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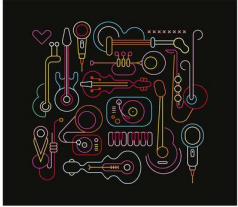
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The Routledge Companion to  
Popular Music Analysis:  
Expanding Approaches



Edited by *Ciro Scotto, Kenneth Smith, and John Brackett*

## **The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis Expanding Approaches**

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### **Thank You for the Music**

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# THANK YOU FOR THE MUSIC

*Giles Hooper*

## **In the Beginning**

If, on proposing a dissertation on “Music and Technology” to a music department in the United States, ethnomusicologist Mark Katz can recall being told that “the sociology department is over there,” then I can recall, having myself just introduced a module on “Rock Music” in a music department in the United Kingdom, one of my colleagues insisting, in my presence, that “we must resist this so-called popular music” (this was as late as 2004).<sup>1</sup> One cannot and must not ignore the elitist and insular attitudes against which those wishing to engage with popular music have often felt compelled to define themselves.

And so—in a familiar story requiring only summary recapitulation—as long as the established musicological discipline generally ignored popular music, the study of popular music was mainly confined to the disciplines and departments of sociology, anthropology, communication studies, cultural studies and, later, media studies; and this would come to have a significant impact on the disciplinary identity of “popular music studies,” one which still resonates today.<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, always exceptions, albeit the rarity or iconoclasm of their enterprise rather confirms their exception.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding the aforementioned, in the mid–late 1970s, academic engagement with popular music—or rather with its contexts of production, mediation and consumption—mainly came from within the disciplines of sociology and post-Marxist cultural studies, and often focussed on industry, identity, and “subcultures.”<sup>4</sup> Engagement with material practices (and texts) tended to derive from, or was informed by, ethno-musicology, which however tended to focus on non-Western musics and/or blues and folk, rather than on the urban/commercial/industrial popular musics of Europe and North America.<sup>5</sup> Although reductive, one might propose a tripartite model in which particular disciplinary or methodological approaches were initially married, in the main, to particular repertoires. The institutionalised study of music (i.e. “musicology” broadly conceived) mainly focussed on the texts of the Western art and concert repertoires. Sociological, industrial, and cultural study mainly focussed on the contexts of Western popular repertoires (especially rock). Ethnomusicological study mainly focussed on the texts and contexts of non-Western repertoires (or selected Western folk repertoires).

In fact, the journal *Popular Music*, the first issue of which was themed around “popular and folk,” was from the very beginning notable for its significant inclusion of ethnomusicological work; and throughout the 1980s it also published a small number of text-oriented essays.<sup>6</sup> By the early-1990s, however, topics and approaches were proliferating, not least due to a converging interest in popular music. Some musicologists, from different angles, had increasingly challenged the assumptions of traditional musicology, both in terms of approach and also in respect of the repertoire studied.<sup>7</sup> Ethnomusicology and ethnography had increasingly turned its attention either to the contexts of Western popular musics (in addition to blues or folk) or to the role and cross-fertilising impact of musical traditions associated with diasporic communities and place.<sup>8</sup> Some two decades after Andrew Chester’s original 1970 polemic, a number of North American analytical philosophers began to write in earnest about the aesthetics of popular music.<sup>9</sup> German scholarship—finally emerging from the Adornian shadow—began to engage more positively with the aesthetics and value of popular music.<sup>10</sup> Disciplinary and institutional attitudes were changing (at least in places); and, in something of a “stock taking” moment, the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a (larger than normal) number of articles and essays dedicated to disciplinary self-reflection as well as edited collections intended to represent a field or fields. There were, of course, earlier monographic benchmarks.<sup>11</sup> Two collections, in particular, will serve to illustrate a divergence of attitude which had paradoxically emerged from the very convergence of interest: *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis* (1997) and *Popular Music Studies* (2002).<sup>12</sup>

### In Theory

All of the contributors to *Understanding Rock* were musicologists or music theorists working in North American university music departments.<sup>13</sup> These were all analytically inclined (and classically trained) scholars, and their contributions reflected this, focussing in particular on harmony, melody, thematic-motivic relation, and structure (represented through transcriptions, annotated chord progressions, and voice-leading reductions); and the music considered included Yes, The Beach Boys, Cream, and The Grateful Dead.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, of the sixteen contributors to *Popular Music Studies*, only four were employed in music departments (two of them as ethnomusicologists), while the remainder included scholars employed in departments of sociology, communication and media studies, Latin American Studies, cultural studies, film and television, linguistics, and leisure management.<sup>15</sup> Only three of the sixteen contributions—all safely contained in the first section—dealt in any direct way with the specifics of musical texts. The collection’s primary focus was the contexts of production, mediation, and consumption; even the nods to textual engagement were refracted through articulations of gendered, local, or national identity.

As suggested, the two collections serve to illustrate what was a methodological schism: between the [musicological] “study of popular music” and an [interdisciplinary] “popular music studies.” The preface/introduction to each collection reinforced this. The editors of *Understanding Rock* articulated a clear two-step move: firstly, they justified the relevance of rock music as worthy of academic study, and so positioned themselves in opposition to those “conservatives” who “doubt that rock music should be taught in universities at all.” Secondly, however, it was also their firm conviction that, while in need of modification, it is “through such analysis [that] a better understanding of the music—not just the conditions surrounding it, but the music itself—can be gained.”<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, the reference to the music itself was not placed in “scare quotes,” something which had become mandatory in

the classically oriented new musicology of the mid-late 1990s. The position articulated by the editors of *Popular Music Studies* (David Hesmondalgh and Keith Negus) was radically different. The emphasis was on an “interdisciplinary” engagement with the production, mediation, and consumption of a diverse and international array of popular musics.<sup>17</sup> In short, as tired as the observation has become, this was essentially *still* about “text” and “context” (or “text” versus “context”); and it has long been argued that popular music intends not a collection of texts, but instead a complex web of mediating contexts. This contention is traced all the way back to the founding moments noted above. Usefully looking in from the outside, musicologist Ralf von Appen has observed how early British popular music studies was dominated by cultural studies.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, von Appen noted that “[to] situate the possible functions and meanings in relation to the musical materials, to examine *how* music can fulfil these functions, or why precisely this music and no other music is so functionalised—this was not the concern of cultural studies.”<sup>19</sup>

