

Authentic to Whom? Re-assessing Historical Writing on Popular Music

First the deal-makers in fast food took the malt powder out and made the milkshake; then in the music business they took the soul out and made pop-rock. (Clarke 1995, p.520)

Donald Clarke made this statement in a chapter on Anglo-American popular music during the 1970s and 1980s in his book *The Rise and Fall of Popular Music*. That Clarke can dismiss the majority of commercially successful popular music during that period in a text that the Irish Independent called “The definitive book on the development of modern popular music” is striking. It is also alarming for a number of reasons. On a personal level I find Clarke’s writing disconcerting since he launches scathing attacks on much of the music that I grew up listening to and that I continue to value. Yet for those of us who have an interest in historical accounts of popular music in the U.K and the U.S.A, Clarke’s ‘history’ and historical writing of a similar nature can present far greater problems than a mere affront to certain musical tastes. During this paper I intend to make clear how such writing can serve to mask the multiple histories that can be produced in relation to the popular music of recent decades. In order to accomplish this it is necessary to specifically focus on various historical texts. However, firstly, to aid an appreciation of the problems with the writing I will examine, it is useful to consider some definitions and uses of history.

John Tosh points out in *The Pursuit of History* how histories have a social role. They provide us with a “usable past” and help us to make sense of previous time periods (Tosh 1991, p.10). A particular history with its diverse factors will often be presented to us in the form of a narrative. Often chaotic events will be structured in a way that makes them easier to understand. Therefore, the syllabus of a history course in a school usually tends to have a chronological order and is quite likely to emphasize specific ‘key’ themes or events. It is inevitable that popular music history is almost always presented in a similar fashion. Therefore I would agree with John Tosh’s assertion that all history is selective. This implies that popular music histories are constructed through processes of inclusion and exclusion. There is no unified picture or ‘whole story’ that can be retrieved. Consequently, as I will demonstrate, a flexible approach to popular music history and the concept of history in general is essential.

Thus, as I have suggested through drawing on the writing of John Tosh, people produce histories. As Keith Negus stresses in *Popular Music in Theory*, histories are not ‘neutral’ or ‘natural’; rather they are constructed by individuals to serve certain interests. This does not mean that people are free to make of history what they like. Social and cultural contexts influence the production of histories as they do other aspects of life. Yet as Negus writes: “Some dialogues are presented with specific beginnings and endings and seem to dominate particular periods of time; other dialogues seem strangely absent from history.” (Negus 1996, p.138). Historical writing seems to be able to provide a ‘common sense’ impression of what was important or relevant about the past. I would argue that historical accounts linked to popular music are extremely effective in accomplishing this. Recently my younger brother said to me that he had been arguing with one of his school friends over Beatles albums. His response to the idea that *Revolver* (The Beatles 1966) was their best album was one of annoyance. As he said assuredly to me “Everybody knows that *Sergeant Pepper* was their best album”. It is interesting to consider how he came to that conclusion. Quite possibly his opinion was derived from the privileged position that the *Sergeant Pepper*’s

Lonely-Hearts Club Band album occupies within British popular music history (The Beatles 1967). After all he does not own the album and to my knowledge may not even have heard any songs from it. Whatever the various reasons for my brother's sweeping statement, it seems clear that certain historical narratives had a significant influence on him forming that lofty impression of an album that he had not heard. Past phenomena are effectively structured in terms of 'importance' in certain historical writings on popular music. For instance, the following passage from an article on 'Miss Odetta' in the current edition of Folk Roots is revealing in relation to this subject of prioritized events, people and time periods:

Myths and legends. Romance and folklore. Music has more than its fair share of them all. But if you could travel back through the mists of time to any point in musical history, where and when would you choose? New Orleans during the First World War in the company of Kid Ory, King Oliver and Louis Armstrong might be a strong contender. That crude Texas studio in 1936 with Robert Johnson would also attract numerous flies on the wall. Then again, perhaps your dream would be to hang out in Memphis circa 1954 with Presley, Perkins, Lewis and Cash or swell the audience on a sweaty night at the Cavern in 1962. (Nigel Williamson in Folk Roots No. 191, May 1999, p.45).

