicweek.com
<i>UK Rock</i>			50s Rock 'n Roll	Monthly			www.ukrock.net

Selected music magazine titles circulating in the UK. (Circulation figures from www.abc.org.uk or from the publisher's site. Readership figures from publisher sites. For *Mojo*, *Q*, *Kerrang!* see www.emapadvertising.com)

The chart opposite is an indication of the range of magazines available. It's by no means comprehensive or complete! It's there to provide a starting point and diligent students should find more titles in both shop displays and on the internet. A useful exercise might be to concentrate on just a couple of market sectors – such as high street magazines for 15-35 and specialist magazines for urban music or indie etc.

Historical context

AQA's 'set test' requires GCSE students to work on aspects of the music press related to all the media key concepts. This includes a requirement to consider how music magazines have developed since the 1950s. (Details of what AQA expects can be found on Chief Examiner Pete Wall's page at Collins publishers: www.collinseducation.com/autosites/default.aspx?pageID=1441) Getting hold of music magazines from the 1950s may be difficult for teachers to organise, but eBay and second-hand bookshops offer one solution. What kinds of ideas might students need to consider in looking at the history?

The first music magazines tended to be either industry trade papers or magazines for musicians. In the UK, *Melody Maker* founded in 1926 was famously the weekly paper in which musicians scoured the classifieds to find work. *Melody Maker* was indeed a 'paper' – produced on cheap newsprint, as were all the early publications, including American papers such as *Rolling Stone* when it appeared in the late 1960s.

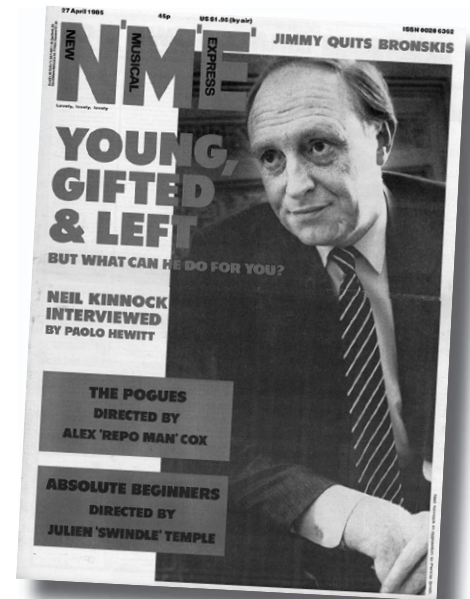
Melody Maker was slow to respond to the 'new' music represented by the rock 'n roll in the 1950s, losing ground to the *New Musical Express (NME)* first published in 1952. Having made up ground, *MM* was again slow to respond to punk and New Wave in the late 1970s and when it tried to become more 'poppy' and younger teen-orientated in the late 1990s it collapsed, many of its journalists following editor Allen Jones to the new title, *Uncut*, from the same publishing group, IPC.

In the fifty years between the mid 1950s rivalry of *MM* and *NME* to the present, music papers/magazines have changed their approach as popular music itself has changed, but their overall structure has stayed much the same. Students might pick out some of these points:

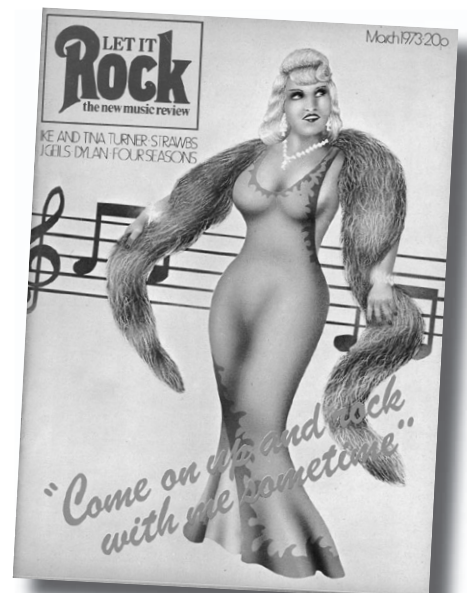
- The press exist in a symbiotic relationship with the industry and the record buyers. They both influence what happens and are subject to the wider cultural changes taking place in popular music culture generally.
- The biggest changes arguably took place in the 1960s and 1970s as 'pop' became 'rock' and then 'punk' – not simply because the music changed, but also because attitudes towards journalism and writing about popular culture changed as well. By the end of the 1960s, new, young music journalists were responding to the New Journalism coming out of America (e.g. journalists wrote about themselves participating in music culture and used the techniques of realist fiction in writing their stories). Music writers also began to include other areas of popular culture and politics in their coverage. By the late 1970s this 'counter culture' was being dubbed as 'rockist' and writing on punk became much more anarchic and nihilistic.
- Magazines moved into reviewing film etc. quite early on, certainly by the 1970s, and film and even television stars began to feature alongside musicians.