It remains a moot point whether the downplaying of textual analysis is driven *only* by academic predisposition and intellectual sentiment. After all, there is no little expediency in arguing against a close engagement with musical texts if one lacks the facility with which to do so in any case. Almost all musicologists (even if their background is in European art or classical music) now move with relative comfort between text and context. By virtue of “the new musicology,” “the critical turn,” and indeed the very influence of popular music studies, musicologists, and certainly post-1990 musicologists, rarely focus only on texts and works in the manner of Joseph Kerman’s famous, if crude, depiction of a discipline defined by positivism and formal analysis.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, those schooled in approaches which do not engage with texts—and/or who, as above, may well lack the means with which to do so—remain *necessarily* focussed on the study of contexts (of production, mediation and consumption).

While a musicologist can at least engage with an interpretive observation, such as rock music, in the manner of Athusserian interpellation, hails an inherently gendered subject, a sociologist may be nonplussed by even a simple analytical observation, such as “the opening section of this rock track derives its effect from a combination of hyper-metric iteration, a Dorian modal inflection, and a  $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$  melodic descent over a cycling I-vi-IV harmonic routing.” To those who cannot move in the other direction, a one-way movement may even appear threatening—as encroachment rather than rapprochement.<sup>21</sup> While musicologists increasingly held two cards, non-musicologists were left with one. This would not matter, of course, if (the specifics of) musical texts are considered irrelevant to one’s particular interest or aim; and a good number of those involved in popular music studies had long argued this to be the case—if they had only the one card, it was however the “trump card.” Or was it?

A good example is provided by Charles Hamm’s study of the radio-broadcast reception of Lionel Richie’s *All Night Long* in a South African township. This was a careful, indeed a meticulous, piece of ethnographic, ethnomusicological and socio-political investigation. Hamm’s point was that the meaning and significance of the track could only be understood in the process, or even at the precise moment, of its particular reception. He argued, correctly, that the analytical systems developed in relation to the Western “classical repertoire” could not find an appropriate application in this context and his principal contention was that “the more precise meaning comes only at the moment of reception, shaped by the cultural capital of the listener.”<sup>22</sup> However, towards the end of the essay, Hamm observed that “the entire chorus and the extended coda of Richie’s song are built on an alternation

between two notes (the tonic and supertonic) and the two chords built on these pitches” and because this musical feature permeates and persists in the acculturated forms of contemporary South African music, “though it was surely not Richie’s intention, extended sections of *All Night Long (All Night)* had a quite specific musical resonance among the black population of South Africa.”<sup>23</sup> Even if it was surely not Hamm’s intention, his latter point was crucial. If one accepts the proposition that “the more precise meaning comes only at the moment of reception, shaped by the cultural capital of the listener,” then one is obliged also to accept that this precise meaning is yet dependent upon particular features of the musical text in question (in other words, Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* would not have had the same resonance because it did not share the features in question). Or, as Marshall puts it, “[musical] meaning is never merely the product of the music itself, but if we are to understand what makes certain music meaningful, if we are to develop better sociological understandings of musical experience, then it is necessary to consider the sounds that people hear as well as the ways in which they hear them. Not doing so fails to do justice to the subject, and the subjects, which we study.”<sup>24</sup>

There may be as many *Eroica* symphonies as there are listeners in the concert-hall, or as many *All Night Longs* as there are radio listeners—an argument for another time—but there are clearly innumerable *Eroica* symphonies and *All Night Longs* which are simply precluded from ever existing by virtue of the fact that the (features of the) musical texts in question, while *affording* a range of receptive identifications, also rule-out a great many more. As Middleton once put it, in referring to “the infinite spiral of multiplying mediations” that is in play in our actual and discursive engagement with music, “the spiral must be arrested at some particular point—the gaze fixed on those mediations not others, and the specific ‘image’ of the text that they produce—if the potential for an abstract relativism is to be avoided.”<sup>25</sup>

Communicative interaction ultimately depends on a necessary “suspension of solipsistic disbelief,” on the presupposition of a third-party world of common objects to which our communicative acts apply. Much of the time, the pragmatics of custom convince us that we are interacting with the same world: if I ask you to “Please pass the salt-cellar” and you run screaming from the room shouting “Fire! Fire!”, I will likely assume you have simply misunderstood me (due to a mishearing, a different use of language, or a culturally specific coding of which I am presently unaware). In other words, at some point I have to believe (that you also believe) that the salt-cellar exists in a world we commonly inhabit and that by “salt-cellar” we intend roughly the same thing and that, while our prandial preference may differ, we have an approximately similar experience of the taste of salt.