In this piece the author appears to have carefully chosen certain historical moments that he considered desirable and familiar to his readers. He is assuming that they will have some knowledge of the events that he is referring to because otherwise they would need further clarification of who these musicians were and why they were significant during these time periods. It is useful to consider why he may have chosen these disparate moments. Interestingly, many are relatively formative points in the careers of the artists mentioned; the suggestion is that this was their 'heyday', their 'prime'. If I could go back in time I would not travel to any of the aforementioned places. Instead I would like to have been at Lewisham Odeon in 1980 when Van Halen first traveled to Britain for a headlining tour. To witness Van Halen's lead singer David Lee Roth pop a bottle of champagne all over the crowd and proclaim that Lewisham was the 'rock n' roll capital of the world!' would have been extremely entertaining. It is doubtful that the Folk Roots readers would be expected to find this particular historical episode as alluring. The privileged moment that I would like to retrieve has its own place within the various narratives that have traced Van Halen's past. My prioritizing of this event has also been shaped by the knowledge of hard rock and heavy metal history that I have developed as a fan. Being self-reflexive I might conclude that a contributing factor in my choice was an awareness of notions of Van Halen's 'peak'. This is a celebrated moment. Guitarist Eddie Van Halen was considered to be at the 'pinnacle' of his form at this time. Yet there are problems with this - why this moment? Why not other performances and other time periods? In the Folk Roots article why were there no references to more recent occurrences? How can this selection be justified? Many such selections seem to rely on a vague notion of 'authenticity'. This is a perplexing concept that warrants closer inspection because of its apparent significance in relation to popular music.

Walter Benjamin in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' wrote that "The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (Benjamin (1936) 1973, p.223). Thus the word authentic is tied in with ideas of originality. Benjamin suggested that it is the 'aura' of a work of art linked to its position as authentic that is under threat in the age of mechanical reproduction.

New technologies and distribution methods make it more difficult to pinpoint the original work of art and the cult of the original becomes increasingly irrelevant during an era of mass production. However, as Simon Frith argues, much critical writing on popular music has sought to counteract this 'threat' and rescue the particular works of musicians, celebrating them as 'authentic'. As Frith writes: "Good music is the authentic expression of something – a person, an idea, a feeling, a shared experience, a Zeitgeist. Bad music is inauthentic – it expresses nothing. The most common term of abuse in rock criticism is 'bland' – bland music has nothing in it and is made only to be commercially pleasing" (Frith 1987, p.136). Yet often the criteria used to assess what is bland or alternatively 'historically significant' is vague and idiosyncratic. Histories that are constructed through the writing of the rock press can often appear arbitrary due to the various agendas of the publications. As Jason Toynbee writes:

In a sense all rock writing is historical. Because it is premised on the need to supply change, the music press takes on a periodising role which involves, on the one hand, nurturing the new and, on the other, killing off the old. (Toynbee in *Popular Music* 1993 p.297)

The expulsion of popular music from the past is therefore often accompanied by the promotion of a new 'scene' or genre that is seen to have 'emerged' and gained importance amongst the buyers of certain music publications. Toynbee goes on to point out how the rock press (particularly weekly newspapers such as *New Musical Express* (NME) and *Melody Maker* in Britain) also functions to limit a sense of 'rock history' by establishing 'rock canons' featuring 'credible' artists from the past and excluding many performers through this process. The following segment from a recent edition of NME clearly illustrates how writing on rock music can suggest what is historically 'pertinent' whilst outlining what could be considered obsolete:

The late-'90s have been something of a golden period for female-fronted soul/R and B music. Sublime albums from the likes of Lauryn Hill, Missy 'Misdemeanour' Elliot and Erykah Badu have revitalised the genre, washing away the histrionic '80s nightmares of Whitney et al and initiating a brave, auteurist trend in distinct relief to the formulaic mire of much early-'90s soul (Chick, NME 21 Aug 1999, p. 34)

This section from an album review implies that the performers mentioned have established a historical precedent from which present and past performers have to be judged and compared. In this instance soul music made in the 1980s by female artists such as Whitney Houston is dismissed as inferior. The authenticity of female performers like Lauryn Hill is seemingly self-evident. They are celebrated as 'brave auteurs' and this choice of language helps to attach status and prestige as individuals. The term 'auteur' itself is a complex one that has its roots in film theory and has been surrounded by many debates amongst critics and scholars. Basically it has been used to denote the stylistic traits and themes that have been identified in relation to a particular filmmaker's body of work. Susan Hayward has pointed out how the concept of the 'auteur' is a romantic one and how the notion of an 'auteur theory' that developed during the 1960s was deeply problematic, as she writes:

The term 'auteur theory' came about in the 1960s as a mistranslation

by the American film critic Andrew Sarris...Sarris used auteurism to nationalistic and chauvinistic ends to elevate American/Hollywood cinema to the status of the 'only good cinema', with but one or two European art films worthy of mention. As a result of this misuse of the term, cinema became divided into a canon of the 'good' or 'great' directors and the rest. (Hayward 1996, p.15)

If we consider the use of such a term in relation to popular music it appears that this concept functions in a similar way to construct a romantic impression of an autonomous individual. With regard to the rock press, it could be suggested that such writing can aid the promotion of new material by deflecting the attention away from the 'old'. Yet as I elucidated earlier this is only 'part of the story' since much writing in such publications actively seeks to promote 'past' genres or 'traditions' by constructing 'canons' (albeit ones that are subject to regular change).

Whereas writing in the rock press may often contain passing (and sometimes biting) comments on past musical events, longer historical texts and academic accounts obviously have the capacity to explore the popular music of the past in more detail. I will now focus upon a number of examples from works of this nature. In each case examination reveals that the treatment of music histories is not dissimilar to that which I have already outlined. To narrow the scope of my analysis I have focused on writing that concerns specific historical moments and periods during the last three decades in the United States.

The latter half of the 1960s in the U.S, which saw the development of the counterculture movement, is often singled out for special attention in histories of rock music. Songs of protest, hippies and rock festivals, images of all these are conjured up through the narratives that have described these times. Whilst I do not want to belittle the significance of the events in North America during this time, what I want to concentrate on is how they have often been contrasted with later decades and moments. In 1987 George and Julie Plasketes had an article entitled "From Woodstock Nation to Pepsi Generation" published in the academic journal *Popular Music and Society*. This title betrays the authors' intentions. They construct a historical narrative that portrays a 'fall from grace' for popular music in the United States. Consequently the Woodstock festival becomes a kind of cultural zenith, nowhere is this more adequately illustrated than in the following segment of their account:

From Woodstock's euphoria and surging belief in omnipotence of inherent goodness and spontaneity of brotherhood, to the collapse of the millennial dream, an Armageddon at Altamont that brought fear, violence and death. From utopia to anti-topia. The Age of Aquarius ended with the flash of a knife...Almost overnight the dream had ended.

(Plasketes and Plasketes in *Popular Music and Society* 1987, p.32)

Their choice of language illustrates quite clearly how a certain 'history' can be presented as a romantic narrative. In this instance Plasketes and Plasketes draw on the idea of the 'end of an era' and with it they attribute broken dreams and failed promises. As they continue their commentary on the 'state of popular music' from their contemporary point of view they make no concerted efforts to tackle questions of what value people could possibly invest in popular music of the present. Instead they use their experiences of being fans of late 1960s rock as a template through which to assess

rock during the 1980s. James F. Harris in his book *Philosophy at 33* and a third rpm (published in 1993) adopts a very similar position. In his final chapter Harris contrasted the 'collective unity' of the 'Sixties' to the apparent commercialism and hedonism of the 'Eighties' and 'Nineties'. As he wrote:

In a way it doesn't matter whether there are two dozen or three dozen or even more distinctive styles of rock music today. The important point is that there is no sense of shared community – no sharing of messages, dreams, and aspirations – in these fragmented and fractionalized genres of music. (Harris 1993, p.236)

This passage suggests that ideals of community and togetherness became totally absent from any music after 1969. Harris may be referring to a particular kind of ideology that was promoted through some musical performances of the late '60s period. Yet accounts such as Harris' imbue the past with an essence and romanticize it, suggesting that a certain historical period can be more 'authentic' than another can. Indeed, Plasketes and Plasketes take this essentialist notion of rock to an extreme. Developing Bob Dylan's comments that there was an "electricity in the air" during the 1960s they suggest that there was an essence to rock music during the period that was almost mystical. Their concluding comments promote the idea that that essence is somehow retrievable and they define it in a rather vague way:

That electricity - for not only the artist, but audience, music industry, rock culture alike – is out there to find. It is more than electricity that is offered by any television or heavy metal band. It is the electricity that only music can provide. It is the electricity that the rock culture thrives on. At times, it may only be a shock. Or it might be bright. Or dim, waiting for tomorrow. but, it's out there – somewhere.