The three titles illustrated here offer snapshots from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s. *Let it Rock* was a 'serious' magazine for UK rock fans, with 60 black and white A4 pages crammed with tiny print and featuring many of the major writers of the period. The cover is glossy and in colour, but otherwise, the paper is newsprint quality. The line drawing of Mae West signals a New Journalism piece by the eccentric Ian Whitcomb about the great camp icon and her new singing career.

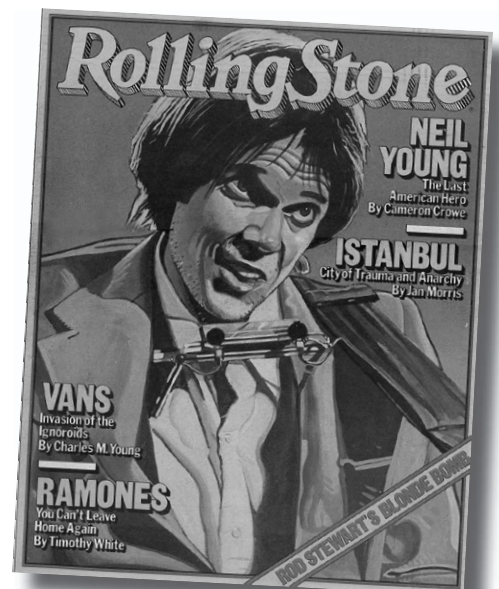
In 1979, *Rolling Stone* was still a newsprint product but with some colour on its 72 tabloid pages. It had lost most of the radical edge which characterised its late 1960s/early 70s output (and the ads for cars and stereo equipment were getting bigger). Nevertheless, it was still a 'solid read' with long articles of several thousand words. This issue carried a feature by the great travel writer Jan Morris – nothing to do with music, but very high quality literature – and a New Journalism piece on a kind of festival for truckers ('Vans – Invasion of the Ignoroids'). Neil Young is interviewed at length by Cameron Crowe (now a



NME, 27 April 1985



Let it Rock, March 1973



Rolling Stone, 8 February 1979

major Hollywood director). The issue also covered movies and photography.

If *Let it Rock* (monthly) and *Rolling Stone* (fortnightly) represented the intellectual end of the rock spectrum, *NME* as a weekly always attempted to be 'streetwise' and 'of the moment'. In 1985 that meant an interview with Neil Kinnock, the then 'young and working-class' Labour leader at a time when youth issues of unemployment/YTS were to the fore and politics and young people was

a relationship to be discussed (cf Blair and 'Cool Britannia' and David Cameron appearing on YouTube).

Coming up to date, AQA has recognised that since the demise of *Smash Hits* magazine, much of the work of reaching younger music buyers will be done online. This will mean researching My Space and YouTube, and the website presence of magazines like *The Fly*, free to pick up in music shops and freely downloadable from: www.the-fly.co.uk

Popular music book reviews

The Popular Music Studies Reader, Andy Bennett, Barry Shank and Jason Toynbee, Routledge 2006, £19.99, 408pp, ISBN 0415307104

Popular Music: The Key Concepts, Roy Shuker, Routledge 2005 (2nd edition), £14.99, 324pp, ISBN 0415347696

There is a growing body of work and course provision in higher education for popular music study. How much of this is accessible for teachers interested in 14-19 education?