We could, of course, recognise the infinite chain of signifiers in play—salt is salt by virtue of not being pepper; we could acknowledge that it is produced via industrial means as part of a complex corporate enterprise; we could observe that it is marketed and distributed according to certain commercial imperatives; we could interpret its role in a social setting (a dinner in a restaurant) which is informed by multiple layers of seemingly natural yet discursively mediated and culturally specific practices (some cultures may not even have a word for salt, since it might not exist as a discrete thing apart from the sea-water by means of which it is normally encountered); we could observe how other guests were using (or not using) salt and we could question them about their relationship with salt, agonising over whether our very presence at their table had already altered the interaction we wished to observe; we could even claim that there is no such as thing as the “salt itself.” But by that time our dinners would have gone cold. Or, as Middleton continued, “[it] is easy to see, too,

how the overall thrust of [theories of mediation] could result in a tendency to evacuate the specificity of the textual moment—that moment where the sounds actually register on the body (physical and cultural)—in favour of discursive and social data alone.”<sup>26</sup>

### In Context

A good example of the latter tendency is apparent in a study already mentioned: Wendy Fonarow’s *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music*. Fonarow, at the time of writing, was in a department of anthropology. *Empire of Dirt*, however, was situated in Wesleyan University Press’s music series and classified under “alternative rock music” in the Library of Congress data. The cover featured a silhouette of a band (rather than an audience) and the acknowledgements finished with a final thanks to “all those who have not left music behind.” The irony, of course, is that through more than 300 pages of meticulously detailed and comprehensively researched exposition, and excepting some brief summary of generic characteristics, Fonarow pretty much “leaves the music behind” and does not obviously examine whether the textual characteristics of the music in question might inform, at least in some manner, however complex, “the aesthetics and rituals of British indie music”—there is no detailed analysis of a piece/track/recording of British indie music (even in the cursory manner of the Hamm study cited earlier). In fact, she describes the book as “an ethnography of audience members’ behaviour at the performances of a particular type of music—British indie music.”<sup>27</sup> Yet, what makes British indie music “a particular type of music” is rarely broached, and, a few pages later, indie is described as “not a thing at all.”<sup>28</sup> And so indie is simultaneously “a particular type of music” yet also “not describable” and “not a thing at all.” This is in no way to impugn a clearly excellent work of ethnographic-anthropological scholarship; but one is left wondering in what sense is this an example of popular music studies, rather than a highly commendable example of ethnographic-anthropology—since exactly the same approach could have been adopted, and in fact has been adopted, in investigating the behaviour and rituals of grocery-shoppers in supermarkets.

A good example of the opposite tendency is apparent in another study, from a collection already mentioned: Dave Headlam’s “Blues Transformations in the Music of Cream” from *Understanding Rock*. In discussing Cream’s “Crossroads,” a cover version of Robert Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues,” Headlam remains almost entirely focussed on describing and analysing structure, harmony, melody, and rhythm; and the account of the cover version remains steadfastly concerned with describing the similarities and differences between the two recordings (or, more precisely, the music as filtered through the abstraction of transcription). There is a brief overview of Johnson’s recordings and occasional references to similarities with other artists or bands. It is easy to understand why many would dismiss, as “missing the point” of the blues, observations such as “... in verses two and four, a focal tonic note appears, initiating a characteristic descent  $\hat{1}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{5}$  in a turnaround with only a faint outline of a preceding dominant.”<sup>29</sup>

It is difficult to imagine two more different approaches than the studies by Fonarow and Headlam. In an inversion of the old saw, one might propose that popular music studies is one nation divided by two entirely foreign languages. This also recalls an earlier point: it is misleading to describe “popular music studies” as inter-disciplinary simply because, as a broadly conceived field, it incorporates a diverse range of what can often remain resolutely mono-disciplinary approaches (such as those just discussed).<sup>30</sup> In that sense, both authors



miss a trick. Fonarow does not consider, at least in any detail, how the textual specifics of indie music might themselves inform or afford the attitudes and identifications she ethnographically investigates; indie music may be a fluid and open concept, but it is clear that Wham and S-Club 7 would not be considered “indie,” and this fact has at least something to do with the nature of the music in question. Conversely, Headlam does not consider, at least in any detail, how the textual specifics of “Cross Road Blues” and “Crossroads” (including parameters such as timbre and recording/production technique) might inform or afford their reception; or how the cover version itself is mediated by a complex range of issues (such as race, authenticity, commercial imperative, etc.).<sup>31</sup>

In Headlam’s study the first foot falls, but the second remains suspended; in Fonarow’s study the second foot falls, but without the anchoring of the first. To paraphrase a certain philosopher, “text without context is blind, context without text is empty.”

### In Practice

To illustrate this, and to ensure some concrete application in what might otherwise remain an abstract exercise in meta-disciplinary observation, I have chosen to focus on Nirvana and, in particular, harmonic (or chordal) structure—because this is precisely what many would consider to be *the* singularly inappropriate approach. It is also because, insofar as they have received academic attention (and they have received less than one might expect), their treatment is a good example of what Middleton referred to “as a tendency to evacuate the specificity of the textual moment.”<sup>32</sup> There are, of course, hundreds of popular and journalistic publications; yet even academic publications tend to focus on issues such as “authenticity,” “selling out,” “post-punk politics,” and the role of MTV in mediating the success of “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” For example, Neil Nehring devotes two chapters of his *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism* (1997) to Nirvana (or Kurt Cobain), but eschews any reference to the music.<sup>33</sup> Bannister, who otherwise does refer, at least descriptively, to the textual characteristics of certain indie genres in his book, *White Boys, White Noise*, mainly limits a brief discussion of Nirvana to lyrics and song-titles. Chris McDonald is one of very few to engage, tangentially, with the music, albeit his reference to selected Nirvana tracks is in the service of a wider analysis of “modal subversion in alternative rock.”<sup>34</sup>

Nirvana’s songs typically fall into three categories: (1) “hard-core” (dissonant, heavy use of distortion, little dynamic contrast), e.g. “Negative Creep,” “Radio Friendly Unit Shifter,” “Scentless Apprentice” (these bear the closest resemblance to the sound of the Seattle hard-rock grunge scene in the late 1980s and are most represented on the first and third albums, *Bleach* and *In Utero*); (2) “ballad” (slow, soft), e.g. “About a Girl,” “Dumb,” “Something in the Way” (these are less frequent, but they signal the combination of unconventional harmonic routing and melodic invention that was also characteristic of the third category); (3) “dynamic” (utilising the characteristic soft-hard alternation that defined many of Nirvana’s most successful tracks), e.g. “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” “In Bloom,” “Pennyroyal Tea” (in effect, these brought together the two earlier categories, with softer verses alternating with anthemic, if coarsely delivered, choruses). It is misleading to speak of a “Nirvana sound” *per se*; however, certain features are relatively recurrent, especially in the less hard-core tracks on *Nevermind* and *In Utero*.