Essentialist accounts of prior historical epochs are unhelpful because they close off historical analysis. On the one hand they suggest that there is a 'truth' in relation to the period and therefore it does not warrant any further inspection. In this respect the 'history' that is written about becomes almost monolithic in its presence, the implication is that it is the dominant account, regardless of alternative histories that can be written. Furthermore the offering of a romantic past in comparison to recent years could deflect analysis away from careful consideration of the multiplicity of contexts apparent during the more contemporary time periods.

Returning to the specific contrasts drawn by Plasketes and Plasketes and also Harris, it seems that some of their distinctions appear to have been overemphasized. Whilst some rock music in the United States during the late 1960s may have promoted a message of 'peace, love and unity' this was just one of a multitude of discourses apparent at the time. There are other factors that need to be taken into account when considering the popular music of this period. Moreover, it is misleading to assert that such messages are unique. There are numerous examples of subsequent songs from later decades that have explored such subjects. Although these were performed in different social, political and economic contexts, there are often similarities rather than glaring differences. The U.S rock of the '80s that the writers I have mentioned seem to consider the antithesis of the 'rock canon' that they privilege, can, in fact, frequently appear to be concerned with ideals of community and togetherness. Hit singles such as Starship's "We Built This

City” that Plasketes and Plasketes dismiss as a “wimp anthem” use the pronoun ‘we’ to construct a sense of collective involvement that may be empowering to listeners (Starship 1985; Plasketes and Plasketes, p.47). Significantly, it is the actual listeners and the audiences of popular music who have been neglected in the historical narratives that I have previously identified.

I want to conclude this paper by shifting the focus away from popular music texts. The use-values and functions of popular music for individuals and groups are also rooted in histories. Historical writing such as that of Donald Clarke in *The Rise and Fall of Popular Music* seemingly makes no allowance for this. I would argue that this book, particularly its final two chapters that feature historical accounts of the last three decades, reproduces many of the problems that I outlined earlier. Clarke prioritizes particular musical genres (notably jazz) and particular historical moments at the expense of the commercially successful music of recent decades. The tone of his writing gives the impression that he is speaking from a privileged position and that those ‘in the know’ will recognize his ‘good taste’. Consider the following evaluation of Whitney Houston for example:

Her hit material consists of non-songs written in the studio by hacks and producers, and laden with that sterile sheen that makes good wallpaper for the ears. The girl is still young but nobody knows whether she can sing a good song or not. (Clarke 1995, p.519)

One wonders whom the ‘nobody’ is that he refers to. If I pose the question whose values are being alluded to here, then it seems obvious that there are only his own. Yet Clarke purports to write a ‘history’ of other people. Clarke seems to be writing for a particular audience that he assumes will agree with his judgements on ‘good singing’. He privileges a particularly vague notion of the ‘authentic expression’ in music that is linked in with the ideas of the ‘classical canon’ and the ‘auteur’ that I explored earlier. Historical writing of this nature neglects the fact that music is received and used by people in a variety of different ways. He does not make any serious attempt to even fathom why Whitney Houston was a commercially successful singer at this time who was undoubtedly popular and important to many people. There is no acknowledgement that music is not just interpreted according to his standards. Hence for writers like Clarke ‘musical wallpaper’ becomes a derogatory term for everything that is bland and ‘inauthentic’ to them. Yet from my own experiences as a music fan and as a researcher exploring the importance of popular music within domestic contexts I would argue that such a term can be linked to positive and significant listening practices. The fact that popular music is used as a background soundtrack to other activities (for instance by many people who listen to the radio in their car etc) must not be underestimated. Joseph Lanza suggests that popular music can become a kind of “sonic wallpaper”, it can blend in to accompany different situations in daily life (Lanza 1995, p.3). Such instances, I would suggest, are not about assessing ‘musical quality’ or ‘authenticity’, the use-values and pleasures of popular music at these moments are more difficult to interpret. Whilst popular music histories devote a considerable amount of time to artists and texts, it is the uses of this music within specific historical contexts that also need to be considered or at least borne in mind. By adapting this more flexible approach, popular music historians may, to some extent, be able to avoid generalizing about experiences in accordance with their own particular perspective.

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