Of the two books here, I think that the Reader may, perhaps surprisingly, be of more interest than the Key Concepts guide. Course or Topic Readers are popular because they offer course

providers in HE the chance to put short pieces on reading lists. *The Popular Music Studies Reader* excels in this respect, offering 43 short pieces, each around eight pages in length and organised into nine sections, each with an introduction. Music as text and as practice, various analyses of music as culture, as industry and as technology are offered alongside a section on music and other media and 'music, gender and sexuality'.

Readers often struggle to be contemporary and the material here was mostly written in the 1990s and some of it refers to relatively obscure forms of avant garde music. And yet, I think quite a few of the articles are potentially interesting. Some could definitely be used to give students starting points or models for study in relation to critical research projects or extended essays.

I particularly enjoyed 'Rules of Rebellion: Slam dancing, Moshing and the American Alternative Scene' by William Tsitsos. This 1995 essay involves 'participant observation' on dancefloors and could, I think, help students to see how they could explore the

'lived culture' of different music genres.

There is a paper on 'Anglo-American Music Journalism' by Dave Laing (the editor of *Let it Rock* magazine back in 1973 – see previous page). This would make a useful background text for studying the music press, especially in terms of institutions and

ideologies. The same section carries 'Radio and Popular Music', exploring working practices in radio stations. Elsewhere, one of the best known of the more recent UK academics in popular music studies, David Hesmondhalgh, looks at the 'British Dance Music Industry' and discusses how concepts like authorship and genre help to distinguish different forms of music practice. Where rock has been

'auteurist', dance music tends to downplay authors and stress the immediate emotional impact of 'private' music.

The cultural studies influence on the Reader is evident in the coverage of various 'local' and hybrid musical forms such as bhangra and rai from North Africa. It's also good to see Paul Gilroy on 'Black music and the politics of authenticity'.

This is a book worth acquiring for a large media department as it may well help to inspire individual students to pursue their own interests in popular music in ways which make use of their understanding of media concepts.

Roy Shuker's *Popular Music: The Key Concepts* book should also be a useful reference source, but I found it curiously disappointing. Shuker is a major name in the field and this is the second edition of the book. However, I tried a simple test. I looked up entries for terms that I have

References and further reading

Gill Branston and Roy Stafford (2006) *The Media Student's Book* (4th edition), London: Routledge (also for the music industry case study)

Iain Chambers (1981) 'Pop Music: A Teaching Perspective' in *Screen Education* No.39

Cath Davies (2006) *Teaching the Music Press*, Auteur Publications

Check www.itpmag.demon.co.uk/Bookandwebresources/musicresources.html for updates.

seen in student writing but never properly understood: 'moshing', 'emo' and 'garage'. None of them are covered in this book.

Roy Shuker is based in New Zealand. I don't know if he travels widely, but he certainly gets the UK and US music press. It doesn't seem to tell him that much about black music (the industry term 'urban' isn't in the book either). For instance, the single entry under 'reggae' doesn't recognise the real impact of Jamaican music in the UK from the 1960s through to the late 1980s. Shuker argues that only with Bob Marley did reggae appeal to more than a 'cult' audience in the UK. In fact, many reggae songs from a wide variety of acts made the singles charts in the UK and I can never think of margarita without hearing Desmond Dekker's 'Israelites' turned into 'Vitalite'.

But perhaps it is unfair to criticise the guide in this way. Shuker's main aim is to support students on courses of popular music studies and in the Introduction he justifies his exclusion of classical music and much of jazz and blues in order to focus on:

"traditional 'rock' and 'pop' forms, and their derivative styles/genres, along with more recently prominent genres such as rap, 'world music', and the various styles of dance music." (p xiii).

In its own terms, the book works well and would give students a good idea of how popular music studies are organised in higher education. On this basis it

is recommended, but I'd like to see better coverage of black music, especially in terms of its diversity and globalised presence. The book does begin to cover the impact of digital downloads and internet distribution, but it already seems out of date on that score.

Roy Stafford