As one might expect, Nirvana often make heavy use of power-chords (in their non-ballad pieces); and their chord “progressions”—patterns might be a better term—have something in common with those varieties of 1980s post-punk, metal, and alternative rock



Figure 3.1 Transcription of opening guitar riff of “Smells Like Teen Spirit”

which came to eschew blues or modally derived precepts. Consequently, it is impossible—or, rather, very misleading—to describe most of their songs as being “in a key” or even as utilising either a “natural” or a modified, yet still recognisable, modal scale-set in the construction of chords.<sup>35</sup> Instead, many of Nirvana’s progressions are based around the juxtaposition of *power*-chords or (major/minor) *triadic* chords whose roots (but not necessarily the third and fifth) are elements of the modal scale-set which informs the melody. This can be referred to as a species of “non-functional diatonicism” (something true of several songs by The Beatles, whom Cobain cited as an important influence).<sup>36</sup> There is, of course, a more prosaic strand to the explanation: Cobain’s guitar-work was somewhat limited, and progressions based around maintaining the same hand shape, while simply shifting position vertically or horizontally on the fret, tend to produce patterns of triadic- or power-chords related by unconventional or non-functional intervals. The most well-known example is, of course, “Smells Like Teen Spirit” (Figure 3.1).

“Smells Like Teen Spirit” is sometimes described as *in* F-minor. This makes little sense, not least because V never appears, even if indirectly implied in certain melodic moments. It is more accurate to describe the song as based on the (root-fifth-octave) power chords built on the first, fourth, third and sixth steps of F Aeolian, especially since the vocal melody is F Aeolian for most of the song; i.e. [F Aeolian] I<sup>5</sup>–IV<sup>5</sup>–III<sup>5</sup>–VI<sup>5</sup>.<sup>37</sup> A similar use of non-functional pattern is apparent, for example, in “Pennyroyal Tea.” The truncated verse simply alternates Am and G ([A Aeolian] i–VII); the chorus proceeds via power-chord C, D, B $\flat$  ([C Mixolydian] I<sup>5</sup>–II<sup>5</sup>–VII<sup>5</sup>). The same is true of “Heart Shaped Box,” which, throughout, is based on a cycling A, F, D. The track derives its piquant delicacy in part from the cross-relation between F $\natural$  and F $\sharp$ ; on occasion the D becomes D<sup>7</sup>, but precisely does not resolve to G (and is anything but a dominant seventh), instead simply returning to the A.

The “Smells Like Teen Spirit” pattern requires only one hand shape.<sup>38</sup> In fact, even this presented some challenge to Cobain (who was notoriously averse to repeated takes). The chromatic passing chords discernible at the end of certain bars result from the final strum hitting the open strings as Cobain changes position; similarly, some chords appear to incorporate suspensions (and are identified as such in various amateur and/or published sheet-music/tabs), because Cobain occasionally catches strings additional to those required to achieve the power chords in question.<sup>39</sup> Early punk or “proto-punk” (Dr. Feelgood, New York Dolls), and even much “classic punk,” still bears the residue of blues-rock influence (with I, IV, and V often to the centre—as is the case, for example, with The Ramones’ “Blitzkrieg Bop”). While Nirvana clearly derive elements of style from these precursors, their sound has much to do with chord patterns which emphasise third progressions, cross-relations, and modal ambiguity.

The preceding observations are of course so many red rags to the contextual bulls. And, were one to stop here (as did Headlam in his analysis of “Cross Road Blues”), their subsequent charge might have some justification. However, as MacDonald noted, “[during] rock’s forty-year history, various musicians in this genre have incorporated stylistic



influences from rhythm and blues, country, jazz, Tin Pan Alley, Celtic and English folk, African and Afro-Caribbean music, and various styles from Western concert music. As a result of this ‘stew’ of diverse influences, an individual rock artist may have recourse to blues modality, tonic-dominant tonality, Celtic-flavoured modality, and so on.”<sup>40</sup> And, consequently, “it is possible that these [modally ambiguous] progressions act as a distinguishing characteristic, one of the musical aspects that mark the music of these bands off from that of artists in other genres.”<sup>41</sup>

This is the point: however mediated the concepts of “alternative,” “outsider,” and “alienated”—with which grunge was typically associated—they are also manifest in a music which positions itself *musically* as an alternative to the conventions of pop, rock, and glam metal. And, in particular, by virtue of harmonic context and melodic contour (since Nirvana’s music borrows much from punk and metal in terms of delivery, timbre, set-up, bass-function, drum-set, etc., it is precisely chord-routing and melody that render their music distinctive—precisely the elements that some would argue are an inappropriate focus). More pertinently, the alienation of “Generation X” was not the anarchic-Bohemian rage of 1970s punk; this was much more an expression of suburban, and often middle-class, adolescent angst than a (supposedly) working-class defiance, albeit its expression could stand metonymically for a frustration with the constraining subject-deformation wrought by the commodity-oriented pseudo-individuality of neo-liberal Reagan-era imprint. And this is why Nirvana’s signal tracks are not their nihilistic hard-core thrash pieces, but precisely those which articulate the alienation of the “outsider within”: the subversion of rock convention within a recognisably punk-rock set-up; an extreme dynamic contrast between carefully constrained verse and explosive chorus; modal ambiguity; a vocal delivery that is at once lullaby-delicate and over-wrought, often descending into screams and moans. The lyrical positioning was also bitingly mocking—from “Load up on guns and bring your friends” (“Smells Like Teen Spirit”) to “He’s the one who likes all our pretty songs” (“In Bloom”); existentially desperate—“Think I’m just happy, I think I’m dumb” (“Dumb”) to “I wish I was like you, easily amused” (“All Apologies”); and, by the time of *In Utero*, self-de(con)structive. Although any many tracks spoke to the latter point—“Serve the Servants,” “Scentless Apprentice,” “Milk It,” “Radio Friendly Unit Shifter,” “Tourettes,” and others—the most obvious, and most notorious, example was the track “Rape Me.”<sup>42</sup>

### In Reality

Allan Moore once observed that,

it has been a salutary experience to engage with scholars who spend their entire professional lives researching aspects of music, but who cannot accept that such a thing as a ‘perfect cadence’ or a ‘gapped melodic contour’ can have any bearing on the way listeners respond to music, because conceptualising such things requires training those listeners have not had.<sup>43</sup>

This speaks to what remains the central point of contention—and not only in relation to popular music. There are two interrelated components. The first is based on the classic distinction, and potential tension, between emic and etic approach. Given the centrality of cultural anthropology and social-scientific method in both popular music studies and ethnomusicology, it is unsurprising that the emic-etic distinction remains (if only implicitly) at the centre

of methodological debate or dispute. It also explains why, in addition to those who had absorbed various tenets of post-structuralist literary-theory, some of the early interventions in the “new” or “critical” musicology came from ethno-musicological scholars. The arguments arrayed run from the observation that some cultures have no discrete concept of “music” (as a separate practice or collection of putative objects), through the observation that, in any culture, music is rarely consumed as the intentional object of directed (aesthetic) attention, to the observation, cited by Moore, that analysis typically describes music in terms unfamiliar or unavailable to the majority of its listeners. Each of these observations is true: but the issue is how one runs with them, or away from them.

It is indeed unlikely that, in 1991, Western teenagers were holed-up in their bedrooms, listening to “Smells Like Teen Spirit” as a bourgeois-romantic aesthetic object, observing its poignant subversion of the modal norms associated with rock convention, and musing on its articulation of an existential circumstance with which they explicitly and self-reflectively identified. Then again, it is also unlikely that, in the mid-1970s, listeners were delving into their well-thumbed copies of Althusser in order to recognise the gendered interpellation of identity enacted in the process of listening to (cock) rock—insofar as they did become aware of this, it was more likely via *Spinal Tap* than Frith and McRobbie.<sup>44</sup> This bears on what I might refer to as the discursive version of an emic fallacy: the belief that it is inappropriate to refer to “modal subversion” when describing Nirvana’s “Heart Shaped Box” or to tonic and supertonic when describing Lionel Richie’s “All Night Long” simply because the listeners (in whichever cultural context) would not conceptualise the music in those terms. The issue is pertinence. A problem only arises when the theoretical language presupposes functions that are not pertinent to reception and affect (e.g. describing “Smells Like Teen Spirit” as in F-minor which implies a dominant-tonic function which simply does not exist, and cannot be heard, in the track); or when the music is reduced or contorted to an exemplar of the theory (deployments of pitch-class set theory are a good example); or when a theory is mobilised in unmodified form to explicate a music unlike that for which it was originally intended (e.g. seeking an authentic *Ursatz* in a strophic blues-rock track). However, it remains unclear as to why these concerns do not apply equally (or more so) to, say, the co-option of literary theory or French post-structuralist philosophy.<sup>45</sup>

The second component stems from a fear of imposing a reading (or hearing). The phase-shift in emphasis, beginning in the 1990s, from object to subject, has left academic scholarship in a double-bind. As sociologist Lee Marshall observed, “... there is a frequent implication that the affective nature of music is impossible to pin down and cannot be captured by academic analysis. In the sphere of popular music, incorporating a prominent anti-intellectual current, such ideas are amplified and it is commonly accepted by musicians and music fans alike that to academically analyse popular music is to miss the point.”<sup>46</sup> The counter-argument, however, is that this too misses the point.

On the one hand, it raises the thorny question of to what end is the academic study of popular music (or music more broadly for that matter). This is clearly too large a question to broach here, yet it suffices to note that, by definition, the academic study of any cultural phenomena (the province of the humanities and social-sciences) is predicated precisely on “getting behind” or “under the hood” of objects and experiences that are otherwise taken for granted by those who interact with those objects and have those experiences. If this were not the case then it would no longer be academic study.

On the other hand, it tends to propel the academic study of (popular) music towards, as Middleton put it, the evacuation of the textual moment. As one approaches the theoretical

extreme, the music itself (suitably problematized) becomes a kind of vanishing point. In a peculiar game of zero-sum circularity, the listener takes away only what they already bring with them—there really are as many *Eroica* symphonies as there are listeners in the concert-hall. Under such a dispensation, one would expect that the study of music might become, instead, the study of almost everything except the music e.g. the study of audience behaviour at a concert or gig, the study of mediation and industrial distribution, the study of individual and collective identity formation, and, significantly, the study of the processes through which individuals derive meaning (and since music was itself a culturally specific, fluid, and contested concept, one might expect an increasing reference to the study of sound *per se*). And since the focus was now on the latter—such that, in a sense, the music itself was secondary—one would expect a turn to methodologies and discursive frameworks originally developed to examine and explicate things other than musical texts e.g. ethnography, urban geography, post-Marxist cultural theory, psychoanalysis, literary theory, post-structuralist theory etc. This would then be described as interdisciplinary and set against those outmoded approaches which yet reserved a place for music in the study of music, albeit only insofar as they enjoined inappropriate analytical tools in order to impose a reading on a text which in any case did not really exist except as a kind of virtual substrate of the irreducibly multiplicitous moments of “its” individually mediated reception(s).

Marshall, a sociologist by trade, is worth quoting at length. He suggests that:

Among other things, sociologists have produced detailed analysis of musical scenes, subcultures, local economies, have told us a lot about the music industry, and have examined the relationship between music and politics, or music and the state. There remains a notable absence, however. There seems to be little in the sociology of popular music that deals with the specifically *musical* aspects of its subject. Not music as an object to [be] bought, held, collected, traded, shared, but music as music, as organised sound. The sociology of music skirts around music and, as a result, contains remarkably little on the experience of listening to music. Yet it is surely the power of musical experience that makes (popular) music so important and, therefore, worthy of sociological investigation in the first place. Without an understanding of how (popular) music can give rise to such intense individual and collective experiences, the sociology of popular music offers not just an incomplete picture, but a picture with a big black hole in the middle.<sup>47</sup>

It is interesting to reflect on why this state-of-affairs is so notably peculiar to the study of popular music (or, rather, popular music studies as commonly perceived). Most would consider it more than unusual if the study of English Literature were largely to eschew any obvious engagement with such things as novels, poems, and plays; and were instead to focus, predominantly, on such things as the publishing industry, the ethnography of readers, the mediating effect of covers and dust-jackets, the consequence of digital distribution, and the meta-study of literary theory. Similarly, it would be an unusual form of Film Studies which largely avoided talking about what actually happens on the screen.

### In Conclusion

Perceptions and misperceptions can flow in both directions. On the one hand, popular music studies would have looked on with no little amusement as traditional musicology,

in becoming the new musicology, suddenly realised that there was more to music than the music itself and proclaimed the radicalism of considering music from the perspectives of identity, gender, nationalism, culture, ideology, reception etc. On the other hand, as suggested above, the circumstances of popular music studies' emergence also served to establish the notion that popular music is better, or even only, understood by virtue of investigating its contexts of production, mediation and consumption. And so, while (classical) musicology gradually deconstructed the text-context binary on which its traditional approach had depended, popular music studies did not quite reciprocate to the same degree, instead continuing to accentuate the latter pole of the binary (which in part explains why "popular musicologists" and "pop analysts" are still viewed by some as adjunct to the core identity of popular music studies; and why engaging with the textual specifics of the music is seen by some as a peripheral and subsidiary component within the overall enterprise).

One criticism of musicological-analytical approaches to popular music was that they tended to focus on those types of music which appeared most amenable to existing or modified modes of engagement: for example, progressive rock has received an amount of musicological-analytical attention notably disproportionate to the extent of its production and consumption.<sup>48</sup> However, in much the same way, popular music studies, at least until more recently, also tended to focus on those types of music which were most amenable to its own methodological tools and critical goals (i.e. music which appears explicitly to engage politics, race, gender, and local identity).<sup>49</sup> This is why, for example, boy bands, contemporary rhythm and blues, and acid jazz have received *comparatively* less attention, since they do not so obviously wear their resistant identity on their sleeves. And if one does not wish to talk about the music—or, indeed, one cannot talk about the music—certain types of popular music afford less of an obvious way in. As Hesmondalgh and Negus themselves observed, in order to rescue popular music from being treated as trivial and unimportant, the study of popular music has "tended to effect this rescue operation in a certain way: by attempting to show that music is often – some would say always – bound up with questions of social power."<sup>50</sup> And Foucault and Gramsci have rather more to say about social power than Schenker or Forte.

Von Appen makes a similar observation, noting that academic engagement with popular music, well into the 1990s, followed two main paths: (1) musicological-analytical approaches tended to focus on music with a presumed complexity or richness (as traditionally conceived)—hence The Beatles, Zappa, progressive rock—and, even into the 2000s, still tended to focus on certain forms of rock; (2) cultural-sociological approaches tended to focus on music in terms of its socio-political value, its role in identity-formation, and its presumed counter-cultural, subversive or democratic potential, hence protest-song, punk, riot-grrrl, and, later, rap (and hip-hop culture), and dance (and rave culture) would feature prominently.<sup>51</sup> Mainstream exceptions were typically investigated as cultural, rather than musical, phenomena—e.g. Madonna or the Spice Girls, wherein image and mediation were to the fore, and often interpreted through the lens of postmodern and/or postfeminist theory (and even where more text-oriented scholars sought to engage with such music, they often did so via recourse to the music video).

Although some boundaries have shifted, and some border-crossings have been made, it remains salutary to observe that, particularly in the UK, the speakers (and attendees) at, say, a typical International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) conference will not significantly overlap with the speakers (and attendees) at, say, a typical Society for Music Analysis (SMA) conference.<sup>52</sup> Even today, the academic study of popular music still reveals

stark divisions among its practitioners in respect of methodological assumption, discursive foundation, and intellectual (or ideological) sensibility.

Straw-target characterisation has also at times played a role. As we have seen, for example in the case of Hamm, the argument runs that since textual analysis (or analysis per se), founded in the precepts of classical musicology, presumes, rightly or wrongly, to frame music as an autonomous aesthetic object, so such approaches are inappropriate when applied to a form of music (popular music) that is not typically consumed or conceived in this way. Yet, in recent years—arguably for more than a decade—analysis has developed into an increasingly pluralistic and interdisciplinary methodology; and often in a more genuine sense than the “co-existing aggregation of approaches” that normally underpins the avowed interdisciplinarity of popular music studies. Moreover, the development of an appropriately attuned form of “analysis”—the second foot falling—into areas such as semiotics, metaphor, gesture, emotion, and affect, arguably affords precisely the relevant means with which to illuminate Marshall’s “big black hole in the middle.”

### Notes

- 1 Mark Katz, “What Does it Mean to Study Popular Music?: A Musicologist’s Perspective,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 26, no. 1 (March 2014): 22–27.
- 2 The phrase “popular music studies” expresses the fact that it comprises an aggregation of disciplinary approaches which tend to focus on the contexts of production, mediation, consumption and reception of music; it is normally distinguished from “popular musicology”, which, from within musicology, tends to engage more obviously with texts (albeit as mediated by production, consumption and reception). See also Allan Moore, *Analyzing Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 3 See for example, Wilfrid Mellers, *Twilight of the Gods: The “Beatles” in Retrospect* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973); Richard Bobbitt, *Harmonic Technique in the Rock Idiom: The Theory and Practice of Rock Harmony* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1976); Peter Winkler, “Toward a Theory of Pop Harmony,” *In Theory Only* 4, no. 2 (1978): 3–26; and Philip Tagg, *Kojak—50 Seconds of Television Music: Toward the Analysis of Affect in Popular Music* (PhD thesis, University of Göteborg, 1979).
- 4 See for example, Simon Frith, *The Sociology of Rock* (London: Constable, 1978); and Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979).
- 5 See John Blacking, *How Musical is Man* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1973); Bruno Nettl, *Folk Music in the United States* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1976); and Judith Becker, *Traditional Music in Modern Java: Gamelan in a Changing Society* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1980).
- 6 See Philip Tagg, “Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice,” *Popular Music* 2 (1982): 37–65; Barbara Bradby and Brian Torode, “Pity Peggy Sue,” *Popular Music* 4 (1984): 183–205; Gino Stefani, “Melody: A Popular Perspective,” *Popular Music* 6, no. 1 (January 1987): 21–34; and Gary Burns, “A Typology of ‘Hooks’ in Popular Records,” *Popular Music* 6, no. 1 (January 1987): 1–20.
- 7 See Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice (1800–1900)* (Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 1993); Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); and Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).
- 8 Andrew Chester, “Second Thoughts on a Rock Aesthetic: The Band,” *New Left Review* 62 (1970): 75–82; Martin Stokes, *The Arabesk Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).



- 9 See Bruce Baugh, "Prolegomena to Any Aesthetics of Rock Music," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 23–29; Theodore Gracyk, "Romanticizing Rock Music," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 27, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 43–58; and Stephen Davies, "Rock versus Classical Music," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 193–204.
- 10 See Peter Wicke, *Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics and Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). It was not until the mid-2000s that German engagement with popular music attained something approaching a critical mass, as represented in particular by the Transcript-Verlag series. See for example, Dietrich Helms, "Musikwissenschaftliche Analyse populärer Musik?," in Helmut Rösing, Albrecht Schneider, and Martin Pfeiderer, eds., *Musikwissenschaft und populärer Musik* (Hamburger Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft, Bd.19, 2002); Michael Fuhr, *Populäre Musik und Ästhetik* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2007); Ralf von Appen, *Der Wert der Musik* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2007). This is not to ignore earlier exceptions such as Tibor Kneif, "Ideen zu einer dualistischen Musikästhetik," *Musik und Bildung* 9 (1970): 133–169; Konrad Boehmer, *Zwischen Reihe und Pop: Musik und Klassengesellschaft* (Wien u. München: Jugend und Volk, 1970); and Dieter Baacke, *Beat–die sprachlose Opposition* (München: Juventa, 1968).
- 11 Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990); John Shepherd, *Music as Social Text* (London: Polity, 1991); and Allan Moore, *Analyzing Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 12 John Covach and Graeme M. Boone, eds., *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and David Hesmondalgh and Keith Negus, eds., *Popular Music Studies* (London: Hodder, 2002).
- 13 Among the contributors, Graeme Boone had previously published on Dufay, Matthew Brown on Debussy, Daniel Harrison on harmonic function in chromatic music, and Dave Headlam on Berg.
- 14 The contribution of Lori Burns, the only female contributor, was on k.d. Lang, the only female artist considered in the book. The analysis of the music was oriented toward explicating the track's affect (also the theme of Burns's later book from 2002, co-authored with Melisse Lafrance, *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity & Popular Music* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002). One might note the unfortunate impression: male artists produced music to be analysed as music (tonal ambiguity, style, chromaticism) while female artists produced music to be interpreted as an expression of emotion (feminist anger).
- 15 The organisation of the collection is itself instructive, comprising four parts: I) Musical Meaning and History; II) Audiences, Composition and Everyday Life; III) Productions, Institutions and Creativity; IV) Place, Space and Power.
- 16 Covach and Boone, *Understanding Rock*, vii.
- 17 The designation "interdisciplinary" can often mislead when applied to popular music studies, since this is often simply by virtue of the fact that ethnographers, sociologists, anthropologists, and scholars of media, industry and culture all happen to engage with (the contexts of) popular music; however, each individual study often remains, in large part, an exercise in ethnography, sociology, anthropology, etc. (i.e. is precisely *not* interdisciplinary). A study is more meaningfully interdisciplinary only when several approaches are combined, and allowed reciprocally to inflect one another, in the course of a discrete enterprise. Hence, for example, Adam Krims' study of rap music is genuinely interdisciplinary (and intra-disciplinary) in a way that Fonarow's study of indie music is not. See Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Wendy Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006).
- 18 Ralf von Appen, *Der Wert der Musik* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2007).
- 19 "Die möglichen Funktionen und Bedeutungen aber in Beziehung zum musikalischen Material zu setzen, zu untersuchen, *wie* Musik diese Funktionen erfüllen kann, warum gerade *die* gewählte und keine andere Musik funktionalisiert wird – das lag nicht im Interesse der Cultural Studies." See von Appen, *Der Wert der Musik*, 23. My translation.
- 20 Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).



- 21 As long ago as 1995, Brackett effectively articulated the same point when, in referring to the “text versus context” debate, he observed that “there is some indication that these lines [between sociologists and musicologists] may be growing fuzzy: *from the musicology side, at any rate, many have become increasingly interested over the past several years in the way in which contexts influence the perception of texts.*” David Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 17. My emphasis.
- 22 Charles Hamm, *Putting Popular Music in its Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 26.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 24 Lee Marshall, “The Sociology of Popular Music, Interdisciplinarity and Aesthetic Autonomy,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 62, no. 1 (March 2011): 172.
- 25 Richard Middleton, ed., *Reading Pop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt*, 2. My emphasis.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 29 Covach and Boone, *Understanding Rock*, 68.
- 30 Marshall suggests that “... what seems to exist within PMS [Popular Music Studies] is not real interdisciplinarity but, rather, a form of *entente cordiale* in which each disciplinary player respects the conclusions of other players but fails to engage in meaningful dialogue with them, resulting in a relatively rigid division of labour between sociologists and musicologists.” See Marshall, “The Sociology of Popular Music,” 157.
- 31 Interestingly, Headlam makes two observations, in passing, which might have provided the basis for a more enriched engagement. He observes that “listening to Johnson’s ‘Cross Road Blues’ and then to Cream’s ‘Crossroads’ is an extraordinary musical experience, even aside from the historical context of the parallel Faustian reputation that links Johnson and Clapton” and that “Cream’s ‘Crossroads’ is driving and powerful, with a relentless reinforcement, then turnaround, of harmonies that assimilates the third line of text within the inexorable forward motion and progression of the meter, suggesting the communal, overdriven state of society that surrounded Cream in the 1960s.” See Dave Headlam, “Blues Transformation in the Music of Cream,” in John Covach and Graeme M. Boone, eds., *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 72.
- 32 Middleton, *Reading Pop*, 10.
- 33 Neil Nehring, *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 1997); and Matthew Bannister, *White Boys, White Noise* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006).
- 34 Chris MacDonald, “Exploring Modal Subversions in Alternative Music,” *Popular Music* 19, no. 3 (October 2000): 355–363.
- 35 In the sense that, for example, one can encounter progressions such as I – vi – IV – bVII in pieces derived from a Mixolydian scale-set, since these are the “natural” (root-third-fifth) triads built upon the relevant scale-steps, i.e. I, ii, iii0, IV, v, vi, bVII.
- 36 In one of the earliest studies of rock harmony, Bobbitt identified “mixed-diatonic harmony”, which described chords whose roots conformed to a particular scale-set, but the chord structures themselves did not. See Richard Bobbitt, *Harmonic Technique in the Rock Idiom: The Theory and Practice of Rock Harmony* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1976). See also Walter Everett, “Making Sense of Rock’s Tonal Systems,” *Music Theory Online* 10, no. 4 (December 2004). Available online at [www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.04.10.4/mto.04.10.4.w\\_evrett.html](http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.04.10.4/mto.04.10.4.w_evrett.html). Accessed 12 December 2017.
- 37 Everett argues that this sequence comprises chords constructed on the minor-pentatonic. However, the standard minor-pentatonic is arrived at precisely by omitting scale degrees 2 and 6 of the natural minor; and the melody and guitar solo use every note of F Aeolian; and Everett refers to them as major triads (which power-chords are not).
- 38 The three-string F power-chord is achieved by stopping the low E-string at pos-1, the A-string at pos-3, and the D-string at pos-3; the B b power-chord simply requires the shape be moved horizontally, by one string; the A b power-chord is the same as F but moved to pos-4; the D b

- power-chord is the same as A $\flat$  but moved horizontally, by one string. Up-tuning by a semitone renders playing the progression even simpler.
- 39 One will also note that the opening bar of the recorded version of “Teen Spirit” does not quite match the transcription. This is because Cobain only locks down the riff in the second bar; in the first bar, he does not quite damp/mute in time and he fractionally delays arriving at B $\flat$ , resulting in a momentary legato effect and an easy to miss, yet discernible, truncation, in order to land as required on the second quaver of the third beat.
- 40 MacDonald, “Exploring Modal Subversions,” 355.
- 41 Ibid., 361.
- 42 The inclusion of “Rape Me,” together with the album’s back-cover artwork, which featured images of female reproductive organs and fetuses, saw *In Utero* initially banned from a number of US retail outlets. In 1994, Nirvana’s record label, DGC, released an alternative version with amended artwork and “Rape Me” retitled as “Waif Me.”
- 43 Allan Moore, *Analyzing Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7.
- 44 Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, “Rock and Sexuality,” *Screen Education* 29 (Winter 1978/1979): 3–19.
- 45 One might note in passing that those who are critical of what is portrayed as a rarefied and reified analytical terminology often deploy a critical-theoretical vocabulary no less arcane, no less obfuscating, and no less distant from the lived reality of those for whom they are equally presuming to speak. It is not unknown (outside of specifically analytical gatherings) to observe the slightly awkward response that can greet the paper on hyper-metrical irregularity in neo-progressive post-punk as compared to the comfortable and gently nodding accommodation of the paper that begins “As Deleuze teaches us...”
- 46 Marshall, “The Sociology of Popular Music,” 157.
- 47 Ibid. Emphasis in original.
- 48 See Edward Macan, *Rocking the Classics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Kevin Holm-Hudson ed., *Progressive Rock Reconsidered* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- 49 As long ago as 1970, Andrew Chester noted that (in the eyes of those who study it) “Pop denotes a cultural, not an aesthetic object ... The acceptance of a cultural definition of the object of criticism leads inevitably to a cultural as opposed to an aesthetic criticism. Musical form and musical practice are studied as an aspect of social relations, and significance is determined by social, not musical, criteria.” (Chester, “Second Thoughts on a Rock Aesthetic,” 83).
- 50 David Hesmondalgh and Keith Negus, eds., *Popular Music Studies* (London: Hodder, 2002), 6.
- 51 Ralf Von Appen, *Der Wert der Musik*.
- 52 A notable exception was perhaps the SMA’s *popMAC* conference in Liverpool 2013.

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